

BEAUTY FINE ART

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The High Modernist era, hitting its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, was a period spanning multiple arts and disciplines characterised by its strikingly novel way of thinking and almost scientific hunger for progress and experimentation. Particularly in literature, authors began to test the boundaries of what was considered previously possible and write from often fragmented perspectives and tones, often with direct or ironic references to literary texts of the past. This movement was catalysed by societal changes- it was prompted by the bitter aftermath of World War One which left many to distrust tradition, and then by economic strength in many countries during the following 1920s that led to a lavish revolution in self-presentation and societal norms. There is evidence to suggest, however, that this liberation receded in the 1930s with the effect of the Great Depression.

However, High Modernism as an ethos still remained strong during this era. Of note is the writer T.S. Eliot, who among his other works started *The Four Quartets* in 1935 with the poem *Burnt Norton*, succeeded by three more of similar structure in the 1940s. *Burnt Norton* is a deliberately meditative piece on the nature of time and human distraction; beauty and the reception of beauty to human eyes is one theme Eliot uses as a vehicle to provoke his reader to think. This idea is most effectively epitomised in the first stanza as Eliot talks of '*the door we never opened/Into the rose-garden.*'. This rose-garden is the setting for most of the poem, and it's this effulgent, blossoming image that evokes the idealised concept in our minds of opportunities we missed, things which could have been- thus the aesthetic beauty of the rose is the ambassador for an idea in our own heads of a perfect alternate possibility. Eliot's *Four Quartets* were received warmly by the British public during wartime, but were subject to mixed opinion from Eliot's literary peers; George Orwell in particular disliked the recurrent religious imagery.

Receiving worse reception still during this time was Daphne du Maurier for what is now her most remembered work, *Rebecca*. In contrast to Eliot's 'high culture' status, du Maurier was at the other end of the spectrum, specialising in the very opposite of the High Modernist zeitgeist. The psychoanalytic female narrative prevalent in *Rebecca* and du Maurier's other works was not taken seriously during this time, and her works were slated as clichéd and inane, once named by a critic as '*a glossy brand of entertaining nonsense*'. The undercurrent of misogyny running through society at this time was clear, as Alfred Hitchcock's film adaptation of *Rebecca* was conversely considered noteworthy enough to be his only production to receive *Best Picture* at the Oscars. However, du Maurier weaves a tale in *Rebecca* more intricate than contemporary critics considered it to be; unlike her High Modernist peers, du Maurier did not seek to experiment with new ideas but rather to examine the past as she repeatedly invokes the tropes of the Gothic genre in the present 1930s, pitting a young and anonymous new bride against the shadow of her superior late predecessor, the eponymous Rebecca. Unlike Eliot, du Maurier focuses not on metaphysical beauty but on female beauty and standards of appearance to show the relationship between these two women and time.

Rebecca, as a figure of the encroaching past, possesses the beauty of the 'flapper' archetype of the previous decade. Her immaculately-preserved dresses are silk and velvet, common in 1920s tailoring as they draped naturally over the frame. Under the influence of designers such as Madeleine Vionnet, '*liberation from the corset*' was a popular aim of 1920s dressmaking, as it aspired to eliminate this rigid structure enforced upon the female body. Indeed, Rebecca's whole character seems to be about subverting oppressive female norms, just as the flappers of the 1920s did: she hosted indulgent parties, feared nothing, and viewed love as sport. Her devoted housekeeper Mrs Danvers remarks of her that '*she despised all men. She was above all that*'; the homosexual implications between Rebecca and Mrs Danvers in the novel prove her both as a woman of the past and of something foreign, as during the 1920s lesbian identities began to emerge in Europe amidst controversy and most famously in subcultures in the jazz clubs of Harlem. Britain was in a depression during this time, however, establishing Rebecca as a creature of a culture far from the book's Cornwall setting, a sort of female

'other'. Convention does not let her get away with this, as she was diagnosed with uterine cancer before her murder; a symbol of this forsaken traditional femininity.

The young and modest protagonist is therefore a bold juxtaposition. She's acceptably within female convention as another character, Frank Crawley, is convinced she '*will make a great success*' of her marriage; however, she describes herself as '*handicapped with a rather desperate gaucherie*', riddled with anxiety and lacking charisma. She arrives to the stately Manderley in a '*jumper of [her] own creation*' and expresses her concern about food waste, remarking '*there was enough food there to keep a starving family for a week*'. As opposed to Rebecca's Golden Age, the protagonist instead represents the recent past of the Depression- plain, deprived and desperate to please. Her face is '*white and thin*', her hair '*lank and straight*'- another contrast to Rebecca's oft-mentioned outside beauty. However, the protagonist is the wife who survives the conflict- she spends the rest of her days alive in peaceful exile from English aristocracy living in small European hotels with her husband, talking of her boredom '*as a pleasing antidote to fear*'. There is no beauty in her current life- yet it is safe.

Thus it's possible to draw parallels between du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Eliot's *Burnt Norton*. Despite their different contexts, they both use the theme of beauty duplicitously as something that extends past a physical perception- of female beauty and earthly beauty, respectively- and goes on to reflect time and the past. The third section of *Burnt Norton* opens on '*Time before and time after/In a dim light*', and thus Eliot turns his attention onto sunlight, another icon of beauty. He describes the daylight '*turning shadow into transient beauty/With slow rotation suggesting permanence*'; the beautiful is the short-lived, the shallow, much like Rebecca. In contrast, the darkness is said to '*purify the soul/Emptying the sensual with deprivation*'. The night is a relief from daylight's superficial beauty, and is an emptiness that heals and grounds- similarly to Plato's ideal of love, something that can ascend from a physical, '*sensual*' thing into an ideal realm of perfection, reachable by the rational mind. Like in *Rebecca*, surface beauty is treated with heavy suspicion, and refuge from it is a harbinger of peace and enlightenment. The narrative of *Burnt Norton* invests beauty with real psychological powers- in this instance, it has the power to shape our thoughts and inhibit our enlightenment.

In addition, Eliot and du Maurier both also use beauty to suggest perfection and idealism, which is then deconstructed with the lack of beauty. Eliot achieves this through the allegorical '*rose-garden*' of wasted potential in *Burnt Norton*, and du Maurier also takes a floral angle with the prologue of *Rebecca*, describing Manderley's ruined gardens after the novel's aftermath. Fate has corrupted the formerly perfect garden- for example, the hydrangeas are '*rearing to monster height without a bloom, black and ugly as the nameless parasites that grew besides them*'. Du Maurier presents traumatic aspects of the past and passage of time as things that have the potential to destroy and diminish this cultivated and idealised perfection. Eliot does this too in *Burnt Norton* after the image of the rose-garden in a section of direct reader address; he talks of reminding the reader of their past and their missed opportunities as '*disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves*'. Eliot aims to invoke remorse; he comments on his re-awakening of a dormant sense of mourning for perfection within the reader using the dream of the potential beauty of the rose-garden compared to the paltry reality of the '*rose-leaves*'. The rose-leaves are an image of infertility, lacking the means to reproduce without the flower- very much like Rebecca's infertility. The passage of time saps this outward layer of beauty from both, suggesting them as something mutated or disturbed from the natural order and subsequently unable to survive.

In conclusion, both Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and T.S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton*, in spite of their different disciplines, are unified by their portrayal of beauty as a shaping force which is intertwined with time and human memories. *Rebecca* is a female-oriented examination of this dynamic as a Gothic-influenced novel- human psychology and female oppression are common Gothic themes. In contrast, *Burnt Norton* uses its own reader's mind to explore how ideas of beauty alter perceptions of memory and opportunities, in a breakdown of conventional perspectives typical of a High Modernist work.