

# **Rebecca Film Summary**

## **Rebecca by Alfred Hitchcock**

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## Context

*Rebecca* is the story of the rich Maxim and a young woman known only as the Second Mrs. de Winter. Maxim's wife has recently died a terrible death, and he is still in mourning. Maxim meets the Second Mrs. de Winter while on holiday where she is the companion to a wealthy woman named Mrs. Van Hopper. The couple meet, fall in love, marry, and return to Maxim's home, Manderley.

At Manderley, the Second Mrs. de Winter finds that things are not quite what she expected. Rather than a welcoming homecoming, the Second Mrs. de Winter finds that everyone is suspicious of her, and she is unable to live up to the expectations set by Maxim's first wife, Rebecca.

As the story unfolds, the suspense builds until we finally discover that Maxim and Rebecca never loved each other and that the housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers, was obsessed with Rebecca. After Mrs. Danvers finds out that Maxim accidentally killed Rebecca, her obsession turns deadly and she burns down Manderley.

Alfred Hitchcock was unquestionably one of the greatest directors of all time. Countless directors have copied his use of suspense; his nickname is even "The Master of Suspense." He created several successful movies before *Rebecca*, including *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *Sabotage* (1936). Hitchcock's later works, such as *North By Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), and *Vertigo* (1958), are among his best known films.

Laurence Olivier gives an exceptional performance in *Rebecca*. *Rebecca* was one of his earliest films, along with *Fire Over England* (1937), *Wuthering Heights* (1939), and *21 Days* (1940). His role as Maxim garnered him quite a bit of praise, and he went on to star in over 80 other movies over the years.

Joan Fontaine was the sister of Olivia de Havilland. Although Joan had a few decent roles before *Rebecca*, she received her first Academy Award nomination for this film. From this point her career skyrocketed and she became a popular choice for films for some time to come.

*Rebecca* was the second film in which Judith Anderson played the convincing role of the evil Mrs. Danvers. Anderson later went on to have performances in films such as Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1940).

*Rebecca* was nominated for several Academy Awards: Best Actor in a Leading Role for Laurence Olivier; Best Actress in a Leading Role for Joan Fontaine; Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Judith Anderson; Best Art Direction, Black-and-White for Lyle R. Wheeler; Best Director for Alfred Hitchcock; Best Effects, Special Effects for Jack Cosgrove (photographic) and Arthur Johns (sound); Best Film Editing for Hal C. Kern; Best Music, Original Score for Franz Waxman; and Best Writing, Screenplay for Robert E. Sherwood and Joan Harrison. The film also won two Oscars for Best

Cinematography, Black-and-White for George Barnes and Best Picture for David O. Selznick.



## Summary and Analysis

As *Rebecca* begins, the Second Mrs. de Winter talks about her dream that she has returned to Manderley. Supernatural powers allow her to pass through the gate to her house. She realizes that things have changed as nature encroached upon the property. Finally she sees the house, Manderley, which is now desolate. She says that sometimes in her dreams she goes back to an earlier time that began for her in the South of France.

The scene changes to a raging ocean where a man stands on the edge of a high cliff. The woman we heard speaking earlier calls to him to tell him not to jump. He tells her to leave, and she runs away. The young woman turns out to be the ladies' maid for a rich older woman, Mrs. Edythe Van Hopper. That night at a party, Mrs. Van Hopper and the woman run into the gentleman again; his name is George Fortescu Maximillian "Maxim" de Winter. Maxim kindly entertains Mrs. Van Hopper, but he also opens the conversation to include the ladies' maid. Mrs. Van Hopper offers the girl to help Maxim, but he refuses the suggestion. She then spends the rest of the walk upstairs talking about Maxim's rudeness, placing the blame on the devastating death of his wife.

The next day, the young woman prepares to have lunch in the dining room, but she tips over a vase. Maxim invites her over for lunch and apologizes for his rude behavior near the cliff the day before. She tells him that she is earning her living by working for Mrs. Van Hopper. Her father was a painter who painted trees but was misunderstood. She was going to sketch that afternoon, and he offers to drive her somewhere in his car. She tries to convince him not to go to all the trouble, but he insists.

Maxim and the girl sit by the shore talking, and Maxim mentions how he does not expect to see his home again. She says that she thinks the ocean is powerful but is not all afraid of drowning. He walks away abruptly and says he'll take her home. When she arrives in Mrs. Van Hopper's room, the girl hears Mrs. Van Hopper telling the nurse that she remembers Maxim's wife, the lovely Rebecca, whom he adored and who tragically drowned while sailing near Manderley. When Mrs. Van Hopper sees the girl come in, she yells at her to get to work.

The girl wakes up remembering all the words about Rebecca. Then she goes out to play tennis, but runs into Maxim who insists that they go for a drive. When the girl returns, Mrs. Van Hopper says that the tennis instructor must be teaching her more than tennis. Mrs. Van Hopper later writes a note to Maxim that she will entertain him as soon as her cold gets better, since she knows he must be very bored. That evening Maxim and the girl dance all night long. The next day she learns that this will be her last day to play tennis: the nurse is being let go and the girl will have to do her job. After she leaves, Mrs. Van Hopper complains to the nurse that Maxim has not called her back.

As the Maxim and the girl drive through the country, she tells Maxim how she wishes she could bottle up the good memories and relive them anytime. Maxim tells her that sometimes the bottles contain demons that pop out just as you try to forget them. She



asks why Maxim wants her to come out with him. He stops the car, turns to her, and tells her that he wants her company. He tells her that he did not ask her out of kindness or charity, and if that is what she thinks, she should just get out. He asks her to call him Maxim, and then he places his finger on his lips and touches it to her forehead.

The next morning the girl is humming as she gets ready. Maxim gave her a bouquet of roses with a note thanking her for the previous day. Mrs. Van Hopper calls her into the other room, tells her that her daughter is engaged, and they must leave the next day. She runs off to begin preparations and to try to find Maxim. He is out riding until noon, and she is horrified that he might not make it back before she has to leave.

The girl is still trying to reach Maxim on the phone when Mrs. Van Hopper demands they leave. She runs back into the hotel to call again, but he is in the shower and doesn't answer. Mrs. Van Hopper is in a terrible rush, but the girl runs up to Maxim's room anyway. Maxim is shocked that she is leaving. She cries that she will be miserable in New York. He goes to the other room to get ready and asks if she would prefer New York or Manderley. She asks if he wants a secretary, but he says, "I'm asking you to marry me, you little fool!" She sits down slowly as Maxim's breakfast is brought into the room.

Over breakfast, the girl tells Maxim that she's not the sort of girl men marry and she doesn't belong to his world. He says that he should decide that, but if she doesn't love him that's another thing. She tells him that she does love him desperately, and she spent all morning crying because she thought she'd never see him again. Maxim says, "I'll remind you of this one day but you won't believe me. It's a pity you had to grow up." He then lets her pour his tea and coffee. Maxim asks who will give Mrs. Van Hopper the news, so he calls the desk and invites her up to his room. She is flattered.

While waiting for Mrs. Van Hopper, Maxim tells his future wife that the proposal should be different and much more romantic. Then, Mrs. Van Hopper shows up and tells Maxim her good news about her daughter. Maxim then tells her of his upcoming marriage to her former maid. Mrs. Van Hopper is shocked and is told that this all just happened a few moments before. She congratulates them both and offers to stay for the week, since the girl knows nothing of these things. Maxim refuses Mrs. Van Hopper's offer and says they would like to marry quietly.

Maxim goes downstairs to get the girl's luggage while Mrs. Van Hopper quizzes her on what she's been doing. She tells the girl that she cannot see her being Mistress of Manderley because she hasn't the faintest idea of what it means to be a great lady. Mrs. Van Hopper tells the girl that he's only marrying her because he was lonely. The girl asks Mrs. Van Hopper to leave and then stands alone in the room.

Maxim and the girl get married later that day. He buys her an armful of flowers and then we see them as they drive through the gates to Manderley. The girl is nervous, but he tells her she has nothing to worry about. The housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers, will take care of everything. The rain begins to pour the closer they get to the house. The girl is amazed and appalled by the sheer size and grandeur of the house. Fred, the butler,



comes in with them. When they walk in soaking wet, the whole staff is in attendance to greet them. Mrs. Danvers is a rather forbidding woman who looks down on the Second Mrs. de Winter.

Later in the evening, Mrs. Danvers comes to see the Second Mrs. de Winter. The girl doesn't understand why she needs her own personal maid, but Mrs. Danvers explains that in her position she must have a personal maid. She also tells her that Maxim had the room changed, as the East Wing has never really been used before. The room also does not face the sea. Mrs. Danvers tells the Second Mrs. de Winter to let her know if she needs anything.

The only person who has been at Manderley longer than Mrs. Danvers is Frith, who was there when Maxim was a boy. Mrs. Danvers came with the First Mrs. de Winter. The girl confides in Mrs. Danvers that she is not prepared for this role, and she entrusts all the household arrangements to Mrs. Danvers. The two women return downstairs, but the girl seems nervous as she walks through the house. As they walk downstairs, Mrs. Danvers shows the girl the first Mrs. de Winter's old room looking down on the sea; it was the most beautiful room in the house. A dog lies in front on the door. At dinner, Maxim and his new wife sit on opposite ends of a very long table.

The next morning, the clouds are gone. The girl goes downstairs and meets Frank Crawley, Maxim's estate manager. Maxim comes downstairs and greets his wife before the men leave to take care of estate matters. He also tells her that Major Giles Lacy and his wife Beatrice have invited themselves over for lunch. The girl leaves almost as soon as the servants enter, because she is so uncomfortable with being waited on. She learns from Frith that the public is admitted to the banquet hall and other parts of the home once a week. She finds a library and Frith directs her toward the morning room where a fire is always lit in the mornings. She then has to ask for directions to the room.

In the morning room, the Second Mrs. de Winter finds Rebecca de Winter's address book. When the phone rings, she tells the caller that Mrs. de Winter has been dead over a year. Mrs. Danvers explains that that was the house phone and the gardener was probably calling for instructions. Mrs. Danvers wants the Second Mrs. de Winter to approve the menu and pick a sauce, but the Second Mrs. de Winter tells her to do whatever she believes the First Mrs. de Winter would have done. The Second Mrs. de Winter opens the address book and finds that some of the names listed are famous - one is even a duchess. She tries to look in another book and breaks a porcelain angel when she knocks it off. She picks up the pieces and hides them in a drawer.

Later, the Lacys arrive before Maxim returns. When the Second Mrs. de Winter goes to meet them, they are discussing how she must be a cheap chorus girl. They treat her somewhat kindly, and then Mrs. Lacy sends her husband to find Maxim. The Second Mrs. de Winter is terribly nervous, but Mrs. Lacy helps lead the conversation. She tells the Second Mrs. de Winter that she is sure Mrs. Danvers will be difficult at first because she adored Rebecca, the first Mrs. de Winter. The Second Mrs. de Winter is disappointed by this news. At lunch, the Lacys encourage Maxim to throw a masquerade ball again that summer. The Second Mrs. de Winter tells them that she



does not ride. Mr. Lacy tries to find out what she does do, but he makes a terrible comment about how lucky they are that she doesn't sail.

Mrs. Lacy encourages the Second Mrs. de Winter to change her hair and clothes. She is surprised that Maxim does not care what the Second Mrs. de Winter wears; she says that he must have changed. She warns the Second Mrs. de Winter that Maxim has a terrible temper, but her placid attitude will probably not inflame it. Mrs. Lacy apologizes for asking so many rude questions and says they are glad for the way Maxim looks. They had been really worried about him. She also comments that, of course, the Second Mrs. de Winter must know the whole story.

Once the Lacys have gone, the de Winters decide to go for a walk with Jasper the dog. Jasper runs down a path to a cover where they used to keep a boat, and the Second Mrs. de Winter begs Maxim to follow him there. As Jasper begins howling, the Second Mrs. de Winter goes to check on him. Maxim gets angry at her for running down that path and tells her that the dog will find his own way back.

Jasper sits at the door of an old house. A man, who looks a bit crazy, opens the door. The Second Mrs. de Winter is scared, but she goes in to look for something to tie up the dog with. She is surprised to see all the nice furniture embroidered with Rebecca's initials. The man begs her not to reveal that he was down there, since he was just putting his shells away. He asks, "She's gone ain't she? She's not coming back no more?" The Second Mrs. de Winter replies, "No. She'll never come back."

When the Second Mrs. de Winter returns to Maxim, he is no longer on the beach. She tries to catch up with him, but he ignores her. Maxim tells her to never go to the cottage again, and she begs for his forgiveness. Maxim says that they should never have returned to Manderley. When she begins to cry, he apologizes and embraces her. They return home for tea and try to forget about the unfortunate matter. As they walk, however, the Second Mrs. de Winter uses a handkerchief embroidered with Rebecca's initials to wipe her eyes.

The Second Mrs. de Winter goes to see Crawley the next day to learn more about the estate. She learns that Maxim gave the tenants free rent and the servants extra wages in honor of his new bride. She tells Crawley about the cottage and asks why it is not kept in better shape. He said that Maxim would have told him if he wanted anything done. He tells her that all the things in the cottage are Rebecca's. She wanted a cottage near the boat. Rebecca wasn't afraid of anything: she went out in the boat in a storm and the boat capsized. The Second Mrs. de Winter tells Crawley that she feels she's always being compared to Rebecca, but Crawley reassures her that he for one is glad she's here and that she has plenty of wonderful qualities. She finally asks him his true opinion of Rebecca. He says that Rebecca was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

The Second Mrs. de Winter looks through a fashion magazine and orders a new dress to impress Maxim. Maxim tells her that he doesn't like her new hairstyle or new dress. She is disappointed, but he reassures her that the change is nice. They watch a film of





their honeymoon and wish it could have lasted forever. However, they are interrupted by Frith, who says that Robert and Mrs. Danvers are in a terrible argument. Mrs. Danvers has accused Robert of stealing the angel from the morning room. Maxim says it was one of their treasures, and he wonders aloud why they bring these problems to him rather than to the Second Mrs. de Winter; it is, after all, her job. After Frith leaves, the Second Mrs. de Winter tells Maxim that she broke the angel. She is afraid to tell the servants, and Maxim calls her an idiot for being scared of them. When Robert and Mrs. Danvers walk in, Maxim tells them the truth, and the Second Mrs. de Winter apologizes. She tells them that she put the pieces in the back of a drawer in the desk. Mrs. Danvers says she hopes that in the future she will be told about events as they happen.

Maxim tells the Second Mrs. de Winter that she acts more like a maid than the Mistress of the house. She feels that everyone is always watching her and treating her like a prize cow. He tells her that all anyone is interested in is the state of Manderley. She responds that he must have married her because she was too boring to be gossiped about. Maxim becomes angry and threatening, turning off the film and telling her that she shouldn't have said it. He wonders if he did a selfish thing by marrying the Second Mrs. de Winter, since he's not a good companion for her. She asks him if their marriage is a success and they are happy, but he walks away. She tells him not to pretend to be happy. If he's not happy, she will go away. Maxim tells her he doesn't know the answer nor anything about happiness, so if she thinks they're happy, then they must be. Then, they continue to watch their honeymoon video.

Maxim leaves early the next morning, leaving a note saying that a holiday from one another must be welcome. The Second Mrs. de Winter sits in her room and cries until breakfast is brought upstairs to her. She looks out the window toward the West Wing and notices that a curtain is blowing in the wind. She watches Mrs. Danvers with Jack Favell. Favell is trying to sneak around so that the Second Mrs. de Winter won't see him. However, Favell walks by a window and spots the Second Mrs. de Winter. He asks about Maxim being gone, and then Mrs. Danvers enters. Favell jumps through the window and introduces himself. The Second Mrs. de Winter invites him to stay for tea, but Mrs. Danvers shakes her head. He asks her not to mention his visit to Maxim, as Maxim doesn't approve of him. Before he leaves, he tells the Second Mrs. de Winter that he was Rebecca's favorite cousin.

The Second Mrs. de Winter hurries up to the West Wing to investigate her earlier discovery. As she nears the door, the suspense rises. She opens the door to reveal a lovely room with a breathtaking view of the ocean. She opens a window and is frightened when it flies closed. Mrs. Danvers comes in, and the Second Mrs. de Winter tells her that she came in to close a window. Mrs. Danvers calls her bluff, telling her that she closed the window when she left earlier. She asks why the Second Mrs. de Winter did not ask to see the room, as Mrs. Danvers would have been willing to show it to her.

Everything in the room is kept just as the Rebecca liked it. Mrs. Danvers even shows the new bride all of Rebecca's lovely clothes, including a fur coat from Mr. de Winter. She mentions that he was always buying Rebecca expensive gifts, and they were always out at parties. Mrs. Danvers enacts the way she used to care for Rebecca. The



Second Mrs. de Winter is shocked to see Rebecca's exquisite lingerie. She begins to cry and starts to hurry out of the room. Mrs. Danvers shares that sometimes she thinks Rebecca is still there, and that she believes the dead come back and watch the living. Mrs. Danvers encourages the Second Mrs. de Winter to stay in the room to rest and listen to the sea, but the Second Mrs. de Winter hurries out of the room.

Downstairs, the Second Mrs. de Winter cries and calls for Mrs. Danvers. She pulls out all the notes in the desk to begin writing, but she also finds an invitation from Flavell that seems to be more than an innocent invitation to a party. The Second Mrs. de Winter asks Mrs. Danvers to get rid of all the things in the desk, but Mrs. Danvers says, "Those are Mrs. de Winter's things." The Second Mrs. de Winter replies, "I am Mrs. de Winter now." Before leaving to meet Maxim, she also tells Mrs. Danvers that she would prefer to forget Favell's visit and everything else that happened that afternoon. Then, she runs to Maxim.

The Second Mrs. de Winter asks Maxim to have a costume ball as they used to. She wants people to feel that Manderley is the same as it always was. Maxim tells her that she does not know how to be a hostess to so many hundreds of people. However, he finally agrees to her request. The next day, the Second Mrs. de Winter spends time designing her costume. Mrs. Danvers suggests that she look at the portraits on the staircase to get ideas. She points to one that was Lady Caroline and mentions that it is Maxim's favorite among his portraits. The Second Mrs. de Winter believes this is a wonderful idea and has a costume created.

On the night of the ball, the guests begin to arrive. The Second Mrs. de Winter has kept her costume a secret. Mrs. Lacy wants to come upstairs to help the Second Mrs. de Winter, but she doesn't want Mrs. Lacy to come. The Second Mrs. de Winter is so excited about her costume and her maid reassures her that she is beautiful.

When the Second Mrs. de Winter goes downstairs, everyone stops to stare in shock when they see her outfit. She is appalled, realizing that she has done something wrong. Maxim tells her to hurry upstairs and change. She runs upstairs, still not understanding what she did wrong.

The Second Mrs. de Winter sees Mrs. Danvers enter Rebecca's room and confronts her about her trick. Sadly, this is the same dress Rebecca wore on her last night alive. Mrs. Danvers tells the Second Mrs. de Winter that she can never overwhelm Rebecca; only the sea could ever destroy her. Mrs. Danvers opens the window and encourages the Second Mrs. de Winter to jump. A ship crashes against the rocks, and everyone, including Maxim, runs to the rescue. The Second Mrs. de Winter calls for Maxim and hurries out of the room.

After changing clothes, the Second Mrs. de Winter hurries down to the beach. She runs into Ben, the strange man from the cottage, and asks him if he's seen Mr. de Winter. He says that she won't come back, and then he says, "Oh, the other one." The Second Mrs. de Winter finally finds Frank, who says Maxim probably returned to the house. Frank tells the Second Mrs. de Winter that the diver who went down came across the hull of a



second boat, a sailboat - Rebecca's sailboat. Frank tells her that this will bring everything back again worse than before. Frank leaves to fix breakfast.

The Second Mrs. de Winter finally notices a light on at the cottage and investigates. Maxim is sitting there alone. She begs for his forgiveness for the dress. He says that he had forgotten already. She tells him that he doesn't have to love her, but she would like to be his friend and companion. He replies that he loves her very much but that it's too late for them to enjoy their little piece of heaven. He says that the thing he has dreaded day after day has finally happened - Rebecca has won. Her shadow was between them all the time, and she knew this would happen. The diver found Rebecca's boat and a body inside - Rebecca's body. Maxim tells the Second Mrs. de Winter that the woman who was buried was not Rebecca; instead it was an unidentified woman. He knew the truth at the time, and he knew that Rebecca's body was lying on the cabin floor in the boat at the bottom of the sea. He admits that he put her there.

Maxim says that the Second Mrs. de Winter can no longer look at him in the same way. She tells him that it's not too late and that she still loves him. She tells him that they were never close enough because she knew how much he still loved Rebecca and how he compared them. Maxim is shocked to discover that she thought he loved Rebecca: he admits that he hated her. He was enchanted by her beauty, breeding, and brains, but he was never happy with her because she was incapable of love.

Four days after they were married, Maxim found out all about Rebecca at the cliff where he first met the Second Mrs. de Winter. He says he will never tell anyone some of the things he learned, but that he wanted to kill Rebecca. She bargained with him that she would be a mistress to his home, and he would not divorce her.

Maxim believes that the Second Mrs. de Winter must despise him as he despises himself, but she says she understands. He tells her that Rebecca became careless and began staying away from Manderley or bringing her friends there. She had affairs with Frank, Favell, and others. Maxim had threatened to kill Rebecca and Favell if he found them together. One night, he thought they were together in the cottage, but Rebecca was alone. She told Maxim that if she had an heir, no one would know whose it was. The child would be Maxim's heir even though it wasn't his child. She asks Maxim why he doesn't kill her, and Maxim says he must have struck her. Then she stumbled and struck her head, and he realized she was dead. He knew no one would believe it was an accident, so he put Rebecca's body on the boat. When it seemed far enough out, he sunk the ship and came back in a small dinghy. He knows they will identify the body easily.

Maxim tells the Second Mrs. de Winter that he loves her and always will, but he knows that Rebecca has won. The Second Mrs. de Winter tells him that Rebecca has not won, no matter what happens. Frank calls the cottage to tell them that Colonel Julyan is on his way to the mortuary to check out the other body. Maxim tells the Colonel that he must have made a mistake identifying the first body, and Colonel Julyan says there will be another inquest. Maxim is obviously concerned, but no one seems to suspect anything.



That night, Frith assures the Second Mrs. de Winter that he will do anything to help the family. She goes to Maxim and tells him that she's scared he will become angry and say something rash. Maxim is saddened that the innocent look is gone from the Second Mrs. de Winter's face. The couple embraces in front of the fire.

The next day at the inquest, Frank is questioned, but all he can say is that he doesn't want to go to the asylum. The inquest continues and the ship examiner reveals that he found the seacocks open and holes were made from the inside. He reports that the boat did not capsize at all. No one believes that Rebecca would have committed suicide. Maxim is then called to be questioned. He is asked whether he and Rebecca were perfectly happy, and he becomes angry. The Second Mrs. de Winter pretends to pass out to protect Maxim.

Maxim and the Second Mrs. de Winter go to the car to have some dinner. Favell comes to talk to the Second Mrs. de Winter, but she asks him to leave. Favell invites himself to join them, and he discusses the holes in the boat with Maxim. He also reveals a letter Rebecca wrote the day she died. The note was obviously not from a woman who planned to kill herself that night. Favell tries to blackmail Maxim in order to keep quiet. The two men go to make a business transaction at the nearby restaurant. Maxim brings Julyan over to reveal Favell's attempt at blackmail. Favell accuses Maxim of murder and says that Frank should know. Frank was always hanging around, but he was scared of Rebecca's threat to put him in the asylum.

Mrs. Danvers comes in and is asked who Rebecca's doctor in London was. Mrs. Danvers tells everyone that Rebecca simply laughed at all the men and the idea of love. She says she knew everything about Rebecca and would not believe that she would kill herself. Favell tells her that Maxim is suspected of her murder, and she finally reveals the doctor's identity. Favell says that Rebecca went to find out whether she was pregnant and that Maxim probably killed her. Maxim leaves with the others to question the doctor.

Favell, Julyan, and Maxim go to London to see the doctor. The doctor says that no Mrs. de Winter came to see him that day, but a Mrs. Danvers did. He describes her as being an exquisitely beautiful woman. Julyan asks if there was any reason the doctor could think of that Rebecca would have committed suicide. The doctor says that the woman was very seriously ill. She was not going to have a child: instead, she had cancer. She would have died very soon. When he told her it was a matter of months, he says that she smiled in a weird sort of way and said, "Oh no, doctor, not that long." They request verification of his findings, and they leave.

Favell and Julyan decide to stay in town that night, but Maxim goes to tell the Second Mrs. de Winter the good news. Maxim wants to tell Frank the truth, but Frank doesn't want to hear it. Maxim realizes that Rebecca wanted him to kill her when she told him about the child. Frank tells him to put it out of his mind.

Favell calls Mrs. Danvers and tells her that Rebecca lied to them both. Maxim hurries home, but he can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. In the house, we see

someone walking through with a lit candle. As they come closer to the house, Maxim sees light over the trees. After checking the time, he realizes that it can't be dawn and that Manderley must be on fire. Maxim asks Frank where the Second Mrs. de Winter is, and they embrace. He kisses her passionately. The Second Mrs. de Winter tells him that Mrs. Danvers has gone crazy, preferring to see Manderley burned rather than seeing them happy there. The last time we see Mrs. Danvers, she is in the middle of the fire in Rebecca's room. We watch as Rebecca's special pillow burns up, and the film ends.



# Characters

## George Fortescu Maximillian "Maxim" de Winter, played by Laurence Olivier

### Description

Maxim is a wealthy man who meets the Second Mrs. de Winter while vacationing at a fancy resort. Despite having been married to a beautiful, classy woman in the past, Maxim falls in love with the Second Mrs. de Winter surprisingly quickly.

Maxim returns home with his new wife only to find that old ghosts are still haunting him. Although he tries to protect the Second Mrs. de Winter, he finds himself trapped amid a rampage of lies and deceit. All he wants to do is enjoy his new wife and the home he loves, but he is still plagued by the past.

### Analysis

Maxim is a strong, caring man, but he cannot seem to get away from his past. The Second Mrs. de Winter believes that he is still in love with Rebecca, but nothing could be further from the truth. Maxim hated his first wife for her deception, and he accidentally killed her.

Maxim tries to keep the truth about his wife's death a secret, but eventually the Second Mrs. de Winter finds out the truth. When he finally tells the Second Mrs. de Winter, she understands everything, and he finds that she loves him just the same. Maxim loves her, but until this time, he doesn't realize that true love would tell her the truth about his past.

## The Second Mrs. de Winter, played by Joan Fontaine

### Description

The Second Mrs. de Winter is a poor woman who works as a companion to Mrs. van Hopper. When she first meets Maxim on the cliff, he scares her, but she begins to get to know him and they fall in love. The Second Mrs. de Winter believes that love and money will take care of all her problems, but she is shocked to find that life at Manderley is not quite what she expected.

The Second Mrs. de Winter is constantly reminded that she does not live up to Rebecca, and she feels completely incompetent. Due to Mrs. Danvers' meddling, she comes to believe that Maxim is still in love with Rebecca. Every time she makes another



mistake, the Second Mrs. de Winter feels even more out of touch with her husband and her new life.

## **Analysis**

The Second Mrs. de Winter is a sweet, innocent girl. She does not understand the ways of the world and is shocked when Mrs. Van Hopper accuses her of manipulating Maxim into marrying her. She remains optimistic about her future, however, until she reaches Manderley and is shocked by what she discovers.

Partially due to her own inexperience and partially to Mrs. Danvers' influence, the Second Mrs. de Winter feels that she cannot live up to the precedent set by Rebecca. As she tries desperately to please her husband and everyone else, the Second Mrs. de Winter feels constantly defeated. Only when she finds out the truth about Rebecca's and Maxim's past does she begin to feel capable and confident that she can face anything.

## **Mrs. Danvers, played by Judith Anderson**

### **Description**

Mrs. Danvers is the cruel housekeeper who was extremely loyal to Rebecca and hates the Second Mrs. de Winter. Mrs. Danvers tries to make Maxim's new wife feel that she will never live up to the expectations everyone has of her. At one point, she even tries to convince the Second Mrs. de Winter to kill herself.

### **Analysis**

Mrs. Danvers is a cruel, unfeeling woman who seems to be partially in love with Rebecca. She has kept everything in Rebecca's room as it once was and is angry with Maxim for bringing in a replacement wife. Mrs. Danvers eventually burns down Manderley out of hatred for Maxim and the Second Mrs. de Winter.

## **Jack Favell, played by George Sanders**

### **Description**

Jack Favell is Rebecca's cousin and one of her former lovers. Maxim hates Favell because of his relationship with Rebecca.

### **Analysis**

Jack is good friends with Mrs. Danvers and tries to annoy Maxim as much as possible. He blames Maxim for Rebecca's death and hates him for it.



## **Frank Crawley, played by Reginald Denny**

### **Description**

Frank Crawley is the caretaker of Maxim's home. He was also in love with Rebecca.

### **Analysis**

Frank is a good friend to Maxim and helps the Second Mrs. de Winter understand more about Manderley's troubled past.

## **Colonel Julyan, played by C. Aubrey Smith**

### **Description**

Colonel Julyan conducts the investigation into Rebecca's death.

### **Analysis**

Colonel Julyan works to free Maxim from accusations that he killed Rebecca. Their investigations succeed in showing that Rebecca wanted Maxim to kill her.

## **Mrs. Edythe Van Hopper, played by Florence Bates**

### **Description**

The Second Mrs. de Winter was working for Mrs. Van Hopper when she and Maxim met and were married.

### **Analysis**

Mrs. Van Hopper is a hypochondriac and is very conscious of her social status. She is kind to the Second Mrs. de Winter until she finds out the Second Mrs. de Winter is marrying Maxim. She then accuses the Second Mrs. de Winter of being a social climber and manipulating Maxim into marrying her.

## **Major Giles Lacy, played by Nigel Bruce**

### **Description**

Major Giles Lacy is Beatrice Lacy's husband.





## **Analysis**

Major Lacy at first resents the Second Mrs. de Winter, but when he recognizes her youth and innocence, he begins to pity her.

## **Beatrice Lacy, played by Gladys Cooper**

### **Description**

Beatrice Lacy is Major Giles Lacy's wife and Maxim's sister.

### **Analysis**

Beatrice likes the Second Mrs. de Winter and tries to help her adjust to her new life. However, like everyone else, Beatrice continues to compare her to Rebecca.

## **Frith, played by Edward Fielding**

### **Description**

Frith is the faithful butler in Maxim's home. He has been with Maxim for years, and although he was loyal to him while Rebecca lived at Manderley, he was also willing to help the Second Mrs. de Winter.

### **Analysis**

Frith is a kind person. Even though he has been with Maxim for years, he tries to be open to the Second Mrs. de Winter.

## **Rebecca, played by nobody**

### **Description**

We never see Rebecca in the film, but we learn about her from Maxim and the other people in his home. She accidentally died when Maxim became angry with her one evening.

### **Analysis**

Rebecca has become a presence in the house and the Second Mrs. de Winter has to live up to her standards. Rebecca was a mean, hateful woman who had many affairs and seemed to hate both men and women alike. She had a great disdain for Maxim, and he was miserable while she lived.



# Themes

## Finding True Love

Finding true love is one of the greatest themes of *Rebecca*. Although Maxim was married to a woman whom everyone respected and admired, he was never happy because she was not his true love. He had only married her because she could run his house well, he was fascinated by her, and she was of the proper social standing.

Until the Second Mrs. de Winter comes along, Maxim has no idea what it is like to experience true love. After their first meeting, the two begin spending a lot of time with each other. As they come to know each other better, they realize how much they enjoy being with each other. Before their time is over, they have fallen in love. Maxim knows the true joy of falling in love with the Second Mrs. de Winter.

True love can easily be tarnished, however, and as the couple arrives at Maxim's home a dark cloud forms over their lives. Rebecca's shadow is over everything, including Maxim. Eventually, the truth surrounding Rebecca's death comes out. When Mrs. Danvers burns down Manderley, the couple is freed from the horrors of Maxim's past. One hopes that as they embrace and watch Manderley burn down, they will once again experience true love and happiness.

## Power of the Past

The past is a powerful thing, and it can easily overshadow our lives as we live day to day. In *Rebecca*, Maxim's past affects both him and everyone around him. The tragedies of Manderley throw a cloud over all the good things happening in the lives of Maxim and the Second Mrs. de Winter.

As soon as Maxim and the Second Mrs. de Winter arrive at Manderley, everything begins going wrong - even the rain foreshadows the problems the new couple will have at Manderley. Maxim loves the house and property dearly, but he is haunted by the events that have happened there, including Rebecca's betrayal and death.

The once happy couple is tortured by a shadow that Rebecca's memory places over their new home. At first the Second Mrs. de Winter feels that everyone, including Maxim, is measuring her against Rebecca. However, she soon discovers that Maxim never loved Rebecca the way he loves her. Mrs. Danvers and the others, however, do compare her to Rebecca, and Mrs. Danvers, especially, takes a certain joy in torturing her with memories of the past with Rebecca.



## Difficulty of Living Up to Expectations

The Second Mrs. de Winter's greatest challenge is trying to live up to the expectations of those around her. She was raised in a poor family and only recently learned anything about the life of the rich, when she served as Mrs. van Hopper's companion. The Second Mrs. de Winter lacks any training in the art of being a lady, and she is completely unprepared for the challenges that await her at Manderley.

During their whirlwind courtship, it never occurred to the Second Mrs. de Winter that her life with Maxim might be difficult. She seems to assume that with his money and their love, her new life will be perfect. However, she finds a much different reality at Manderley. Although the Lacys disapprove of her at first, they eventually recognize her youth and innocence and begin to pity her.

Mrs. Danvers, on the other hand, begins to attack the Second Mrs. de Winter as soon as she walks in the door. She places ridiculous demands and expectations on the Second Mrs. de Winter, who quickly feels that she cannot live up to her new role. Additionally, Mrs. Danvers makes it seem as if Maxim is still in love with Rebecca when nothing could be further from the truth. The Second Mrs. de Winter struggles throughout the film to meet very high and unreasonable expectations, and viewers are reminded to have sympathy for those in similar situations.

## Style and Cinematography

*Rebecca* is a dark film created by Alfred Hitchcock, one of the most masterful tellers of dark stories in the history of American cinema. The film is a classic example of Hitchcock's gothic mystery cinema. Hitchcock uses suspense to create interest and intrigue in the film. Rather than offer a shocking surprise at the end of the film, Hitchcock builds up suspense throughout the course of the movie.

From the moment we first see Manderley and hear of its ultimate ruin, we are hooked on finding out how the ruin of Manderley came to be. Thus, when we suddenly see the future Second Mrs. de Winter run into Maxim, we are shocked by his anger and our curiosity is piqued. Suspense continues building as Rebecca's memory is shrouded in the mansion, and her presence overshadows the lives of everyone involved. When we finally discover that Rebecca and Maxim did not love one another, we realize that we're not terribly surprised, but the thought eluded us until that moment. Hitchcock's use of suspense does not shock viewers, but rather it intrigues and hooks them throughout the film.

Hitchcock commonly uses a technique called the "MacGuffin." The MacGuffin is a character or detail that instigates the entire story. In this film, Rebecca is the MacGuffin. Rebecca's death triggers a series of events that continue to haunt Maxim, his new wife, and the entire town until Manderley is finally ruined. Since we learn the story from the Second Mrs. de Winter's point of view, Rebecca is completely unknown until Maxim tells the true story of her death. We never see Rebecca, but her life and death are the basis and the cause for Hitchcock's story.



# Motifs

## Cinderella Story

As with so many of the great stories of the world, this film also uses the Cinderella story motif. The Second Mrs. de Winter is working as the handmaid and companion of a rich lady when she meets Maxim. As she and Maxim fall in love, he decides to make her his wife. When she moves from companion to the wife of a rich man, she becomes like the poor Cinderella who marries her prince.

However, Hitchcock adds a twist to the film by making everything not turn out happily ever after. When the Second Mrs. de Winter arrives at Manderley, things begin to go terribly wrong. She expects everyone to love her and welcome her openly, but instead they seem to be offended by her presence. The ghost of Rebecca seems to still linger over the house, and the Second Mrs. de Winter cannot seem to get out of Rebecca's shadow.

This Cinderella story gone wrong allows us to see that no story simply ends with "happily ever after." The Second Mrs. de Winter ends up suffering terribly as she tries to work through the truth and the lies of Manderley. Eventually, though, her Cinderella story may turn out all right once the truth comes out.

## Suspense

One of Alfred Hitchcock's most important gifts to the world of film was his excellent use of suspense. For years, people have been copying his techniques in the hopes of garnering similar acclaim.

Hitchcock is known for using suspense to help move a film along. Instead of using surprising shocks throughout the film, suspense builds slowly from the beginning of the film until its final moments. This technique is more subtle than using surprises and creates a richer plot. The suspense builds in the film from the moment we first see Manderley until the moment we see it burning to the ground. Few events in the film are shocking, but we are caught waiting to see what will happen next. After we become interested in the story of the Second Mrs. de Winter and Rebecca, we wait impatiently to find out the truth about Rebecca and the troubled past of Manderley.

Suspense also helps keep the audience focused on the characters. When there are a lot of shocking surprises in a film, the audience tends to forget who the characters are that they're watching. They become more focused on the surprises they see than on the roles and lives of the characters. In *Rebecca*, the use of suspense always keeps us focused on the feelings and experiences of the characters.

## MacGuffin

The "MacGuffin" is a popular technique Hitchcock uses in most of his films. A "MacGuffin" is a small detail or character that the director and writer use to form the plot. For example, in the famous film *Vertigo*, the "MacGuffin" is a woman who died; her death starts off a series of events. Although the detail becomes less important than the events in the plot, the action is instigated and pushed by this "MacGuffin."

In *Rebecca*, the "MacGuffin" of the plot is Rebecca herself. Her actions and existence stand in the background of the rest of the action in the film. Although we never see Rebecca, she seems to haunt the rest of the characters throughout the course of the film. The "MacGuffin" of Rebecca, however, is eventually overcast by the actions and feelings of the other characters. The relationship between Maxim and the Second Mrs. de Winter becomes the most important part of the film.



# Symbols

## Trip to the Cliff

Both Maxim and the Second Mrs. de Winter take a trip to the cliff, but for totally different reasons. The Second Mrs. de Winter is seeking to escape the servitude of her life, while Maxim is reliving painful memories from his past with Rebecca. When the Second Mrs. de Winter spots Maxim standing on the edge of the cliff, she believes that he is about to commit suicide. When she tries to approach him, he yells at her, and she runs away in terror.

Their first meeting reveals a lot about the future of their relationship. The Second Mrs. de Winter is young and naive. She cannot even imagine the horrors that Maxim has lived through or how difficult her young life would end up being. She is innocent and he is haunted.

The trip to the cliff is symbolic for Maxim as he remembers how Rebecca told him hurtful things when they first visited that cliff. Maxim's anger when he meets the Second Mrs. de Winter is aimed entirely at Rebecca, who ruined his life and his home. In addition, he is dogged with guilt for accidentally murdering her. The atmosphere of the cliff follows Maxim and the Second Mrs. de Winter home to Manderley, and their lives are never the same.

## Rebecca's Desk

Rebecca's desk has a lot of Rebecca's personal items, including address books and notes. The Second Mrs. de Winter has no knowledge of the way things are run in the home of a leading man in society. She is constantly compared to Rebecca, who did everything in a very methodical and practical way. Rebecca carried herself like a lady and kept her desk as a lady should.

When the Second Mrs. de Winter sees the names in Rebecca's address book and the items in the desk, she is completely overwhelmed. Mrs. Danvers doesn't help any. She makes the Second Mrs. de Winter even more nervous by pointing out how much better suited Rebecca was to this type of life and how much Maxim supposedly loved her.

Rebecca's desk symbolizes the fact that the Second Mrs. de Winter will never be able to live up to the precedent set by Rebecca. Everyone was fascinated by Rebecca, and she always knew the right thing to say and do. The Second Mrs. de Winter has just come from being a companion to a rich lady and has absolutely no training in the world of the rich. The desk constantly reminds her that she is not good enough for her position.



## Manderley's Destruction

Mrs. Danvers destroys Manderley soon after she finds out that Maxim killed Rebecca. She seems to have been obsessed, possibly even in love, with Rebecca, and she cannot bear to know that her mistress was murdered by her husband. Mrs. Danvers spends all her time trying to remind the Second Mrs. de Winter of her incompetence and even tries to convince her to commit suicide.

As if she wasn't already somewhat unstable, Mrs. Danvers completely loses it when she discovers that Rebecca was murdered. Mrs. Danvers hates Maxim, and she wants to make him suffer as she is suffering. Maxim loves Manderley more than anything else in his life, so she burns it down.

In addition to hurting Maxim by burning down the house, Mrs. Danvers also hopes that the Second Mrs. de Winter, whom she despises, will die in the fire. Thankfully, the Second Mrs. de Winter escapes successfully. Mrs. Danvers, on the other hand, dies in the fire. We last see her as she stands upstairs looking out Rebecca's window and screaming.





## Essay Questions

How does Maxim meet the Second Mrs. de Winter?

What is the Second Mrs. de Winter doing when the couple meets?

Why is Maxim's visit to the cliff symbolic?

Whose point of view is the story told through?

What is Manderley?

What is the symbolism of Manderley's destruction?

How does Rebecca's presence affect Manderley?

How is Rebecca's body found?

What is the truth about Rebecca's death?

Describe Mrs. Danvers' role in the film and her relationship with Rebecca.