To Pin A Butterfly:

A Psychoanalytic Dissection of a wounded, fragile ego

David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* has been categorized as many things: a political drama, a critique of Western imperialism, and a deconstruction of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. While these interpretations are true in their own right, they often treat the protagonist, Rene Gallimard, as a mere symbol of Western ignorance. However, to view Gallimard solely as a political metaphor is to ignore the profound psychological tragedy that drives the narrative. *M. Butterfly* is presented entirely through the subjective filter of Gallimard's memory, creating a reality that is as fragile as it is deceptive. Gallimard isn't just a man swept up by a honey trap operation gone wrong; he is a man who has constructed a complex delusion to cope with traumatic harm that has been inflicted on his psyche.

Viewing the text through a psychoanalytic lens and specifically applying Sigmund Freud's psychosexual development theory, as well as conceptualizations from Jacques Lacan, it becomes clear that Gallimard's narrative is a defense mechanism. His unresolved ego and deep-seated castration anxiety manifest as a phallogocentric fantasy, embodied by Song Liling, designed to shield him from his own masculine inadequacy. Ultimately, the play's climax reveals that Gallimard's suicide is not an act of defeat, but rather what Harry Slochower calls an "ego function," a desperate, final act of agency to preserve his fantasy against a tragic reality.

To understand Gallimard's susceptibility to deception, we must dig deep to uncover and study the roots of his psyche, specifically his unresolved ego. The fracturing of Gallimard's mind began long before he met Song. Indeed, his spiral traces back to his childhood development. In the opening scenes, Gallimard identifies himself not as a powerful diplomat, but as the "least likely to be invited to a party" wimp. He carries a pervasive sense of masculine failure throughout the play. According to Freud's developmental theory, childhood development is driven by the management of internal drives and anxieties (Hussain and Ray). When these anxieties are not managed, they result in a "lack," or void in the self which demands to be filled.

Gallimard's lack is his perceived inability to embody the role of the dominant male. This internal lack appears externally as the manifestation of Marc, Gallimard's childhood friend. Marc serves as a crucial figure in Gallimard's psychosexual development. He is Gallimard's externalized ideal, his toxic masculine "Superego." Marc embodies the hyper-sexualized, unapologetically dominant male persona that Gallimard envies but cannot inhabit. Gallimard's ego simultaneously holds opposition and longing for Marc's power. Consequently, this dynamic incites a psychological need for an externalized mechanism for his self-affirmation. Gallimard is unable to generate his own self-worth internally, so he needs a mirror that will reflect a powerful version of himself back to him. He needs a stage that will allow him to play the role of Marc. This is the role Song steps into not by chance, but by Gallimard's subconscious design.

Gallimard attempts to fill his void by entering what Jacques Lacan defines as the "Symbolic Order." In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Symbolic Order is the structure of language and society centered on the "Phallus," he signifier of power, law, and difference (Lacan). For Gallimard, this Symbolic Order is strictly binary. In his worldview, the West represents the masculine Phallus

(superior, dominant, logical), while the East represents the Feminine (submissive, lacking, mysterious). His promotion to Vice-Consul in China is just as much a psychological promotion as it is a career advancement. It places him structurally in the position of the "Father" or the dominant male he has longed for. However, a title alone isn't enough to quell his insecurity. He needs the "Other" to validate his position.

Gallimard's affair with Song is structured entirely by this belief that the West is owed submission by the East. He explicitly links magazine pinups to his image of "Butterfly," establishing his ideal woman not as a human being, but as a non-threatening object. In his mind, the ideal woman is one whose sexuality is wholly determined by the male gaze. As William Baker notes in his analysis of domination and performance in the play, Song's identity is used to manipulate these specific power dynamics (Baker). Baker's analysis suggests that the "performance" is a two-way street. Song performs the role of the submissive oriental woman, but Gallimard performs the role of the dominant Western man. Gallimard does not fall in love with a person; he falls in love with the reflection of himself that he sees in Song's eyes. He seeks an object of desire who will "do exactly as I wanted," fulfilling a repressed wish for total control that up to that point, felt impossible to him in the real, competitive Western world.

This desperate need for control eventually leads Gallimard to reject the "Law-of-the-Father" the societal and institutional laws of morality and the state. In psychoanalysis, the "Law-of-the-Father" represents the rules that govern social behavior and reality. Gallimard committing treason by passing classified information to Song is a direct offense to these external laws. Gallimard supplants the state's law with his own private, subjective law enforced by his

fantasy. This subverts the function of the Superego, which Freud defines as the conscience or the moralizing agent of the mind (Hussain and Ray).

We see this subversion clearly in his marriage to Helga. When Helga suggests he see a doctor regarding their fertility issues, Gallimard reacts with intense defensive hostility. He states, "I feel like God himself is laughing at me if I can't produce a child" (Hwang 27). Here, Gallimard places his own fragile ego above medical or societal standards. The suggestion that he might be infertile is a direct attack on his Phallic identity. It threatens to expose the "lack" he has tried so hard to hide. Rather than face this biological reality, he retreats further into his fantasy with Song, where his potency is never questioned, only worshipped. He refuses to acknowledge his own shortcomings, preferring to live within a constructed reality where he is the potent patriarch of a secret family.

The maintenance of this constructed reality requires a massive psychological effort, specifically a mechanism known as the "refusal to see." This refusal is a direct defense mechanism against the "Castration Complex." Freud describes this complex as a primal fear of losing power or the phallus (Hussain and Ray). For Gallimard, the stakes of the Castration Complex are incredibly high. Seeing Song’s true anatomy would not just reveal a lie; it would confirm the inherent "lack" in his power fantasy. It would prove that he has been submitting to a man, thereby placing Gallimard in the "feminine" or submissive role he detests. Therefore, his avoidance of the truth is not ignorance; it is active protection. His need for an illusion of absolute power prevents him from demanding that Song disrobe. He rationalizes this avoidance as "respect" or "modesty," but psychoanalysis reveals it as fear.

Song, having studied the Western fantasy, understands that the "lie," the submissive, absent female, is essential to Gallimard's pleasure. In a moment of candor, Song admits, "It was my job to make him think I was a woman. And chew on this: it wasn't all that hard" (Hwang). This revelation is damning. It confirms that Gallimard sees only what he wants to believe. He prioritizes fantasy over reality because the reality of Song's gender would shatter the mirror that reflects Gallimard as a man. As noted in the medical review by Cohen-Kettenis and Gooren, gender identity involves a complex interplay of psychological and social factors. Gallimard projects a rigid, binary social gender onto Song, ignoring the biological reality entirely. He constructs a "woman" out of social cues such as clothing, makeup, voice, because his psyche cannot handle the ambiguity of the truth. Effectively pinning in place, *his* Butterfly, *his* fantasy, *his* pinup girl.

The play's tragic resolution is the inevitable shattering of this ego-construct. The trial scene serves as the intrusion of the "Real" (in Lacanian terms) into Gallimard's "Imaginary" world. When the truth is finally revealed in court, and Song appears in a suit, stripped of the kimono and makeup, Gallimard is faced with the grotesque truth of his delusion. The humor of the courtroom, with the judge and public laughing at him, emphasizes the absurdity of his fantasy when dragged into the light of the Symbolic Order. Yet, even here, Gallimard resists. He rejects the real Song. He tells the man standing before him that he is not "his" Butterfly. This is a crucial distinction. Gallimard is not rejecting the deception; he is rejecting the reality. He famously asserts, "I choose fantasy."

This choice leads to the final, devastating scene of the play, which can be interpreted through Harry Slochower's concept of suicide in literature. In his article "Suicides in Literature: Their

Ego Function," Slochower claims that for many literary characters, killing oneself is not a surrender. Instead, it is an "ego function," a conscious act of defiance or rebellion which preserves the identity or cheats a meaningless death (Slochower 389-416). If Gallimard were to live, he would have to live as the "wimp," the fool, the man who was tricked by a man. He would lose the Phallus entirely.

Gallimard's suicide, therefore, is an act of agency and preservation. By transforming himself into the perfect female subject via donning the kimono and becoming Madame Butterfly, he performs the ultimate castration. He physically and symbolically removes his own masculinity. However, in doing so, he becomes the very thing he loved. He merges with the fantasy. By dying as Madame Butterfly, he ensures that his self-conception is eternally preserved within the comforting narrative of the beautiful woman who died for the love of an unworthy man. He rewrites the ending of the story so that he is the tragic heroine, rather than the comedic victim.

In this final ritual, Gallimard achieves the "mental automatism" discussed by Lacan, where the unconscious mind disrupts the constructed identity (Lacan). The barrier between Gallimard and Butterfly dissolves. He looks in the mirror and sees the woman he loved. This is the ultimate victory of the Imaginary over the Real. He secures the narrative control he lacked in life by orchestrating his own death. *M. Butterfly* serves as a stark warning about the malleability of reality and the fragility of the human ego. Gallimard's journey from a man with a "lack" to a man who consumes himself in fantasy illustrates the terrifying power of the human mind to rewrite the world. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, we see that his downfall was not caused by a simple deception, but by his own desperate need to uphold a fragile ego against the crushing

weight of his own insecurity. Gallimard proves that the most dangerous lies are not the ones told to us by others, but the ones we tell ourselves to keep the darkness at bay.

Works Cited

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