

November 13, 2017

### Sympathetic Sexism and Dr. Burlov

Dan Flory argues that there is a type of character called a 'sympathetic racist.' (Flory 76) The purpose of a sympathetic racist is to give white viewers a new perception of race and privilege. In this essay, I will use Flory's understanding of a sympathetic racist to explore how he would understand a sympathetic sexist and apply that understanding to Dr. Burlov from Hitchcock's film *Spellbound*. Throughout the essay, I will argue that while Dr. Burlov is sexist and provokes sympathy, his character does not function as a sympathetic sexist within the film.

According to Flory, a sympathetic racist is a character that the audience aligns with, especially white viewers. (Flory 67) The character must be a person that white viewers can relate to and see in them a part of themselves. (Flory 67) The character also has to express beliefs or perform actions that racially discriminate. (Flory 67) A sympathetic racist shows how it is possible to be generally likeable and still be racist; that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. But more importantly, the sympathetic racist has to influence the white viewers' understanding of race. (Flory 68-69) The character helps white viewers see the world from a colored person's perspective and shows how racism reveals itself in the lives of people of color. In the end, a sympathetic racist helps the white viewers to look at race and themselves with more critical eyes.

Therefore, based on Flory's understanding of a sympathetic racist, a sympathetic sexist is a character that viewers, especially male viewers, align with. The character has to discriminate based on gender. Most importantly, the character has to help the audience view gender and discrimination with more critically.

To some extent, Dr. Burlov from *Spellbound* is a sympathetic sexist because he is a sympathetic character. He is a sympathetic character because he has many appealing personality traits. For instance, he is intelligent. When Dr. Petersen and Ballentine unexpectedly appear at his home, he deduces the situation and even diagnoses Ballentine with amnesia, but also is smart enough not to reveal what he knows. (*Spellbound*) Later in the film, he recognizes that Ballentine is in a murderous mood and smartly incapacitates him with bromide. (*Spellbound*) Dr. Burlov also has a few humorous moments in the film. A notable moment of humor was when Ballentine made a comment about Freud, and Dr. Burlov points out that it is ridiculous that while Ballentine cannot remember anything about himself, he believes that Freud is nonsense. (*Spellbound*) Dr. Burlov has likeable character qualities and according to Flory, people tend to align themselves with people that they like. (Flory 67)

Dr. Burlov is also a sympathetic character because he acts out of goodwill. For example, he attempts to protect Dr. Petersen by operating as a voice of reason when she wants to keep treating Ballentine after he demonstrates murderous tendencies. (*Spellbound*) Later in the film, he ignores his own judgement and protects Dr. Petersen and Ballentine by not calling the police. (*Spellbound*) Dr. Burlov also embraces Ballentine, telling him to look at him as a father figure even after Ballentine may have tried to murder him. (*Spellbound*) He also has a high level of devotion to Dr. Petersen, despite that he thinks that her decision to keep treating Ballentine is risky and believes that she has reduced her potential as a psychoanalyst by falling in love. His actions and goodwill make him a sympathetic character.

It is important to note that Dr. Burlov is also a particularly sympathetic character for male viewers because he is male. As Flory points out, viewers tend align themselves with people who look like them, so many male viewers will align themselves with Dr. Burlov. (Flory 76) This

means that Dr. Burlov is especially sympathetic to men, the audience he needs to be sympathetic to in order to function as a sympathetic sexist.

Dr. Burlov also functions as a sympathetic sexist in the sense that he is sexist.

Throughout the film, Dr. Burlov makes repeated comments that discriminate based on gender. At one point in the film, he warns Dr. Petersen against replying with the “usual female contradictions” (*Spellbound*), which implies that women, and exclusively women, often make contradictory statements. But most of Dr. Burlov’s sexist statements are aimed towards women in love, which suggests that once a woman is involved in a romantic relationship, he believes that they are useless, especially at making analytical decisions. He tells Dr. Petersen that even though she is in love, she should be able to see the unreasonable nature of her decisions. (*Spellbound*) He also mentions that a woman in love “is operating at the lowest level of intellect.” (*Spellbound*) Dr. Burlov makes repeated sexist comments and in this sense, he operates as a sympathetic sexist.

However, while Dr. Burlov is sympathetic and sexist, he does not function as a sympathetic sexist within the film. Flory claims that viewers need to be alienated from a sympathetic sexist due to the character’s sexist beliefs or actions. (*Spellbound*) However, the viewer is not distanced from Dr. Burlov in *Spellbound*. At the end of the movie, the viewer does not have a negative opinion of Dr. Burlov. In fact, Dr. Burlov’s support and commitment to Dr. Petersen draws the viewers closer to the character throughout the movie, not farther apart.

This failure to create distance between Dr. Burlov and the viewer is partly because Dr. Burlov’s sexism is not viewed as a negative trait. Rather, his sexism is not addressed at all. Dr. Petersen, the only significant female character in the film, has no reaction to his sexist statements. For instance, at one point, Dr. Burlov makes a comment about women in love

making the best patients. The group, including Dr. Petersen laughs at the comment and then the scene cuts, not to be addressed again. (*Spellbound*) Hence, his sexism is not recognized by the characters, much less perceived negatively.

Dr. Burlov's sexism also does not alienate the viewer to the character because his sexism does not have apparent unfavorable consequences. Dr. Burlov does not suffer at all in the film, and any obstacles that Dr. Burlov and Dr. Petersen face are independent of Dr. Burlov's sexism. In the end, Dr. Petersen helps Ballentine clear his name and they marry, despite Dr. Burlov's sexist comments. (*Spellbound*) In fact, Dr. Burlov's help with decoding the dream, among other things, actually helps them get to the happy ending. Additionally, Dr. Burlov's sexism is not expressed in a harmful way. His sexist comments are not made in anger, but usually in love, when he is trying to convince Dr. Petersen not to do something he believes will hurt her. Thus, the goodwill behind his sexist comments can even increase his likeability.

Since Dr. Burlov's sexism is never addressed, his sexism does not help the audience view gender critically, but rather helps normalize sexism- the opposite of what a sympathetic sexist is supposed to do. This normalization prevents the audience from critically analyzing sexism because they cannot see the sexism outside their own experience. Some viewers may not have background to feel the impacts of Dr. Burlov's comments and if his sexism behavior is never addressed, then they will not gain the knowledge needed to understand sexism. This prevents Dr. Burlov from functioning as a sympathetic sexist because he does not help the audience to look at gender issues differently.

Dr. Burlov's failure to function as a sympathetic sexist in *Spellbound* demonstrates that if the presence of sexism is not addressed, then conversation surrounding sexism act is never initiated. This lack of conversation hides the negative impacts from those who are positively or

neutrally impacted by sexism. Thus, in order to further a diverse conversation about sexism, it is essential that people address the presence of sexism, whether that be through the use of sympathetic sexists, or other means.

While Dr. Burlov has many characteristics of a sympathetic sexist, he does not function as a sympathetic sexist within the context of the film. Dr. Burlov's failure to function as a true sympathetic sexist prevents *Spellbound* from furthering the conversation surrounding sexism and even participates in the act of normalizing sexism. Sympathetic sexists play an important part in furthering a diverse conversation around sexism and it is important that we use sympathetic sexists and other means to initiate gender related discussions.