

Beyond Pygmalion: The Writer as Narcissus in *Ruby Sparks*

Touted by critics as another modern day Pygmalion story, Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's 2012 film, *Ruby Sparks*, tells the story of a writer, whose creation of the perfect girlfriend on paper comes to life. Naturally this premise invites interpretations as a Pygmalion story, but the elements of the Pygmalion myth alone are insufficient for examining the film's message about creativity and the dynamic between the author and artistic product. This paper proposes that interpreting the film's protagonist, Calvin, in terms of Narcissus and examining his artistic object, Ruby, as a representation of inspiration itself, uncovers aspects of the creative process, particularly those that are magical, miraculous, and external to the artist.

The connections between Ovid's versions of Pygmalion and Narcissus have been noted before (Barolsky 256, Danahay 35-36, James 22-23). Both stories address the primacy of the authors' subjectivity and how their objects are reflections of their desire rather than subjects in and of themselves. Narcissus becomes useful when considering Ruby's roles other than that of love object. Ruby is not only the girlfriend Calvin desires to have, but she is, in a sense, a reflection of him, making Calvin's story one of self-love. Several lines in the film point to Calvin's self-affection, the most direct of which is expressed by Calvin's ex-girlfriend: "The only person you wanted to be in a relationship with was you." Thus, Ruby is the image of Calvin. As if to reinforce this, the two actors who play Calvin and Ruby bear a striking resemblance to one another. Initially, this projection of the artist's desire onto his object is desirable, even necessary, because, as Janan argues, in her discussion of *Salomé*, "That overflow of self onto the object enables creativity" (287).

Ruby also embodies the creative impulse that the artist cannot control. Her name, *Sparks*, suggests the idea of external divine inspiration, not unlike a muse. *Salomé* addresses the

connection between the love object and inspiration: “Love and creativity are identical at the root. In all creation, the product springs from an overpowering love for the stimulus . . . , and likewise all love is the self-empowered pleasure in production, occasioned by the beloved, though not for his sake but its own” (Salomé via Schultz 187). Moreover, the event or encounter cannot be forced. For Narcissus, who comes across his image in a pool when trying to slake his thirst, one desire produces another (*Metamorphoses* 3.415). The same is true of Calvin, whose invention of Ruby is born unexpectedly out of an assignment from his therapist to treat a long period of writer’s block.

Ruby represents the tenuous balance between control and letting go that the writer must strike in order to create. At her fleshly conception, she is “real,” insofar as she is she is autonomous, and she is autonomous, so long as Calvin does not write about her. Realizing this, Calvin vows at first not to write about her ever again, but when he violates this promise, his efforts to control Ruby produce freakish results, thus diminishing her “realness.” Calvin’s interference with Ruby threatens their relationship, since a love relationship has to happen between two autonomous subjects to be valid, or as Salomé expresses it, “Two become one only if they remain two” (Salomé via Schultz 186). Ruby even warns Calvin, “There has to be space in a relationship, otherwise it’s like we’re the same person.” Calvin’s attempts to control Ruby align with Narcissus’ realizing the image he loves is his own. Just as Narcissus cannot return to a state of not knowing the truth once he learns it, Calvin cannot bring back the “real” Ruby. Ultimately, Calvin fails at writing Ruby for the same reason he had writer’s block, his too great desire to control the process. In the end he learns, “Any writer can attest in the luckiest, happiest state, the words are not coming from you but through you. She came to me wholly herself. I was

just lucky enough to be there to catch her.”

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