Manderley: a House of Mirrors; the Reflections of Daphne du Maurier’s Life in *Rebecca*  

by  
Michele Gentile  
Spring 2014  

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a baccalaureate degree in English  
in cursu honorum  

Reviewed and approved by:  

Dr. Kathleen Monahan  
English Department Chair  

Thesis Supervisor  

Submitted to the Honors Program, Saint Peter's University  

17, March 2014
# Table of Contents

- Dedication .......................................................................................................................... 3  
- Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 3  
- Abstract .............................................................................................................................. 4  
- Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 5  
- Chapter I: The Unnamed Narrator .................................................................................... 7  
- Chapter II: Rebecca .......................................................................................................... 35  
- Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 54  
- Works Cited Page .............................................................................................................. 55


**Dedication:**

I would like to dedicate this paper to my parents, Tom and Joann Gentile, who have instilled the qualities of hard work and dedication within me throughout my entire life. Without their constant love and support, this paper would not have been possible.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr. Monahan for serving as my advisor during this experience and for introducing me to Daphne du Maurier’s literature. Dr. Monahan, your assistance has made this process much less overwhelming and significantly more enjoyable.

I would also like to thank Doris D’Elia in assisting me with my research for this paper. Doris, your help allowed me to enjoy writing this paper, rather than fearing the research I needed to conduct.
Abstract:

Daphne du Maurier lived an unconventional life in which she rebelled against the standards society had set in place for a woman of her time. Du Maurier’s inferiority complex, along with her incestuous feelings and bisexuality, set the stage for the characters and events in her most famous novel, *Rebecca*. Throughout this paper, I will conduct character studies of the unnamed narrator and Rebecca de Winter, in order to emphasize the inspiration du Maurier drew from her own life to create the characters and events of this novel.
Manderley: a House of Mirrors; the Reflections of Daphne du Maurier’s Life in *Rebecca*

**Introduction**

As noted by Daphne du Maurier’s daughter, Flavia, in *The Daphne du Maurier Companion* by Helen Taylor, “…both Rebecca and the second Mrs de Winter are based on my mother: the dark side is Rebecca and Mrs de Winter is the timidity and social awkwardness…” (4). I will begin my paper by examining the similarities between du Maurier and the second Mrs. de Winter. Both women appear to reject the prevailing concept of womanhood and see other women as obstacles that need to be surpassed in order to obtain the undivided attention and affection of the men in their lives.

Daphne du Maurier was born on May 13th, 1907 in London. She was the second daughter of Gerald du Maurier and Muriel Beaumont, who were both involved in the theatre. Throughout her childhood, du Maurier had a very close relationship with her father, and she often looked to her grandfather, George du Maurier, for inspiration in her writing. In 1923, du Maurier attended a finishing school in London where she experienced her first attraction to another woman, a subject that du Maurier later touched upon in *Rebecca*. Although *Rebecca* is her most famous novel, it was not her first; du Maurier’s first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, was published in 1931. Shortly after her first publication, du Maurier was introduced to Major Frederick Browning, and the two were married in 1933. Together, du Maurier and Browning had three children, two daughters and a son. After the publication of *Rebecca*, du Maurier restored and moved into the famous estate of Menabilly, which was the inspiration for the iconic and haunting Manderley in *Rebecca*. From 1943 to 1969, du Maurier lived in the house which had helped her create the most memorable novel of her career. In April of 1989, at the age of 81, Daphne du Maurier died
at her home in Cornwall. During her lifetime, du Maurier published several novels and short stories, in addition to the many non-fictional accounts she wrote about her family.

On the surface, du Maurier appears to have lived a life of normal social conventions, but a closer look at her childhood reveals that she ignored many of the standards society had set in place for a young girl. Like both Mrs. de Winters, Daphne du Maurier experienced many issues with accepting her identity. In *Daphne du Maurier*, Richard Kelly references du Maurier’s desire to abandon her female identity, a thought she expresses in her autobiography, *Growing Pains*. Kelly explains that “Du Maurier…had powerful yearnings as a youth to be a boy. ‘Why wasn’t I born a boy?…They do all the brave things’ (GP, 26)” (6). In order to escape the suffocating constraints of society, du Maurier “adopted the persona of a fictitious character she named Eric Avon…” (6). The concept of the “boy-in-the-box” (3) is a clear manifestation of her desire to be anyone other than herself, a trait that du Maurier shares with the unnamed narrator of *Rebecca*. 
Chapter I: The Unnamed Narrator

In her article “Rebecca,” Sally Beauman addresses the personality traits that du Maurier shared with the timid narrator of Rebecca. Beauman states:

Shy, and socially reclusive, she detested the small talk and the endless receptions she was expected to attend and give, in her capacity of commanding officer’s wife. This homesickness and her resentment of wifely duties, together with a guilty sense of her own ineptitude when performing them, were to surface in Rebecca… (48).

Du Maurier’s lack of confidence in social interactions is directly mirrored in the narrator’s timid personality and her lack of identity.

Rebecca is told through the eyes of an unnamed heroine who struggles to establish an identity for herself. The reader soon learns that the narrator’s identity is derived entirely from the people with whom she surrounds herself. When we first meet the narrator, she is nothing more than a paid companion to an American woman named Mrs. Van Hopper. Her role as Mrs. Van Hopper’s employee is the only piece of information the reader has about the narrator and her life. Through her employment with Mrs. Van Hopper, the narrator’s small identity is established and becomes evident when the narrator and reader are introduced to Maxim de Winter. During this meeting, Van Hopper is incredibly rude to Maxim; she creates a sense of intimacy and familiarity with a man she knows nothing about. The narrator, despite her immature and simplistic way of thinking, understands how rude Mrs. Van Hopper has been to Maxim during their conversation and is utterly embarrassed. She explains to the reader “…and I was left to writhe in her stead feeling like a child that had been smacked” (16). The reader recognizes that the narrator feels that she and Mrs. Van Hopper are one person; she is responsible for Mrs. Van
Hopper’s actions and choice of words and vice versa. Without her connection to Mrs. Van Hopper, the narrator appears to have no identity at all.

This concept of merging her identity with other characters in the novel can be seen even more clearly in the second chapter. As she tells the reader about Manderley and her life as Maxim’s wife, she constantly refers to “we.” The narrator seems to combine Maxim and herself into one person, much as she had done with Mrs. Van Hopper. Early in the novel, the narrator goes into great detail about her current life with Maxim and explains:

We have no secrets now from one another. All things are shared. Granted that our little hotel is dull, and the food indifferent, and that day after day dawns very much the same, yet we would not have it otherwise. We should meet too many of the people he knows in any of the big hotels. We both appreciate simplicity, and if we are sometimes bored—well, boredom is a pleasing antidote to fear. We live very much by routine, and I—I have developed a genius for reading aloud… (6).

From this quote, the reader can see how strongly this married couple has merged their identities into one. The narrator only separates herself and Maxim when she refers to the people he knows, which indicates that there was a time in Maxim’s life in which she did not play a part. The reader can also see just how uncomfortable the narrator is with the idea of considering herself as an individual. The first time the narrator refers to herself as “I,” she appears to pause before she can continue with her thought. By using a dash after the first time she separates herself from Maxim, du Maurier was attempting to draw the reader’s attention to the narrator’s rejection of her own identity. While she can refer to Maxim and herself as “we” and Maxim as an individual as “he,” she clearly cannot consider herself as an individual without some hesitation.

One final example of the concept of merging her identity with other characters can be
seen in the description of her stay in Monte Carlo. Mrs. Van Hopper comes down with influenza and must stay in her bedroom for two weeks. On her first day without Mrs. Van Hopper’s company at lunch, the narrator is asked to join Maxim at his table. The waiters begin to treat her with respect due to her connection to a man as well known as Maxim. In the midst of her excitement, the narrator tells the reader “I was a person of importance, I was grown up at last” (28). In the company of Mrs. Van Hopper, the narrator is considered to be an immature and silly young girl. During her time with Maxim, she appears to blossom into a mature young lady of importance. As seen in the previous examples, this portion of the novel clearly indicates the narrator’s lack of identity. The way in which she is perceived by society depends entirely on the status of the people to whom she is connected.

After she is married to Maxim and the couple returns to Manderley, the narrator is faced with the challenge of becoming a suitable wife for Maxim. She is expected to become someone who is fit to run an estate as well known as Manderley. There is pressure from Maxim, his relatives, the servants, and society in general for the narrator to transform into someone similar to the first Mrs. de Winter, the infamous Rebecca.

Neither du Maurier nor the narrator felt comfortable performing the social and wifely duties required of them as reputable women of society. In an interview with Helen Taylor, du Maurier’s daughter, Flavia, recalls how her mother “…didn’t get up in the morning when the Duke of Edinburgh was staying at Menabilly. She was terrified to go down to breakfast” (4). This event is relived in *Rebecca* when the narrator hides from Maxim’s sister, Beatrice, and her husband until Maxim has returned from Crawley’s office. Throughout *Rebecca*, the late Mrs. de Winter is credited with being the epitome of an ideal mistress, something the narrator believed she could never be.
From the very beginning of her marriage to Maxim, the narrator begins her quest to become Rebecca. The only name the narrator is ever given throughout the novel is Mrs. de Winter, which comes from her relationship to Maxim. This name, however, also connects her to someone other than Maxim. The name Mrs. de Winter belongs to both the narrator and Rebecca therefore, her only established identity merges her with Rebecca. Since the two women have the same title, many of the characters in the novel, including the narrator, expect her to become Rebecca in a figurative sense. She is expected to follow the same schedule Rebecca followed while she was alive. The second Mrs. de Winter learns of Manderley’s strict schedule during her conversation with a servant named Frith. Frith explains to Mrs. de Winter that “The fire in the library is not usually lit until the afternoon…Mrs. de Winter always used the morning-room” (83). Although Frith offers to light a fire in the library, Mrs. de Winter declines and begins to follow Rebecca’s schedule by sitting in the morning-room after breakfast. The narrator did not want to disturb the way in which Manderley was run because she did not want to displease Maxim. For the first few months of their marriage, the narrator believed that the only way to make Maxim love her was to become Rebecca.

The influence from other characters to become Rebecca is not lost on the narrator. On two separate occasions, she appears to transform into the late Mrs. de Winter. One night during dinner with Maxim, the narrator begins to daydream about Maxim’s life when Rebecca was still alive. She explains “…I had so identified myself with Rebecca that my own dull self did not exist, had never come to Manderley. I had gone back in thought and in person to the days that were gone” (203). It is in this quote that the narrator reveals her desire to become Rebecca. She sees herself as “dull” and believes Rebecca was anything but dull. Maxim notices an alteration in his wife’s appearance and states “Do you know you did not look a bit like yourself just now?”
You had a different expression on your face…You looked older suddenly, deceitful. It was rather unpleasant” (203). Maxim appears to be disturbed when his wife displays similarities to Rebecca, but the narrator does not seem to make this connection in her mind.

Her second transformation into Rebecca takes place just before the beginning of the annual Manderley fancy dress ball. Due to a suggestion from Mrs. Danvers, the ominous housekeeper who loved Rebecca, the narrator copies a picture from the gallery to use as her costume for the ball. Little does she know that the costume she has chosen was the exact costume Rebecca had worn to the last ball she attended before she died. When the narrator comes downstairs and Maxim sees her costume, he is furious and tells her to change immediately. Neither the reader nor the narrator are aware of the reason for Maxim’s rage until his sister, Beatrice, explains:

‘Why, the dress, you poor dear, the picture you copied of the girl in the gallery. It was what Rebecca did at the last fancy dress ball at Manderley. Identical. The same picture, the same dress. You stood there on the stairs, and for one ghastly moment I thought…’ (220).

Although Beatrice never finishes her statement, it is safe to assume that she thought it was Rebecca who was walking down the stairs as opposed to the narrator. This event allows Maxim, as well as his friends and relatives, to see the ever present competition between Maxim’s two wives. The constant comparison between the second Mrs. de Winter and Rebecca causes the former to transform into the latter. The narrator spends most of the novel wishing to be like Rebecca in order to please Maxim. However, she is so preoccupied with becoming someone similar to Rebecca that she is unaware of how Maxim actually feels; both of the events described cause Maxim to feel uncomfortable and angry. Although the narrator does not pick up on this,
the reader is able to infer that the narrator’s glamorized perception of Rebecca may not be true after all.

Since the narrator continuously merges her own identity with the identities of others, it is safe to say that her relationships with these other characters are of central importance to the novel. In each of the relationships I will examine in this section, it is clear that the narrator allows other characters to be dominant in their relationship. The narrator’s lack of identity sets the stage for her inferiority complex and her place as the submissive person in almost every relationship she has throughout the novel.

From the very beginning of the novel, it is evident that the narrator is subservient by nature. The narrator, along with the other characters, is entirely aware of her inferior status in her relationship with Mrs. Van Hopper. She explains that during their stay in Monte Carlo “the waiter…had long sensed my position as inferior and subservient to hers…” (10). In this quote, the narrator openly acknowledges her inferiority complex; she does not see herself as an equal to Mrs. Van Hopper, but rather sees herself as a servant and Mrs. Van Hopper as her mistress.

These two women share a bond that appears to be somewhat deeper than a simple employer-employee relationship. Since the narrator never tells the reader about her past, he knows nothing about her family, including her mother. The hierarchy between Mrs. Van Hopper and the narrator allows the reader to compare the professional relationship between these women to the relationship between a mother and a child. Both the narrator and Mrs. Van Hopper are aware of the role of mother figure that Mrs. Van Hopper plays for the narrator. Mrs. Van Hopper states “’after all, I am responsible for your behaviour here, and surely you can accept advice from a woman old enough to be your mother’” (19). By taking responsibility for the narrator’s actions, Mrs. Van Hopper is taking over the narrator’s identity, as well as treating her as if she
were an irresponsible child.

Mrs. Van Hopper is not the only maternal figure the narrator encounters throughout the novel. Upon her arrival at Manderley, she is introduced to the housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers. While Mrs. Van Hopper can be compared to the foolish, yet—mostly—well intentioned mother from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Danvers is more like the evil stepmother from a fairy tale. From the moment the narrator sets foot in Manderley, Mrs. Danvers is determined to ruin her marriage, as well as her life in general.

Almost immediately upon meeting Mrs. Danvers, the narrator is intimidated by the older woman. There is a sense of unexplained resentment Mrs. Danvers expresses toward Mrs. de Winter. When Mrs. Danvers shows the narrator to her new room, she explains that the narrator and Maxim will be staying in the East Wing near the rose garden as opposed to the West Wing near the sea. Mrs. de Winter acknowledges the resentment Mrs. Danvers clearly has for her, but she does not understand the reason behind Mrs. Danvers’ resentment. She explains:

> I felt uncomfortable, a little shy. I did not know why she must speak with such an undercurrent of resentment, implying as she did at the same time that this room, where I found myself to be installed, was something inferior, not up to Manderley standard, a second-rate room, as it were, for a second-rate person (76).

It is clear from this quote that Mrs. Danvers compares the narrator to Rebecca, as well as her marriage to Maxim with Rebecca’s marriage to Maxim. In the opening pages, the narrator recalls her first encounter with Mrs. Danvers and clarifies “…She is comparing me to Rebecca” (8).

From her first moments at Manderley the narrator is aware of Rebecca’s dominance over the estate and the people who live there. This competition, however, does not end with the burning of Manderley. Years later, the narrator can still remember that she was compared to Rebecca in
every aspect of her life. The constant comparisons to Rebecca and the resentment Mrs. Danvers feels toward the narrator are key components in the narrator’s inability to fit into the world of Manderley.

In the beginning of her life at Manderley, the narrator accepts the belief that she is inferior to Rebecca in all ways. She assumes that Mrs. Danvers’ resentment is caused by the narrator’s lack of breeding and that this might cause Manderley to suffer. The resentment she feels from Mrs. Danvers causes the narrator to feel inferior to all of the other servants of the house as well. While Rebecca had been their superior, the narrator allows the servants to see her as their inferior. On one of her first mornings at Manderley, Mrs. de Winter is sitting at the desk in the morning-room and breaks a piece of china, which she immediately hides. Mrs. Danvers finds the broken china and blames the accident on one of the other servants. When the butler, Frith, brings the problem to Maxim, the narrator does not confess until after Frith leaves; she explains that she did not want to confess in front of Frith because she was afraid he would think she is foolish. Maxim replies “‘Don’t be a little idiot. Anyone would think you were afraid of them’” (143). The narrator explains “‘I am afraid of them. At least, not afraid, but…”’ (143). Even though her thought is interrupted by Frith’s return, Mrs. de Winter admits to Maxim—and the reader—that she is clearly uncomfortable around the servants. She allows the servants to intimidate her, something Rebecca would never have allowed while she was the mistress of Manderley.

With the character of Maxim de Winter, du Maurier was able to insert her father and his influence over her life into the most famous novel of her career. A close character study of Maxim, along with information about du Maurier’s life, allows the reader to see the unmistakable similarities present within the relationships between Maxim and the narrator and
Gerald and Daphne. In Manderley, the House of Mirrors, Gerald is transformed into Maxim, while Daphne is transformed into his wives.

Incidents like the one described above are clear indicators of the differences between Rebecca and Mrs. de Winter in their role as mistress of Manderley. While Rebecca was seen as an effective—almost perfect—mistress, the narrator is completely ineffective. The differences between the two Mrs. de Winters are not lost among the servants, and Mrs. Danvers takes it upon herself to remind the narrator of this fact every chance she gets. After the incident at the fancy ball, Mrs. Danvers attempts to rid herself—and Manderley—of the second Mrs. de Winter forever. While Mrs. de Winter is standing on the ledge of an open window, Mrs. Danvers tells her to jump and end everyone’s misery. Mrs. Danvers explains:

‘You’ll never get the better of her. She’s still mistress here, even if she is dead. She’s the real Mrs. de Winter, not you. It’s you that’s the shadow and the ghost. It’s you that’s forgotten and not wanted and pushed aside’ (250).

Mrs. Danvers is the main advocate for Rebecca’s cause. From the moment the narrator arrives at Manderley, Danvers refuses to let her take Rebecca’s place. Although the other characters expect the narrator to become Rebecca, Mrs. Danvers makes it her mission to destroy the narrator and preserve Rebecca’s memory. The information Mrs. de Winter receives from Mrs. Danvers establishes a never ending competition and reiterates the narrator’s inferiority complex.

Although Mrs. Danvers is the main source of information regarding Rebecca, she is not the only person who shares information about Rebecca with the narrator. Even before she is formally introduced to Maxim in Monte Carlo, the narrator hears about Maxim de Winter and his late wife from Mrs. Van Hopper. The first time the narrator sees Maxim, Mrs. Van Hopper explains that “…’They say he can’t get over his wife’s death…”’ (11). Prior to this conversation,
the narrator had never heard of Maxim de Winter or any aspect of his life. With the first mention of his name, the narrator is given false information about Maxim. As the novel continues, however, the reader can see subtle hints that the picture perfect image of Manderley and the de Winters may not be so perfect after all.

While Mrs. Van Hopper and Mrs. Danvers remind the narrator of Rebecca’s prominence in Maxim’s life, his sister and his agent attempt to revise the distorted image of Rebecca the narrator has formed in her mind. Maxim’s sister, Beatrice, passes along information regarding Rebecca during her very first meeting with the narrator. She states “‘You see…you are so very different from Rebecca’” (107). Although Beatrice is reiterating what the narrator has been told all along, she is not criticizing the narrator for being different from Rebecca; she even seems pleased with the fact that the narrator and Rebecca have almost nothing in common. Beatrice does not reveal any specific details about Rebecca’s nature during this conversation, but du Maurier creates a friendly relationship between Mrs. de Winter and her sister-in-law, which allows the reader to consider the possibility that Beatrice may be the first person who did not absolutely adore Rebecca.

Along with his sister, Maxim’s agent attempts to steer the narrator’s thoughts about Rebecca in the opposite direction. When asked by the narrator if Rebecca was “very beautiful,” Frank Crawley replies “‘Yes,…yes, I suppose she was the most beautiful creature I ever saw in my life’” (137). Thus, the narrator’s suspicions of Rebecca’s physical beauty are confirmed. A few pages earlier, however, Crawley alludes to the possibility that beauty is sometimes only skin deep. During a walk along the drive, the narrator begins to ask Crawley all sorts of questions regarding Rebecca and her life at Manderley. It is during this conversation that she expresses her inferiority complex to Crawley which seems to upset him greatly. He states “‘You have qualities
that are just as important, far more so, in fact….kindliness, and sincerity, and if I may say so—modesty—are worth far more to a man, to a husband, than all the wit and beauty in the world”” (135). Crawley’s mention of modesty is subtle enough for the narrator to ignore, but the reader can certainly pick up on the weight of that word. This is the first instance in the novel when the reader has direct proof from another character that Rebecca was not the wonderful person she was perceived to be. Despite the clues she receives from Beatrice and Crawley, the narrator continues to believe that Rebecca was a perfect mistress of Manderley and—more importantly—the perfect wife for Maxim.

Despite the fact that Rebecca is dead, her relationship with the narrator is one of the strongest relationships in the novel. These women are essentially foils of each other and represent the two sides of du Maurier’s personality, as previously noted by her daughter, Flavia. They have become one person in the sense that they both hold the title of Mrs. de Winter, and even after her death, Rebecca fights to maintain her hold over Maxim and Manderley. At one point in the novel, the narrator alludes to the possibility that Rebecca’s ghost had taken over her mind and body and was controlling her thoughts and actions. She states “It was not I that answered, I was not there at all. I was following a phantom in my mind, whose shadowy form had taken shape at last” (44). This quote allows the reader to see that Rebecca’s power does not end with her death. She is able to control the narrator, the servants, and even Maxim over a year later.

Rebecca’s ability to control the narrator’s thoughts establishes her dominance over her rival. Before she is even acquainted with the concept of Rebecca, the narrator wishes to abandon the little identity she has. She constantly expresses the desire to be someone—anyone—other than herself. The first time she expresses this desire to Maxim, she states “…I wish I was a
woman of about thirty six dressed in black satin with a string of pearls”” (38), expressing her desire to be someone like Rebecca. Her desire to abandon her identity and become someone else continues throughout the novel. At one point in the novel she explains “…I wished…that I could be old even, with grey hair, and slow of step, having lived here many years, anything but the timid, foolish creature I felt myself to be” (65). The narrator’s early rejection of her own identity causes the reader to question how much of the competition between the two Mrs. de Winters is fueled by outside sources and how much is fueled by the narrator’s insecurities.

The narrator’s competition with Rebecca begins early in the novel. From her very first moments as Maxim’s fiancé, the narrator is comparing her proposal to Rebecca’s proposal. She explains:

Original proposals are much better. Much more genuine. Not like other people.

Not like younger men who talked nonsense probably, not meaning half they said.

Not like younger men being very incoherent, very passionate, swearing impossibilities. Not like him the first time, asking Rebecca….(58)

The narrator attempts to justify Maxim’s curt proposal by criticizing the elaborate passion of younger men who propose for the first time. She is expressing her preference of “original proposals” simply to allow herself to accept that she had not been able to drive Maxim mad with passion. By comparing her own proposal to Rebecca’s proposal, the reader can see the narrator’s obsession with surpassing Rebecca. The comparison suggests her infatuation with the late Mrs. de Winter, as well as Rebecca’s control over a woman she had never met.

As the novel progresses, the narrator appears to be losing the battle with Rebecca. The more she tries to fight Rebecca’s memory, the more she appears to push Maxim away. She learns with each passing day that she is not fit to be married to a man like Maxim. Rebecca’s strong
nature and breeding allowed her to be an entity in Maxim’s life, while the narrator is simply a decoration. Before she died, Rebecca organized the entire fancy dress ball by herself. She planned everything from the menu to the flowers used to decorate the house. When Maxim agrees to have the fancy dress ball, the narrator admits she may not be of much help in the planning department. Crawley states “‘There would be no need for you to do anything…you would just be yourself and look decorative’” (130). In this quote, Crawley literally tells the narrator that she is only a decoration in Manderley. While Rebecca was the essence of Manderley, the narrator is simply a flower on the table or a picture hanging on the wall. These examples clarify that the competition between Maxim’s two wives was certainly fueled by society, even though the narrator’s insecurities were the main cause.

Despite her initial efforts to surpass Rebecca as Mrs. de Winter, the narrator’s spirits begin to dwindle upon arriving at Manderley. When she learns how effective Rebecca was as mistress of the estate, the narrator immediately feels inferior and out of place. On her first morning at Manderley, Mrs. de Winter receives a phone call from Mrs. Danvers on the house telephone. When Mrs. Danvers calls her Mrs. de Winter, the narrator is flustered and responds “‘I’m afraid you have made a mistake,…Mrs. de Winter has been dead for over a year’” (86). Although this is the first occasion when the narrator acknowledges Rebecca as the only Mrs. de Winter, it is not the only occasion. The morning after the fancy dress ball incident, the narrator reflects on her marriage as a failure. She believes that after her faux pas, Maxim will never love her, and she has lost any chance she had at living happily ever after. She explains that “Rebecca was still mistress of Manderley. Rebecca was still Mrs. de Winter. I had no business here at all” (237). On this second occasion of acknowledging Rebecca as the only Mrs. de Winter, the narrator appears to surrender to Rebecca; she allows Rebecca to defeat her and regain her title as
Mrs. de Winter—even if only temporarily.

For a majority of the novel, Rebecca is the dominant personality in the power struggle between the two Mrs. de Winters. However, a shocking confession from Maxim tips the scales back in the narrator’s favor. After Maxim confesses to the narrator that he had never loved—and actually hated—Rebecca, the narrator believes that she has won the battle. Knowing that Maxim hated, and murdered, Rebecca is simply a boost for the narrator’s ego. She is unaffected by the fact that her husband is a murderer; she is only concerned with the fact that he loves her, and he never loved Rebecca. Winning Maxim’s love allows the narrator to feel as if she belongs at Manderley; she is finally an effective mistress of the estate. She admits that being severe with the servants is simpler than she expected, and she even passes Mrs. Danvers in the hierarchy of Manderley. Mrs. de Winter begins to make her own decisions and ignores the way in which Rebecca chose to do things. When Mrs. Danvers attempts to regain control of the situation and reestablish Rebecca’s superiority, Mrs. de Winter responds “I’m afraid it does not concern me very much what Mrs. de Winter used to do… I am Mrs. de Winter now, you know” (295). This new found confidence allows the narrator to establish her identity as Maxim’s wife and the mistress of Manderley; however, this triumph is only temporary.

Richard Kelly spends a significant portion of the first chapter of Daphne du Maurier discussing du Maurier’s childhood and family life. He explains that du Maurier portrays her mother as a “minor character” (11) in her autobiography, while her “life centers upon her father” (11). Kelly goes on to discuss the memories du Maurier had of her mother, portraying her as a selfish and temperamental child. He references an essay by du Maurier entitled “The Matinee Idol” in which she describes her mother as “really roused, with a high color and stamping foot” (11). Her mother’s outbursts allowed du Maurier to reverse their positions within the family;
Muriel became the moody child, while du Maurier believed herself to be the mature and stable maternal figure. To support this belief, Kelly cites a passage from the *Rebecca Notebook* where du Maurier admits the significance of Gerald’s ability to confide in his daughter. She writes “‘How old was I? Nineteen, twenty? I don’t remember, but I felt then as if he were my brother, or indeed my son. The father-daughter relationship had entered a deeper phase’ (RN, 241)” (12).

This scene is mirrored in *Rebecca* when Maxim confesses his crime to the narrator, and she becomes the dominant, parental figure of the relationship.

At the very end of the novel, Maxim literally gets away with murder, and the narrator believes that she and Maxim have finally beaten Rebecca. Maxim, on the other hand, is aware of how strong Rebecca still is and that there is still a possibility she would win. Maxim decides to race home to Manderley after the truth is revealed about Rebecca’s illness and a potential motive for suicide is discovered. On the way home, the narrator is sleeping in the back of the car and dreams that Rebecca is alive again and Maxim is brushing her hair; her hair turns into a snake and wraps around Maxim’s neck. This dream is an omen that Rebecca will never be beaten as long as Manderley still exists. Du Maurier’s choice to end the novel with the burning of Manderley—the symbol of Rebecca—reiterates the original belief that Rebecca would still beat Maxim. With the burning of Manderley, Rebecca takes away Maxim’s happiness and the narrator’s possibility of claiming her title as mistress of the estate; the power struggle between Rebecca and the narrator comes to an end, and Rebecca’s superiority is preserved.

In addition to her relationship with Rebecca, the narrator’s relationship with Maxim is equally important and complex. From the very first time they meet, the narrator is unsure about where her relationship with Maxim stands. She fears that when he takes her for rides in Monte Carlo, he is only being polite. On one of their drives, Maxim takes the narrator to the top of a
cliff and loses himself in the moment. The narrator explains her moment of insignificance by stating:

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. (29)

It is during this moment that the reader learns of the narrator’s fleeting importance to Maxim. One moment he is laughing with her in the car, and the next moment, he is completely unaware of her existence. His momentary indifference toward her causes the narrator to question the foundation of their relationship; she is not sure if he truly wants to spend his time with her or if he simply has nothing better to do. This sense of confusion the narrator experiences regarding Maxim’s desires for her is a theme throughout the entire novel and is a direct reflection of du Maurier’s relationship with her father.

Much as the narrator spends the novel fighting the spirit of Rebecca, du Maurier spent her life fighting the relationship between her mother and father. Kelly explains:

It seems that du Maurier was never totally convinced of her father’s all-consuming love for her—her mother, with prior claims upon him, not to mention the various actresses in his company upon whom he showered gifts and attention, were rivals for his affection—and so, through this adult fairy tale, she transforms her father into Maxim de Winter, a man seemingly dedicated to the memory of his domineering wife, who suddenly reveals that he loves none other than the nameless adoring heroine who, if she were named, might be called Daphne (56-57).
With the creation of Maxim—and his confession of hatred for Rebecca—du Maurier fulfills her own desires to be the sole object of her father’s affections. Just as the narrator is able to surpass Rebecca and become Maxim’s one true love, du Maurier believed she had defeated her mother, and her prize was her father’s undivided love and attention.

Once the narrator and Maxim are married and return to Manderley, Maxim immediately begins to display his dominant nature. Upon their arrival to Manderley, the servants are waiting to welcome their master and meet his new wife. When Maxim learns of this surprise, he tells the narrator that she will not have to say a word to any of the servants. He explains “…It’s all right, you won’t have to say anything, I’ll do it all” (66). Maxim dismisses any possibility of the narrator introducing herself to the servants; he takes that responsibility for himself and simply wants his wife to stand there. The narrator obeys Maxim’s desire with no objection, which emphasizes Maxim’s authority over his young bride.

During one of her earliest conversations with Maxim, the narrator expresses the immense love she had for her father. When Maxim commands the narrator to tell him about her father, she explains to the reader:

I looked at him over my glass of citronade. It was not easy to explain my father, and usually I never talked about him. He was my secret property. Preserved for me alone, much as Manderley was preserved for my neighbour. I had no wish to introduce him casually over a table in a Monte Carlo restaurant (25).

When the narrator shares her memories of her father with Maxim, Maxim becomes the father figure she desperately needs. The only name the narrator is ever given throughout the novel comes from her relationship to Maxim, much as du Maurier was given her name through her relationship to her father. The narrator becomes entirely dependent on Maxim because without
him, she has no identity at all. Similarly, du Maurier felt that her father had a commanding influence on her life. Kelly explains that du Maurier’s “…biography, in a sense, is an attempt, only partially successful, to exorcize this powerful spirit, to distance him, to gain a perspective on him that will allow her the freedom to develop her independence” (3); it is not until the men confide their secrets in the women that the roles are reversed.

Before the couple even returns to Manderley, Maxim had established his dominant nature over the narrator. During their last day in Monte Carlo, Maxim proposes to the narrator, but she misinterprets his marriage proposal as a business proposal. Within the following conversation, Maxim presents the narrator with a curt ultimatum as opposed to a romantic proposal:

Maxim:…Either you go to America with Mrs. Van Hopper or you come home to Manderley with me.

Narrator: Do you mean you want a secretary or something?

Maxim: No, I’m asking you to marry me, you little fool. (52)

This conversation highlights the narrator’s confusion about her relationship with Maxim as well as Maxim’s dismissive nature toward his soon to be wife. She assumes that he only wants her to be his secretary, a thought most likely due to the inferiority complex from which she suffers. Maxim’s dominance continues into the scene where they discuss their wedding for the first time. When the narrator suggests having a big, traditional wedding, Maxim states “’You forget…I had that sort of wedding before’” (56). Although Maxim has been married before, this would be the narrator’s first wedding, and Maxim simply dismisses any possibility of her having a traditional wedding. He shows that he is only concerned with his own desires, and the narrator is perfectly willing to ignore her own desires to appease Maxim’s. She explains “…I was thinking for the moment we would be married at home. Naturally I don’t expect a church, or people, or anything
like that”” (56). The narrator immediately abandons all of her plans for the wedding she envisioned simply to please Maxim; this is one of the many occasions in the novel that the narrator allows Maxim’s desires to determine her own.

The dominant nature of Maxim seems to mirror that of Mrs. Van Hopper. Mrs. Van Hopper openly acknowledges that she was some sort of a mother figure to the narrator, and, in turn, Maxim appears to be somewhat of a father figure. Twice her age, he is dismissive of her desires and believes his own decisions are more practical than those of his young bride. Many times in the novel, Maxim orders the narrator to behave a certain way or to complete certain tasks. At times, however, the narrator feels that he sees her as something even less significant than a child; one day while they are sitting together, she is sitting with her head against his arm while he strokes her hand “absent-mindedly” (103). This encounter causes the narrator to realize that Maxim treats her the same way she treats their dog, Jasper. She explains:

That’s what I do to Jasper, I thought. I’m being like Jasper now, leaning against him. He pats me now and again, when he remembers, and I’m pleased, I get closer to him for a moment. He likes me in the way I like Jasper. (103)

By comparing her relationship with Maxim to the relationship between a dog and his master, the narrator is openly acknowledging her inferior nature. She “leans” on Maxim who acknowledges her when he “remembers”; she is appreciative of any sign of affection from Maxim, no matter how half hearted the gesture may be.

Maxim’s dominant nature appears to benefit the narrator on certain occasions; she admits to often feeling inferior and shy, and she is glad to hide behind Maxim whenever possible. Although Maxim appears to enjoy his dominance over his young wife, he seems to want her to accept her responsibilities as Mrs. de Winter. The narrator explains that her shy nature makes
calling on other members of society an unbearable task. When Maxim grows frustrated with her, she explains that she is not shy by choice and wishes she could overcome her shyness. Maxim responds by stating “I know you can’t, [help being shy] sweetheart. But you don’t make an effort to conquer it” (147). This conversation mirrors that of a conversation between a father and his daughter. Most fathers are more frustrated when their daughters refuse to try their best than if they actually fail. This conversation emphasizes that the narrator’s shyness is not what bothers Maxim, but rather her lack of desire to overcome her problem. This scene very clearly depicts Maxim as a stern, yet loving and affectionate father.

This father-daughter relationship continues for the first few months of their marriage. The narrator believes that the only way to become Maxim’s wife and his equal is to outshine Rebecca in his mind. The need to win Maxim’s love is the main reason for the narrator’s constant desire to be better than Rebecca. When the narrator learns the truth about Maxim’s relationship with Rebecca, she is relieved. She feels a sense of triumph in knowing that Maxim hated Rebecca. As soon as Maxim confesses his hatred, and murder, of Rebecca, the narrator explains:

…I had built up false pictures in my mind and sat before them. I had never had the courage to demand the truth. Had I made one step forward out of my own shyness Maxim would have told me these things four months, five months ago.

(280)

It is with this realization that the narrator is able to change her ways; she finally sees herself as Maxim’s wife and equal rather than his pet or child. Once the secrets of Maxim’s past are revealed to the narrator, the couple begins a new life. They see each other as equals and become partners in their marriage, as well as in their attempt to conceal Maxim’s guilt. Maxim states “We’ll talk over things this evening when I get back…We’ve got so much to do together…”
(325). For the first time since they met, Maxim considers her mature and responsible enough to discuss his business with. This is also the first mention of the couple doing things together instead of Maxim doing things for his wife.

By being honest with each other, the couple was able come together as equals, but this achievement is only temporary. Over time, the hierarchy of the de Winter marriage is reestablished; however, the roles are reversed and Maxim becomes dependent on his newly dominant wife. The first occasion Mrs. de Winter is able to exert her new role is when Maxim learns that he will have to attend an inquest about the boat found containing Rebecca’s body. She explains “I held out my arms to him and he came to me like a child. I put my arms round him and held him” (358). This is the first time in the novel when Maxim must turn to his wife for support. She likens him to a child, which was the way she always saw herself. Maxim’s confession ultimately creates a chink in his armor and causes him to be vulnerable for the first time. Mrs. de Winter is able to comfort and support her husband because she can finally disregard the belief that Maxim is still in love with Rebecca.

This is not the only occasion of Maxim’s vulnerability and need of support from his wife. After they had learned of Rebecca’s illness from Dr. Baker, the couple stopped for something to eat. Mrs. de Winter notices that her husband seems anxious and explains that he will feel better if he eats something. During this scene, Mrs. de Winter is once again treating Maxim the way a mother would treat her child. She explains:

‘Your lobster will be cold,’ I said; ‘eat it darling. It will do you good, you want something inside you. You’re tired.’ I was using the words he had used to me. I felt better and stronger. It was I now who was taking care of him. He was tired, pale. I had got over my weakness and fatigue and now he was the one to suffer
In this passage, Mrs. de Winter acknowledges the reversal of roles between Maxim and herself. At first, Maxim would comfort her and tell her what she needed in order to feel better; Mrs. de Winter emphasizes her dominance over Maxim at this moment, and it is one of the rare occasions in the novel in which Maxim appears helpless, while the narrator appears to be in complete control. Mrs. de Winter has become the dominant, parent-like figure in the relationship, while Maxim’s vulnerability causes him to become child-like and entirely dependent on his wife.

As seen in the previous section, Mrs. de Winter is expected to fulfill many different roles throughout the novel. She begins the novel as an employee of Mrs. Van Hopper and soon becomes the wife of Maxim de Winter. During her time as Mrs. Van Hopper’s employee, the reader knows almost nothing about the narrator. Her actual job description is never discussed; she is simply expected to obey the commands of Mrs. Van Hopper in return for ninety pounds a year. Readers are accustomed to learning the personal information of a protagonist in the opening chapters of a novel. In this novel, however, the narrator actively avoids revealing any of her personal information to the reader. At one point, the narrator is looking back on her time in Monte Carlo and remembers a specific day. She tells the reader to “never mind how many years ago” (13) that day was. Although she hides her current age—during the time of the flashbacks—from the reader, she does admit that when she met Maxim she was twenty one years old.

Her age is not the only part of her identity she hides from the reader. There are three separate occasions in the beginning of the novel when the narrator avoids revealing her name. She explains that when she meets Maxim for the first time, Mrs. Van Hopper “waved a vague hand in my direction and mumbled my name” (14). After his abrupt departure from their conversation, Maxim sends a letter to the narrator to apologize for being rude. She explains “But
my name was on the envelope, and spelt correctly, an unusual thing” (20). During her time as Mrs. Van Hopper’s employee, the reader learns almost nothing about the narrator at all; the only valuable piece of information the narrator reveals during her time in Monte Carlo is that she believes herself to be inferior to the people who surround her.

Once she marries Maxim, however, her identity begins to take form. As Maxim’s wife, she is expected to fulfill two different roles: Maxim’s wife in their private life and the mistress of Manderley in the public realm. The narrator’s inferiority complex and obsession with Rebecca cause her to have difficulty fulfilling the duties of each role. Prior to their marriage, the narrator tells Maxim about her family history. It is during this conversation that Maxim states “‘You’ve taken me out of myself, out of despondency and introspection, both of which have been my devils for years’” (25). Maxim acknowledges the narrator’s ability to help him forget his own past. This foreshadows the role she will be expected to play in their marriage; she is expected to distract Maxim from his past and symbolize his future. Frank Crawley expounds on this belief when he states “‘We none of us want to bring back the past, Maxim least of all. And it’s up to you, you know, to lead us away from it. Not to take us back there again’” (136). Crawley describes the narrator’s first job as Maxim’s wife, which is to help him—and the people he knows—forget the past. While Rebecca symbolizes a corrupt and distorted past, the narrator symbolizes a new and innocent future.

During the beginning of their marriage, Mrs. de Winter is desperate to fit into Maxim’s world. She does anything she can to please Maxim, even if she dreads the task at hand. When Maxim is asked if he will be hosting the annual ball at Manderley again that year, the narrator notices he looks at her “‘doubtfully’” because “he thought [she] could not face it” (196). She explains that she would love to host the ball again because she “did not want him to feel [she]
would let him down” (196). Despite the fact that Mrs. de Winter dreads almost any form of social interaction, she agrees to host the ball because she believes that is what Maxim would want. Her role as Maxim’s wife is to simply fulfill Maxim’s wants and desires without becoming the dominant personality in the marriage.

The narrator’s inferiority complex is not the only issue she faces in fulfilling her duties as Maxim’s wife; Maxim also causes her great difficulty and confusion throughout the novel. As soon as they are married, Maxim begins to send the narrator mixed signals about what he expects from her. He explains that he wants her to overcome her shyness and accept her place at Manderley, but he often inhibits her from doing so. For example, when Lady Crowan convinces the de Winters to host another fancy ball, Maxim states “‘All right Frank, you will have to go ahead with the arrangements. Better get Mrs. Danvers to help you’” (196). While Rebecca was Maxim’s wife, she organized the entire ball from start to finish without anyone’s help. Although Maxim often encourages his new wife to fulfill her wifely duties, he does not even offer her the chance to help organize the ball. By asking Crawley and Mrs. Danvers to plan the ball, Maxim is simply justifying the narrator’s inferiority complex and her belief that she will never measure up to Rebecca.

As previously mentioned, there is an apparent shift in the roles in the de Winter marriage as the novel progresses. When they are first married, Maxim is the dominant person in the relationship. He often resembles a father figure and treats the narrator as if she were his daughter, or even his pet. By the novel’s end, however, the narrator is almost a mother figure to Maxim. She supports him when he is weak and tells him what he must do in order to feel better. In previous examples, it is clear that Maxim wanted a wife but not necessarily an equal partner. The constant power struggle during his first marriage causes him to marry a girl half his age who can
easily be controlled. His increasing vulnerability, however, forces the narrator to become the stronger person in the relationship; as time passes, Maxim’s strength is shifted to the narrator, and she becomes the care giver and decision maker of the marriage.

Similarly to her private role as Maxim’s wife, the narrator’s new role as the mistress of Manderley causes her a great amount of grief. Upon her arrival at Manderley, she believes that she is not fit to run the estate. During her first meeting with Mrs. Danvers, the narrator explains that she would “much rather” (75) leave the running of Manderley to Mrs. Danvers. It is evident from this scene that the narrator’s inferiority complex and shy nature keep her from even attempting to learn the way in which Manderley is run.

During her first few months at Manderley, the narrator often feels as if she does not belong there. On her first morning in her new home, Mrs. de Winter is sitting at the desk in the morning-room; she begins to look through the desk and explains that she feels like a guest in someone else’s home. It is during this time that Mrs. Danvers calls her on the house telephone and the narrator literally rejects her title of Mrs. de Winter. The narrator’s timid nature and inability to see herself as Mrs. de Winter directly relates to her ineffectiveness as the mistress of Manderley.

After she has been encouraged by Maxim to attempt to overcome her shyness, Mrs. de Winter begins to make changes to Manderley and the way things are done. The first time the narrator attempts to see Manderley has her house is on the morning she receives her wedding present from Beatrice. She explains that she does not want to display her present—a set of books on art—in the morning-room because “they were out of place in that fragile delicate room” (141). She goes on to disregard her previous concern by explaining that “it was [her] room now” (141). This event is the first time the narrator allows herself to make even the slightest change to
Manderley, as well as the first time she describes a part of Manderley as her own.

In terms of her public role as the mistress of Manderley, her main job is to deal with the servants and the issues that arise among them. When Mrs. Danvers accuses Robert of breaking the piece of china, Frith reports the incident to Maxim rather than Mrs. de Winter. Maxim is annoyed by Frith’s report and states “…How I loathe servants’ rows too. I wonder why they come to me about it. That’s your job, sweetheart” (143). In this quote, Maxim implies that resolving a disagreement among the servants is essentially a waste of his time; since he has more important issues to deal with, the narrator must step up and manage any problems with the servants and the way in which the house is run. Although Maxim clearly explains that this is a job for his wife to handle, she feels as if she will not be able to solve the problem and asks Maxim to step in. Once again, the narrator allows her timid nature to prevent her from fulfilling her duties as the mistress of Manderley, something Rebecca never would have done.

After some time passes, the narrator begins to feel more at home while at Manderley. She explains that “Standing here, looking down upon it from the banks, I realised, perhaps for the first time,…that I belonged there, and Manderley belonged to me” (263). After this realization, the narrator begins to change her behavior; she ignores her timid nature and finally accepts herself as Mrs. de Winter, the mistress of Manderley. She begins to be severe when dealing with the servants and even instructs them to make changes when she feels it is necessary. For example, she calls Robert on the house telephone and instructs him to “Tell Mrs. Danvers to order something hot…If there’s still a lot of cold stuff to finish we don’t want it in the dining-room” (294). Prior to her acceptance of her place at Manderley, the narrator would have simply accepted Mrs. Danvers’ menu for lunch. This change causes Mrs. Danvers to worry that she is losing the control she has over the narrator and Manderley. She explains that Rebecca had
always spoken to her about the menus directly rather than sending a message through another servant. Mrs. de Winter ignores Danvers’ attempt to correct her behavior. This is the first time in the novel that the narrator blatantly disregards Rebecca and the way she choice to run Manderley; this is also the first occasion where the narrator is able to stand up to Mrs. Danvers and explain that she is the mistress, and Mrs. Danvers is the servant, not the other way around.

The narrator’s effectiveness as the mistress of Manderley is strengthened throughout the remainder of the novel. She begins to make her own decisions regarding the servants, the daily menu, and other household chores. She becomes the dominant personality in her relationship with each of the servants in the house, which eventually extends into her relationship with Maxim. Her control over the servants allows her to feel more comfortable making decisions regarding Manderley, even when Maxim is present. The clearest example of her effectiveness as the mistress of Manderley can be seen in the following passage:

The door opened and Frith came into the room. I pushed Maxim away. I stood up straight and conventional, patting my hair into place.

‘Will you be changing, Madam, or shall I serve dinner at once?’

‘No, Frith, we wont be changing, not to-night,’ I said. (359)

When Frith enters the room, the narrator literally pushes Maxim away from her, something she has never done before. She is able to stand up straight and tell Frith her decisions about dinner that evening. She does not feel the need to consult Maxim with something that clearly falls under the description of her role as the mistress of Manderley.

In both her private role as Maxim’s wife and her public role as the mistress of Manderley, the narrator is entirely ineffective prior to Maxim’s confession. As long as Rebecca and her greatness are looming over the narrator and Manderley, the narrator feels that she is not a part of
Maxim’s world. It is only after Maxim confesses his past to the narrator that she is able to step up and run Manderley on her own without advice from anyone—including Maxim.
Chapter II: Rebecca

As previously mentioned, the character of Rebecca has caused a great deal of debate among the characters of the novel and literary critics alike; while some view her as a monstrous villain, others view her as an innocent victim. Although I think both readings present valid points, I cannot help but wonder what Daphne du Maurier would think of these analyses of one of her most famous characters. In my opinion—and based on the research I have conducted—I do not believe du Maurier would categorize Rebecca as a villain or a victim. I strongly believe that du Maurier partially based the character of Rebecca on elements of her own life and personality, and it is safe to assume that du Maurier did not see herself as a monstrous villain or a pitied victim.

While the narrator represents the insecurities of du Maurier, Rebecca is the embodiment of du Maurier’s secrets and unconventional feelings. Richard Kelly cites Mrs. Danvers’ explanation “…that Rebecca ‘had the courage and the spirit of a boy’ (244)” (60); although du Maurier did not have the courage of a boy, the spirit of the boy-in-the-box, Eric Avon, helped create the character of Rebecca.

In her article “Rebecca,” Sally Beauman discusses the way in which du Maurier perceived herself, the way in which society expected her to behave, and how these expectations were mirrored in Rebecca’s character. Beauman explains:

Half accepting society’s (and her husband’s) interpretation of ideal womanhood, yet rebelling against it and rejecting it, she came to regard herself as a ‘half-breed’ who was ‘unnatural’. To her, both her lesbianism and her art were a form of aberrance: they both sprang, she believed, from a force inside her that she referred to as the ‘boy in the box’ (59)
The conflict du Maurier experienced in terms of accepting society’s standards and rebelling against them can be seen clearly in the character of Rebecca; Rebecca allowed the public to see her as an admirable woman and the perfect wife, while she hid her true self from the people that knew her. The secrets Rebecca hid from the world, such as her incestuous relationship with Favell and her bisexuality, caused Maxim to explain that “She was not even normal” (275). Du Maurier experienced similar relationships in her life which caused her—according to Beauman—to identify herself as “unnatural” (59). In addition to her conflicting identity, Beauman explains that du Maurier “…gave her independence, her love of the sea, her expertise as a sailor, her sexual fearlessness, and even her bisexuality…to Rebecca” (59). Rebecca’s incestuous and lesbian relationships were inspired by relationships du Maurier experienced early on in her life.

Unlike the unnamed narrator of the novel, Rebecca’s identity is established from the first moment her name is mentioned. In the eyes of society, Rebecca was the perfect mistress of Manderley and the only woman that Maxim de Winter could ever love. Although the image of Rebecca is very different from the reality of her character, it is her perceived image that the reader and most of the characters are responding to.

In her role as the mistress of Manderley, Rebecca was respected by the servants and seen as an effective mistress by the rest of society. Rebecca’s ability to run an estate as well-known as Manderley with ease separates her from the narrator of the novel. Even after her death, the servants are concerned with following the schedule Rebecca had set in place. She spent her mornings in the morning-room where she completed all of her “correspondence and telephoning” (83). On her first morning at Manderley, the narrator immediately admits that, unlike Rebecca, she had no personal affairs to attend to after breakfast, allowing the reader to see that Rebecca
was an established member of society, while the narrator is a nameless, faceless ghost.

Society had created an image of Rebecca that the narrator could never surpass. Many of the de Winters’ friends and neighbors believed that Rebecca was the personification of what every woman should be. During a conversation with Crawley, the narrator explains that Rebecca “possessed” “confidence, grace, beauty, intelligence, wit…all the qualities that mean most in a woman” (135). Unlike Rebecca, the narrator does not believe she possesses the qualities that made Rebecca the remarkable woman that she was. Rebecca’s captivating beauty and strong nature allowed her to control Manderley and the people who lived there with ease.

Mrs. Danvers spends most of the novel attempting to rid Manderley of the narrator in order to preserve Rebecca’s memory. During a conversation with the narrator, Mrs. Danvers explains that she believes Rebecca is still present at Manderley even though she has been dead for almost a year. Mrs. Danvers states:

‘It’s not only this room…It’s in many rooms in the house. In the morning-room, in the hall, even in the little flower room. I feel her everywhere. You do too, don’t you?...Sometimes, when I walk along the corridor here, I fancy I hear her just behind me. That quick, light footstep. I could not mistake it anywhere. And in the minstrels’ gallery above the hall. I’ve seen her leaning there, in the evenings in the old days, looking down at the hall below and calling to the dogs. I can fancy the sound of her dress sweeping the stairs as she comes down to dinner…Do you think the dead come back and watch the living?” (175).

This passage reiterates the fact that Rebecca’s spirit is still present at Manderley and is still attempting to control the estate, the servants, and Maxim. Mrs. Danvers’ alludes to the fact that not even Death could remove Rebecca’s spirit from the world.
Part of the reason for Rebecca’s effectiveness as the mistress of Manderley was the fact that she created the estate. Although the estate had been a part of Maxim’s family for years, he admits to the narrator that the Manderley they live in only exists because of Rebecca. He explains:

‘Her blasted taste made Manderley the thing it is today….Half the stuff you see here in the rooms was never here originally. The drawing-room as it is today, the morning-room—that’s all Rebecca. Those chairs Frith points out so proudly to the visitors on the public day, and that panel of tapestry—Rebecca again….The beauty of Manderley that you see to-day, the Manderley that people talk about and photograph and paint, it’s all due to her, to Rebecca.” (278-279).

This passage explains the possibility that Rebecca haunts Manderley because she knows that it would not exist without her. Manderley was Rebecca’s creation, and that is why she was such an effective mistress. She was able to create her own estate and possessed the ability to make it one of the most beautiful and well known estates in the country.

Despite her strong nature, her beauty, and her wit, du Maurier alludes to several occasions when Rebecca—like the narrator—rejects her own identity. Maxim describes scenes of deception to the narrator. He recalls the “shabby, sordid farce” (278) the two played together. She would smile at the servants, and “they never knew how she laughed at them behind their backs, jeered at them, mimicked them” (278). Rebecca portrayed herself as a respectable wife and admirable woman while she was at Manderley; she only revealed her true identity when she traveled to her apartment in London. On one occasion, however, Rebecca would not allow her true identity to be seen in her refuge of London. At the inquisition of Maxim after Rebecca’s body is discovered, it is revealed that during her last trip to London, Rebecca had an appointment
with Dr. Baker under a false name—Mrs. Danvers. Du Maurier suggests that Rebecca knew she was sick, and by using a different name, she was attempting to protect herself from what the doctor might find. Rebecca knew that even her strong nature could not survive the force of her illness, so she figuratively saved herself from the pain by using Mrs. Danvers’ name. It is clear that Rebecca was strong enough to fight and overcome anything—including Death—but she was terrified of pain and would do anything to avoid it.

Although Rebecca dies, she dies on her own terms. After Dr. Baker’s diagnosis, Rebecca knew that she would not be able to endure the pain; she tricks Maxim into killing her so that she will never experience the pain of her illness. By dying on her own terms, Rebecca is able to overpower Death and haunt Manderley and its inhabitants until Manderley’s last moments. The reader learns that Manderley is a part of Rebecca and cannot exist without her. Even after the estate is destroyed, Rebecca’s spirit haunts the minds of the narrator and Maxim.

Rebecca was able to secure a place in the hearts of every person she met during her life, especially Mrs. Danvers. The ominous housekeeper is the one character in the novel who is not afraid to mention Rebecca and the effect she had on Manderley. She states:

‘She was lovely then….Lovely as a picture, men turning to stare at her when she passed, and she not twelve years old. She knew then, she used to wink at me like the little devil she was…She twisted her father round her little finger and she’d have done the same with her mother, had she lived. Spirit, you couldn’t beat my lady in spirit. She drove a four-in-hand on her fourteenth birthday, and her cousin, Mr. Jack, got up on the box beside her and tried to take the reins from her hands. They fought it out together…She won though, my lady won…(247).

Unlike Rebecca, the narrator never feels confident of her physical appearance and almost never
steps on anyone’s toes. She allows her desires to be pushed aside if it means pleasing one of the other characters. While the narrator is afraid of the most informal social interactions, Rebecca was not afraid of anything; she knew nothing could beat her, and so did Mrs. Danvers. Danvers explains that when “she was beaten in the end…it wasn’t a man, it wasn’t a woman. The sea got her. The sea was too strong for her” (248). Thus, only a natural force as powerful as the sea could outmatch Rebecca’s spirit.

As mentioned by Mrs. Danvers, the strength of Rebecca’s spirit was similar to that of a man’s. It can be argued, that like du Maurier, Rebecca also had a “boy in the box” within her who determined her actions and thoughts. In Daphne du Maurier, Richard Kelly discusses du Maurier’s earliest thoughts of identifying herself as a boy instead of a girl. Kelly explains that du Maurier’s father, Gerald, often treated his three daughters as the sons he never had. Du Maurier wrote about the times she and her sisters played cricket with their father and “…dreamed and thought as boys… (Gerald, 189)” (5). Both Rebecca and du Maurier felt that their female identities were holding them back in a world run by patriarchy and were desperate to escape the confines of womanhood.

Rebecca’s arrogance lasted until the moment of her death. Maxim recalls the entire night of Rebecca’s murder and describes the scene to his young bride. He explains “She turned round and faced me, smiling, one hand in her pocket, the other holding the cigarette. When I killed her, she was smiling still” (284). This scene is the perfect example of Rebecca’s wit and arrogance. She knew she could make Maxim angry enough to murder her, which would save her from the inevitable pain in her future; she devised a plan that would save her from the only thing she feared, and this allowed her to die with an air of triumph about her.

As previously mentioned, the narrator and Rebecca are essentially foils to each other. The
narrator represents innocence and submission, while Rebecca symbolizes wickedness and a ruthless dominance. Rebecca, however, was clever enough to hide her wicked nature from respectable members of society. Only a handful of people knew Rebecca’s true identity and just how cruel she was. Prior to Maxim’s revelation, the reader is given clues pertaining to Rebecca’s cruelty. During a walk on the beach, the narrator encounters a mentally challenged man named Ben. Upon seeing the narrator, Ben states that she is “not like the other one…Tall and dark she was,…She gave you the feeling of a snake” (157). Although Ben never mentions Rebecca by name, the reader has enough information to understand that the snake-like woman was Rebecca. Ben compares Rebecca to a snake, a common symbol of wickedness, and immediately tells the narrator that she is not like Rebecca. The many differences between the women allow the reader to fully grasp the concept that Rebecca’s corruption had enveloped Manderley, and it was up to the narrator’s innocence to break the spell.

In this novel, the relationships between characters are of central importance. The narrator spends almost the entire novel attempting to win the hearts of Maxim, his relatives, and other members of society. Her task is made more difficult by the fact that society appears to have adored Rebecca de Winter; she was the perfect wife and a model woman. Despite this generally held belief, the reader soon learns that not all of Rebecca’s relationships were a success.

As previously mentioned, Maxim’s relationship with Rebecca was drastically different from the picture the narrator had in her mind. While their acquaintances believed Maxim to be lamenting the death of his beloved first wife, Maxim reveals that he could have never loved a woman who was so wicked. Maxim exposes the truth about Rebecca and their marriage to the narrator after the authorities discover Rebecca’s boat with a body inside. Maxim states:

‘You thought I loved Rebecca? You thought I killed her, loving her? I hated her, I
tell you, our marriage was a farce from the very first. She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together. Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal.’ (275).

This is the first point in the novel when the reader directly learns of Rebecca’s wicked nature, and it is also the first time Maxim even dares to mention Rebecca’s name. At first, the narrator and the reader assume that Maxim does not speak of his first wife because it is too painful for him, but in reality, he is trying to leave Rebecca and her vile nature in the past.

Maxim explains that he learned the truth about Rebecca on their honeymoon in Monte Carlo. He explains that “She sat there, laughing, her black hair blowing in the wind; she told me about herself, told me things I shall never repeat to a living soul…I nearly killed her then” (276). The fact that Maxim thought of killing his new bride during their honeymoon stresses the severity of Rebecca’s evil nature. Maxim appears disgusted by the thought that he knew—let alone married—a woman who was capable of these unspeakable deeds. He dismisses her as abnormal and takes away her humanity; in its place, he creates the image of a damnable succubus who was only interested in pleasing herself. The scene of Maxim’s confession allows the reader to see just how clever and manipulative Rebecca was.

While the other characters of the novel and the reader believed Maxim and Rebecca’s marriage to be a union of unconditional love, Maxim clarifies that it was simply a “bargain” (277). Rebecca promised to make Manderley one of the most beautiful and well known estates in all of England, and Maxim’s pride accepted this deal. He explains “She knew I would sacrifice pride, honour, personal feeling, every damned quality on earth, rather than stand before our little world after a week of marriage and have them know the things about her that she had told me
then” (277). Much to the narrator’s—and the reader’s—surprise, Maxim and Rebecca were not madly in love from the moment they met, but rather they were both concerned with keeping up appearances in the public realm. As long as society believed their marriage to be a success, Maxim would allow their bargain to continue.

Rebecca’s spirit caused Maxim to fight for dominance on a daily basis. Unlike his second wife, his first wife would not simply accept his orders and desires; Rebecca chose to live her life as she pleased, and not even Maxim could keep her in line. Despite Maxim’s contempt and disgust for Rebecca, many other characters were captivated by her presence and adored her; while Maxim portrays Rebecca as the personification of pure evil, Mrs. Danvers attempts to depict Rebecca as the perfect example of womanhood.

Mrs. Danvers is the main advocate for Rebecca’s cause throughout the entire novel. She does whatever is in her power to rid Manderley of the narrator in order to keep the memory of Rebecca alive. Unlike Maxim, Mrs. Danvers “…simply adored Rebecca” (102). Upon her arrival to Manderley, the narrator believes that Mrs. Danvers resents her because she is not as refined as Rebecca was; she learns later on, however, that “She [Mrs. Danvers] was also Rebecca’s personal friend…She was with her years before she married, and practically brought her up” (345). Rebecca had been more than a mistress to Mrs. Danvers. The older woman saw Rebecca as a friend, a confidant, and sometimes even as her own child. It is possible, however, that their friendship and professional relationship were not the only aspects of the connection between Mrs. Danvers and Rebecca.

At one point in the novel, the narrator sneaks into the room in the West Wing that used to be Rebecca’s bedroom. Upon her arrival, she learns that Mrs. Danvers has kept the room in perfect order, as if Rebecca were still living. Mrs. Danvers appears and begins to show the
narrator around the room and points out some of Rebecca’s most beautiful possessions. During this tour, Mrs. Danvers pulls out one of Rebecca’s nightgowns and states “‘This was the nightdress she was wearing for the last time, before she died….Feel it, hold it,…how soft and light it is, isn’t it? I haven’t washed it since she wore it for the last time” (171). This quote, along with this entire scene, is filled with homoerotic subtext. The way Mrs. Danvers idolizes every possession of Rebecca’s—along with the fact that she has not washed the nightgown—implies that Mrs. Danvers most likely had romantic feelings toward Rebecca. Mrs. Danvers continues the tour and points out Rebecca’s under garments and identifies a pair that Rebecca had never worn. Mrs. Danvers has memorized every article of clothing Rebecca wore during her life time and uses this tour as a chance to feel the materials and remember Rebecca’s body. The homoerotic subtext in this scene clearly signifies that Mrs. Danvers saw Rebecca as more than an employer and friend; she saw Rebecca as a potential lover.

During the tour of Rebecca’s bedroom, the reader learns of the deeper level of Mrs. Danvers’ feelings for Rebecca; there is no confirmation, however, if the feelings were mutual and if the two women had a lesbian relationship. The reader begins to suspect if Rebecca’s beauty was powerful enough to make anyone fall in love with her, or if Rebecca encouraged Mrs. Danvers’ affections by returning them; this suspicion is acknowledged in the scene in which Favell accuses Maxim of murdering Rebecca.

Following the inquest of Maxim, Jack Favell—Rebecca’s cousin and lover—is not satisfied with the ruling that Rebecca had committed suicide. He ventures to Manderley and in front of the narrator and the county magistrate, accuses Maxim of murdering Rebecca. Favell explains that Maxim killed Rebecca because he was jealous of their love, and Mrs. Danvers uses this moment as an opportunity to present herself as the only object of Rebecca’s affections. She
Gentile45

explains:

‘She was not in love with you, or with Mr. de Winter…She despised all men. She was above all that….Lovemaking was a game with her, only a game. She told me so. She did it because it made her laugh….She laughed at you like she did at the rest. I’ve known her come back and sit upstairs on her bed and rock with laughter at the lot of you’ (346).

The narrator goes on to explain that “There was something horrible in the sudden torrent of words, something horrible and unexpected” (346). Although Mrs. Danvers never directly states that she had a sexual relationship with Rebecca, the words she chooses contain enough evidence. This speech allows Mrs. Danvers to appear as the only person who Rebecca shared everything with, which allows the reader to fully accept the potential relationship and Rebecca’s sexual feelings for Mrs. Danvers.

Similar to the speculations regarding Rebecca’s sexuality, du Maurier’s daughters discussed their mother’s questionable sexuality during their interview with Helen Taylor. Her younger daughter, Flavia, states “I believe she was rather torn about her sexuality. I mean, this always wanting to be a boy, and her father wanting her to be a boy….she talks about the boy in a box—so I think she was frightfully muddled about her sexuality, sometimes” (6). Her oldest daughter, Tessa, also mentions the letters one of her mother’s biographers discovered “relating to du Maurier’s affair with [Gertrude] Lawrence and unrequited desire for Ellen Doubleday” (6). Du Maurier’s unconventional feelings toward other women were mirrored in Rebecca’s relationship with Mrs. Danvers; these relationships are clear examples of the way in which these two women rebelled against society’s norms.

Prior to Favell’s accusation of Maxim, the reader believes that Rebecca did not care
about anyone but herself. Mrs. Danvers appears to be the only person she is willing to welcome into every aspect of her life. After this scene, Mrs. Danvers is no longer Rebecca’s servant; she is her friend, her lover, and her sole confidant. Or is she?

In an attempt to find a potential motive for suicide, Maxim and company search through the appointments Rebecca had the day she died. When they come across a 2:00 appointment with a Dr. Baker, Mrs. Danvers is taken aback. Mrs. Danvers states “’Baker?...She knew no one called Baker. I’ve never heard the name before” (349). While Mrs. Danvers believed that she was the only person who Rebecca truly loved and was her sole confidant, Rebecca had another agenda. This scene proves that Rebecca had never cared for anyone more than she cared for herself. She was willing to manipulate and lie when necessary in order to secure her own wants and desires. Mrs. Danvers goes from being perceived as the only person Rebecca ever loved to simply another notch on her bedpost.

As if Mrs. Danvers’ confession did not reveal enough about Rebecca’s taboo choices, her relationship with her cousin, Jack Favell, adds another level of unmentionable behavior to Rebecca’s life. As with most of the information about Rebecca, her relationship with Favell is not confirmed until the end of the novel. The reader is left to surmise the truth about Rebecca and her life based on the observations of the narrator during her time at Manderley. One day while Maxim is in London on business, the narrator returns from walking Jasper and sees Mrs. Danvers standing by the window of Rebecca’s old room with a mysterious man. Upon seeing the narrator, Danvers closes the shades of the window, as if to keep the narrator from seeing who the man is. As Mrs. Danvers attempts to sneak the man—who turns out to be Favell—out of the estate, the two encounter the narrator. After introducing himself, Favell requests “’By-the-way…it would be very sporting and grand of you if you did not mention this little visit of mine
to Max. He doesn’t exactly approve of me’…” (164). The narrator and the reader are left to wonder why Maxim would not approve of Rebecca’s cousin, but Mrs. Danvers’ reaction to being discovered is enough to imply the worst.

The suspicious relationship between Favell and Rebecca is revealed when Maxim confesses to the narrator. Maxim explains:

‘She used to have this fellow Favell down to the cottage…she would tell the servants she was going to sail and would not be back before the morning. Then she would spend the night down there with him. Once again I warned her. I said if I found him here, anywhere on the estate, I’d shoot him. He had a black, filthy record….’ (281).

The reader learns that Maxim knew the details of Rebecca’s relationship with Favell, but he did not directly state what went on between his wife and her cousin. Maxim’s refined nature causes him to be disgusted by the fact that he married a woman who partook in an incestuous relationship.

Her relationship with Favell is eventually revealed to the narrator and the reader. When Favell meets Colonel Julyan for the first time, he explains that he has “…a right to speak, not only as Rebecca’s cousin, but as her prospective husband, had she lived” (335). This quote implies that Rebecca was willing to abandon Maxim and ruin his reputation in order to pursue an incestuous relationship with Favell. Favell’s confirmation of his sexual relationship with Rebecca only heightens the amount of scandal in Rebecca’s life. Her wicked nature and her forbidden sexual preferences help to separate Rebecca from the narrator.

In the same way Maxim was inspired by du Maurier’s father, Rebecca’s cousin, Jack Favell, was inspired by her cousin, Geoffrey. In Daphne du Maurier, Richard Kelly explains that
Geoffrey was the object of du Maurier’s first romantic feelings (9). During one of Geoffrey’s visits, du Maurier and her cousin bonded, and they both were aware of their feelings for each other. On Geoffrey’s last night with the family, Kelly explains that “Geoffrey took du Maurier for a last look at the sea...” when “they both noticed Gerald standing up on the cliff looking down at them” (10). Rebecca and Favell met on the shores of Manderley to escape the prying eyes of Maxim, while du Maurier and Geoffrey saw the sea as a refuge from Gerald and his disapproval of their relationship. Kelly explains that “In this man…lies the dangerous and thrilling potential for a kind of imaged, surrogate incest” (10). The incestuous relationships in which du Maurier and Rebecca were involved emphasize the unnatural feelings each woman experienced.

Throughout the novel, Rebecca is adored—and almost worshipped—by many of the characters, but she is despised by others, such as Maxim and his new wife. Like the characters of the novel, literary critics have different perspectives on who is the real villain of Daphne du Maurier’s Gothic tale of romance. Many feminist critics believe that, contrary to popular belief, Rebecca cannot be considered the villain of the novel. In her article, “Rebecca as Desdemona: ‘a maid that paragons description and wild fame,’” Kathleen Butterly Nigro argues that Rebecca was actually a victim of Maxim’s brutal and cold hearted villainy.

Nigro begins her article by likening Rebecca to Shakespeare’s heroine, Desdemona and compares Maxim to the vicious and cruel Othello. She explains Robin Wood’s belief that examining Rebecca in the same light as Othello would allow readers to see Rebecca as “a woman whose worst crime…was ‘simply that she resisted male definition, asserting her right to define herself and her sexual desires’” (145). The male characters of Gothic Literature almost never experience constraints; they are not required to sacrifice their own desires in order to
appease their female counterparts. On the other hand, Gothic female characters are expected to obey their father’s every wish until they are married, and then they must obey their husband’s desires. Men were allowed to do as they pleased, while their wives and daughters were essentially locked in the worlds of their husbands and fathers. Nigro mentions that both Rebecca and Othello “use images of locks and keys…implying enclosure and restraint” (146). According to feminist critics, Maxim suffocated Rebecca and locked her in his world because he knew he could not contain her spirit to be an independent woman.

The patriarchal social system of this time period required women to be subservient to men. The second Mrs. de Winter is often portrayed as the heroine of the novel because she is willing to submit to Maxim entirely. Nigro goes on to explain Maxim’s decision to murder Rebecca was due to his inability to keep his wife from having affairs with other men. Rebecca and Desdemona are both believed to be having affairs with other men; while Desdemona was innocent, Rebecca had been guilty of infidelity. Although Desdemona was an innocent woman who was murdered by a jealous husband, many feminist critics believe that Rebecca’s crime of infidelity does not justify the punishment of murder (147-148).

It is evident from the novel that Maxim saw Rebecca’s desire for autonomy to be the sole factor in his possible downfall. In this relationship, Maxim symbolizes the old world of patriarchy, and Rebecca symbolizes the ‘hope’ for a more woman-friendly future. Rebecca often promotes her womanhood through her sexuality, and this is the ultimate reason that pushes Maxim to murder his wife. Maxim decides to kill Rebecca when she implies that she has been impregnated by another man and plans to raise the child as Maxim’s. Nigro discusses the writings of Peter Stallybrass which study the “prevailing attitude during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries toward women’s bodies as dirty or contaminated, and the notion of
motherhood as sinful (and possibly demonic)” (150). Although Rebecca is not actually pregnant, Maxim believes that her child will be a constant reminder of her prominent sexuality and his ineffectiveness as a man, two things that Maxim is not willing to admit. In order to protect his own reputation—and the institution of patriarchy—Maxim kills Rebecca, the only independent woman present in the novel.

The character of Rebecca threatens much more than Maxim’s pride; she threatens a way of life. Nigro explains:

The ‘tyrant custom’ that drives Othello also drives Maxim de Winter, who put Manderley above all else. The daily menu protocol and the ‘solemn ritual’ of tea emphasize the rigidity of life at Manderley, a life which would not allow a spirit like Rebecca’s to threaten its tradition (152).

The narrator—along with the other female characters of the novel—simply accepts the patriarchal society in which she lives. Rebecca, on the other hand, is willing to fight to obtain a sense of autonomy. Nigro concludes her article by stating that “an examination of Maxim as an Othello figure reveals Rebecca as a Gothic heroine who is dominated by her husband and the ‘tyrant, custom,’ whose only real crime was insisting on her right to individuality” (153). Despite the common belief that Rebecca is an evil woman who represents corruption and destruction, feminist critics have compared her to Desdemona; Rebecca shifts from being the obvious villain to a pitied victim, while Maxim—and his desire to preserve male supremacy—becomes the proper villain of the novel.

While the feminists have established Maxim as a vicious villain and Rebecca as a blameless victim, Auba Llompart Pons presents an entirely different reading; in the article “Patriarchal Hauntings: Re-reading Villainy and Gender in Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca,” Pons
presents the argument that “villainy in this novel is not exclusively linked to gender and, therefore, the victim and abuser statues cannot be equated to femininity and masculinity, respectively” (69). Unlike many literary critics, Pons does not choose a side in the war between Maxim and Rebecca; he acknowledges that characters of both genders are equally willing to sacrifice their morals in order to obtain their desires.

Throughout his article, Pons explains his qualms with reading *Rebecca* in the traditional or the feminist light. He mentions that by considering Maxim as the novel’s ultimate villain, we do “…not break with the assumption that villainy stems from one sex to the detriment of the other” (71). Attempting to establish which de Winter is the villain and which de Winter is the victim causes critics to disregard the truth about each character’s morals. Pons argues that “…all the main characters of the novel display signs of vice and dishonesty, regardless of their gender” (71). He goes on to explain that “…the ultimate gothic villain in Daphne du Maurier’s novel is the haunting presence of an old-fashioned, strict patriarchal system represented by…Manderley” (71). In this thought, Pons shifts the wickedness from all of the characters and establishes Manderley—and a certain way of life—as the definitive villain of the novel.

A traditional reading of *Rebecca* presents the title character as a corrupt and wicked woman who was willing to abandon her morals in order to develop a sense of independence. In the eyes of Maxim, his first wife was “…everything that is traditionally undesirable in a wife, a threat against patriarchy” (74). Maxim was concerned that Rebecca’s antics would cause the other members of society to question Maxim’s ability to fill the role of patriarch; if a man cannot control his own wife, then surely he cannot be considered an effective patriarch. Although Maxim claims that he was disgusted by Rebecca’s sexuality, Pons argues that “his main concern is not so much Rebecca’s sexuality *per se*, but the effect it might have on his estate and his
reputation” (75). When Maxim confesses his crime to the narrator and reveals Rebecca’s secrets, he tells the narrator that he ignored Rebecca’s revolting nature because he knew she would turn Manderley into one of the most admired estates in the country. Rebecca’s life and secret existence were safe until the moment she threatened Maxim’s future as a patriarch.

Despite Rebecca’s immoral and forbidden behavior, Pons argues that “…there is no such thing as a threat to the patriarchal system” (75) within the novel. However, “…there is a constant preoccupation about its perpetuation” (75). Each of the characters is willing to commit villainous acts in order to maintain the hierarchy established by a patriarchal social system. Even the naïve and insecure narrator is willing to help her husband get away with murder in order to protect their family and the reputation of Manderley. Both Mrs. de Winters were slaves to the established system which provided them with a sense of protection; Pons clarifies that “…Mrs. de Winter needs patriarchy to define who she is, and Rebecca needs it to protect and conceal her unaccepted sexual behavior under the image of a perfect wife” (80). Without the shield of patriarchy, Rebecca’s secrets would have been revealed to society, and Mrs. de Winter would have no established identity whatsoever.

Maxim de Winter is often read as the sympathetic hero of the novel. The reader pities him for marrying a woman as vile and dishonest as Rebecca; his horrific first marriage is rectified in his marriage to the innocent and modest narrator. Feminist critics, on the other hand, have no sympathy for Maxim; in their eyes, he is viewed as a sadistic misogynist who detested his wife and her desire to be autonomous. Pons presents the argument that Maxim did not simply hate Rebecca because of her thirst for independence, but rather “…that he felt feminised and ‘otherised’ by her” (77). Rebecca’s spirit made it difficult—essentially impossible—for Maxim to control her, and his lack of ability to control his wife directly affects his ability to be a man,
according to the standards of his time.

In spite of popular belief, neither Rebecca nor Maxim is responsible for the treachery within the novel; Pons explains that “The source of all the trouble is Manderley; not Rebecca—who, after all is absent from the narrative—and not even Maxim, who is simply a puppet in the upper-class world he is trapped in” (81). Manderley drives many of the characters—both men and women—to ignore their principles in order to preserve and protect their position of power within society.
Conclusion

Daphne du Maurier’s identity and life experiences inspired the characters and events of her most famous novel. By basing the two wives of Maxim de Winter on her own personality, du Maurier was able to confess her insecurities and unconventional feelings to her readers. The characters of Maxim and Favell allow her to express the incestuous feelings she had toward her father and cousin, and the creation of Manderley provided her with an opportunity to express her love for Menabilly. The reflections of Daphne du Maurier’s life present within *Rebecca* permitted du Maurier to share a piece of herself with the world, even if the significance of these characters and events were lost on the reader.


