

The death of the butterfly: murder, or suicide?



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Many have lamented the tragic story of a Japanese wife abandoned by her American husband in Giacomo Puccini's 1904 opera, *Madame Butterfly*, which was adapted from John Luther Long's novella, *Madame Butterfly*. In the opera, Cio-cio san (*Butterfly*), a Japanese girl, marries B. F. Pinkerton, an American naval officer. The performance follows her futile wait for her husband after he leaves her, until her suicide when she finds out that he has already wed in America. As the story was told in a period of American imperialism and Western fascination with the Japanese culture, *Butterfly's* story has mostly been seen through an Orientalist frame, with authors depicting her as an "Asian female conquered and destroyed by the sexually and culturally dominant white male" (Tsen 153). However, I argue that she is not entirely blameless in her own death. *Madame Butterfly* hints at *Butterfly's* complicity in her destruction by suggesting that she is in fact responsible for imprisoning herself in a fantastical cultural narrative that she has created. Through the portrayal of *Butterfly's* walk towards self-destruction, the opera criticises the stereotypical figure of a submissive Japanese woman who engages in blind admiration and belief in the West and its promises.

In Act I, *Madame Butterfly* sets up the marriage between Pinkerton and *Butterfly* as an empty one by drawing a parallel between the marriage contract and the contract for the house that Pinkerton buys. Pinkerton views both matters the same way – just as he buys the house "for nine hundred and ninety-nine years, but with the option to cancel the contract every month", their marriage contract also leaves him "free to annul the marriage monthly" (Fisher 42-43). The similar way in which he views both matters

suggest that Butterfly and the house are of equal standing to Pinkerton; they are both commodities that can easily be bought and given up. Later, Pinkerton has Sharpless drink to “ the day of [his] real marriage to a real American wife” (45), referring to his and Butterfly’s marriage home as “ a fairy-tale dwelling” (39). These two instances indicate that Butterfly and their marriage are both unreal to him; they belong in a fairy-tale world and have no place in what he considers his real life.

In contrast to Pinkerton’s disregard for Butterfly as a person, she is shown to have a blind admiration for America and its culture, as evidenced through the stereotyping of Japanese women in the opera to be mindless admirers of the West. This is seen during the wedding in Act I, when Butterfly’s “ Relations and Friends and Mother” exalt Pinkerton as “ a great man” (Fisher 57). They claim that “ one could search far and wide and not find a better man” (57), implying that he is a man of great character. Ironically, these people do not seem to know Pinkerton at all – just a few seconds ago, they ask Butterfly “ where is he?” as they are unable to pick him out from the crowd. This suggests that they determine the greatness of his character on his appearance as a Western man, indicating their mindless admiration for the West. The fact that these female characters do not have individual voices, but are presented as one voice instead, further shows how the opera is stereotyping Japanese women as mindless admirers of the West.

Indeed, Butterfly displays the same tendencies to senselessly worship the West. In Act II, she praises “ The American God” for being “ more persuasive and respond[ing] immediately to prayers”, putting down “ the gods of Japan [as] fat and lazy” (Fisher 65). In ironic contrast, it is revealed that she is in a

dire situation; Pinkerton has abandoned her, and “ a few coins” are “ all that [she has] left” (65). The American God has evidently not responded to her prayers, but, even though evidence tells her that what she is saying is not true, she creates excuses to justify the failure of her beliefs: “ I fear he [the American God] doesn’t know that we are here in this house” (65). Similarly, when Pinkerton fails to return “ when robin redbreasts rebuild their nests”, she refuses to face the truth that he has lied, instead choosing to believe the unlikely possibility that the robins in America do not build their nests once a year (69). Butterfly’s mindless faith in the West is so strong that even when met with direct evidence that her beliefs may not be true, she chooses not to see the truth.

Her intense admiration for America provides motivation for Butterfly’s attempts to play the role of the “ real American wife” and craft an American identity for herself (Fisher 45). During the wedding, Butterfly “ throws away the images” that symbolise “ the souls of [her] forefathers”, informing Pinkerton that she has “ forsake[n her] ancestral religion” to pursue Christianity as he does (53-54). By throwing away the artefacts that represent her lineage and adopting a new religion, she is essentially abandoning her Japanese heritage in order to be reborn as the typical church-going American wife. She also requests for Sharpless to call her “ Madam Pinkerton” (67), taking on her husband’s American last name as a way of embracing a new American identity.

However, Butterfly’s efforts at molding herself into an American citizen ultimately fall short. Her identity as the American wife is just as unreal as her marriage, and can only be upheld in the fairy-tale space of her marital home.

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Pinkerton only sees her as a “ plaything” (Fisher 60), while her Japanese counterparts, Goro and Yamadori, say that she “ believes she is married” (71), suggesting that her new identity is recognised in both American and Japanese spheres. Butterfly herself unconsciously reveals that even she does not truly see herself as an American citizen. Although she has supposedly thrown away her Japanese heritage, she tells Pinkerton, “ We are simple people accustomed to little things” (61). Her unconscious use of the word “ we” when speaking of Japanese values suggests that she still identifies with being Japanese. Similarly, when she is speaking of Pinkerton to her child, she tells him that his father will come and take them “ to his land” (78). Her description of America as Pinkerton’s land seems odd when contrasted to how she tells Goro that America is “[her] country”. The discrepancy in her descriptions hint that Butterfly does not really think of herself as being American; she is merely playing a role, desperately wanting to be a part of the culture that she so admires.

However, Butterfly’s creation of an illusory identity for herself causes her self-imprisonment. Earlier, Butterfly notes that in her marriage home with Pinkerton, they “ are away from the world” (Fisher 60). The marital home in the opera acts as a space that stands aside from the real world – a fantastical space where Butterfly’s fantasy of being an American wife can be sustained. This makes it so that it is only possible for her to live in the magical space of the marriage home; she is never seen leaving the house after her marriage, and eventually dies there (94). At the end of Act II, when Butterfly is looking out for Pinkerton before the shosi screen, she is described to be “ rigid and motionless as a statue” (83). This image of her being stuck

in a single position mirrors her imprisoned status – she cannot go to Pinkerton as her American identity is not recognised in American society. However, neither can she re-assimilate herself into Japanese society through a marriage to Yamadori, a Japanese man, as the American values that she has adopted cause her to look down upon her fellow countrymen. This is seen through the great disparity in the way she treats Yamadori and Sharpless, a respected Western man. While she politely asks if Sharpless’ “honourable ancestors are well” (68), she looks down upon Yamadori for having “had so many wives”, mocking his multiple divorces as “very flattering” (71). Here, she expresses respect for the Western Sharpless, and a sense of superiority towards the Japanese Yamadori, revealing how she no longer fits into her original culture. Butterfly’s imagined American identity renders her stationary, unable to truly be a part of both American and Japanese societies and only existing within the space of her home, separated from the world around her.

As such, I argue that Butterfly’s eventual death is a tragedy of her own making, as her self-imposed identity as the American wife is broken when Kate Pinkerton, Pinkerton’s real American wife, intrudes into her fantasy space. When Butterfly sees Kate, she refuses to hear the truth about her from Suzuki, claiming that she “might die the moment [she] hear[s] it” (Fisher 90). The death that Kate inflicts on Butterfly is quite a literal one; her identity as the American wife is rendered invalid, and thus, dead, when she finds out that Kate is Pinkerton’s wife. While she is able to live with that identity in the fantastical space of her home, fantasy and reality cannot exist at the same time. Finding out that Kate is the “real American wife” (45),

includes accepting that she, Butterfly, is nothing but a fake. Butterfly has to face the fact that she has never been truly American before, but is a disgraced Japanese woman who attempts to abandon her heritage and family. This, I posit, is what leads to her decision “to die with honour”, as she “cannot serve life with honour” as a Japanese – yet, her disgraced Japanese identity is all she has left.

Throughout the opera, Butterfly’s mindless admiration for the West gradually leads her into a spiral of self-destruction. She acts as a caricature, an embodiment of the stereotypical Japanese woman who is submissive and quick to trust. Through her death, Madame Butterfly condemns this stereotype and criticises the blind admiration for another’s culture, as all it is shown to accomplish is to create a fantastical culture that does not exist, a fantasy that too easily breaks in the face of reality.

Works Cited

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