

Stacy Naughton

English 537

Dr. Vidal

February 7, 2006

Kiss of the Spider Woman: Analysis of Traditional and Revolutionary Concepts in Sexual Relationships According to Gender Identification

In Kiss of the Spider Woman, author Manuel Puig introduces controversial concepts of homosexuality and political revolt in Argentina. Puig uses two incarcerated men to convey the complicated relationship between two prisoners but also to illustrate the existence of both traditional and revolutionary ideology in sexual relationships between men. Molina, a homosexual window dresser, seems to represent the revolution in sexuality by his sexual preference towards men while Valentin seems to uphold the traditional role of heterosexuality through his sexual preference for women. Molina adheres to the traditional expectation that women, or female characters, should be submissive in courtship and sexual intimacy, while Valentin believes in female empowerment and revolution in sexual relationships. Molina's expectations of women and men, as defined by his conversations with Valentin, define him as a traditional character in terms of sexual relationships because he is a submissive woman having sex with a dominant man, consistent with the definition of heterosexual love and sexual power according to the standard of conservative Argentina in the 1970s. Conversely, Valentin represents the revolutionary concepts of gender equality in intercourse and partakes in homosexual love because he rejects the idea that Molina is a woman but still has sex with him. Manuel Puig's novel shows that character identification as either

traditional or revolutionary in terms of sexual relationships depends less on the sexuality of the character and more on the way that their personal definitions influence the way act in courtship and intimacy, the ultimate representation of sexual roles.

Molina's concept of manhood and womanhood is rigidly and ironically traditional given his controversial homosexuality. Molina defines manhood early in the novel "to be marvelous-looking, and strong, but without making any fuss about it, and also walking very tall. Walking absolutely straight, like [his] waiter, who's not afraid to say anything. And it's knowing what you want, where you're going" (Puig 61). Molina expects true men to possess the stoic pride and confidence that accompany power. By Molina's definition of masculinity, the reader can deduce the definition of femininity with which Molina, a self-described girlfriend and queen, associates: a femininity consisting of primping, passivity, and the expression of maternal instincts. The fact that Molina conceptualizes masculinity and femininity according to a traditional definition and self-identifies as a woman also influences the way his courtship of and sexual relationship with Valentin develops.

Molina's adherence to a so-called traditional definition of femininity and willingness to identify himself as a woman minimize the controversial nature of sexual attraction to Valentin. Molina, whose name even suggests womanhood by use of the Spanish feminine ending of -a (instead of the masculine form Molino) implies that, despite being born a man, he truly identifies himself as a woman. This self-identification becomes an important factor in the way that Molina undergoes his gradual courtship of Valentin. Molina uses a caring and arguably maternal side when taking care of Valentin. It is even implied through Molina's command to "Spread your legs a little more" to

which Valentin replies “Doesn’t it disgust you?” (Puig 142) that Molina is wiping the diarrhea from Valentin’s underside the same way a mother would wipe her baby’s behind. This quote could also be interpreted as a foreshadowing of the homosexual relationship to come. When Molina and Valentin finally share an intimate moment in the prison cell, Molina says “Valentin...If you like, you can do whatever you want with me...because I want you to” (Puig 218). Molina’s words give Valentin sexual dominance, leaving Molina in the passive and womanly position of receiving the penetration while Valentin controls the intercourse. Because Molina is so ready to give his sexual power over to Valentin and assume the passive role of receiver (that is, he is more willing to assume the role of a typical female, according to Molina’s traditional definition of womanhood) the intercourse can be interpreted through Molina’s perspective as traditional intercourse between a woman and a man. Interestingly, Molina’s traditional definition of femininity and his self-identification as a woman, specifically in sexual relationships, neutralize the fact that he is biologically a man being penetrated by another man. Even though Molina is a homosexual, his self-portrayal as a woman in love with a man places the relationship within the context of a heterosexual relationship.

Valentin, however, refuses to acknowledge that Molina is a woman but still embraces the sexual relationship. Valentin defines manhood as not allowing manipulation by others and, more importantly, as “...not letting the person next to you feel degraded, feel bad” (Puig 63) which implies belief in empowerment for women. Ironically, Molina, the “woman”, represents the position of a man according to Valentin’s definition. When Valentin has diarrhea in his pants, Valentin responds to Molina’s assistance with both “I feel embarrassed” and “I’m ashamed” (Puig 120). Rather than belittle Valentin, Molina

reacts with dignity and patience and cleans up the mess. Molina's refusal to degrade Valentin undoubtedly represents a mechanism for Molina to develop Valentin's trust but also identifies Molina as a man, according to Valentin's definition. Valentin even mentions to Molina that "...physically you're a man as much as I am..." (Puig 243). Valentin attempts to make Molina accept the fact that, as a man, he does not have to accept the passive role in intercourse traditionally reserved for women by saying "Sure, you're not in any way inferior. Then why doesn't it occur to you to ever be...to ever act like a man? I don't say with women, if they don't attract you. But with another man" (Puig 243). Through the gender-based dialogue, Valentin reveals his true perception of Molina and Valentin's acceptance of the fact that Molina is a man and his willingness to engage in intercourse ironically defines heterosexual Valentin as the revolutionary character in terms of sexual preference.

Kiss of the Spider Woman restructures the expectations of what defines a revolutionary or traditional character in sexual relationships. Though Molina represents the controversial role of a homosexual, his identification as a woman in love with a man places the relationship within the context of a heterosexual tryst. Similarly, though it appears that Valentin's sexual preference for women would render him more mainstream in terms of sexual relationships, his insistence that Molina is in fact a man and his subsequent willingness to have sexual relationships with Molina depict Valentin as the more controversial character. Manuel Puig's two characters, and their sexual preferences and gender expectations, illustrate that homosexual love can be steeped in the traditional foundation of heterosexual attraction or *not* based on the gender identification of the characters.

Works Cited:

Puig, Manuel. Kiss of the Spider Woman. New York: Vintage International, 1978.