

Corruption in Pursuit of Perfection

By Victoria Candau

Is it truly by divine intervention that a man finds that one woman who seems to be the precise embodiment of everything he ever wanted, or is it merely the man himself who makes an ordinary woman his idealized object despite incongruities with his picture of her? There is no way to prove either side of this question in an objective manner, yet it seems clear that more often than not when we meet a person with whom we become smitten, we are willing to overlook any flaws that our beloved may possess in order to perceive this person as perfect in our minds. Such is the case with the protagonist of John Updike's short-short story "Pygmalion," who creates his own ideal woman in the image of his previous love, yet cannot weed out the positive aspects of his former wife from the negative when transplanting her personality into his new bride. His first wife is not perfect, yet Pygmalion wishes to re-create her in his new partner, maybe hoping to perfect his model with this second prototype. He fails to recognize that what makes these women desirable to him are their independently realized characteristics and mannerisms, not the attributes which he pushes upon them, ultimately fabricating a listless shell of a woman with whom he can never truly feel fulfilled.

The title of this story, *Pygmalion*, which shares its name with the protagonist, is an allusion to an ancient myth of Greece and Rome, in which a sculptor literally creates his idealized woman. He becomes infatuated with his creation and makes her his life partner after Venus, the goddess of love, transforms the sculpted image into a living woman. The most glaring difference between the love of the mythical Pygmalion and the one in Updike's story is the fact that the latter creation was a complete person previous to Pygmalion's imposition of a new identity on her. This forced transformation is the source of considerable conflict as Pygmalion loves certain aspects of both his first and second wives, yet neither is able to attain lasting perfection for him. With the first wife, although little is said about her, the narrator clearly states in the opening line of the story that "What he liked about [her] was her gift of mimicry" (p 33). Pygmalion would laugh at her impressions of acquaintances, even when she mocked his mistress, who became his second wife, as this is a characteristic which he values highly in his significant other.

His second wife, although a vibrantly passionate woman in the bedroom, does not possess a natural inclination for mimicry. For years with his second wife, Gwen, Pygmalion "would wait, unconsciously, for the imitations, the recapitulations, to begin" (p 33) not realizing that she was a gentler kind of person who did not wish to speak negatively of others whom the couple met. He does not allow her to maintain this aspect of her personality, however, telling her brusquely that his ex-wife would do impressions that were pleasing to him, therein implying that if she desired to make him happy, she should do the same.

The classical Pygmalion does not have to force his ivory wife, Galatea, to do as he pleases. She looks and acts just as he would like, and she sees him as he would like to be seen. He is the creator, and she is no more than an extension of himself made real through divine blessing. John Updike makes this myth more realistic, illuminating the outcome of a modern Pygmalion who attempts this creation of perfection with real women, underscoring the emptiness that would undoubtedly exist within an entirely fabricated partner, an issue that the ancient myth never endeavors to address.

The metamorphosis of Gwen, juxtaposed against the fixity of Pygmalion's character, is illustrated through repetition of language and the pleasure that Pygmalion experiences through his ability to manipulate a living being's character to create an illusory ideal. While still married to Marguerite, his first wife, Pygmalion "would laugh and laugh" (p 33) at her impersonations as her mocking "brought back, for a dazzling instant, the presence of an absent acquaintance" (p 33). He was unable to rekindle this tradition when married a second time, as the other woman was in no way like his first wife.

A chance encounter with Marguerite and her new husband Ed acts as a catalyst to endow Gwen with a newfound interest in mimicry. In her imitation of Ed, the narrator remarks that "for a dazzling second . . . the man's . . . expression . . . invaded her own usually petite and rounded features" (p 34). Not only is this language almost exactly identical to that which was used in the description of Marguerite's impersonations, but also this initial imitation marks the first time that Gwen changes herself into a different person, the woman that Pygmalion wishes her to be. In response to Gwen's newly acquired trait, her husband "laughed and laughed" (p 34), just as he did with Marguerite. This repetition serves as evidence to prove that Pygmalion's efforts to fashion his wife as though she were not her own person with a pre-formed personality and identity, are becoming manifest in her. He is realizing his dream: a woman whom he can manufacture according to his desires.

Pygmalion describes his wife's metamorphosis as an arrival at a "proper womanliness – a plastic, alert sensitivity to the human environment, a susceptible responsiveness tugged this way and that by the currents of Nature herself" (p 34). He wants his wife to be no more than a blade of grass bending in the wind, an empty slate that mirrors his mind. He takes such delight in Gwen's face distorting and contorting itself to represent another being that he loses the woman behind the expressions, the woman that he had once loved for who she was.

The theme of Updike's story varies from that of the Pygmalion of antiquity. According to this modern version, one cannot know true happiness or contentment with another until he/she learns to accept the other wholly, faults and all, understanding that each attribute is an integral piece of the person they love. That which Gwen lacked in the eyes of Pygmalion was relatively minimal when compared with the positive aspects of her personality. Gwen is hurt when she catches in Pygmalion's "expectant silence an unvoiced demand" for her to perform the recapitulations of party guests as did his former wife Marguerite. When Gwen reluctantly gives in to the pressure to conform to Pygmalion's idea of a perfect woman, she loses much of what he loved about her. He honestly believed that he could neatly separate that which he liked from that which he wished to change in his bride as though he was separating an egg yolk from its white. He only later realized that the part that he tossed away as undesirable contained a great deal of the Gwen he loved and lost.

It may seem curious that the author of this story chose to change the outcome of a classic myth that has been retold in many incarnations, often with the same happy ending. In the original myth, Pygmalion's ideal woman came to life and became his bride, thus suggesting a happily-ever-after ending. When translated from the realm of the mythical into the dimension of reality, such a story would be impossible, for there is no goddess to animate a stone woman in our world. Essentially, the modern story is about a man who marries a woman whom he tries to "fix up" according to his desire. By manipulating a woman who loves him and wants to make him happy, he is able to achieve his aims temporarily. However, as is always the case when one attempts such a feat, best left to the gods, neither person in the relationship is happy and the manipulator realizes, too late, that his partner was

perfect as she was before. This story thus may be viewed as a cautionary tale for those who enter into relationships with the notion that they can “perfect” their partner.

Pygmalion’s success in altering his wife so drastically does not end as well as he had hoped; rather he ironically creates for himself another Marguerite, complete with the aspects of her personality that he did not enjoy, the aspects that made him leave her when he met Gwen, the woman who is now rapidly dissolving before him. With the return of his favorite tradition of mimicry with a new woman, the narrator asserts that “[Gwen] had become perfect for him” (p. 34). Indeed she had become something she was not. In the first part of the story, when contrasting Marguerite and Gwen, it is explained that “what [Pygmalion] disliked about his first wife was the way she would ask to have her back rubbed and then, under his laboring hands, night after night, fall asleep” (p. 33). Gwen, on the other hand, brings passion to her relationship with Pygmalion, but that flame is extinguished when he imposes his idea of perfection on her. The final blow to his shining achievement comes from his own hand, both literally and figuratively. When she hints at a lack of desire for intimacy, Pygmalion offers Gwen a massage, as he had done with his former wife all too often when she did not wish to be close to him. Once this undesirable tradition begins anew with Gwen, “that small something in her that was all her own – sank out of reach; night after night, she fell asleep” (p. 35).

Updike’s Pygmalion is no more than a modern Dr. Frankenstein who pieces together an ideal that only exists in his mind, but playing God is risky, as we see it in the protagonist’s failed relationships with two women. The only reason the mythical Pygmalion did not meet an unfortunate fate was that his creation was brought to life by a goddess, a perfect being, who was able to transcend human limitations – a luxury denied to Updike’s Pygmalion.

This character-driven story – an example of the genre called “sudden fiction” – is not written as an overtly didactic piece. Since it is offered simply as a snapshot of life, the reader must work a little harder to make connections and find meaning. There is no character development, no setting, and no real plot; there is just the central action of the story. Such stories free both the author and the reader to create what they want from the spectacle, thus broadening the spectrum of interpretation by intensely engaging the reader’s analytic and imaginative faculties. They allow the author an attractive ambivalence and, when successful, they are etched on the mind as sharply and suddenly as they are presented.