

# Rebecca – an enduring psychological tale

**ANOUSHKA BEAZLEY** takes into her therapy room the second Mrs de Winter, the young woman narrator of Daphne du Maurier's tragic masterpiece, *Rebecca*

**L**AST NIGHT I dreamt I went to Manderlay.' These are the immortal words which begin Daphne du Maurier's 1938 gothic novel *Rebecca* as well as Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 movie of the same name. *Rebecca* was Hitchcock's first American film, though set in England, and it received eleven academy award nominations at the thirteenth academy awards winning Best Picture and Best Cinematography. In 1940 *Variety* magazine announced the movie 'too tragic and deeply psychological to hit the fancy of wide audience appeal.' In 1997 and 2020 *Rebecca* was remade for a completely new generation of cinemagoers, as well as multiple television adaptations in between, perhaps the ultimate confirmation of how this tragic psychological story has endured.

## Client presentation

We are introduced to a young woman in her early twenties. It is she who narrates the opening words and first introduces us to Manderlay, a statuesque family house in the country. The client has thin mid-length hair and her shoulders are a tad hunch and rounded as she attempts to take up as little space as possible. Nervous, she often looks down to the floor and apologises when she has done nothing wrong. Insecure, she avoids making direct eye contact. She sits at the corner table of the restaurant where she can disappear. There is a girl-like quality to her carriage and she appears to spend most, if not all, of her waking hours in her Child ego state (Berne, 1961). I am left wondering exactly who my client is: the young woman I have just met or this place Manderlay she speaks of which seems to dominate her thoughts and, in turn, mine.

## Client history

Both her parents are deceased, her mother when she was very young and her father, with whom she had a strong attachment, the previous year, describing him as 'very unusual. . . but people didn't understand him.' He was a painter and painted the same tree over and over again professing a theory that 'if you should find one perfect thing or place or person you should stick to it.' My

countertransference is to feel a deep existential sadness at this moment. I wonder if the world has failed him somehow and whether the repetition in his creative endeavours is a coping mechanism to mask a deep need to find perfection – safety.

Her profession is that of a lady's companion, a glorified maid to a woman named Mrs Van Hopper. What is of particular interest is that my client has no name. The reader/viewer is not made aware of her identity, as the story narrates in first person, and neither does anyone refer to her by name. I am struck by what it means for a client to be nameless. To feel so insignificant and without an identity, how she might exist in the world, defined, it seems, by everybody else.

Our protagonist meets the older widowed estate owner Maxim de Winter and the attraction between them is delightfully quick and bold despite the obvious cultural differences in class and Mrs Van Hopper's passive aggressive and jealous disapproval. My countertransference is immediate and quickly I am invited to place her in the position of victim. Society, represented by Mrs Van Hopper, as the persecutor and Maxim assuming the role of rescuer, all positions now taken on our drama triangle (Karpman, 1968). Interestingly, the first time we refer to her by name is after she marries Maxim and becomes Mrs de Winter, and from then on we still only know her by her married title, no first name. A particular characteristic of the time, when women were often known by their husband's name, and yet the importance of women and their specific role in society was being noticed and starting other social and political conversations. I am also wondering about how Maxim might assuage for my client the deep grief of

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losing her father and how quickly she might have put the head of her father on Maxim's shoulders.

**Presenting problem**

Two dark trees dominate the screen. Shrouded in slow moving fog, ominous music heralds a sombre foretelling. The music changes becoming lively as it speaks of new life, an important story to be told, despite 'tenacious fingers' in the background holding fast to the sinister undercurrents of the first few bars. As the fog begins to shift so too does the landscape and we can see that it is possible for other life to grow. The melody changes again, turning romantic but serious, as fog floats across a full moon, a literary and filmic device of the lunacy that can befall.

Mrs de Winter has had a dream. She has dreamt she went back to Manderlay. 'It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive and for a while I could not enter for the way was barred to me. Then, like all dreams I was possessed of a sudden, a supernatural power and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me. . . and finally there was Manderlay, secretive and silent.'

Novellino (2012), writes in his paper, 'The Psychodynamics of Nightmares' about the psychotherapeutic importance of enclosures and openings, a dialectic that underpins the psychological themes of *Rebecca*. 'Opening, I am referring to those times that our unconscious pushes us to consider more fully some intrapsychic dynamic (eg a fantasy, an emotion, a memory) that we would rather not acknowledge. By enclosing I am referring to those times when our conscious mind is successful in removing or keeping hidden some unconscious process that is disturbing to our homeostasis,' (p277). Mrs de Winter's dream of returning to Manderlay has her stopped by an unconscious opening and the 'sudden' sense of being able to enter the opening is how she is led into the nightmare.

Manderlay is haunted by the memory of the late Mrs de Winter, 'the beautiful Rebecca,' for Maxim, who attempts a homeostatis by trying to block Rebecca from his mind. For his new bride, who is drowning in Rebecca's monogrammed paraphernalia littered all over Manderlay, but moreover for Mrs Danvers, who runs Manderlay. Danny, a contrasting moniker and used by those who are closest to her denoting a more carefree

demeanour than that possessed, is a walking ghost. The only living thing is her grief, perhaps a mother's grief over losing her daughter; she came to Manderlay with Rebecca and had looked after her since she was a girl. In a rare, tender moment we see Danny remember how she used to brush Rebecca's hair, that she loved it and was almost ordered to do it. She embodies the paralysing sense of the nightmare and her arresting uncanniness to a corpse takes your breath away.

The new Mrs de Winter arrives at Manderlay but to her shock Manderlay seems obsessed with the old Mrs de Winter and the memory of Rebecca strangles her. She fears for her marriage, for her husband's sanity and for her life.

**Client therapy session, January 1940**

Maxim takes my client back to Manderlay. The drive is long and winding through huge trees and it takes a moment to realise they are driving through the grounds. When the house first comes into view it is the most foreboding, gigantic structure she has ever encountered. She gasps, audibly. More than ten staff are standing outside the house to meet her and she feels overwhelmed. Mrs Danvers is also introduced to her and she remembers feeling scared. Cornell suggests we expand the notion of games to include within it the Child ego state unconscious processes, 'learned at a body level and lived, experienced not in the words of an internal dialogue, but in somatic organization, in unconscious fantasies and wishes, and through the styles of our contemporary relationships' (2008, p97).

**Client therapy session, February 1940**

Mrs de Winter is surprised by a sense of isolation she was not expecting to encounter after getting married. In an effort to be more sophisticated and perhaps shake off the Childlike ego state she was herself becoming aware of, she ordered fancy couture evening wear for their dinners together. But it did not have the desired effect. She and Maxim argued about why she felt the need to change herself. She was left still feeling like she was not enough and that, despite being overshadowed by the elegant Rebecca, reminding Maxim of aspects of his late wife incurred a wrath which she feared. I noted the mirroring, twinning and idealising transferences (Kohut, 1977).

**Client therapy session, March 1940**

Maxim's sister and brother-in-law came for tea to meet his new wife. Mrs de Winter was surprised by her sister in law's friendly openness and she is comforted to hear that Maxim looks happy again. She talks of the Manderlay masquerade balls that stopped when Rebecca died. My client is inspired to revive the tradition and sets about making a thrilling surprise dress but on the night atop the stairs where she reveals her creation to Maxim

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and their guests she meets Maxim's rage and he orders her to change. She then discovers that Mrs Danvers has lied to her about the owner of the original dress and that it was in fact worn by Rebecca herself. The symbiotic invitations (Schiff, 1975) to the masquerade ball abound between Mrs de Winter, Maxim, Danny and the ghost of Rebecca herself.

#### Client therapy session, April 1940

Mrs de Winter is distraught and yet possesses now a strange sort of confidence I have not seen before. A sunken boat has been found and with it, Rebecca's body in the hull. Who then is the woman in the cemetery and why did Maxim identify the stranger as his wife? Who started the fire at Manderlay and now that the infamous Rebecca has been found dead, will this make her seem more or less alive than she was before? I wonder if for the first time I may be witnessing Mrs de Winter's Adult and possibly the beginnings of a behavioural cure. 'Script cure at the behavioural level means that that person is no longer engaging in script-related behaviours' (Erskine, 1980).

#### TA diagnosis

I found myself in an unusual position. As a therapist I had never felt inclined to diagnose projective transference located in a house. My diagnosis seemed to extend beyond the P1 and P2 transferences of my client. Du Maurier and Hitchcock, respectively, had written and directed narratives so deeply interwoven into the humanness of both unbearable grief and love that I felt Manderlay itself contained the P1+ and the P1- (Hargarden & Sills, 2002) in its mortar and the P2 in its bricks.

#### Treatment

Rebecca is a film from my childhood. Movies were places where my little girl would escape and narratives offering emotional resonance were therapy. 'Children's tears are very near the surface, and come at the first crisis,' (Du Maurier, 1938). Mrs Danvers was the archetypal maternal persecutor and Maxim the fantasy father/husband to save me from a fate worse than dying in the fire; that of being abandoned and unseen. Manderlay was a house as scary as the house I lived in but in it I could choose which character I wanted to be and which part of their story I wanted to imbue. I chose to write my film degree dissertation on *Rebecca* and the culmination of this therapeutic constructivism can be seen in the spirit of my private practice. [www.manderlaytherapy.com](http://www.manderlaytherapy.com)

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