

Analysis of Identity Crisis and Individual Self-Realization in *Rebecca* from the Perspective of Identity Theory.

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Abstract

As a classic work of Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* has won wide acclaim for its intricate plot and profound theme and cleverly incorporated the elements of deeper dissection and reconstruction of individual identity. Under the perspective of Erikson's self-identity theory, this work has a profound inspirational significance to the self-exploration and identity-building of individuals when they face life's challenges. This paper takes the three core characters of the novel as the research object, and through analyzing the psychological changes and behavioral choices of the characters, it reflects the self-identity crisis and reconstruction of individuals in the social and cultural context, comprehensively demonstrates the complexity and multidimensionality of the self-identity issue of the novel, advocates the in-depth excavation of self-knowledge by individuals in the society, and encourages the individuals to construct a solid self-identity in the process of continuous self-reflection and exploration. The novel comprehensively presents the complexity and dimensionality of self-identity and its reconstruction.

Keywords

Self-identity; *Rebecca*; Identity crisis.

1. Introduction

Rebecca, crafted by British author Daphne du Maurier in 1938, is a masterpiece of gothic suspense and profound psychological depiction. The work has not only won wide acclaim for its unique and exceptional narrative technique and rich and diverse thematic content but has also had a far-reaching impact on different disciplines around the globe and is regarded as a classic of 20th-century literature. The novel unfolds from the point of view of a young, unnamed woman who struggles with Rebecca after she moves into the mysterious Manderley Manor and becomes Maxim's second wife. The novel presents a complex narrative of love, power, memory, and death through the heroine's inner struggle and exploration of her identity. The work is "full of Gothic mysticism and fatalistic sentimentalism, and occupies a special and important position in British and even world literature" (Ye, 2010: 241), and some scholars have proposed "analyses *Rebecca* as a novel of awakening and identity as a novel of awakening and female development since it follows the established pattern of female growth characterizing the novels comprised within this category" (Marta, 2018: 90). Although *Rebecca* has been extensively studied, scholars have never stopped interpreting it, from Freudian psychoanalysis (Ye, 2014) to feminist readings (Guo, 2015), to gender studies and ecofeminist perspectives (Chen, 2014), various theoretical frameworks provide multiple dimensions of interpretation for this novel. However, the existing research situation seldom deals with the theme of deconstruction and reconstruction of characters' identities, which, to a certain extent, hinders us from understanding and exploring the deeper meanings of this work, precisely the core topic of this paper. Under the perspective of Erik Erikson's self-identity theory, this paper will

systematically analyze the identity process of the main characters in *Rebecca*, explore their identity crises, conflicts, and transformations in different situations, and how these identities affect their choices of behaviors, expressions of emotions, and the direction of their destinies, to explore the deconstruction and reconstruction of the characters' identities in depth. This paper aims to provide new perspectives and depths for the character analysis of *Butterfly Dreams* by profoundly analyzing the identity issues of the characters in *Rebecca*, exploring the psychological changes and self-discovery process of different characters, as well as deconstructing and reconstructing the self-image of individuals under social and cultural pressures and unlocking the hidden corners of the characters' character and their growth process.

2. The New Mrs. de Winter: Perception and Exploration of Identity

In the opening part of the story, the present Mrs. de Winter, as the guide of the story clues, formally enters Manderley Villa as the new identity of the hostess and starts a new chapter of her life, and her mediocre background and fearful character initially builds up a brand-new self-perception framework, which lays the foundation for the subsequent exploration of self-identity. Erikson once said, "identity is an accrued confidence in the fact that one's inner sameness and continuity are guarded by the sameness and continuity of one's surrounding social world" (Evans, 1995: 35). The heroine was originally an ordinary woman with a mediocre background and a low social status. Under the impact of the luxurious and solemn atmosphere of the Manderley Manor, the sense of self-identity that she had previously constructed collapsed. Facing the brand-new living environment, the self-confidence that the present Mrs. de Winter had built when she was around Mrs. Van Hopper had gone. Moreover, the vast contrast in the environment, the sudden change of identity, and the solid non-adaptation to the customary norms cut off the heroine's inner self and made Mrs. de Winter herself feel that she was a woman with a low social status. Mrs. de Winter not only cut off the internal consistency and continuity of herself but also broke the meaning of herself to others and society and revealed the most authentic core of herself for the "broken" self. For the "broken" self, Mrs. de Winter is like this: "I am like a between-maid. I know I am, in lots of ways" (Maurier, 2019: 138), "I'm gauche and awkward. I dress badly, I'm shy with people. I warned you in Monte Carlo how it would be" (Maurier, 2019: 142), for the new Mrs. de Winter, who first stepped into the noble territory, she often feels out of place in the surroundings, whether it is the conversation and interaction with the servants, or the etiquette and courtesy of the guests. Whether interacting with the servants or making courtesies during meetings, the heroine consistently failed to match her noble status in terms of image and demeanor. At the same time, this also constructed the framework of the heroine's pre-existing self-cognition - fear, inferiority complex, dependence, sensitivity, confusion, and a lack of understanding of myself and my family. At the same time, it also builds up the framework of Mrs. de Winter's self-perception in the early period - fear, low self-esteem, dependence, sensitivity, and confusion, and through the surface of the framework, we can find out that the heroine "suppresses her individuality, buries her ego, does not dare to fight for her independence and freedom, tries to rely on the marriage to change her destiny, and is willing to be a man's subordinate" (Han, 2011: 51). As an internal image running through the early period, is the fundamental reason. One is the influence of social customary ties, "What may be called an individual's ego space-time thus preserves the social topology of his childhood surroundings as well as the image of his own body, with its social connotations" (Erikson, 1963: 5). Social customs learnt from childhood and what one sees and learns from the childhood environment stay with the person for the rest of his life, but the social customs that the heroine knows and uses do not apply to Manderley Manor, so she always chooses to escape, and when Maxim's sister, Beatrice, arrives for a visit she subconsciously reacts with the words "I wondered if it would be possible to hide, to get out of the window into

the garden" (87). And for the meeting scene which she could not avoid, she was afraid to say something because of her timidity, but she was afraid of making a bad impression on the visitors, so "in my shyness and anxiety to please, those schoolgirl phrases would escape from me again, those words I never used except in moments like these, 'Oh, ripping' and 'Oh, topping' and 'absolutely' and 'priceless'" (119). When Maxim joins the conversation, "I became dumb at once, a set smile on my lips, my hands in my lap" (119). The heroine's desire to escape and her uncomfortable responses highlight her struggle with self-identity. This is a process of reconstruction and gradual clarification of the framework of self-knowledge and a profound portrayal of all individuals seeking to strike a balance between social conventions and personal expectations.

As the storyline progresses, the heavy atmosphere pervading the Manderley Manor and the invisible influence of Rebecca are intertwined, which profoundly impacts the heroine's identity exploration. Under this double pressure, Mrs. de Winter fell into a deep self-worth doubt, until the prom incident, which pushed this identity crisis to an unprecedented climax. "When the subject's self-identity perception does not match the culture of the group to which he belongs, the subject is prone to identity crisis" (Dou, Xu, 2023: 172). The heroine's self-identity is mediocre, timid and formal, while the atmosphere of Manderley Manor and the invisible presence of Rebecca are all noble, confident and awe-inspiring, which is a strong contrast that makes the heroine feel an insurmountable gap and a remarkable sense of alienation, and triggers a profound self-identity crisis. The Dance incident has brought this self-identity crisis to an unprecedented climax. The heroine feel that she is always living in the shadow of Rebecca, unable to get rid of the ghost of her late wife, and even subconsciously believing that she is the true and unassailable mistress of the house, so much so that she subconsciously answered the phone with the words: "I'm afraid you have made a mistake. Mrs. de Winter has been dead for over a year" (83). and in the invisible battle with Rebecca, the heroine had long accepted the reality of her own inferiority, and frankly said: "when there was someone there who was born and bred to it, did it all naturally and without effort. And I realise, every day, that things I lack, confidence, grace, beauty, intelligence, wit---oh, all the qualities that meanmost in a woman---she possessed" (128). Under Rebecca's omnipresent shadow, the heroine's self-identity crisis continues to intensify, until it reaches its climax with the arrival of the ball event. The heroine's self-identity crisis continues to intensify under Rebecca's omnipresent shadow, until the events of Dance bring it to its peak. "Only such integration provides a sense of being at home in this world" (Erikson, 1963: 1). The heroine's fragile self-identity, in conflict with the noble atmosphere of Manderley Manor, relies only on her love for Maxim to maintain a delicate psychological stability and balance, but the outbreak of the Ball incident completely destroys this last support, Mrs. de Winter not only feel utter despair about their relationship: "We did not get on. We were not companions. We were not suited to one another" (226), but also made herself deeply reflect on and question her self-worth, "I was not of his world. The fact that I loved him in a sick, hurt, desperate way, like a child or a dog, did not matter. It was not the sort of love he needed" (226). During this profound self-exploration and psychological struggle, the individual's self-perceived structure encounters a major challenge, resulting in a shaky sense of identity. Although this lack of identity weakens the individual's positive attitude towards daily life, it prompts the individual to gain the opportunity to re-examine the self, rebuild the identity structure, and realise self-transcendence.

The crisis of the heroine's self-identity gradually dies out as the truth of Rebecca's death emerges, and she completes the process of self-reconstruction under a series of profound internal transformations and external influences. "Identity is never homogeneous or unified, but plural or fragmented...in the historical process of continuous change" (Chen, 2016: 25). After experiencing environmental changes, profound psychological changes, and the impact of major events, an individual's identity often undergoes significant transformation. For the

heroine in the novel, when she uncovers the truth about Rebecca's death, her inner world and self-perception undergoes a fundamental reshaping: she metamorphoses from a state of mediocrity, lack of self-confidence and constrained behaviour into a determined and self-confident individual who possesses the style of the mistress of the manor, and who significantly reflects on and questions her own past image and behavioural patterns: "I wondered why it had seemed hard for me before" (282). This transformation of self-perception reveals the complex psychological process of the heroine in the face of identity change, which is not static, but a dynamic process of development, which requires the individual to continually explore the self, recognise the self. It requires individuals to constantly explore themselves, recognise themselves, and adjust their self-image in interaction with the outside world, while "If people do not have a clear understanding of who they are and whether they like who they are, this can lead to problems like identity crises and role confusion" (Yadav, 2023: 3647). In the past, Rebecca's ubiquitous apparition penetrated into the environment of the heroine's life, seriously interfering with her judgement of her own identity and the process of identity construction, and as a result, Mrs. de Winter had a vague and subtle feeling towards her. Thus, when the truth of Rebecca's death emerges, she overcomes the identity crisis and role confusion, and completes the reconstruction of the structure of self-identity: "I was not young anymore. I was not afraid" (278), faced with the possibility of threatening Maxim's reversal of his conviction, Mrs. de Winter firmly said: "I would fight for Maxim. I would lie and prejudice and swear, I would blaspheme and pray" (278), faced with the unsatisfactory When confronted with the unsatisfactory menu, Mrs. de Winter scolded: "I am Mrs. de Winter now, you know. And if I choose to send a message by Robert I shall do so" (283). This dramatic transformation not only marks the re-establishment of the heroine's self-identity, but also reveals a profound truth: true strength comes from inner independence and the realization of self-worth, not from the approval or expectation of others.

3. Rebecca: The Construction and Crisis of Identity

As a late but influential character, Rebecca's portrayal transcends the boundaries of traditional female roles and demonstrates a relentless pursuit of freedom and self-realisation, undoubtedly typifying freedom and wisdom. "The individual feels free when he can choose to identify with his own ego identity and when he learns to apply that which is given to that which must be done" (Erikson, 1968: 76). Rebecca, who has received superior education since childhood, not only dabbles in a wide range of arts and skills, but also shows a firm sense of self-worth and a high degree of self-identity in self-knowledge and self-confidence, and in the face of other people's interference in her life, she said "It's nothing to do with anyone but myself" (163). In the face of the warning issued by Maxim, she says "What the hell's it got to do with you?" (269) In these situations, Rebecca displays qualities that are different from the prevalent image of women in contemporary social systems, and her individuality seems to transcend the scope of the era in which she lives, showing a unique transcendence of the times. "Each system, in its own way, tends to make similar people out of all its members, but each in a specific way also permits exemptions and deductions from the demands with which it thus taxes the individuality of the individual ego" (Erikson, 1963: 149). Whereas in traditional male-dominated social systems women are usually portrayed as a disadvantaged group of people with a lower status and dependent on men, Rebecca develops her unique individuality and charisma in a special way that subverts the traditional conception of what it means to be a woman: "I came back once, having been away shooting in Scotland, and found her there, with half a dozen of them, people I had never seen before" (269). In traditional concepts, female chastity is often closely associated with male dignity and image, but she chooses to fight against gender norms and challenges traditional gender roles with her free and indulgent extreme sexuality, which not only demonstrates the pursuit of self-worth as well as freedom, but is also

better regarded as an act of resistance to the social structure of gender inequality, "Such vindictive choices of a negative identity represent, of course, a desperate attempt at regaining some mastery in a situation in which the available positive identity elements cancel each other out" (Erikson, 1968: 175). Rebecca's freedom and self-worth realization are limited by the constraints of the social system and the gender norms. However, by adopting this retaliatory act of resistance, she is able to gain a relatively advantageous position in the social structure of gender inequality, and this act of resistance can also be regarded as a challenge and reconstruction of the past gendered power structure, which is clearly victorious and affirmed by Maxim: "Rebecca knew she would win in the end. I saw her smile, when she died" (275). Through her unique strategy of resistance, Rebecca successfully challenges the deep-rooted traditional gender norms and, in the process, constructs a free and individual self-identity, and her action is not only a subversion of the traditional gender roles but also an active exploration and practice of personal freedom and independence.

In the process of pursuing personal freedom and equality, even though Rebecca maintains a good balance between the maintenance of her identity and the pursuit of freedom, she still inevitably faces the challenge of an identity crisis, which is a profound inner struggle and challenge triggered by her conflict with the expectations and norms of the traditional patriarchal society. In the end, Rebecca overcomes the identity crisis and maintains the stability and unity of her personal identity and unity. Erikson once pointed out that "a certain ratio of trust and mistrust in our basic social attitude is the critical factor. When we enter a situation, we must be able to differentiate how much we can trust and how much we must mistrust, and I use mistrust in the sense of a readiness for danger and an anticipation of discomfort" (Evans, 1995: 15). While individuals maintain their self-identity, the ever-changing and evolving self-consciousness always stimulates the inherent tension between the maintenance of self-identity and the pursuit of growth, and in this way, promotes the dynamic balance of personal development. As an identity with a deep quest for freedom, Rebecca achieves a skillful balance between the expectation of preserving one's identity and the pursuit of hope for a new life: In public, she presents herself as a shrewd and capable hostess, transforming with her own hands the acclaimed mandalas: "The beauty of Manderley that you see today, the Manderley that people talk about and photograph and paint, it's all due to her, to Rebecca" (268). In private, she maintains a free and unconstrained personality: she is a free and unconstrained person: she is a free and unconstrained person. and uninhibited personality: "She would have one or two of them and mix them up at a weekend party so that at first I was not quite sure, not quite certain" (268). Although Rebecca achieves a certain balance between preserving her personal identity and pursuing her free will, her increasing contradictions and conflicts with the traditional expectations of female roles inevitably lead to a profound crisis of self-identity. However, as Erikson says, "the vital personality weathers, re-emerging from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase of good judgment, and an increase in the capacity 'to do well' according to his own standards and to the standards of those who are significant to him" (Erikson, 1968: 91). As a representative of a confident and dynamic character, Rebecca, when faced with an identity crisis shows remarkable composure, she does not give in to the expectations of traditional gender roles, but becomes more determined to defend her own pursuit of freedom, and in the end, by provoking Maxim to shoot herself, she regains control over her own destiny and succeeds in overcoming her identity crisis. "In order to become ourselves, we must first dissolve ourselves; we must become a part of the larger social structure of 'being' in order to create ourselves" (Xing, 2016: 55), and in a traditionally male-dominated social structure, women's challenge of inherent gender norms is often accompanied by significant sacrifices, but Rebecca has demonstrated her unwavering pursuit of gender equality at the cost of her own life, and through the dissolution of her individual identity, she has taken on a form of 'invisible' existence, inspiring women to courageously challenge irrational societal

expectations, while at the same time, not fearing the identity crisis caused by identity transformation.

4. Maxim: Identity Perseverance and Challenges

As the quintessential character in this work, which demonstrates the characteristics of patriarchy, Maxim fully demonstrates the characteristics of a male supremacist in a male-dominated society, and he exemplifies the male hegemony in a traditionally masculinist society with his controlling behaviors over the mental aspects of women. As Erikson says, “‘former’ environments are forever in us; and since we live in a continuous process of making the present ‘former’ we never—not even as a newborn—meet any environment as a person who never had an environment” (Erikson, 1968: 47). No matter when, the environment that an individual experiences will be transformed into consciousness in one form or another. Thus, even as the environment changes continuously, individuals will confront new environments with their past experiences and history, rather than accepting and adapting to it as a blank slate. Maxim’s personal experiences, values and historical background, which were deeply influenced by patriarchal society and culture during his growing up process, are all rooted in the concept of male supremacy, so this concept profoundly affected his marital relationship. When he proposed to his second wife, he emphasized in a tone that brooked no doubt: “You are almost as ignorant as Mrs. Van Hopper, and just as unintelligent. What do you know of Manderley? I’m the person to judge that, whether you would belong there or not” (50). When the heroine unintentionally offended him, he commanded, “Promise me you will never wear black satin” (40). Maxim’s words and attitudes reflect his desire for dominance and control over women, as well as his evident sense of superiority, and these characteristics reveal his position as a patriarchal feminist, even when confronted by Rebecca, a staunch opponent of the patriarchal system, Maxim disregards the content of the contract that was agreed upon earlier between the two parties, and implements the principle of masculinity to the extreme, and through an act of shooting by his own hand, he ends her life, demonstrating an extreme interpretation of masculinity. In a male-dominated social structure, the effects of which are not confined to women but are pervasive among members of society, such a structure has a broad and far-reaching impact on an individual’s identity, including, but not limited to, gender identity, social roles, and personal values.

In his relationship with his ex-wife Rebecca, Rebecca’s independent and rebellious spirit contrasts sharply with the traditional patriarchal values represented by Maxim, resulting in Maxim’s identity being challenged by a crisis, but he ultimately succeeds in overcoming this identity crisis and maintaining the coherence and consistency of his self-identity. “As is the case with individual identity, a dynamic process of internal and external factors is involved. One of the most important internal factors is the sharing of a communal history between individuals” (Brunsdon, 2017: 3). Individual identity is both unique and exhibits universality, it is shaped by a combination of an individual’s unique experiences and the wider socio-cultural contexts shaped by patriarchal socio-cultural influences, Maxim displays not only a typical notion of male dominance, but also a deep emotional attachment and complex personality traits in his approach to traditional gender roles, which is well reflected in his first encounter with the heroine: “I ask you because you are not dressed in black satin, with a string of pearls, nor are you thirty-six” (36). Maxim’s decision to invite the heroine to join him on the trip is based on the fact that the heroine exhibits qualities that match his admiration of traditional femininity and that these qualities fulfill his expectations and demands as a patriarch, but when confronted with Rebecca, her “maturity, beauty and competence are beyond his control, and his machismo is challenged” (Xu, 2009: 92). The contrast between Rebecca’s free spirit and defiant behaviour and Maxim’s embodiment of male supremacy inevitably leads him into an identity dilemma.

Erikson has said that “Nothing is more fruitless in the relationships between individuals or groups than to attempt to question the ideals of the adversary by demonstrating that, according to the logic of one’s own conscience, he is inconsistent in his preaching” (Erikson, 1963: 116). Faced with antagonistic individuals who hold views that are vastly different from his own, Maxim has made several attempts at persuasion: “I warned her...” (268). “Once again I warned her. I said if I found him here, anywhere on the estate, I’d shoot him” (270). But this was clearly unhelpful, Rebecca remained unmoved, “she shrugged her shoulders. ‘What the hell’s it got to do with you?’” (269), after a series of ineffective persuasions, Maxim’s resentment builds up, and as a committed masculinist, he is deeply concerned with the crisis of identity and desperately seeks a solution. In the end, provoked and stimulated by Rebecca, Mr Maxim takes extreme action and ends her life with a gun himself, which is not only an extreme response to the identity crisis but also a decisive means to safeguard his self-identity, and from which the severe harm caused by gender inequality is also deeply revealed.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides an in-depth discussion of the self-identity construction and crisis of different characters in *Rebecca* at the social and personal levels from the perspective of Erik Erikson’s self-identity theory. Through a careful analysis of the three main characters, we reveal how identity is formed in the interaction between the individual and his or her social environment, as well as how, in the face of the challenges of an identity crisis, the individual can, by positively transforming or adhering to self to cope with these challenges. The heroine’s self-identity is not static but is gradually shaped through her interaction with Rebecca, social expectations, and personal growth, and the heroine’s identity is not simply a change in her external image, but a complex interaction between her inner self-knowledge and social role expectations; Rebecca’s identity presents a process of confrontation and deconstruction in work, and despite her appearance as an aphasic, the We can still gain insight into how she holds on to her position and self-identity in the face of an identity crisis through the narratives of other characters; Maxim’s role and position in society are not only affected by internal psychological needs, but also constrained by external social structures and cultural norms, and his identity crisis reveals that in a traditionally male-dominated society, men are equally faced with the challenges and dilemmas of identity. The study argues that exploring identity constructs and crises can help deepen our understanding of individual behaviour, promote personal self-knowledge, and contribute to the development of a diverse and inclusive society. Exploring the identity construction and crisis of different characters in *Rebecca* from the perspective of Erikson’s self-identity theory provides us with a window to understand and explore how individuals form and develop their self-identity in society, which not only helps us to understand the deeper themes of the novel deeply but also provides us with a rich source of inspiration to think about the construction of individual identity in modern society.

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