

Pygmalion: the power of the artist in metamorphoses



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Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a work about transience, and perhaps no two things in the natural world are more fleeting than life and beauty. Artists aim to preserve these two qualities in their work by simultaneously imitating the natural world to give the appearance of life to static creations and also looking to transcend and outlast nature's beauty. Within the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells the story of such an artist, Pygmalion, whose statue blurs the boundaries between art and nature. The tale of Pygmalion demonstrates that the artist, paradoxically both an imitator and an innovator, assumes the unique role of mediator between nature and art. Initially, Pygmalion's attitude implies he has created the perfect woman, thereby rejecting nature's imperfection. After witnessing the Propoetides, the first women to become prostitutes, and whose shamelessness hardens them into stone, he chooses to "have no woman in his bed" (*Metamorphoses* X: 247). His vow subtly accuses nature of blundering when it bestows vices "only too often" on real females, forcing Pygmalion to find a better alternative (10: 246). After witnessing prostitutes turning into stone, Pygmalion performs the reverse: he sculpts an ivory statue to be his perfectly chaste companion. This statue is also described as more beautiful than any human "could" be, implying nature is actually incapable of ever equaling the artist's skill (X: 252). Essentially, Pygmalion creates a superior work of art because he possesses the artist's imagination. In accordance with his own ideas, the artist can specify exactly how beautiful and virtuous to make his masterpiece, whereas nature worships reality and is confined by the physically and organically possible. At the same time, the passage paradoxically focuses on art's imitation of nature, something supposedly inferior to it. Ovid's observation, "The best art, they say, / Is that which

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conceals art," summarizes the concept of mimesis, by which art attempts to mimic reality (X: 254-55). By definition, the understudy for his statue was a natural woman, and the statue's remarkably "almost lifelike"—or natural—qualities captivate him (X: 252). In fact, Pygmalion's one complaint is that his art is not alive. This makes sense, as Pygmalion is torn between the two identities of artist and lover. He has fallen in love with his artwork, but he is also a man and hungry for human contact. In an attempt to simulate courtship, he covers the statue's naked body with dresses, brings it with flowers, shells, pet birds, and other baubles, and fawns over it (X: 258-68). These scenes to any onlooker would appear the acts of a lunatic. Yet Pygmalion's questioning arguably betrays a willful denial: "...Was it ivory only? / No, it could not be ivory" (X: 258). He treats the statue like a living being that could respond to his advances "as if she felt it" (X: 267), and even believes "his fingers almost leave / An imprint on her limbs" (X: 261-62). The tentative uses of "as if" and "almost" again mirror his self-deception. He knows this is not a living girl, that she will never reciprocate his love, but dotes on her anyway. During the festival of Venus, Pygmalion ultimately reveals his desire for a living woman when he asks the gods to make him a wife "like his ivory girl" (X: 277). When he admits a living girl would satisfy him more than his statue, Pygmalion at last discovers the tension between being an artist and being human. At this point, Pygmalion comes full circle. He finds nature cannot create a perfect woman, but neither can he, the artist alone, achieve the extra dimension of life. In order for nature and art to fulfill each other's potential, they must join hands. The artist's power lies partly in imitating nature, but also in being able to improve upon it with his own imagination, which transcends the beauty and chastity

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found in reality. Meanwhile, nature's unique gift is that of giving life. The following scene, in which the statue is transformed into a living being, illustrates the combined power of nature and artistry. Significantly, the repetitious structure of Pygmalion's action and the statue's reaction demonstrates Pygmalion is a direct participant: " And lay beside her, / And kissed her, and she seemed to glow, and kissed her, / And stroked her breast, and felt the ivory soften" (X: 281-84). The sculpture imagery depicts Pygmalion creating alongside natural forces, together morphing the simulacrum into a pulsing being. Overall, the transformation of art into the realm of the living retains the beauty and chastity of his sculpture. He can hardly believe she is a real woman now (" It is a body!"), proving that she has not changed in appearance and is still preternaturally beautiful (X: 257). She even blushes, and, in a vision of starry-eyed innocence, turns her virgin gaze on " lover and heaven" (X: 263). This near-perfect transfer of art's virtues into reality affirms the artist's ability to comment on how nature ought to be. The natural world also provides the setting for artwork to fulfill not only artists, but also human beings. Together, art and nature contribute something more meaningful than their independent efforts. In the end, Pygmalion gained a human companion in addition to his ideal creation. His resolution presents one theory of appreciating art, namely that a piece is meant to imitate and also expand the possibilities of the world; but as a social being a person can never find existential satisfaction in artwork alone. That said, merging art with life still has its drawback of mortality.

Pygmalion's living woman will not survive forever, as the ivory statue would have. Therefore, although nature and art fashion a fine woman, they still cannot achieve a permanent, perfect product. But this of course is the <https://assignbuster.com/pygmalion-the-power-of-the-artist-in-metamorphoses/>

central idea of *Metamorphoses*. People and things always become something else, everything is in the process of becoming, and nothing stands on its own. Using this story and many more, Ovid gradually unveils his fundamental philosophy that life and beauty are transient. Works Cited Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. Rolfe Humphries. New York: Indiana UP, 1955. Print.