

# *Rebecca* (2020) and *Rebecca* (1940): A new film version of the popular novel, and the old one

David Walsh  
8 November 2020

*Directed by Ben Wheatley, written by Jane Goldman, Joe Shrapnel and Anna Waterhouse, based on the novel by Daphne du Maurier*

*Rebecca* is a new film released in certain theaters in mid-October and digitally on Netflix at the end of that month.

It is an adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's popular 1938 novel of the same title, which was also made into a highly acclaimed film in 1940, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980), with Joan Fontaine and Laurence Olivier in the leading roles and important contributions from Judith Anderson, George Sanders and Gladys Cooper.

The essential story, set in the 1930s, is this: a shy, awkward young British woman (Lily James in the new version), whose first and maiden names we never learn, is employed, rather humiliatingly, as a “paid companion” by a wealthy, boorish American woman, Mrs. Van Hopper (Ann Dowd).

During the pair's stay in luxurious Monte Carlo, on the French Riviera, the younger woman meets the wealthy Maxim de Winter (Armie Hammer), owner of the famed Manderley estate. After spending a few weeks of daytimes with the unnamed woman, Maxim asks her to marry him, and they eventually return to Manderley, located on the southwestern English coast.

The new Mrs. de Winter feels out of place and overwhelmed in the massive, intimidating mansion, with its longstanding, rigid traditions and dozens of staff and servants. The first Mrs. de Winter, the Rebecca of the title, who died in a boating accident a year previously, continues to dominate the place. The second Mrs. de Winter becomes convinced, especially as a result of the comments and actions of the stern housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers (Kristin Scott Thomas), that Rebecca far outdid her in beauty, experience and *savoir-faire*, and that Maxim remains obsessed with his deceased wife.

In a pivotal sequence, Mrs. Danvers cruelly manipulates the new Mrs. de Winter into wearing a gown to a costume ball that is an exact replica—unbeknownst to the latter—of a dress Rebecca wore to a similar party just prior to her death. Maxim's angry, explosive reaction and Mrs. Danvers' taunting and coaxing nearly drive the second wife to suicide.

Those who do not want to learn important details about an 82-year-old novel and the new film adaptation should now avert their eyes.

A shipwreck nearby leads to the discovery of Rebecca's boat at the bottom of the sea, with a body inside. Maxim confesses to his new wife that, in fact, he “hated” Rebecca, that she was corrupt, vicious and brazenly promiscuous. After she informed Maxim she was pregnant with another man's child, he shot and killed her, and placed her body on board the boat before sinking it.

An inquest returns a verdict of suicide, but Rebecca's cousin, Jack Favell (Sam Riley), with whom Rebecca was having an affair and who is suspicious of Maxim, attempts blackmail. However, a doctor is located who explains that Rebecca was not pregnant, but rather terminally ill. Fearing a lingering, painful death, it seems, she goaded Maxim into killing her: suicide by aggrieved, enraged husband.

In the latest film version, a half-mad Mrs. Danvers sets fire to Manderley before jumping to her death from a cliff. Maxim and the second Mrs. de Winter set out to find happiness, if they can, in other locales.

To sum it up, an unloved, lonely middle class girl (with “mousy hair”) falls for an elegant aristocrat and eventually, after passing through various trials and ordeals, comes to realize that he adores her and despised his ravishing, decadent, equally aristocratic wife. *Rebecca* is a romance-fantasy.

Nonetheless, the story in all its incarnations (there are also numerous television and radio adaptations) remains intriguing enough. The four central characters, the second Mrs. de Winter, Maxim, Mrs. Danvers and the dead Rebecca, are glued together in an awful, compulsive and often dramatically gripping manner.

The new version, directed by Ben Wheatley, is a conscientious recounting of the story. While it does not “update” the events and characters and their relationships chronologically, it treats them in a far less formal and more immediately realistic manner.

Hammer is younger and less bullying than Olivier, while James is allowed to be more “empowered.” The film attempts to render more psychologically believable this latter-day version of *Cinderella*. That the new *Rebecca*, as opposed to Hitchcock's 1940 film, is in color adds to its everyday plausibility.

The strength, such as it is, of du Maurier's novel lies in its smoldering emotional fanaticism. Hitchcock's film offers, among other things, social critique. Neither element appears largely in the new Netflix film. It is a more or less genial retelling. It is not entirely clear why it has been done. Do the filmmakers have any definite and pressing ideas to convey?

The director speaks about his interest in the novel's turning the romance genre inside out: the handsome hero turns out to be a “murderous swine” who drags “this poor, innocent woman through all this misery.” Wheatley points out that the 1940 film was unable to duplicate du Maurier's plot because of the Motion Picture Production Code, which made it impossible for anyone to get away with a crime. In Hitchcock's version, Rebecca dies in an accident, although de Winter does place her body on the small sailboat and scuttle it.

If the reader detects hints of identity politics in Wheatley's comment about "this poor, innocent woman," who, incidentally, is fully complicit after the fact in de Winter's crime, he or she is probably correct. Likewise, there is the director's decision to make de Winter and his new bride much closer in age. (Hammer is 34, James 31—in the novel, de Winter is 42 and the new Mrs. de Winter is in her early 20s. Olivier was 33 and Fontaine 23 in 1940, but the former was made up to look older.) Wheatley explains that "I changed it, really, because I could probably live the rest of my life without seeing another film about an old man romancing a young woman... I knew it was a controversial decision to make, but I just felt I'd seen it too much."

This is telling, in its own small way. The director made the story more palatable to himself (and, to be frank, an entire milieu). What then becomes of the element of filming a book or a drama whose important details the filmmaker wants to keep at a distance and *criticize*? The creators of the new Netflix version of *Rebecca* have drawn the story closer to themselves in various ways, and made it more acceptable, and, as a result, left it mostly without edge, rather bland. It is a perfectly well-told, literal version of a mildly interesting melodrama, which leaves no powerful image or emotion behind.

Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 film is a far more urgent, memorable work. It was the British-born filmmaker's first film in the US and the experience was apparently not a happy one, as he found himself under the thumb and watchful eye of independent producer David O. Selznick.

Hitchcock, the son of a greengrocer in East London and the grandson, on his mother's side, of Irish immigrants, grew up acutely aware of class and social status. Producer John Houseman, a longtime friend, described Hitchcock as "a man of exaggeratedly delicate sensibilities, marked by a harsh Catholic education and the scars from a social system against which he was in perpetual revolt."

Writing about *Rebecca*, its hero and his "lord of the manor" existence, critic Bill Krohn noted that Hitchcock, in his first treatment, recognizing "a story about the disappearance of a world he never cared for," also ran "roughshod over the producer's [Selznick's] conception of Max as a Byronic hero: an introductory scene showed Max blowing cigar smoke in his future wife's face, causing her to throw up." Selznick vetoed that idea, but, Krohn comments, "Hitchcock encouraged Laurence Olivier to play Max as a boor anyway."

(This is de Winter's gracious marriage proposal, in both the novel and Hitchcock's movie: "Either you go to America with Mrs. Van Hopper, or you come home to Manderley with me." "You mean you want a secretary or something?" "I'm asking you to marry me, you little fool.")

The finished product is a somewhat uneasy coming together of features attributable to du Maurier, Selznick and Hitchcock and his screenwriters. Critic Robin Wood suggests that the film "fails either to assimilate or vomit out the indigestible novelettish ingredients" of the original book, and suffers from Olivier's "charmless performance," although this, as mentioned, seems to have been Hitchcock's intent.

The greatest strength of the 1940 film lies in its portrayal of Manderley as an inhuman and oppressive setting, a series of endless hallways and high-ceilinged torture chambers for the second Mrs. de Winter, a place of intense menace, whose history and social reality weigh on the brains of the living like a nightmare.

Hitchcock hated the British upper class and authority in general, and that comes across here in a somewhat muted, indirect fashion. He was

hampered in this regard by the novel itself, which suffers significantly from the degree to which the author was under the spell of her personal demons and fixations, including her fantasies about "great houses."

Hitchcock put his finger on one of the weaknesses when he observed that the book was "lacking in humor," i.e., it suffers from an airless (and, ultimately, tediously single-noted) lack of liveliness and breadth. For such qualities to be present, in the end, would have required a far greater objectivity on du Maurier's part, her ability to put considerably more space between herself and her characters and their world.

Bound up with that, also missing from the novel—and this is a work written in the midst of the Hungry Thirties—is social concreteness. (The only indications of de Winter's source of income are a couple of fleeting references to his "tenants" and his agent Frank Crawley's collecting "rents.")

*Rebecca* was not a second *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel—a work alive with social protest and anger, to which du Maurier's book is often compared—or anything like it.

In this regard, Mrs. Danvers' implied lesbianism in Hitchcock's film, treated rather luridly, seems a diversion. The housekeeper is not a horror because she is still consumed with love for Rebecca, but because she personifies the house, Manderley, and its crushing—and as Rebecca's conduct reveals, entirely hypocritical and empty—values. She has absorbed and turned those values into deadly weapons. The sinister housekeeper kills herself when she comes to see that everything was based on lies.

Furthermore, as indicated above, Hitchcock's overall approach was softened and weakened by Selznick, as part of the American film studio apparatus and its requirements.

This picture of aristocratic criminality and callousness might have drawn comparisons with Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game* (1939), another film made on the eve or in the first days of the Second World War, had Hitchcock had a free hand. As it is, his *Rebecca* is an affecting, but constricted work. Those interested by the new *Rebecca* should make the effort to view the earlier film.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**