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Art and Rebellion in Medea and Pleasantville

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Art and Rebellion in Medea and Pleasantville

A hierarchy is only as stable as either its lower-classes are willing to be a part of it, or as its upper-classes are willing assert their dominance through force. When more tightly-restricted groups begin to question their boundaries, either out of boredom in their current roles or exasperation at being repeatedly stepped on, the continued longevity of the hierarchy suddenly hinges on the upper-classes' ability to hedge the lowers' desire for change. The restructuring of social hierarchies and progressivism are significant points in both the 1998 film *Pleasantville* and Euripides' tragedy *Medea*. These stories feature characters who interestingly choose to rebel against their oppressors through their remarkable talents in areas that by all societal norms, they should not have skill in; namely, Medea's mastery of magic and cleverness, and Mr. Johnson's gift for painting. Acting against their predetermined roles in their societies – wife, mother, small town shop owner – they both find and nurture their fierce love of the arts. The critical difference in these stories centers on the level of destructiveness employed by each character in their rebellions; Mr. Johnson creates highly stylized paintings which succeed in producing confusion, curiosity, and new ways of thinking, while Medea uses her art to violently destroy some of her oppressors to a much less potent effect.

In *Pleasantville*, it is not until an outside force in the form of Jennifer and David appear that some of the townspeople begin to ponder their societal roles. After having experienced newness in the form of closing up by himself at David's suggestion, Mr. Johnson questions his

repetitive routine; “I’m just not sure I see the point anymore. [...] it’s always the same, you know? [...] It never changes... It never gets any better or worse...” (1998). In this line, Mr. Johnson, for the first time, expresses discontent with the status quo. Pleasantville’s social hierarchy is then rapidly brought to the forefront of the story as the imbalance of power in the town becomes more evident, visually dividing the citizens into technicolor and monochrome.

The people who burst into vivid colors the earliest are for the most part the ones who have been the most repressed by the town’s “pleasantness,” even if they were unaware of it. These are the people who realized that departing from their society’s strict social norms would be beneficial to them, and who then set about breaking down the theretofore invisible hierarchy. Teenagers began listening less to the “history” adults were teaching them and more to each other, creating new experiences together in the forms of sex and voracious reading. Women began to live their lives for themselves, rather than to serve their husbands. Mr. Johnson, who was dissatisfied with the predetermined role his community had placed him in, rejected his job and began creating art that visually represented new ways of thinking.

The people who remain in monochrome, however, are mainly those who held the most power before the arrival of David and Jennifer. From their point of view, they have the most to lose from the dismantling of the established social hierarchy, so they feel the need to prevent that from happening in any way possible. While Mr. Johnson’s first out-of-the-box painting on the shop window, the cubist Santa, is met mostly with curiosity or confusion, the subject matter makes it familiar enough that the rendering is no more than somewhat uncomfortably out of place. However, his next piece, the life-size image of Betty unapologetically nude, sparks disgust and fascination in the community. This work is the catalyst for full violence to be introduced to

Pleasantville, and the monochrome people begin to riot in the street, attempting to destroy everything related to the technicolor citizens and their new ideas.

Mr. Johnson does not let the closed-minded reaction of his society stop him, and instead continues to promote tolerance of new ideas through his art. His third and final artwork portrayed in the film is painted directly onto the side of the town hall, displaying a vibrant, nearly utopian view of what Pleasantville could look like in full color. More so than the other two pieces, this mural draws feelings of awe and wonder from the townsfolk, monochrome and technicolored alike; it is a vision of a potential future for the town wherein radical change itself is depicted as pleasant. This painting aids in breaking down the final barriers between the monochrome and the technicolor. David sums this up well with, “Nothing went wrong... People change” (1998). Mr. Johnson’s quiet perseverance in the face of intense social pressure allowed people time to adjust to new ways of thinking instead of fearing them. By holding steady in his peaceful rebellion, Mr. Johnson shows his oppressors the value in his way of thinking and succeeds in making life in his society better for people like himself.

Despite the similarities in the stories, Medea has markedly less success in making any significant changes to the society surrounding the hierarchy she finds herself bound to. Medea is held to certain expectations solely because she is a woman, while Jason is essentially blind to his wife’s predicament. The depth of this incongruity is underscored in the two characters’ differing reasons for wanting to be wealthy. Jason says, “But [...] that we might live well, and not be short of anything. I know that all a man’s friends leave him stone-cold if he becomes poor” (18). For Jason, the idea of losing his wealth is distasteful to him because he would be displaced socially, and he is willing to leave his wife and children to marry into royalty in order to prevent this from happening. Medea, on the other hand, says, “Firstly, with an excess of wealth it is required for

[women] to buy a husband and take for our bodies a master [...] And if we work all this out well and carefully, and the husband lives with us and lightly bears his yoke, then life is enviable. If not, I'd rather die" (8). Medea takes a much more practical view on the need for money. A woman in her time period would have been expected to marry whoever wanted her out of necessity; most women could not support themselves financially, and were forced to depend on men to provide for them. This could easily land a woman in an abusive relationship, so money would allow a woman to remain independent until she finds a husband who will treat her well. The difference between Jason and Medea's answers is stark – wanting to entertain friends versus preventing lifelong abuse – and neatly outlines both Medea's subservient position in society and Jason's obliviousness to her plight.

Medea's gifts for the arts of language and magic are uncommon enough, but they only serve to garner distrust and discomfort from the people around her. Creon goes so far as to banish her because of her skills, "I am afraid of you – why should I dissemble it? [...] You are a clever woman, versed in evil arts [...] I shall take my precautions first" (10). However this is perhaps not unreasonable, as Medea uses these very skills to rebel against her oppressors. Using her intelligence and skill with language, Medea coerces Jason into letting her children inside the palace, and then launches her attack on the hierarchy that has damned her using her magical arts to kill both Creon and his daughter.

Despite all of Medea's pains taken to rebel against her society, she is only successful in freeing herself, not in making any lasting changes that would benefit other women. Jason, who is both the original source of Medea's desire for change and representative of men outside the narrow scope of the story, does not understand Medea's actions by the end of the play. When he and Medea speak at the conclusion of the tragedy, Jason is in mourning and unable, or unwilling,

to comprehend how he played a role in the four murders; “O children, what a wicked mother she was to you! [...] I tell you it was not my hand that destroyed them” (44). Although Medea managed to escape the society that prevented her from thriving, her destructive actions were too extreme in nature to serve as a catalyst for any real social change.

Art plays a critical role in the social rebellions that take place in both *Pleasantville* and *Medea*. It is used as a means of expression for people who were not benefitting as much as others from their social hierarchy, and also to convey new ideas to less progressive people. However, there are stark differences in the implementation of artistic ideas between these two stories. Medea’s violent tactics allow her oppressors to feel like the victims of the situation, as they are focused on mourning the losses that occurred at her hands rather than their own actions and mistakes that led up to her rebellion in the first place. On the other hand, Mr. Johnson’s peaceful display of controversial ideas and his persistence in the face of dissent allowed his oppressors time to evaluate their own actions and think about whether they were truly in the right. While Medea’s destructive rebellion garnered results very quickly, it had neither the impact nor the spread on her society as a whole as Mr. Johnson’s peaceful rebellion had on his.

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