

My Cousin Rachel Short Guide

My Cousin Rachel by Daphne Du Maurier

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Characters

Philip Ashley is much like the second wife in *Rebecca*. Because they are young and inexperienced, they cannot accurately judge the character of others. Philip must decide if his beloved Ambrose, his older cousin and guardian, became simply ill while in Italy or if he was poisoned by Rachel, his cousin and new wife. In some ways, Ambrose is like Maxim, the husband in *Rebecca*. Both Maxim and Ambrose are older than the narrator and consequently assume a paternal role. Too, Ambrose seems to be more than just a father figure. Women are shunned in the home Ambrose creates for Philip, and Philip is intensely jealous of Rachel when Ambrose writes about her. There is, then, a homoerotic cast to the relationship of Ambrose and Philip.

When Rachel comes to England, a widow, Philip vacillates between loving and fearing her. Because *My Cousin Rachel* is told through Philip's point of view, the reader cannot objectively judge Rachel. She could be guilty of murder; equally, she could be innocent of any crime. Even if Rachel is capable of murder, she remains a victim of the premodern times in which she lives.

She is naturally forthright and sensuous, characteristics a good woman was not supposed to have in earlier times.

Moreover, in a time when a woman's income must come from a man, it is not surprising that Rachel, a debt-ridden widow, would be interested in marrying a man of wealth and securing her own fortune. In *Rebecca* (1938), the narrator's vacillation toward the title character is resolved when Maxim reveals his first wife's evil nature; in *My Cousin Rachel*, there is no one to reveal Rachel's true nature.



Social Concerns/Themes

While Rebecca describes the struggle between good and evil, *My Cousin Rachel* explores the nature of good and evil. The narrator, Philip Ashley, shifts from one opinion to another as he desperately tries to discover whether Rachel is a murderer and greedy conniver or a hapless victim of circumstance and misguided men. Because Philip ultimately solves the problem of Rachel by killing her, readers must also judge whether Philip has wrongly killed an innocent woman, or struck a necessary blow against evil. As the novel vividly shows, the presence of evil is not easily recognizable, and the true worth of a person is highly subjective.

My Cousin Rachel also addresses the role economic independence plays in a person's life. Rachel marries Ambrose because she wants economic security.

Their marriage appears to threaten Philip's financial security because he has been Ambrose's heir, but Ambrose dies before he can change his will.

Rachel, thus, is once again financially vulnerable. After Philip falls in love with Rachel, he wants to grant her the economic security she desperately craves, but Ambrose's will does not permit him access to his estate until his next birthday. On his twenty-fifth birthday, Philip turns over his estate to Rachel with the provision that, if she remarries, the estate reverts to him.

What Philip does not realize is that she then no longer needs him. In fact, if she marries Philip, she loses the estate.

Philip argues that he would share with her all that he has, but she can attain economic independence only if she remains unmarried. Through Philip and Rachel du Maurier explores the relationship between self-determination and financial independence. Near the end of the novel, Philip, young and desperately in love, is willing to give up both; Rachel, who has known the vulnerability a poor and older woman faces, is not.



Techniques/Related Titles

Techniques used in *Rebecca* are duplicated or reworked in *My Cousin Rachel*. Both novels are narrated in first person, and both open with the narrators looking back on the tragic events that make up the plot. With the opening of *My Cousin Rachel*, Philip remembers first a hanged man he saw as a child and then Rachel, whose guilt he still cannot determine. The novel ends by returning to the opening scene: "They used to hang men at Four Turnings in the old days. Not any more, though."

As a Gothic novel, *My Cousin Rachel* focuses on a house very much like *Manderley* in *Rebecca*. To Philip, the house where his cousin Ambrose brought him to live is a sanctuary until Rachel comes to live in it and upsets the peaceful life he once knew. Appropriately, this home becomes the means to kill Rachel. Philip lets Rachel walk on a bridge over the sunken garden knowing full well it will collapse under her weight.

The party scene in *Rebecca*, where the narrator unwittingly wears a dress just like the one *Rebecca* wore, is recast in *My Cousin Rachel*. For a dinner party Philip hosts, he gives Rachel a pearl necklace to wear, a necklace that belonged to his late mother. Just as Maxim's people are horrified to see the narrator wearing a dress like the one *Rebecca* wore, Philip's godfather is horrified to see Rachel wearing the necklace that is supposedly to be worn only by brides. But Rachel is more sophisticated than the narrator in *Rebecca*. While Maxim's young wife is devastated by her mistake, Rachel with equanimity returns the necklace.

Adaptations

Richard Burton was new to Hollywood in 1952 when he starred in the film version of *My Cousin Rachel*. Directed by Henry Koster and produced by Nunnally Johnson, it received good reviews. Critics praised the rich setting, well-paced suspense, and the cast — particularly Burton. The film version sustains the inconclusiveness of the novel and does not ultimately determine the innocence or guilt of Rachel.



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