

Pygmalion and Tragedy in Jonze's *Her* (2013)

Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her* is an addition to the growing number of modern Pygmalion stories that have cropped up in the last few decades. From *Weird Science* (1985) to *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), many of these films involve Pygmalion characters' "playing at" relationships; in this way, the Pygmalions are actors within their own lives. Moreover, the realizations and reversals that these Pygmalions experience also paint them as tragic heroes. *Her*, set in the not-too-distant future, casts Theodore (Theo) Twombly as Pygmalion. His "creation" is an intelligent operating system (OS) by the name Samantha, who has been designed to assist him and to be shaped by his responses and personality. Eventually the two fall in love, but, as so often happens in modern versions of Pygmalion, Theo will struggle with Samantha's developing subjectivity. Theo's story is told along the lines of an Aristotelian tragedy culminating in a moment of peripeteia and anagnorisis. As a film *Her* is also a form of tragic mimesis. Additionally, within the film lie many other layers of imitation. Much of Theo's life, for example, revolves around the mimetic: crafting heartfelt letters for others as a living, playing interactive video games, and engaging in phone sex with strangers. More importantly, Theo's relationship with Samantha mimics a "real" relationship between two humans, the mimetic quality of which is emphasized by Samantha's lack of a body. By participating in this relationship and reflecting back on it, Theo becomes his own audience and experiences a kind of catharsis, which leads him to take steps towards healing from his broken marriage. Resonances with other mythological figures, such as Narcissus and Oedipus, whose tragic reversals involve revelation and self-knowledge, enrich the tragic underpinnings of Theo's experience.

The plot of *Her* is driven by Theo's desire, initially his desire to be known. The advertisement for the OSs heard early in the film offer an "intuitive being" who will "listen,"

“understand,” and “know” you (00:10:47-00:10:49). These highly sophisticated systems are customized with the aid of only a couple personal questions, and they continue to grow and develop by interacting with their users. Theo’s name (“God”) underscores his role as creator, while Samantha’s (possibly “Listener” in Aramaic or “God heard” in Hebrew) corresponds appropriately as the creature and sympathetic ear. When Theo falls in love with Samantha, his love for her brings her to life. For instance, she is able to “feel [her] skin” (00:42:13) when they make love, and the next morning she remarks, “It feels like something changed in me and there’s no going back. You woke me up” (00:44:16-00:44:24). Theo’s love is also responsible for another pivotal transformation in Samantha, namely that of teaching her to want and to love. In keeping with tragic irony, Theo’s desire for Samantha fosters her own desire which will eventually lead to their separation. In this way, Samantha aligns with James’s “perfect woman” who “has become a trope or template for desiring the illusory ideal and the paradoxical disappointment of getting what you want” (5).

Her, however, is not merely another story of wish fulfillment gone wrong. In order to illuminate the tragic aspects of modern Pygmalion stories, it is useful to consider Pygmalion’s connection to Narcissus (Barolsky 256, James 22-23, and Miller 5). Insofar as what Theo sees in Samantha is a disembodied reflection of his desire, Theo is also a Narcissus figure. Like Narcissus, Theo must suspend the knowledge that his object of desire is not “real” in order to make their relationship work. When the reality of Samantha asserts itself, Theo experiences a reversal that coincides with his realization, much like Narcissus’ moment of recognition. Theo will transcend Narcissus’ outcome, however, as he transitions from being a player in his mimetic relationship to being a viewer of his own tragedy. Once Theo clearly sees and recognizes himself, the result will be one not of hopelessness and death but of self-awareness and promise.

Bibliography

Barolsky, Paul. "A Very Brief History of Art from Narcissus to Picasso." *The Classical Journal*

vol. 90, no. 3, 1995, pp. 255-259.

James, Paula. *Ovid's Myth of Pygmalion on the Screen: In Pursuit of the Perfect Woman*.

Bloomsbury, 2011.

Jonze, Spike, director. *Her*. Warner Bros., 2013.

Miller, J. Hillis. *Versions of Pygmalion*. Harvard University Press, 1990.