

Delicate, Passionate Characters - The Narrator of *Rebecca*

On first reading, Daphne du Maurier's tale *Rebecca* is that spooky and gripping psychological thriller that its Alfred Hitchcock movie version has made so unforgettable. But on second reading, there is a wealth of detail and depth that reaches far beyond the basic ingredients required to tell the plot and deliver on the what-happened-to-Rebecca mystery story. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that another writer might find herself unwittingly emulating some of these more meaningful aspects of the tale

Maturing, aging, and the passage of time feature prominently in the book. There is an obsession with observing people coming and going, leaving rooms empty behind them, driving past others on the highway and discovering that the moment is always just past and cannot be recovered. But there is also the contrast against seemingly unchanging elements, like afternoon tea service promptly performed each day, or birds and the rest of nature carrying on with their less volatile existence. Ironically, the life of an individual bird may be very volatile but taken as a group, it is likely that some bird will in future be doing exactly what this one is doing. However, as an individualist-artist-romantic, du Maurier never views human experience from the group perspective; it is the precious individual's experience of the moment that makes it so rare and so irreplaceable. It may seem odd, then, to imagine this single individual poured into two distinct characters, but so the author appears to have done in this story: the unnamed narrator of du Maurier's tale and Rebecca herself can be seen as the same woman at two different points in her maturity and aging. The narrator is the young, hesitant, timid wife who is terrified of being alone and is willing to blend herself completely with her husband's life decisions and even feelings, letting herself be patted like a dog. Rebecca has been married for some time, has long ago discovered that her husband is not going to make her happy, and has moved on to an independent life and social circle outside of the home. No one is patting her head! She confidently seeks for her own happiness and sails her small boat by herself at night without longing for any company. Did Rebecca start out like the narrator did? It seems unlikely in the book, but Daphne du Maurier's own life may have been a tighter blend of these two characters, first one and then the other, as the writer married and had children but then ultimately lived apart from her husband. Certainly few married women would say they had remained unchanged since their diffident and naïve young-bride days, just as few people in general would say that life experience had not changed them greatly since childhood. Rebecca is the disillusioned and disappointed wife, all grown up, heroic in her way.

The view of marriage in the book is likewise very cynical, far more so on second reading than on the first. Maxim de Winter seems like a catch – handsome, wealthy, emotionally strong and silent – but the problems with his character go deeper than just the plot challenges that he has to face. He is far more volatile of a person than his young bride realizes, in fact he is quite a handful and can be a real jerk. He is reticent to the point of duplicity, and thanks to his healthy dose of double-standard, he justifies keeping from his wife serious facts about himself that, if the situation were reversed, he would certainly feel entitled to know. He needs a very young woman as his partner because he wants the submissiveness that her starstruck-ness will ensure; he has already had to put up with the complexities of a mature woman equal, and he didn't like that at all. He proposes marriage without a word of love, and he only offers it once he realizes how deeply embroiled he has become in his crisis. On the face of it, what do this husband and wife have in common? But these two do have similarities, such as their inability to stand up to the pushy Mrs. Danvers, their deathly fear of the low opinion and gossip of others, and most especially their inability to be alone. The narrator is just the right wife for such a needy, selfish, and moody man like Maxim. He, however, shares too little and leaves her far too much alone given her needs, which he appears not to see. The writer seems to suggest that the only way out of the misery of a mismatched marriage is to give up hoping for connection, and instead to accept the loneliness and strike out for independence.

As for the thick steam of mystery that rolls through the book and decoratively obscures any slight shortcomings in the story, it is the work of a master. How many small descriptions of detail enrich it, making it seem like the reader is there and living in all these moments with the characters! A great effort was made to create such a living-in-it feeling in *The Delicate, Passionate World*, although the brilliance of du Maurier's writing is such that other writers can at best hope they are making a tribute to it. In *The Delicate, Passionate World*, especially at the beginning, there are echoes of the mysterious older man harboring past suffering and secrets, and the contrast with his very young and childish female companion who thinks of their future in rosy, unrealistic terms. Like morning fog, these dreams never stay intact once the character has done a certain amount of living and experiencing, and the older character recognizes the moment of the shattering of this childish world and recalls that a similar thing happened to himself once. The buildup of love and neediness, of unreasonable dreams, of uncertainty and fear, and then finally the moment of crisis and the inevitable dénouement as the characters have to come to terms with what is still going to be reasonable in their life together – all of this is the real drama of any marriage, and that was the real story here. Paired with a sinister mystery story as surface decoration, it was magnificently delivered in *Rebecca*.