

Du Maurier, *Rebecca*: Lecture 1
Bluebeard Revisited: The Gothic Mystery of Marriage

1. ***Rebecca* examines the mystery of female psychosexual development - one woman's pattern of growth and maturation.**
 - a. The nameless heroine, who could be "everywoman," starts out in the story as a girl and becomes a woman through the process of marriage.
 - b. Story begins as romance of "Cinderella" - the narrator plays the role of persecuted servant who is rescued by handsome prince.
 - c. Story rapidly evolves into gothic of "Bluebeard" - marriage to a man who murders women.
 - d. Du Maurier alters the traditional Gothic ending, changing its ideological implications radically: the heroine rewards and redeems the Bluebeard instead of punishing him - the first wife's murder is seen as justifiable punishment rather than as a crime.
 - e. Du Maurier's novel enlists a classical psychoanalytical trajectory - the family romance - to explain the heroine's maturation and to rationalize the husband's murder of the first wife.

2. **Psychosexual mystery: how does Oedipal conflict work for girls?**
 - a. Freud's theory: male child individuates by desiring to marry mother, murder father, lack of resolution causes child to separate, individuate, become heterosexual, develop superego (deferral of gratification/ethical sense). Major problem with theory: Freud posits no realistic paradigm for female child (except penis envy - sense of lack, desire to coopt male privilege).

Please see the handout "Freud and the Oedipus Complex," at the end of this document, for more detailed information about how the complex works.
 - b. Du Maurier and other writers create female family romance version that mirrors male version:
 - i. The heroine's story overall mirrors the male child's family romance:
 - (1) the mother (Rebecca) is killed (conveniently, by the father)
 - (2) the father is married and transformed by the narrator into someone better
 - ii. Textual elements that resonate with female version of family romance:
 - (1) heroine repeatedly descr as "childlike"
 - (2) heroine's lack of parents/identity (no name, parents dead)
 - (3) antagonism towards mother figures (Van Hopper, Danvers)
 - (4) confusion of patronyms (who is the real "Mrs. De Winter"?)
 - (5) heroine's story details her growth into adulthood

- c. Female version of Oedipal drama, as depicted in novels, involves marrying father but discovering him to be brutal, threatening, and in need of transformation ("Cinderella" becomes "Bluebeard").

3. As Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* was Freud's literary paradigm for male Oedipal conflict, Gothic fiction is a paradigm for female Oedipal conflict: desirable Daddy is a killer of women.

- a. The Gothic archetype, based on Perrault's "Bluebeard," is an enduring and popular theme in literature/DF (by male as well as female writers):
 - i. Previous English 231 readings: The Holmes stories that feature women threatened by charismatic but dangerous father-figures: "The Copper Beeches," "The Speckled Band."
 - ii. Future 231 readings: Clarice Starling, aided by Hannibal Lecter, in *Silence of the Lambs*.
 - iii. Television and film: "women in jep" subgenre in tv-movies and thriller films (have them name some, identify elements).

b. Gothic paradigm: "Cinderella" romance meets Gothic of "Bluebeard"

- i. Romance of "Cinderella": silent, virtuous orphan oppressed by mean mother/stepsisters, fairy godmother arranges transit to ball, prince, shoe that fits, hypergamous marriage that recognizes innate virtue, marriage resulting in "happily ever after." Cross-culturally popular story in patriarchal culture.
- ii. Gothic of "Bluebeard." From same set of tales (Charles Perrault, collected in 1797) as "Cinderella" but much less well-known (and unlikely to made into a cartoon version by Disney). The motif of "happily ever after" is transformed into marriage-as-nightmare.

(1) Elements of gothic paradigm (ask them to list; write on board):

- (a) virile powerful husband with many previous wives
- (b) nameless young heroine married off by older women/family
- (c) house; secret that tempts heroine in husband's absence
- (d) secret is knowledge of husband's destruction of earlier wives
- (e) wife's knowledge results in imprisonment, death threat
- (f) heroine saved through lying/siblings rescue her
- (g) heroine prevails, makes better marriage to younger man, ends Bluebeard's tradition of violence

(2) What are the psychosexual implications of each of the key images:

- (a) the namelessness of the narrator/protagonist
- (b) the virile husband twice her age
- (c) the huge, prison-like house
- (d) the key that can't be washed clean of blood
- (e) the closet full of the bodies of dead women

(f) the death of Bluebeard, the triumph and remarriage of wife

4. How the gothic paradigm plays out in *Rebecca*.

- a. The nameless heroine encounters a single “dead wife” who is not bodily present in the house, but traces of whose existence persist everywhere: “je reviens,” or “I return” is the name of her sailboat and her motto.
 - i. the dead wife becomes a role model for the new wife
 - ii. narratives by Mrs. Danvers and others reinforce Rebecca’s present-absence.
- b. The heroine intrudes into forbidden parts of the house, where she discovers further evidence of the dead wife’s presence:
 - i. the boat-house
 - ii. the west wing/Rebecca’s room
- c. The heroine, halfway through the novel, discovers that the husband is indirectly responsible for the dead wife’s demise.
 - i. Rebecca was murdered in the boathouse
 - ii. Max destroyed the evidence of her death by sinking her body in the boat.
- d. Instead of being threatened by the husband - and arranging for her relatives to kill him - the nameless heroine conspires with him to conceal the murder.
 - i. She becomes psychosexually mature and her marriage improves - she has successfully supplanted the dead wife.
 - ii. Their marriage is barren, however, and unsatisfying.
 - iii. They lose the ancestral home, symbol of the patriarch’s privilege and inheritance, and become drifters.

Freud on the Oedipus Complex

What is the Oedipus Complex?

Sigmund Freud developed his theory of the Oedipus Complex to describe how male children learn to separate from their parents, become heterosexual beings, and learn to tolerate frustration. Freud theorized that children from birth experience a variety of sexual feelings, but that at the age of about five or six male children become conscious of their genitalia as sources of pleasure and begin to direct their sexual desires outward towards other people. The most obvious targets for the male child's desire, theorized Freud, is the mother, who has been the child's earliest source of security, love, and pleasure. The Oedipus complex reflects Freud's Victorian upbringing and culture: it assumes the primacy of a nuclear, patriarchal family in which parents and children have very "traditional" roles and relationships.

What are the central issues of Oedipal conflict?

Freud conceptualizes the penis as an emblem of social and political power. He argues that children become aware very early of whether or not different people have penises - an external sign of gender - and that children, watching their fathers and mothers, connect having a penis with being male and hence with being powerful. (This makes sense if you think about it: children and adults value what they can see easily, whereas they ignore or are mystified by what is internal or invisible to them.) As young children progress through the family romance, girls develop "**penis envy**" (a frustrated desire for power) while boys develop "**castration anxiety**" (fear of the source of power being taken away). Freud argues that these anxious feelings are resolved when the children successfully redirect their incestuous Oedipal erotic feelings towards more appropriate (that is, non-parental) objects.

Resolution of the Oedipus Complex through **identification** with one parent is normally the most important single contribution to the formation of the **superego**, the psychological agency that helps the child cope realistically and ethically with problems and frustration.

Doesn't Oedipal conflict affect boys and girls differently?

Yes. Freud argues that castration anxiety is very effective in pushing boys through to the resolution of their Oedipal conflict, but notes that girls have a more difficult time, probably because their options for achieving power are more limited and frustrated by their anatomy. (And, implicitly, by the limitations of the culture in which they are raised.)

What does Freud say happens to boys?

The Boy is attached to Mother and wants to command all her attention. Likewise, the Boy hates Father and wants to kill him, but also fears him, because boy sees Mother as castrated and fears Father will do the same to him. Boy represses his erotic feelings toward Mother and instead begins fearfully to identify with Father, who seems omnipotent and threatening. The reassignment of identification permits boy to internalize Father's values and accept them as his own. It helps explain how boys become male-identified, ready to assume a ruling position in patriarchy.

What does Freud say happens to girls?

The Girl is attached to Mother, but sees Mother as a mirror of herself - therefore another "castrated" person who lacks the all-powerful penis possessed by Father and brothers. (Freud calls this the Girl's awareness of "shared misfortune.") Girl also resents Mother's failure to give her a penis. Girl rejects Mother and falls in love with Father, but is doomed to lose. Consequently Girl transfers her affection to (male) baby or male sexual partner - effectively colonizing the penis! If Girl's Oedipal conflict isn't resolved, she may reject heterosexuality and become "frigid" or lesbian or develop a "masculinity complex" (which Freud considered undesirable).

Aren't these ideas a little weird/sexist/dated?

Freud's psychology has been widely criticized, particularly for its emphasis on anatomy. (Freud was the originator of the maxim "Anatomy is destiny.") Remember, though, that his ideas are theories, not facts; moreover, his theories were strongly influenced by the culture of the Victorian period he lived in. Many later psychoanalytic scholars (e.g. Ernest Thompson, Jacques Lacan, and Nancy Chodorow) have reformulated Freud's paradigm. Thompson, for example, substitutes the term "privilege envy" for the biological determinism of "penis envy." Jacques Lacan perceives Oedipal conflict as the gateway to the world of language he calls the Symbolic Order. Nancy Chodorow reads the family romance as a reflection of unequal child-rearing practices.