



The Poet's Choice

Gaze and Tragedy in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

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Abstract. Though the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* can be discussed through a variety of dimensions, this paper focuses on the gaze between the protagonists as well as the tragic temperament in this film. The first part of the paper analyzes the female gaze and its utilization throughout the film. The second part turns to the discussion of “the poet’s choice.” Finally, the paper expands on the tragedy itself and illustrates the reason why people need tragedy and how it is beautiful.

Keywords: French cinema · Greek Mythology · LGBTQ+ Films · Feminism

1 Introduction

How much emotion can a portrait undertake? A woman, a little distance into the painting, was portrayed from a horizontal gaze. Every other color in the painting was done in a cold tone except for the burst of flame on the bottom of her dress. The fire represents the painter’s burning love for the lady on fire, yet the distance made her unreachable. That is how much a portrait can undertake: love that burns like fire, and an unavoidable tragedy.

The film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* can easily be interpreted by the public as a mediocre love story of the same gender, yet it was greatly expanded through the addition of the tragic love story between Orpheus and Eurydice [1]. Moreover, among a series of films that illustrate the love stories of the LGBTQ community, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* stood out as the one that demonstrates the female gaze to the extreme [2]. The entire story happens on a small island that no outside influence seems to be able to penetrate, providing the protagonists Marianne and Heloise the freedom to live their lives and eventually fall in love. However, due to the nature of the specific time period that this story happened, it already set the tone of the tragedy from the very beginning of the film: only the small island can be the place where they are free to love.

This paper aims to analyze the gazes in this film as well as the parallels between the tragedy of the protagonists and Greek mythology. I will first summarize the central part of the film, about how the gazes in this film transform along with Marianne and Heloise’ relationship development. By bringing the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice into the film, the director draws a bigger picture for the tragic ending of Marianne and Heloise. I will then connect the mythology to the protagonists to find the similarities and differences between them. In terms of the discussion of love and tragedy, which is the central theme

of this film, I will analyze the essence of tragedy and why people need them – both from artistic expressions and in real life.

2 The Female Gaze

One of the most distinctive traits of this film is the lack of male characters [3]. We see the interactions between the maid and her mistress, Heloise's mother, and the painter Marianne. These women made up the entire cast of this film. The only few male characters are the passengers who were riding on the boat with Marianne, the people admiring the paintings, and the fiancé that never showed face throughout the entire film. Yet their presence was pervasive and was the cause of this entire tragedy to happen. When Marianne's painting board fell into the sea, none of the men stood out to help her get it back. She jumped into the water herself to save her boards from floating away. The scene shows men's indifference when seeing a woman with the occupation of a painter in 18th-century France [4]. In fact, women were not supposed to have any occupations: they were expected to be the subordinate to their fathers and husbands, to be the good housewife who never causes trouble. The result of this lack of male gaze in this film was thus relative freedom within the scope of the small island and the liberty to experience relative equality away from the hierarchical male-dominated society.

A deep understanding of this film cannot be achieved without analyzing the gazes – both between Marianne and Heloise as well as between the protagonists and us as an audience. One can see how different choices of the camera's angle depict the gazes in the film and thus help to develop the storyline. With the basis of this premise, this film made a further step toward creating equalness in the relationship between Marianne and Heloise. In the first half of this film, the story was told almost entirely from Marianne's perspective. Being the painter whose job is to produce a painting for Heloise to get married, she spent her days following Heloise everywhere to observe her. As a result, even though the camera is often placed at an angle parallel to Heloise's eyes, this is a relatively dominant gaze that corresponds to all those previous male painters who made their attempts but failed to paint her. By considering her as just the object of study in Marianne's painting, the shots of her face cutting directly into Marianne's reactions is a way of objectifying her using the camera. The turning point happens after Marianne showed Heloise her finishing work but then destroyed it. This first version consisted of Marianne's imagination of what Heloise looks like due to her lack of cooperation: what Marianne painted was not "Heloise" but what she interprets her to be like from a dominant gaze. In a way, this painting was made by only the painter but not her subject.

After Marianne destroyed the painting and bought Heloise some time, Heloise started to put down her guard towards Marianne. She became more cooperative, letting Marianne into her life to observe her more closely and eventually. She even complied and sat down to be her model. However, this doesn't mean that she became the subordinate in this relationship. "When you're observing me, who do you think I'm observing?" Is what Heloise said that surprised Marianne. As a painter, Marianne was used to posing a dominant gaze to her object of study. Within the next few sentences, Heloise described every little detail that Marianne has when painting, feeling shy, and being focused. "When you don't know what to say, you touch your forehead. When you lose control, you raise your eyebrows. And when you're troubled, you breathe through your mouth."

From the observation of the subject towards the painter, the film portrays the equality of the female gaze despite their social status: they are equal as independent people as well as lovers. The female gaze in this film and the use of the color green and red as a contrast to show that they are intelligently equal and independent, but their social status is extremely different. This kind of changing relationship between the observer and the observed is a thread throughout the film. It not only pushes the storyline but also sets up psychologically the relationship between the subject-object and then the subject-subject. It is only when Marianne and Heloise both become subjects that they begin to love.

Male gazes, and the subject-object (the Hegelian master-slave) relationship, nevertheless, still pertains in the film, although inconspicuously [5]. They give rise to the tragic fate of Marianne and Heloise as well as the tragic temperament of this film. The island shielded Marianne and Heloise away from the outside world. They were free from other people's opinions and social expectations as long as they stayed on it. But the male gaze is like an invisible hand that hovers over them: no matter how hard Heloise tried to resist and stall, she could not escape from her designated destiny to be married to a man whom she had never met before. On the other hand, Marianne was unable to do anything to stop this from happening. As a result, the story is set to be a tragedy from the very beginning, and both of them know it. There is another essential part in this film that "foretold" the ending of their relationship, and it is subtle in a way that might initially look like Marianne, Heloise, and Sophie were just reading stories and playing around.

3 The Poet's Choice

After Heloise's mother left the island, the three girls gathered together one night to read stories from Marianne's book. The light was dim but warm, and as Heloise finished reading the story for the first time, her breath became heavy, and the ambiance got intense. Marianne requested a second read and then each one of them came up with a different interpretation of why Orpheus turned back to look at his wife at the brink of bringing her back to life.

In Greek mythology, Orpheus was a poet, and his wife Eurydice was bitten by a poisonous snake. Because of Orpheus' deep love for his wife, he went down to the underworld, found Hades, and begged him to bring Eurydice back to life. Hades agreed under one circumstance: to never look back on the way back to earth. As Orpheus made his last step towards the land of the living, he turned back, and his wife fell into the darkness for eternity [6].

The maid Sophie blamed Orpheus for turning back because if Orpheus really loved his wife, then he shouldn't ever turn around to look at her. According to Sophie, it was entirely his fault that this tragedy happened, and it can be easily avoided if he obeyed the order of Hades. Marianne, however, believed that turning back was a choice he made, and he was completely aware of his choice when he chose to turn back and look. It was not a lover's choice, since a lover would do anything to be with her loved one, and "being separated by life and death" would be a complete tragedy for them. Instead, Marianne said that it was a poet's choice.

What exactly is a poet's choice, and why is tragedy considered beautiful to a poet?

As a poet, being able to leave the traces of her beloved in memory might as well be the most beautiful ending. A poet can feed on the pain and suffering from losing her

lover to create poems and art that could last forever, even after the death of our mortal bodies. In a sense, poets can turn this tragic event into beauty, and in order for Orpheus to continue being a poet, he had to make the poet's choice to leave his wife behind. From this unique perspective, it would not be considered a tragedy for Orpheus to look back at his wife, it is an act of pure beauty and romance.

In Heloise's mind, it is somewhat selfish if the choice of being a poet is Orpheus' and Orpheus' alone. This was when Heloise proposed the possibility that it might be Eurydice who told Orpheus to look back. For the first time, she turned our focus from Orpheus to Eurydice and included her in this choice. Being a poet's wife, she loved her husband and understood the nature of his profession. By telling him to look back, she knew that her second demise would help him continue creating poems. In fact, this choice was made by both sides of the lovers. By listening to what his wife said, Orpheus respected her choice and let her go. These three different interpretations of this tragedy corresponded to the day when Marianne said goodbye to Heloise: as Marianne hurried downstairs, not being able to bear looking at her once again, Heloise told her to look back one last time. She made the choice of a poet and that image of Heloise in her wedding dress became eternal in her memory. Just like how Eurydice loved his husband Orpheus, Heloise's love for Marianne initiated her choice to let her go in order to thrive and create more paintings. Comparing the story of Orpheus and Eurydice to Marianne and Heloise, we cannot neglect the parallel between the two endings. Marianne and Heloise together made the poet's choice to leave their lover in their own memories and paintings.

4 Tragedy as a Way of Life

However, within this seemingly parallel ending between the Greek mythology and the protagonists of this film, there is a distinct difference that sets them apart, which made the ending of the film a complete tragedy. In the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, there is a choice that both of them can make, which directly alters whether their results are tragic or not. On the other hand, no matter how Heloise and Marianne chose to say goodbye, it could not change the fact that their relationship was unable to be accepted and was destined to be a tragedy. Under the invisible hand of the male gaze, the only thing that Marianne and Heloise had power over was to turn their tragedy into art and beauty.

Near the end of the film, Marianna's student painted her as if she was in great sorrow. "I was in great sorrow then, but I'm fine now." she said, and she smiled. At this point, her smile shouldn't be interpreted as a sign of "being relieved" by the passing of time: she has been in love with Heloise ever since their precious shared time on that small island. In fact, with the prior knowledge of the destined tragedy they are going to experience, it seems like the relationship itself is futile: why should people experience tragedy when they know they are going to suffer? "Every artist is an 'imitator', and indeed either an Apolline dream-artist or a Dionysiac artist of intoxication or finally - as, for example, in Greek tragedy - an artist of both dream and intoxication at once." [7]. Tragedy itself, by Merriam-webster's definition, is "a serious drama typically describing a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (such as destiny) and having a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion that elicits pity or terror," [8]. which its nature is to inevitably happen to every single person. No matter how hard people try to avoid tragedy, no one can escape it at

some point in their lives. Tragedy, though being the cause of pain and suffering, is just another essence of life.

What seems to be causing pain and suffering is tragedy itself but ironically, humans always find tragedy beautiful, or at least amusing. From the Ancient Greek mythologies to the recent films with a tragic ending like *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, tragedies were well preserved and were told by us over and over again [9]. So what is it that empowers tragedy to draw people from time to time? First, just like what I analyzed in the previous paragraphs, making a poet's choice can be a tragedy in a lover's eyes, yet it ensures the continuity of creating artwork and beauty. For instance, knowing Vincent Van Gogh's decades of sufferings before his death tend to make audiences admire his artwork from an entirely different altitude [10]. We eulogize his ability to turn pain into beauty. What's more, his own tragedy inspires countless people coming after him to pursue art. In a sense, tragedy is indeed painful for those who experience it but the beauty it creates and its unique ability to inspire greatly exceeds the pain it causes.

Furthermore, when we look at tragedy of other people as an audience, both from fictional stories and real life, it serves to heal and bring happiness into our lives. In a sense, tragedy operates as a "Katharsis", which means purification and the removal of negative emotions such as pity and fear [11]. After listening to a tragic story or seeing other people going through pain and suffering, people would naturally generate a feeling of gratitude and would cherish the life they already have. In a sense, tragedy heals the wounds that are caused by our daily life. It brings happiness to those in need, and inspiration and beauty to other artists.

This is the very reason why the story between Marianne and Heloise is a complete tragedy but at the same time a beautiful creation. Echoing the Greek tragic mythology, the film draws out the final essence of tragedy: Beauty itself.

5 Conclusion

In a nutshell, the paper follows the trail from analyzing female gazes to the discussion of the tragedy-parallel between the Greek mythology and the protagonists in the film. By drawing out the differences afterwards, the paper continues to philosophize tragedy outside of the context of the movie: people inevitably experience tragedy in real life; though it is painful, people indeed need tragedy and tragic art has the power to generate beauty.

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