

Rebecca

by Daphne du Maurier · Language: EN

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Overview

Rebecca is a Gothic novel that follows an unnamed young woman who marries the wealthy, brooding widower Maxim de Winter and moves to his grand estate, Manderley. There, she is haunted by the memory of his first wife, Rebecca, whose perfection is upheld by the sinister housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers. The narrator struggles with her own insecurity and the oppressive shadow of Rebecca, leading to a tense psychological atmosphere.

The novel unfolds as a mystery, with the truth about Rebecca's death gradually revealed. Maxim confesses that Rebecca was cruel and manipulative, and that he killed her in a fit of rage. The second half of the book deals with the aftermath of this confession, as the couple faces a potential scandal and the threat of exposure. The story culminates in a dramatic fire at Manderley, which destroys the estate.

Rebecca is a classic of Gothic literature, exploring themes of identity, jealousy, and the power of memory. Its enduring appeal lies in its atmospheric prose, psychological depth, and the iconic character of Mrs. Danvers. The novel has been adapted into film and stage, and remains a significant work in 20th-century literature.

Key Takeaways

- The past can exert a powerful and destructive influence on the present, especially when it is idealized or hidden.
- Insecurity and self-doubt can be exploited by others, as seen in the narrator's relationship with Mrs. Danvers.
- Appearances can be deceiving; Rebecca's perfect image masks a cruel and manipulative personality.
- Marriage can be built on secrets and lies, leading to tragic consequences.
- The setting of Manderley is a character in itself, symbolizing both beauty and decay.
- Jealousy and obsession can consume a person, as demonstrated by Mrs. Danvers's devotion to Rebecca.
- The truth, once revealed, can shatter the foundations of a relationship and a home.
- The novel suggests that the dead can still control the living through memory and influence.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

The narrator, now married to Maxim de Winter, dreams of Manderley, which is now a ruin. She reflects on their life together and the events that led to the destruction of the estate. The chapter establishes the novel's frame narrative, with the narrator looking back on the past from a position of exile and loss.

Chapter 2

The narrator recalls her time as a paid companion to Mrs. Van Hopper in Monte Carlo. She meets Maxim de Winter, a wealthy English widower, and they begin a whirlwind courtship. Despite her shyness and lack of confidence, Maxim proposes to her, and she accepts, though she feels unworthy of him.

Chapter 3

The narrator marries Maxim and they travel to Manderley. On the journey, she feels increasingly anxious about meeting the household and living in Rebecca's shadow. Maxim is moody and distant, and the narrator senses that he is troubled by memories of his first wife.

Chapter 4

The narrator arrives at Manderley and is overwhelmed by its grandeur. She meets Mrs. Danvers, the housekeeper, who is cold and hostile towards her. The narrator feels out of place and intimidated by the staff and the house itself, which seems to be preserved as a shrine to Rebecca.

Chapter 5

The narrator struggles to adapt to her new life as mistress of Manderley. She tries to make changes but is constantly reminded of Rebecca's perfection by Mrs. Danvers and the servants. She becomes obsessed with Rebecca's memory and feels that she can never live up to her predecessor.

Chapter 6

The narrator discovers Rebecca's private cottage on the beach and learns more about her from Ben, a simple-minded man. She also meets Frank Crawley, Maxim's agent, who is kind but evasive about Rebecca. The narrator's curiosity and jealousy grow as she pieces together Rebecca's life.

Chapter 7

The narrator attends a costume ball at Manderley, dressed in a gown that Mrs. Danvers suggests. The gown is identical to one worn by Rebecca at a previous ball, and Maxim is furious when he sees her. The narrator realizes that Mrs. Danvers deliberately sabotaged her, deepening her sense of humiliation and inadequacy.

Chapter 8

After the ball, the narrator confronts Maxim, and he finally confesses the truth about Rebecca. He tells her that Rebecca was evil and that he killed her in a fit of rage after she taunted him about her pregnancy. The narrator is shocked but feels relieved that Maxim does not love Rebecca, and they reconcile.

Chapter 9

The truth about Rebecca's death comes under investigation when her boat is discovered with her body. Maxim and the narrator must maintain their composure as the inquest begins. The novel builds tension as the couple fears that Maxim will be exposed as a murderer.

Chapter 10

The inquest concludes with a verdict of suicide, but the situation becomes complicated when Rebecca's cousin, Jack Favell, attempts to blackmail Maxim. Favell claims that Rebecca was in love with him and that she was not suicidal. The investigation reopens, and the couple faces a new threat.

Chapter 11

The truth about Rebecca's final hours is revealed through a doctor's testimony. It is discovered that Rebecca was suffering from terminal cancer, which explains her reckless behavior. The court accepts that Rebecca took her own life, and Maxim is cleared of suspicion. The couple returns to Manderley, hoping to start anew.

Chapter 12

The novel concludes with Mrs. Danvers setting fire to Manderley, destroying the estate. The narrator and Maxim escape, but the house is reduced to ashes. The narrator reflects on the loss and the freedom from Rebecca's shadow, though the memory of Manderley will always haunt her.

Themes

- Memory and the past
- Jealousy and insecurity
- Identity and self-worth
- Gothic atmosphere
- Secrets and lies
- Power and control

Notable Quotes

- "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again." — Opening line of the novel, spoken by the narrator as she reflects on her dreams of the ruined estate.
- "If only there could be an invention that bottled up a memory, like perfume. That it never faded, never got stale. Then I could unlock the bottle, and live the moment all over again." — The narrator reflects on the fleeting nature of happy memories, early in her marriage.
- "I am glad it cannot happen twice, the fever of first love. For it is a fever, and a burden, too, whatever the poets may say." — The narrator muses on the intensity of her feelings for Maxim, contrasting them with the calm of later love.
- "We can never go back again, that much is certain." — The narrator concludes that the past cannot be revisited, near the end of the novel.
- "The house was a sepulchre, our fear and suffering lay buried in the ruins." — The narrator describes the destruction of Manderley, symbolizing the end of their ordeal.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Rebecca about?

Rebecca is a Gothic novel about a young woman who marries a wealthy widower, Maxim de Winter, and moves to his estate, Manderley. She is haunted by the memory of his first wife, Rebecca, and struggles with the housekeeper Mrs. Danvers's hostility. The story is a psychological thriller that uncovers dark secrets about Rebecca's death.

Is Rebecca worth reading?

Yes, Rebecca is widely considered a classic of Gothic literature. It offers a gripping plot, rich atmosphere, and deep psychological insight. The novel's exploration of jealousy, identity, and the power of memory has kept it relevant for decades. It is a must-read for fans of suspense and literary fiction.

How does Rebecca end?

Spoiler: After Maxim confesses to killing Rebecca, the truth about her terminal illness emerges, and he is cleared of murder. However, Mrs. Danvers sets fire to Manderley, destroying the estate. The narrator and Maxim escape, but the house is lost. The novel ends with the narrator reflecting on the past, unable to return to Manderley.

Who should read Rebecca?

Rebecca is ideal for readers who enjoy Gothic romance, psychological suspense, and classic literature. Fans of Jane Eyre or Wuthering Heights will appreciate its atmospheric style and complex characters. It also appeals to those interested in themes of identity, marriage, and the lingering influence of the dead.

How long does it take to read Rebecca?

The book has around 400 pages, and at an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes about 8 to 10 hours to finish. Most readers complete it in a week or less, depending on their schedule. It is a compelling read that often keeps you turning pages.