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## Sex, Lies, and Murder: Feminized Detective Fiction and the English Estate Novel

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Despite its intended association with dignity and dominance, the English estate serves as the perfect setting for abhorrent criminal actions in the detective fiction genre due to these distinct qualities. An estate ensures an enclosed environment with a wide range of characters that bring new allegations to light during tumultuous times. Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* follow this framework with one glaring disparity from the traditional detective fiction novel: the narratives are told through the lens of young female detectives. There is no stoic male detective to guide each story from beginning to end in an objective manner as is traditionally done; instead, the two protagonists must accommodate their emotional attachments to the crimes while also telling their respective stories. *Rebecca* and *Atonement* destabilize the romanticization of the English estate novel tradition through the narrative of the female detective figure, and the detective fiction genre overall.

The protagonists are able to unmask the rotten roots of the British upper class due to their respective positions within the social group. Susan Rowland defines crime fiction as:

offering a story that the laws cannot or will not tell. It is saying, in effect, that ... there is more to criminals, their motives, actions and lives that can be represented through the cultural authority of the legal system. (17)

*Rebecca's* unnamed narrator refuses to participate in this “will not tell” policy in the initial stages of her investigation. Neither Maxim's upper crust peer group nor the working class of Manderley question the events surrounding Rebecca's death. The unnamed narrator is the only person who sees both sides of Manderley interact with each other. This obscures Rebecca's murder as the narrator intrudes on the estate's typical operation. Manderley's established residents uphold the “picture post-card” image from Rebecca's youth by maintaining their same routines in her absence so the estate's iconic facade is preserved in the eyes of the general public (du Maurier 73). Manderley's “post-card” image implicitly shields it from an outside investigation into the property and Maxim himself:

[I] asked the wrinkled shop woman what it was meant to be. She looked astonished at my ignorance. ‘That's Manderley,’ she said, and I remember coming out of the shop feeling rebuffed, yet hardly wiser than before. (du Maurier 24)

This foreshadowing defines the unnamed narrator's role as the disruptive middle-class inheritor found in the typical English estate novel. She already has

an outsider's perspective of Manderley even before she sets foot on its grounds, yet her utter "ignorance" prevents her from inquiring further into its affairs. The estate's magnificence casts a noble shadow over her perception of Manderley just as it does to every other ordinary person. Common knowledge asserts Manderley's influence over the unnamed narrator in a simple "painting." The unnamed narrator breaks away from public sentiment once she marries Maxim and assumes her disruptive role in the estate's carefully manicured affairs.

The unnamed narrator harnesses her insignificance to her advantage in her pursuit of the truth. When she takes on the role of Manderley's mistress she cannot remain "hardly wise" about her surroundings as she could have as an ordinary citizen. As her entire existence revolves around disturbing the status quo, the unnamed narrator takes on the detective role as it melds to her position as middle-class disruptor. The investigation commences because she cannot stand to live in the same "ignorance" that other Manderley outsiders accept as normal. Her inferiority complex revolves around the sentiment of being "rebuffed" by social convention, so she believes that uncovering the mysteries behind Manderley's exterior will catapult her out of her infantilized bourgeois position and into the elegance and glamour that Rebecca standardized while she was still alive. The unnamed narrator is used as the point of genre infusion within *Rebecca* to analyze the social hierarchies embodied in the English estate setting.

Briony serves as a similar conduit for examining British aristocratic corruption because she is isolated from the reality of the adult world. Like the unnamed narrator of du Maurier's novel, her "ignorance" affects her, "[s]uch was Briony's last thought before she accepted that she did not understand, and that she must simply watch" (McEwan 29). Like every other conventional detective, she is the onlooker of a dangerous world that can be neatly organized by rationally deducing every situation into a logical conclusion, or so she believes (Nickerson 744). She has the privilege of "watching," as she is a member of this particular class yet is too young to "understand" her own entrenchment within that system. Briony can only emulate the actions of the stoic male detective seeking justice in the face of absolute evil because she has learned to see the world in black-and-white terms. However, she is not old enough to possess the critical thinking skills needed to observe her class position and privileged living impartially. Class division does not exist in her youthful imagination as she has never had to see it work against her in any capacity. She has never had to face any kind of social "confrontation" in her sheltered life. Briony thus feels entitled to romanticize and eventually create her own dangerous intrigue to feed her wild imagination (McEwan 11).

Briony is allowed to imitate the detective figure because her upper-class childhood enables her adolescent fantasies to blur reality without limitations. Significantly younger than her siblings and hardly looked after by an absent single mother, she roams around the Tallis estate with only her imagination as a morality check. Briony is written off as a silly child who spends more time

“watching” the world than participating in it, though the severity of her condition is clear to see. She cannot distinguish the line between reality and fantasy because she has been indulged and undisciplined her entire life. Briony’s detective fiction novels constructed her the black-and-white outlook on life, which motivates her vendetta against Robbie. She has never been taught to “understand” anything else about real life besides the things she has read in her carefully constructed literary microcosms. Briony imposes her warped worldview onto every situation without regard to others as her affluent lifestyle and rigid moral influences facilitated her self-absorbed upbringing.

Although Briony and *Rebecca’s* unnamed narrator are vehicles for analyzing the corruption of the British social hierarchy, their detective work leads them to uphold the status quo instead of dismantling it. Briony’s conjecture overwhelms any genuine investigation into the actual crime as she has been taught to value imagery over objectivity; “Briony was their only source, and she made herself speak calmly” (McEwan 133). Both Robbie and Danny Hardman fulfill the young working-class male figure that threatens to upend aristocratic bloodlines, a staple of the English estate novel genre, so they are the immediate suspects for Lola’s rapist. The real detectives choose Robbie as the culprit over Danny due to Briony’s imaginary investigation as her childish accusation is respected more than any real evidence that Robbie can provide. As Briony is the “only source” that the real detectives have, she is given the power to decide the outcome of the case despite her known overactive imagination. She weaponizes her image as a young traumatized girl from the noble Tallis estate against Robbie’s image as the rough working-class boy to secure the results that she wants from her fictitious testimony.

The narrative reasserts the existing status quo that Briony plays a part in because she does not recognize her own influence that stems from her social position. Brian Finney states that,

McEwan subtly suggests the invidious nature of a class system that permeates even those seeking to reverse its effects and works to protect the upper-class rapist from exposure throughout his lifetime. (Finney 76)

It is assumed that until grown-up Briony publishes her novel posthumously, Robbie is labelled as a rapist in historic criminal records, whereas Paul continues to be a celebrated philanthropist. Although the novel could clear Robbie’s name publicly, it cannot do anything for individuals that lived through the events. Briony will be dead before she can see her novel come to fruition, so the “upper-class rapist” will be “protected” from any physical repercussions for the remainder of his life.

McEwan writes the novel from Briony’s point of view, using her voice to commentate upon the British social system that shields Paul from “exposure.” Briony was empowered to accuse Robbie of the rape because it followed the “invidious nature of the class system” in which she was raised. Stereotypes encouraged both law enforcement officials and the residents of the Tallis estate

to turn on Robbie because of the whims of the fanciful young Briony. However, once she tries to backtrack on her accusation, she is met with resistance as there is no one left to support her new claims. Paul has used his freedom to build up his philanthropic portfolio and wealth, making Lola and himself untouchable in a court of law. The only agency that Briony is left with is to write down the truth and hope that the book can be published to expose Paul, yet even this action is unresolved as she does not publish it before she dies.

Unlike the confident Briony, the unnamed narrator begins her investigation because of her immense insecurity. However, her obsession with obtaining Maxim's approval stops any legitimate judicial procedure from occurring. The narrator states, "I would fight for Maxim. I would lie and perjure and swear, I would blaspheme and pray. Rebecca had not won. Rebecca had lost" (du Maurier 320). The repetition of "I would" stresses how she would rather feel a sense of belonging than seek moral or legal justice. Her investigative work does not right the terrible wrongs committed at Manderley, rather it only serves to enforce the social system that has already protected her husband without question. The unnamed narrator is poisoned by the first wife/second wife dichotomy that places her in competition with Rebecca as soon as she arrives at Manderley. To the Manderley residents, Rebecca was always favored, as the first wife of a first-rated estate, coming from a first-class lineage. The unnamed narrator detests her clumsiness and unsophistication, and these traits are only accentuated further by walking in Rebecca's shadow. She would rather "win" the place beside Maxim as his true wife and do anything to please him in order to feel like she finally is a member of Manderley's social structure. "I would" becomes a mantra of integration for the unnamed narrator to convince herself to remain by Maxim's side instead of following the moral path which would lead to her husband suffering the consequences of his actions.

To "lie and perjure and swear" evokes conventional court case proceedings that the unnamed narrator will undermine in order to defend Maxim, subversive actions that can be linked to historical representations of femininity within the detective fiction genre. Rowland asserts,

[t]he feminine has been the dark other to the masculine western tradition of privileging reason, intelligence, order and rationality; a tradition that has much to do with the generating of the fictional detective. (Rowland 16)

The unnamed narrator is not motivated by traditional attributes associated with the "fictional detective" in her investigation because her actions are inspired by her inferiority complex. She cannot see Rebecca as the objective victim to a murder; instead, she is the ghost that haunts the halls of Manderley and could destroy its hallowed grounds forever. There is no pursuit of true justice because she is solely driven by her morbid desire to take Rebecca's place in every capacity, from dutiful wife of Maxim to benevolent mistress of Manderley. In fulfilling the self-sacrifice required of heterosexual wifedom, the unnamed narrator

assumes a “dark other” in her investigation that renounces “reason, intelligence, order and rationality” for Maxim’s sake.

Briony and the unnamed narrator infuse their personal anxieties into their investigations to create imaginary projections of potential events, thus impeding a path towards justice. The unnamed narrator suffers the quintessential female experience of not being “good enough:” she is not pretty, not cultured, not witty, not anything in comparison to the effervescent Rebecca. She casts herself as the victim of Rebecca’s dominance and empathizes in Maxim’s (perceived) suffocation under her ever-constant superiority. The narrator thinks,

[o]ther women had been through this. Women I had read about in papers ...  
And the ordinary people who read about it in the papers said why should the fellow get off, he murdered his wife, didn’t he? What about the poor, murdered wife? (du Maurier 354)

The unnamed narrator uses free indirect speech to enforce sympathy for the criminal in the audience. She associates “ordinary people” with a mob mentality that blindly follows the “poor, murdered wife” narrative established by “papers” full of similar crime stories. In assuming this free indirect speech narrative style, she believes she has transcended the ignorance of “ordinary people” through the results of her investigation.

The unnamed narrator concludes her investigation based upon her submissive faith in her husband, too blinded by love to look further into his version of the story. “Ordinary” connotes a separation made by the unnamed narrator between the couple and the rest of the world. As soon as she hears his confession, she implicitly chooses to uphold the estate’s reputation as it is finally her possession to defend. To be a part of Manderley is to maintain the facade, and the unnamed narrator sets out to do this with a fresh vigor after Maxim gives her what she has always longed for in her life: a sense of belonging. By imitating the perspective of the “ordinary people,” she cements her place beside Maxim at Manderley. She silences her inferiority complex once she makes this distinction, strategizing how to save her new domain from ruin. She releases herself from the repulsive “ordinary” label that has haunted her existence by attributing it to those who would not respect Maxim, and thus Manderley’s, importance as she does. Since Maxim fulfills her lifelong desire for acceptance, she transitions from detective to accomplice and sullies any continued inquiries.

The unnamed narrator becomes a bleak symbol for the reinforcement of the British class system by putting her personal identity over finding justice. Alison Light writes,

[a]ll is not lost, however, for the heroine’s bourgeois virtue triumphs and in the end she manages to save both her husband and her marriage. (Light 7)

She succeeds in her role as the disruptive middle-class inheritor through her detective work, yet her investigative intrusion is the key to “saving her husband.” “Save” suggests a positive connotation as the unnamed narrator wants the reader to see Rebecca, not Maxim or the structural forces that went along with his version of the truth, as the real villain of the story. Rebecca defied the accepted

societal standard of heterosexual monogamy to partake in her own sexual escapades, disturbing the marital inequity that Maxim wanted. Asexualized, submissive, and an accomplice to the crime, the unnamed narrator performs her “bourgeois virtue” in standing by her husband. His confession becomes the only version of events presented to the audience as she chooses to position herself in a supporting role to Maxim’s story. Her detective work ends when she stops being an active participant in her own narrative because she would rather execute the duties of a properly domesticated wife.

Briony enters into a state of self-paralysis by the end of her investigation which is fueled by a lack of adult guidance. She begins to panic in the presence of the inspector,

[u]nder his neutral gaze her throat constricted and her voice began to buckle. She wanted the inspector to embrace her and comfort her and forgive her, however guiltless she was. But he would only look at her and listen. (McEwan 133)

Since Briony is a child, she inherently desires adult approval for every action she takes. Her childish anxiety ultimately controls the course of her investigation as she strengthens her commitment to her accusation in the face of passive authority. She balks under the “neutral gaze” of the real investigator as she is used to being coddled like the child she is, not treated like the adult she thinks she wants to be. Her investigation is based upon youthful ignorance and imagination. Rather than admit to her misunderstanding and lies, Briony chooses to continue her fabricated reality as she is fearful of getting into trouble like every other guilty child facing the consequences of their actions. In projecting what she wants the interrogator to do, rather than what he actually does, the narrative points out the corruption of the British social hierarchy. He only “looks and listens” to her because he treats her like a verifiable witness, despite her obvious emotional distress and established reputation for telling tall tales. The official police investigation accepts the whims of a volatile child as they value Briony’s opinion over any adult below her in social standing. As the outcome of the crime depends on circumstantial evidence, her story outweighs Robbie’s because she is inherently “guiltless” in the eyes of the system due to her wealth. To the investigators, a small, distressed child of her social stratum could not commit to the kind of horrendous lie that Briony executes when under pressure to please. Her history of fabrication does not need a background check as the British social hierarchy only needs her words of accusation to incriminate Robbie.

*Rebecca* and *Atonement* conflate the detective fiction and the English estate novel to analyze the endurance of the British social system through their narrative voices. *Atonement* combines first and third person narration styles to create a metanarrative that implements an “intrinsic conservative social bias” (Rowland 39). Despite her argument, Briony’s metanarrative creates a sense of distance between her present self and her past actions. Briony uses only a first-person narration style in the present, while reserving the third person style for her younger self. This choice enables her to elicit sympathy from the reader as

she has the privilege of hindsight to rework her childhood actions and emotions of the past to fit her narrative goal in the present. She can displace her actions onto a separate child character by using the third person style, not fully reckoning with her past in the way she could have if she had used the first-person style instead. Briony still cannot accept full responsibility for the false accusation because she never had to face any tangible repercussions in the real world, instead only experiencing an internalized guilt that she transforms into her book. The editorial rejection letter emphasizes this privilege of constructing the novel as a final literary project, not as a true act of contrition. Rather than facing consequences for her actions, she is only critiqued on her writing ability by the editors, who write, “[p]ut the other way round, our attention would have been held even more effectively had there been an underlying pull of simple narrative” (McEwan 240). Briony approaches the story as a novelist tinkering with the form and flow of her words and images as she still looks at her life through a literary lens as she did when she was thirteen. “Simple narrative” implies that her novel is not digestible enough to the average reader, calling attention to Briony’s obsession with form over content. Had she actually written the novel in the way the letter suggests, she would have been forced to directly confront her juvenile investigative assumptions without literary devices to shield her. She is so obsessed with the actual construction of her narrative that she does not have the ability to truly feel remorseful for her actions. Had she tackled the novel in an objective, linear method, the metanarrative distance would have collapsed, and she would thus come closer to an actual recognition for Robbie’s incrimination. She treats the act of atonement as another literary project to create and manipulate our perception of real people and events.

In *Rebecca*, the unnamed narrator corrupts her own narrative by withholding her own name from the reader, which provides her perspective without the nuisance of her personhood to impede her investigation. As Rowland articulates,

[t]hrough the person of the detective, the reader searches for clues and signs, leading to criminal and innocent identities to ‘make up’ the boundaries of a meaningful world in the novel. (91)

By erasing her individuality, the unnamed narrator positions herself as the literary surrogate for the readers, so that they only understand the novel’s events through her partisan view. They are expected to wholeheartedly accept Rebecca and Maxim’s respective “criminal and innocent identities” because she has already decided this for the reader. She assumes the anonymous detective figure to solidify Maxim’s version of events as the truth in the reader’s consciousness, despite an overwhelming need to investigate further into his confession. The first-person narration style transforms Maxim’s confession from her individual perspective, to the only available account of the crime. The reader’s entire perception of the confession and crime is filtered through the unnamed narrator’s unwavering compliance to her husband.



Unrepressed sexuality is criminalized when the English estate novel combines with the detective fiction genre to expose the gender dynamics of the British social hierarchy. *Rebecca* heightens the consequences of illicit sexuality through the unnamed narrator's investigative enlightenment. The narrator herself muses that

[t]he silences that I had always taken for sympathy and regret was a silence born of shame and embarrassment. It seemed incredible to me now that I had never understood. (du Maurier 309)

Given Rebecca's status as the wife of an aristocrat, her potent sexuality could only be criticized by the unnamed narrator's "bourgeois virtue." She personifies "silence" to masculinize Rebecca's conquests as it is the only way she can conceptualize her sexual dominance within their patriarchal culture. "Born" places Frank and Beatrice in the submissive maternal role, forced to produce and carry their feelings of "shame and embarrassment" planted by Rebecca's wild behavior. The unnamed narrator's investigation leads her to "understand" Rebecca's untamed sexuality in a masculine sense as she does not possess the language to describe liberated female sexuality due to her sheltered middle-class point of view. Her conclusion unintentionally leads the reader to infer that Rebecca's voracious sexuality was provoked in part by Maxim's impotence:

Rebecca's most heinous crime, which drove Maxim to shoot her, was, of course, to taunt him with a future heir of Manderley who might not be his. What is at stake in her murder is the continuance of male authority and of masculinity itself, as it is defined through ownership and the power of hierarchy. (Light 15)

Before being shocked by the plot twist that Rebecca had a malformed uterus and therefore could not be pregnant, the reader sees how Rebecca had the capability to determine the inheritance of Manderley at the expense of Maxim. Manderley immediately transformed into a matriarchy in his eyes as soon as she "taunted him" with the threat of a "future heir" that would be solely connected to her bloodline. The unnamed narrator thus absolves Maxim as Rebecca's "threat" trumps Maxim's deadly deed as the true crime that plagues the novel. She has only lived in a world of "male authority," so a matriarchal Manderley is completely forbidden in her mind. Even a theoretical seizure of the Manderley bloodline justified Maxim's actions to the unnamed narrator.

The unnamed narrator "understands" the central problem of Maxim and Rebecca's relationship as a skewed gender dynamic, symbolized by the imagery of blood. "'I'd forgotten,' said Maxim, and his voice was slow now, tired, without expression, 'that when you shot a person there was so much blood'" (du Maurier 314). Detective fiction novels are rampant with bloody crime scenes that emphasize the victim's gory demise, yet the unnamed narrator uses this conventional image to create empathy for the criminal. She inflects his confession with a "slow" and "tired" cadence as if he had to put up a great fight against Rebecca, instead of the premeditated shot through the heart. Their struggle was a battle of wits, and the winner was a self-assured, sexually liberated

woman who invaded and transformed her husband's English estate into a celebrated cultural landmark. The unnamed narrator flips this crime scene image to portray Maxim as the victim of a masculinized woman, too powerful and robust to be contained and the murder a necessary evil.

The words “[s]o much blood” demonstrate how Rebecca's insatiability continues to tarnish Maxim's legitimacy as the heir of Manderley. As the English estate represents a physical concentration of patriarchal power, her blood usurps that power when it seeped into the Manderley cottage. Rebecca was too “much” for Maxim to handle even in her death as he struggled to cover up her murder. As it physically stains Manderley, the image of Rebecca's blood leaves a lasting psychological mark on Maxim that blocks him from assuming any kind of authority ever again. He is tormented by her death because he knows she has displaced him as the patriarch of Manderley, as her presence is now a permanent part of its legacy. Although Maxim is protected from further inquiry because of his social status, the discovery of her blood would set off a chain reaction that would evict him out of Manderley and place him in prison. Rebecca's blood equates to her psychological grip on Maxim's mind, teasing and torturing him into an emasculated state. Every other part Manderley could be burnt to the ground, but her stained blood will always remain as a symbol of her everlasting power.

*Atonement* criminalizes unrepressed sexuality, especially in women, so as to highlight class inequity within the British social system via Briony's investigation. As Rowland asserts,

[sexuality] becomes the sinister aspect of a society of social masks. It ... challenges social forms, becoming concentrated into irrational, sometimes criminal, passion. (Rowland 162)

Briony connects the “irrational” with the “criminal” when she sees Cecelia and Robbie together in the library, thinking that,

[h]e looked so huge and wild, and Cecilia with her bare shoulders and thin arms so frail that Briony had no idea what she could achieve as she started to go towards them. (McEwan 94)

Robbie fulfills the young, erotic, male, working-class figure specifically for Briony in this moment as he “challenges the social form” of the Tallis estate in having sex with Cecelia. Briony juxtaposes Robbie's “huge and wild” stature with Cecelia's “frailness” to reestablish the natural order of the British social hierarchy. The reader is meant to sympathize with her misunderstanding of Robbie and Cecelia's liaison due to her youth and inexperience. However, Briony imposes a historically-based working-class stereotype upon Robbie by comparing him to an animalistic, sex-crazed brute. The imagery's implicit evil emerges from our own empathy towards Briony's naiveté. Our perception of Robbie's stigmatization is nullified by Briony's genuine fear for her sister. By enhancing Briony's perspective of Robbie and Cecelia's encounter through this biased imagery, the reader is tricked into neutralizing the heavy-handed class discrimination because she is a young, scared, prepubescent girl. Her gender,

youth, and social class elicit our sympathy, and justify her reasoning for, investigating despite the fact that it is nothing more than a constant intrusion into Robbie and Cecelia's privacy.

The conventional detective fiction novel is supposed to uphold the traditional social order set by the upper-class inhabitants of the English estate novel. *Rebecca* and *Atonement* exist at a vital intersection of the two genres to show how the criminal justice system is corrupted by the injustices and inequalities performed by its inhabitants. Taking on the detective role, the two protagonists uncover the dark forces that protect upper class men from punishment due to the othering of their youth, class, and gender. The female detective especially subverts the facade perpetuated by the traditional English estate novel as Briony and the unnamed narrator expose the crimes committed, yet do not act upon their findings to right the wrongs. They do not fit the qualifications of the stoic male detective figure, so their feminized emotions and positions in society halt their investigations from ever being fully completed. *Rebecca* and *Atonement* show how external societal forces enforce one particular narrative at the expense of others, muting truthful voices in order to maintain the pretense of order and stability, especially in the upper class.

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