Illusion In M. Butterfly Essay, Research Paper

Illusion in M. Butterfly

In David Henry Hwang’s play M. Butterfly we are introduced to Rene Gallimard who has unknowingly been sexually involved with another man for twenty years. The idea of mistaken gender within the play causes the reader to question how could one mistake his/her lover’s gender for so long? In Rene Gallimard’s search for self-identity he ignorantly chooses illusion over reality.

Hwang effectively uses the opera Madame Butterfly by Giacomo Puccini as a framework to mold the main character, Rene Gallimard. Gallimard longs to be like the hero in Madame Butterfly, Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton, who dominates and possesses a beautiful Asian woman. Within the drama Gallimard concedes that he is not very attractive and that he hasn’t always been popular amongst the ladies. Gallimard states “We, who are not handsome, nor brave, nor powerful, yet somehow believe like Pinkerton, that we deserve a Butterfly”(747). Obviously Gallimard is not happy with himself or his life so he goes in search for his Butterfly or more importantly a new identity.

Gallimard thinks he has found his Butterfly when he meets and Asian actress named Song Liling. Unaware of Song’s real gender he shows interest in her. As the drama progresses so does Gallimard and Song’s relationship. Upon becoming intimate Song exclaims, “No?let me?keep my clothes. [. . .] Turn off the lights”(761). Song’s repeated modesty should invoke curiosity within Gallimard but he chooses to overlook her strange requests. As the readers, we

too could find nothing wrong with her modesty at this point, but during the trial, revealing facts are exposed. Song replies to the judge “I suppose he might have wondered why I was always on my stomach”(780). Now that we have the details of their sexual relationship, it is quite clear that Gallimard chooses illusion over reality in order to maintain his new identity. Gallimard becomes as sick as his idol Pinkerton when talks about Song’s reaction to his affair “It was her tears and her silence that excited me, every time I visited Renee”(769). Another example of Gallimard’s choice of illusion is his belief that Song bore his child. Song claims she is pregnant and then runs away only to come back several months later with a child. Gallimard never sees her pregnant yet he still chooses to turn his back on reality and looks to illusion.

In the end Gallimard confesses to his choice of illusion and wishes to remain there because the reality is to ugly to face. When Song reveals her true gender Gallimard confesses “I knew all the time somewhere that my happiness was temporary, my love a deception. But my mind kept the knowledge at bay”(783). In Gallimard’s attempt to obtain a more manly and fulfilling identity he ultimately has to live in a fantasy.

Gallimard is so desperate to hang on to his Pinkerton-like identity that he consciously chooses to turn his back on reality and find solace within illusion. Tragically he continues to embrace illusion until the end as he places the wig upon his head and exclaims, “My name is Rene Gallimard-also known as Madame Butterfly”(785) and kills himself. Ultimately in the end he refuses to face reality and takes the easy way out and ironically he becomes the butterfly that “?writhe[s] on a needle”(757).

Hwang, David Henry. M. Butterfly. Literature and the Writing Process. Elizabeth McMahan,

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