

Advanced Higher English Dissertation

A comparative literary analysis of the authors' depiction of conflict between female character 'models' in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.



"Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again."



"She isn't wearing black like most of the others. Instead she's in white."



"The fire broke out at dead of night..."

4,439 words

In *Rebecca*, *The Robber Bride* and *Jane Eyre* two contrasting models of womanhood are presented: one is 'inferior', a stereotype of plainness and loyalty that must compete against a more 'superior' model of beauty and cunning. In *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, the narrator is dominated by the memory of her husband's late wife. The new Mrs de Winter struggles to cope as mistress of Manderley and feels inadequate to her vision of Rebecca's perfection. Further, in Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*, Zenia is the eponymous character who is beautiful and manipulative. The title derives from Zenia's ability to 'rob' the other female characters of their partners. Three women narrate the novel: Tony, Charis and Roz who each endure an encounter with Zenia that also 'robs' their self-esteem. Contrastingly, in Charlotte Bronte's classic *Jane Eyre*, the narrator is not as inferior as Mrs de Winter and Tony as she succeeds against the beautiful Blanche Ingram and the insane Bertha. Jane, however, shares many of the qualities attributed to the 'weaker' characters: she is loyal, plain and devoted to her romantic hero.

Firstly, the very title of Daphne du Maurier's novel 'Rebecca' instantaneously conveys a sense of painful inferiority for the narrator who remains nameless throughout as it is her husband's late wife who is the eponymous character. This initial erasure of this important personal detail is a dramatic and tragic warning of the subsequent lack of identity she struggles against the shadow of Rebecca and the domination of Maxim.

The narrator is working as a companion for the supercilious Mrs Van Hopper who compels the narrator's insecurities that she is too insignificant to provide any source of interesting conversation. Mrs Van Hopper belittles the narrator and treats her much like a child, requiring her to obey orders and keep her mouth shut in the company of guests:

'Mr de Winter is having coffee with us, go and ask the water for another cup," she said, her tone just casual enough to warn him of my footing. It meant I was a youthful thing and unimportant, and that there was no need to include me in the conversation...'

When the narrator first encounters the existence of the handsome and mysterious Maxim de Winter, he does not allow Mrs Van Hopper to exclude her and this is the first time that someone like Mr de Winter has shown her such kindness. Maxim then becomes an unexpected and

tumultuous presence in the young narrator's life.

It is the discovery of the existence of Maxim's beautiful deceased wife Rebecca that initiates the narrator's destructive obsession with her. The narrator searches desperately for any piece of information about Rebecca she can possibly uncover to more clearly depict the perception of her she has created:

'she would tear off sheet after sheet of that smooth white paper, using it extravagantly, because of the long strokes she made when she wrote, and at the end of each of her personal letters she put her signature, 'Rebecca', that tall sloping R dwarfing its fellows.'

When comparing herself to Rebecca, the narrator dramatically and obsessively exaggerates her own faults and insecurities when held in direct contrast to what she believes is perfection. The words "smooth", "extravagantly", "strokes" and "sloping" each connote elegance and highlight the elevated opinion the narrator holds of Rebecca's personality. The "tall sloping R" dwarfs all the other letters in the name Rebecca, much the same way as Rebecca "dwarfs" anyone else in her company. It becomes clear that even the mere mention of Rebecca's name is enough to remind the narrator of her position in her marriage to Maxim. Without Maxim, it would appear that the narrator does not exist, without a name she appears to be a nobody. Rebecca, however, has a name all of her own, an independence, a beauty and a presence that presides and continues to haunt long after she is dead.

It is from this almost obsessive compulsion to think, dream and ask about Rebecca that our narrator's insecurities are heightened and exaggerated. Mrs de Winter's perceptions of Rebecca are based upon rumours and her imagination. Consequently Rebecca seems almost illuminated against the dull narrator, and the constant need to think about Rebecca only deepens her own misery:

'what must I have seemed like after Rebecca? I can see myself now, memory spanning the years like a bridge, with straight, bobbed hair and youthful, unpowdered face, dressed in an ill-fitting coat and a jumper of my own creation...'

The narrator exaggerates her own faults and thus begins her struggle with insecurity and

paranoia that those around her cannot accept her without thinking of the differences between herself and Rebecca. The inability to accept herself is one of the main flaws in the narrator's personality and it is on this flaw that the haunting memory of Rebecca manifests itself so inescapably:

"and I realise, everyday, that things I lack, confidence, grace, beauty, intelligence, wit - oh, all the qualities that mean most in a woman - she possessed."

Rebecca seems to be the narrator's desired alter ego. The narrator never met Rebecca, nor has she seen a photograph, she builds this image based on assumptions and a lack of clarity from Maxim further emphasising the desperation with which she idolises Rebecca. The malicious housekeeper Mrs Danvers has also exaggerated Rebecca's memory in order to callously intimidate the narrator and preserve Rebecca's memory. To have Maxim's love she believes she must be Rebecca, and the irony is so painful when with hindsight we realise Maxim never loved Rebecca, and indeed the narrator perpetuates her own hopelessness.

While Rebecca stayed at Manderley she enthused personality into everything she touched. By leaving such a prominent presence upon the house it is almost impossible for anyone to make the place their own. The shy and insecure narrator struggles hopelessly to forget that these were the walls in which Rebecca happily spent the married years of her life with Maxim. The narrator does, however, find respite amongst the free and non-judgemental air of the garden in the Happy Valley. Here the flowers are untainted. Here, there are no servants to scrutinize the way she goes about her business and compare it with how Rebecca confidently went about hers:

'there I was an interloper, wondering in rooms that did not know me, sitting at a desk and in a chair that were not mine. Here, it was different. The Happy Valley knew no trespassers...'

The Happy Valley seemed to be her refuge; her sanctuary where for a fleeting moment she believed the ghost of Rebecca would not follow. Here, she was not an 'interloper', the Happy Valley belonged to no one, most especially not Rebecca. However the lexical choice of

'interloper' and 'trespassers' provides an ominous warning that her hopeless confidence is not to last. When walking in the gardens with her dog Jasper, she finds a coat in the cupboard but does not realise it used to belong to Rebecca. She finds a handkerchief that has a red lipstick mark upon it and that "tall and sloping" R emblem crested upon the corner:

'There was a pink mark upon the handkerchief. The mark of lip-stick. I noticed a dull scent clung about it still...And then I knew that the vanished scent upon the handkerchief was the same as the crushed white petals of the azaleas in the Happy Valley.'

The reddish lipstick mark on the handkerchief is significant as the colour red is associated with Rebecca throughout the novel. Sally Beauman asserts in the essay, which accompanies the novel, it is an appropriate association as the colour red signifies danger, glamour and fire, which like Rebecca, is destructive and difficult to control. When the narrator smells the handkerchief she suddenly recognises the smell and the once comforting smell of the Happy Valley. She has now indeed become a "trespasser" in what was for a fleeting moment her only haven. Her hope has been unceremoniously ripped from her and there is now nowhere in Manderley she can escape the effervescent memory of her predecessor.

However the narrator is about to discover the chilling truth that Maxim hated Rebecca so much he murdered her the night in which it was believed she drowned in a boating accident. The relationship was built upon jealousy and the clash of two people too strong minded to co-operate. The narrator's distorted depiction of Rebecca is set into focus and her suffocating inferiority shows hopeful signs of dispelling. For fleeting moments the couple share newfound intimacy but it is only temporary. Rebecca may have been hated, she may have been "vicious and damnable", she may even have been mentally unstable, but it will not create a love between Maxim and the narrator. Despite Maxim's protestations of hatred towards his wife, it does not seem that their marriage was completely loveless. Subtle hints at tenderness between them, such as Maxim brushing Rebecca's hair every night before the mirror, show that some love and intimacy was present in the relationship. Maxim's marriage to the narrator seems desperate and it would appear that Maxim fell in love with a woman deliberately antithetical to Rebecca so that he would never have to suffer with a headstrong femme fatale again. Had

Manderley not been destroyed and engulfed flames when Maxim and the narrator return from a car journey, perhaps the couple may have been able to accumulate a form of passion and closeness in their relationship, especially with the secret they share. However, once again it would seem that the ever-indestructible Rebecca stands in the way of their happiness:

'the road to Manderley lay ahead. There was no moon. The sky above our heads was inky black. But the sky on the horizon was not dark at all. It was shot with crimson, like a splash of blood. And the ashes blew towards us with the salt winds from the sea.'

The "splash of crimson" represents both the embers of the fire and also Rebecca herself who remains associated with red throughout the book. The "ashes" from the sea are significant as they represent death and the ashes of Rebecca's body which once lay decaying in the sea. The "salt" sea connotes bitterness, suggesting the bitterness of the wretched housekeeper Mrs Danvers and is also associated with Rebecca as we learn that she loved to sail and her room at Manderley looked out upon the sea. Perhaps now, as the couple live together in irksome monotony, they will be able to kindle a stability they never had before. If never mentioned, the indestructible Rebecca fails to endanger their safety, but that their safety depends upon forgetting her only highlights the irony of how dominant she remains in their relationship.

The biggest destruction to the narrator's relationship, however, is Rebecca herself. With such a headstrong independence it would seem that Rebecca has perpetuated her own destruction. Is it fair to fault Rebecca when the only crime she ever truly committed was being strong enough to want independence in a relationship with a man who only ever wanted to keep her for himself? It is questionable whether the reader can judge Rebecca when our only perspective of her is through the biased voice of the narrator, who builds such a strong infatuation with her that we have no choice but to experience the same disappointing and even resentful sensation when we realise that Rebecca had a ruthless secret personality. Even here, though, it is also questionable how sincerely Maxim reflects upon his relationship with Rebecca and truly how "damnable" she was. Could Maxim just resent the slander to his pride that Rebecca controls him so determinedly? And is it fair to sympathise with the narrator for being so blinded by her perception of Rebecca when it is this exaggerated imagination that makes Rebecca's personality

seem so wretched when the truth is discovered? Also Mrs Danvers unwittingly corroborates many of the points Maxim makes and paints an invariably chilling picture of a selfish woman who has been spoiled all her life. The reader can never fully engage an understanding of the narrator's internal conflict for we hear only of Rebecca through the perception of others and she is not able to defend herself. However this unheard, invisible woman leaves the strongest impression upon the reader as we struggle to understand why Rebecca is condemned for her strength and independence when the only alternative is to live like the narrator, in a tedious and placid life with a man whose hedonism has incurred such destruction.

Also exploring the painful inferiority of a central character struggling against a beautiful and hungry femme fatale is Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* in which the manipulative and beautiful Zenia savages the stable and logical Tony. Unlike *Rebecca*, this story employs free indirect discourse, allowing Atwood to enter her characters thoughts and feelings and allowing us to sympathise with Tony, whilst also maintaining a distance to prevent our perceptions accumulating entirely from Tony's point of view.

Like the narrator in *Rebecca*, Tony lacks confidence in herself, and with such a deep lack of self-appreciation it makes it easier for Zenia to abuse her vulnerability and naivety:

'What sort of match is skinny, awkward, and bone-headed Tony, with her over-sized spectacles and walks in the park and cups of tea, for the memory of the shimmering Zenia that West carries next to his heart, or else instead of it?'

Tony meets the gangling yet handsome West and embarks upon a potentially romantic friendship with him, but Tony is oblivious to West's relationship with the alluring Zenia. Unlike the other 'victims' of *The Robber Bride*, Tony is the only one to fall for Zenia's boyfriend and not the other way around. In this way Zenia appears all the more powerful as we realise that she has possession of the one thing Tony so desperately wants. With the discovery of this relationship, Tony can feel nothing but disheartenment and a savage relapse of self-depreciation:

'Almost is what she always felt; approximate. Zenia has never been *almost*, even at her most fraudulent. Her fakery was deeply assumed, and even her most superficial guises were total.'

Tony, it seems, is someone who settles for what she can get rather than fighting for what she really wants. Zenia, however, is not. When she wants something she hunts it down with a savage hunger, caring nothing for those she destroys along the way. Tony, similarly to Mrs de Winter, compares her own faults and insecurities to Zenia's abundance of beauty, charm and confidence. Tony is small and insecure about herself whereas Zenia is the stereotypical dark haired voluptuous vixen who can steal a man she barely cares for if only to claim the pleasure in knowing she *just can*.

Other similarities between Zenia and Rebecca are the names themselves and the titles of each book. *The Robber Bride* is not named after our central character Tony, but is named for Zenia - the literal 'robber bride'. Both Rebecca and Zenia also begin with sharp, prominent initials dominating the rest of the name:

'The Z floats on the page as if scrawled on a wall, as if scratched on a window, as if carved in an arm. Z for Zorro, the masked avenger. Z for Zero. Z for Zap...It's as if Zenia has already been here, leaving a taunting signature.'

The capital Z represents the character of Zenia herself, the 'masked avenger' signifying the many facades she hides behind when she slowly destroys people's lives. Even when she is not present physically, Zenia leaves behind her mark, sharp and tantalizing, upon pages of her letters, just like Rebecca's tall and sloping 'R'. In coherence with the illusiveness of her name on paper, Zenia in person stands out magnificently, almost dangerously, with such enticing beauty:

'All the others, in their black, sink into the black background of the walls. Zenia stands out: her face and hands and torso swim against the darkness...in the presence of Zenia she [Tony] feels more than small and absurd: she feels non-existent.'

Unlike the narrator in *Rebecca* who merely imagines herself completely inferior to the memory

of Rebecca, Tony feels completely inadequate in the company of Zenia. The 'swim' gives the idea that Zenia is shimmering, like a reflection on water, a mirage or an oasis - something not quite real. This mirage quality of her presence makes her all the more alluring as no matter how close people come to touching her she'll always quickly disappear. Zenia also becomes more like a vision, an exaggerated illusion, and the third person narrative here allows the reader to empathise with Tony's inferiority. The free indirect discourse also allows the reader to understand that Zenia's charm is not based upon Tony's exaggerated, biased perceptions, but is the true and hopeless fact. In this way Tony is characteristically dissimilar to the narrator of *Rebecca* as it seems she does not, fuelled by her lack of self-confidence and crippling inferiority, exaggerate her perception of Zenia, unlike Mrs de Winter whose infatuation with Rebecca seems to falsely enhance an image that may or may not have existed. This is also supported with both Charis' and Roz' accounts of their experiences with Zenia.

It is in the same shocked manner we discover the truth behind Rebecca's death in *Rebecca* that we also learn of Zenia's "death" in *The Robber Bride*. However it is also with great uneasiness that both the reader and Tony accepts this revelation. Someone like Zenia is surely too beautiful to be forgotten so easily. In her desperation, Tony half-heartedly believes that her relationship with West can become passionate. Zenia however then becomes a memory and as already witnessed in *Rebecca*, memories are far harder to forget.

Tony's relationship with West does not seem to improve after Zenia's "death" but seems one of convenience. When Zenia "returns from the dead", walking into their lives as if she had never left, West hopelessly runs back to her. Tony realises her naivety and sympathy for West is foolish, but she still welcomes him back into her life anyway. Like Mrs de Winter, Tony's life is now devoted to looking after her husband and tending to him like an incapable patient. Their life is dull yet precarious in that at any moment, waiting around the corner, is Zenia, even when she is truly dead:

"Tony didn't tell West about the memorial service. He might have gone to it, and fallen to pieces..."

They had a tacit agreement never to mention Zenia.'

Zenia may be dead, but her memory endures. She is not shy and timid like Tony, whose biggest asset is her intelligence but whose biggest flaw is her insecurity. Despite Zenia's extreme faults and weaknesses of character, this does nothing to hinder the fact that after reading the book, it is by her we are most enchanted. By denying Zenia her 'voice' within the narrative - like Rebecca - it is harder to truly judge as it requires complete trust in our narrator's accounts of them. The element of mystery in Rebecca's 'abnormality' and Zenia's past piques our curiosity. Like Rebecca, it is difficult to judge Zenia, even when we are introduced to her from several points of view. Atwood's empathy with Tony seem to suggest that Zenia is a character we should despise. However the reader wants to know the truth of her childhood, we want to know why she pursues West so desperately and we want to know if she was ever afraid, even seconds before she died. Zenia, it seems, is not faultless in her own spiralling destruction, and perhaps it is true that beauty itself is her fatal flaw. With this fatal flaw, however, Zenia cannot be fully condemned for toying with her power, flaunting it in the face of men who think they can claim her just because she is beautiful. Zenia is strong and independent, and despite savaging the life of the defenceless Tony, it is Zenia who provokes a strong sense of understanding within the reader that in such a patriarchal society, to have beauty is both dangerous and tantalizing, and living a life on the edge is surely more attractive than settling half-heartedly for an inferior life of complacency.

Charlotte Bronte creates a lonely and insecure heroine battling against personal and societal struggles in a frightening world in her novel *Jane Eyre*. Despite Jane's struggles as an unloved orphan to her ascendance to power and the fact she finds inheritance, kinship and what seems to be a happy marriage, the reader is still left with a sense of the precariousness of human experiences. Jane is 'inferior' but not as pitiable as Mrs de Winter and Tony as she fends off both 'femme fatales' in her life successfully and leaves Rochester. When she returns, independently, she chooses to return to her relationship with Rochester and proves that even without the strength and seeming outrageousness of those femme fatales, it is possible for a

'weaker' character to triumph.

When Jane becomes a governess for the ward of the brooding Mr Rochester, she cultivates a secret attraction. Daily walks and talks with Mr Rochester seduce her and despite her apprehension and inexperience, she begins to believe that her love may be requited. Mr Rochester begins devoting his attentions to another, more "suitable" young lady named Blanche Ingram. Rochester openly reciprocates Blanche's teasing. Like Rebecca and Zenia, Blanche is a woman who relishes power and will depend on no one for support:

'I am resolved my husband shall not be a rival, but a foil to me. I will suffer no competitor near the throne; I shall exact an undivided homage: his devotions shall not be shared...'

Blanche appears shallow and over-confident as it seems she needs to be admired and adored to make herself feel important. She is also self-assured and will not be overpowered by a man,. She disdains Jane and brands her a 'blotch on the fair face of creation'. Despite this, however, Blanche does not come across to the reader as possessing a tantalizing sexuality. Blanche may be confident and self-assured, but this confidence is dependent upon the devotion of a man. Without a man's devotion Blanche is insecure thus contradicting her apparent confidence. Mr Rochester's desire for Blanche, however, is almost as superficial as her desire for him. It must be questioned, however, whether Rochester's love for Jane is simply an antidote to femme fatales. It also seems tragically cynical that Rochester cannot bigamously marry Blanche and destroy his position in society; Jane is less risky.

Rochester deliberately flirts with Blanche in order to manipulate a response from Jane:

'What love have I for Miss Ingram? None: and that you know...I would not - I could not - marry Miss Ingram. You - you strange, you almost unearthly thing! - I love you as my own flesh. You - poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are - I entreat to accept me as a husband.'

Despite professing his love for Jane, Rochester does so in a resolutely harsh manner, calling her 'small' and 'plain' which does nothing to dispel her insecurity and is mirrored in Maxim's proposal to the narrator of *Rebecca*. The word 'entreat' suggests desperation, perhaps even suggesting

that this marriage is one in which he pursues rather unthinkingly. Indeed, the date for their marriage then proceeds with haste and in the time between Jane's acceptance of marriage and the wedding date, the couple procure what seems to be, with hindsight, a rather tragic but passionate dependency upon each other. The reader at this point feels most sympathetic towards Jane as we know that this happiness will only be temporary when she discovers the reality that Rochester is already married to a "madwoman" Bertha. With this discovery marks the extreme deterioration of Jane's confidence and the short-lived happiness she experiences with Rochester, without feeling inferior to any other woman. Jane cannot forgive Rochester for such a betrayal and decides she must leave him, inflicting upon herself days of starvation, despair and homelessness until she stumbles across, unexpectedly, members of a family she never even knew existed.

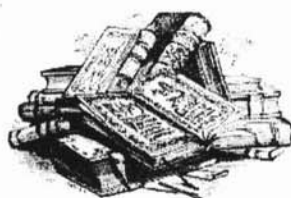
Spending time with this family, Jane realises how much she pines for Mr Rochester. She establishes a strong bond with the family and subsequently discovers that she is to inherit twenty thousand pounds, making her rich and independent. Upon her arrival back to Thornfield, Jane discovers the ruins of Thornfield Hall due to a catastrophic fire the "lunatic" Bertha is proposed to have been responsible for - first setting fire to Rochester's curtains and then 'made her way to the chamber that had been the governess's...as if she knew somehow how matters had gone on, and had a spite at her...'. With this discovery, Jane fears for Rochester's safety, even more so when she learns that Bertha lay 'smashed on the pavement' after committing suicide in the aftermath of the fire. With growing anticipation, Jane questions locals as to Mr Rochester's whereabouts and condition until she discerns that he is blind. Upon learning this information the reader gains echoes of both Maxim de Winter and West as at the end of both novels all three men are emotionally or physically crippled.

In conclusion, the stereotypical 'femme fatale' is portrayed as dark and mysterious, whilst the inferior narrator of each of these novels is depicted as small, unattractive and child-like. Rebecca, Zenia and Bertha possess an innate sexuality and the appearance of independence. The traits of the 'superior' characters are ones modern female readers may aspire to: confidence, beauty, charm and desirability. However the use of narrative promotes 'realistic'

levels of beauty, loyalty and uncertainty, thus explaining our consequent empathy with Mrs de Winter, Tony and Jane. As Elizabeth Wurtzel comments, 'bad girls understand that there is no point being good and suffering in silence' and that good and bad are just 'different forms of intensity'. We dispense our sympathy upon our central characters and understand the pain they endure living in the shadow of such 'perfection': to live dangerously and recklessly, stealing the hearts of men along the way. However, each of these characters suffer: Rebecca, Zenia and Bertha die and Blanche is consigned into obscurity. This conflict between female characters serves to represent the conflict between the roles and qualities inherent in femaleness and the internal conflict within all women to be desirable. Ultimately, neither model prevails: the narrators continue to feel inferior despite the demise of their rival and the femme fatales, despite their beauty and cunning, are vulnerable and lonely.

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