

Life as suffering in Michael Haneke's *Amour* and Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar*

Chung Chin-Yi

National University of Singapore

'Amour' rationalizes mercy killing. The slow deterioration of Anne also prevents the audience from judging Georges for finally snapping and killing Anne before he commits suicide. There is a great feeling of relief for the two in this situation which prevents us from judgement. The amount of sacrifice Georges has made for Anne is immense and we do not judge him for killing her in her deteriorative state. George's suffering reflects what life is all about: conflict, and since Anne can't defend herself, she's actually better dead. As with Amour, Plath's suicide is almost a relief to the decline she has been suffering in gradually being enslaved to a man and entrapped with children. Many of us judge those who commit suicide as weak and unstable but given the amount of pain we are exposed to in Amour and Plath's novel, suicide indeed seems a form of relief and escape. While not entirely rationalizing suicide or mercy killing, the gradual decline and excruciating pain that we witness in the characters make us sympathize with the decision to simply escape life through self harm. Yet we are made to see their hubris as they take fate into their own hands rather than let the divine determine it. We are left wondering if they escape in this life but will escape condemnation by the divine for self harm in the next.

Keywords: *Suicide, Mercy killing, Life, Suffering, Pain*

A story such as 'Amour', which involves the deterioration of a stroke victim and her husband's brave efforts to care for her, become harsh when true-life events are reproduced realistically. Haneke does not entirely keep to grimness and then throws in a twist ending. The stroke victim is Anne, who lives with her husband, Georges, both retired music teachers. When Anne spaces out at the breakfast table one morning, Georges knows something is wrong but Anne doesn't seem to have any memory of the incident. It turns out she has a blocked carotid artery but after undergoing surgery, Anne ends up paralyzed on one side.

The first half of 'Amour' involves Georges' efforts to help Anne with her rehabilitation. He holds her up out of her wheelchair and she takes feeble steps, using her one good leg, and dragging the other. Eventually, Anne has another stroke, which reduces her to a child-like state; often, she talks in gibberish. Georges becomes more frustrated as there are moments when Anne refuses to swallow the soft food Georges is trying to spoon feed her.

Outside visitors occasionally intrude on Anne and Georges' sad world. Early on, before the second stroke, one of Anne's students, a well-known classical pianist pays a visit and asks Anne what happened to her. She doesn't want to discuss her situation, merely stating that her condition is a result of 'old age'. Later, Anne and Georges' daughter, Eva, pays a visit, and argues with her father, recommending that she put Anne

in a home. Georges' reacts angrily and considers Eva's suggestion heartless. It eventually comes out that the relationship between daughter and parents is not good, primarily due to her British-born husband, who apparently the parents did not care for too much.

After Georges decides to hire a second nurse, he discovers that this particular woman has been mistreating Anne. Georges fires the nurse but she indignantly claims that she's never had a problem before with any of her employers and rudely curses the old man, before leaving. The visitors to the apartment, however, serve to break up the monotony of Anne's deterioration, not only for Georges but for the audience as well. The film is almost unbearable as it documents the depressing decline of Anne and we find it almost impossible to watch on as she becomes a shadow of her former self.

'Amour' turns into a crime drama when the caring Georges, suddenly decides he cannot take it anymore, and suffocates Anne with a pillow. He prepares the body so that when the police finally arrive, Anne appears in a dignified state. He also seals the door with masking tape, presumably to prevent the foul odor from permeating the apartment. Then Georges pens a final note and while it's not entirely clear, it appears he commits suicide, to join his wife in death. Right before the note, Georges captures a pigeon that has flown into the apartment, but lets it go, perhaps symbolizing that he has freed Anne by effecting the mercy killing.

'Amour' rationalizes mercy killing. The slow deterioration of Anne also prevents the audience from judging Georges for finally

snapping and killing Anne before he commits suicide. There is a great feeling of relief for the two in this situation which prevents us from judgement. The amount of sacrifice Georges has made for Anne is immense and we do not judge him for killing her in her deteriorative state. George's suffering reflects what life is all about: conflict, and since Anne can't defend herself, she's actually better dead. In a very satisfying scene, Georges dismisses an incompetent nurse by telling her "I hope that you have the misfortune to be treated exactly the way that you treat your patients when you are helpless." Helpless, is the state of Anne, and Georges is the only one to understand that she needs someone who treats her like an adult. One of the most devastating scenes occurs when Anne refuses to drink, George's reaction is shocking but believable, he slaps and forces her to drink. Indeed, we'd never harm those who love, except if they try to harm themselves. The slap Georges gave is a sort of defense he applies in the name of Anne's soul, because she can't respond for herself. George suffers on behalf of Anne.

Emmanuelle Riva and Jean-Louis Trintignant portray well the close loving bond of a very compatible couple and its disintegration as illness permanently changes the relationship. Over two hours one witnesses the affectionate camaraderie the couple shares degenerate into painful co-dependence. The wife, independent and intelligent, is reduced to a gibbering shadow of herself - treated with unwanted pity and undignity. Her husband, anxious that not only has he lost the woman who means most to him, cannot bear to see her suffer either. He is tormented by the enormous responsibilities he feels. When Anne's health

begins to deteriorate rapidly due to a series of strokes, Georges assumes the role of full-time caregiver. Like all of us facing this situation, Georges is confronted with the dilemma of keeping Anne at home where she can be cared for by the man who loves her, or of placing her in an unfamiliar nursing home where she could be looked after by professional caregivers who would, however, be strangers. Georges chooses the former, despite the tremendous physical and emotional burden it places on him. This is clearly a couple who takes their "for better or for worse...in sickness and in health...till death do us part" wedding vows to heart. We aren't shown the kinds of trials Georges and Anne's love has had to endure over the years for them to have arrived at this point. But something has held them together all this time, and we sense that their life experiences and their commitment to one another have prepared them for this final challenge. Anne's illness becomes the test in which all lingering frictions will be burned away and out of which their love will emerge as solid and indestructible. For only in times of utmost suffering and pain can love be manifested in its truest and purest form. And this is the message of Georges and Anne's story: true love is being selfless, the act of giving.

One might say the *Bell Jar* is about Plath's regret that she is not a man with a phallus, because that condition might actually enable her to lead a life of authenticity and freedom. Being female comes with the expectations of eventually becoming a domestic keeper no matter what one has achieved prior to getting married, as Plath mentions when she says men like

Buddy Willard intend to serenade her with high romance only to iron her out flat like a mat like Buddy Willard's mother after marriage, reduced to a life of menial household chores and work that revolves entirely around the family while Buddy Willard lives a double life of male hypocrisy and is able by virtue of his status as a male to engage in casual sex with a waitress.

Plath is also repulsed by the idea of sex, as she finds that it is an act of violence towards women and not in the least attractive as a prospect. Upon Buddy Willard exposing his male genitals to her, Plath confesses that all she can think about is turkey neck and gizzards, the male organ does not stimulate her sexually and when she first has a sexual encounter in order to get revenge on Buddy Willard for his casual attitude towards sex with an older professor she bleeds incessantly, demonstrating that the sexual act has more gratification for males than females and leads to more suffering on the part of females than males, essentially an act of violence towards females as Plath comes close to being raped by a woman-hater Marco in one section of the book.

Plath is repulsed also by the need for women to be incessant child bearers and household keepers, as she is revulsed by the figure of Dodo Conway, who has a large family of six children and seems to be completely immune to the burden and entrapment that being a mother and household keeper brings, she seems completely to fit the mould of being a child-bearer and child-rearer complacently and it is such women that Plath or her alter-ego Esther resents completely because it seems

to be an entrapment for women, while men can pursue affairs and careers and money and glamour women are reduced to being appendages to men in having to be enslaved to bringing up the children that they bear for them.

Plath thus feels that being female is little more than being an appendage to men as they are allowed sexual liberties that are forbidden to women and allowed to pursue money glamour and fame all at the expense of their wives who have to make sacrifices and raise children for them. The idea of marriage appals Plath who finds it little more than an entrapment and imprisonment for someone as talented and full of promise independently as herself. Plath is also revulsed by the idea of females being completely passive, indebted and at the mercy of male desire as Doreen demonstrates at the presence of Lenny Sheppard, independently Doreen had been sharp-witted and satirical of people around her but around Lenny Sheppard Doreen transforms into a completely passive sex object for him, to be played around with at his will and mercy, the sight of them making out is so abhorrent to Esther or Plath that she has to leave the apartment altogether.

As a consequence of all the expectations of her as a female to throw away and abandon her life of high achievement and personal accolades when she becomes married and enslaved to a man like Buddy Willard who has no intuition or sense of decency towards women as he crudely and insensitively engages in casual sex with a waitress with no heed of Esther's feelings as she is

expected to remain pure and sexually untainted for him, Esther descends into a deep clinical depression that can be cured only by electroconvulsion, the ultimate violence towards her as she feels part of her is being executed like the Rosenbergs she mentions at the beginning of the novel, to be female it seems is a crime liable to being punished for one's simple status as a woman and the discomfort it causes in her when she does not complacently fit into the mould of Dodo Conway and Doreen who do not mind at all being completely at the mercy of men and indebted to them as well as being little more than domestic or sexual slaves to men as Dodo Conway ungrudgingly has one child after another and sees no need to distinguish herself with a career and as Doreen who had been so satirical and sharp is reduced to a completely compliant sexual object at the hands of Lenny Sheppard. Eventually, Esther makes a suicide attempt, albeit unsuccessful, as she feels she cannot escape the bell jar or suffocating imprisonment that the status of simply being female imposes upon her. This bell jar however was to descend on Plath eventually when as a mother of two married to an unfaithful Ted Hughes she eventually successfully takes her life by putting her head in a gas stove oven. At the heart of Plath's grievance is the fact that women seem to be completely subordinated and at the mercy of male desire and the need for women to sacrifice their careers and reputation to simply become domestic keepers, it seems that all the academic accomplishment Plath has achieved will become utterly meaningless after she marries Buddy Willard because she will be flattened out like a rug under his feet like Buddy's mother. Plath is also alienated from her mother, who fails to understand her completely and tries to make her feel guilt

for her depression by repeatedly asking Plath how she had failed as a mother and what she had done wrong to cause her to go into depression when it is largely convention and society which has victimized Plath by confining her to the bell jar of marriage and motherhood in place of the alternative futures she had envisioned for herself with a successful career as a professor or editor. It is society's rigid expectations of her path as a mother and wife that causes her to descend into depression. Plath also rejects the lesbian alternative, she rejects Joan's advances and does not see Joan as an alternative to male subordination as she is repulsed by the idea of being lesbian for it seems unnatural and disgusting to her.

As with *Amour*, Plath's suicide is almost a relief to the decline she has been suffering in

Works Cited:

Hanake, Michael. *Amour*. 2012. Film.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Faber and Faber, London, 1963.

gradually being enslaved to a man and entrapped with children. Many of us judge those who commit suicide as weak and unstable but given the amount of pain we are exposed to in *Amour* and Plath's novel, suicide indeed seems a form of relief and escape. While not entirely rationalizing suicide or mercy killing, the gradual decline and excruciating pain that we witness in the characters make us sympathize with the decision to simply escape life through self harm.

Yet we are made to see their hubris as they take fate into their own hands rather than let the divine determine it. We are left wondering if they escape in this life but will escape condemnation by the divine for self harm in the next.