

FYS 16: Fifth Essay
Length: 1,000 words

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Earth Sciences 306

Dates:

Dec. 15-17: Editorial conferences

Office hours: Tues. 2-4; Fri. 10-12

Dec. 19 (Sun.): Final draft due by e-mail by 5:00 PM

Does the Spider Woman Set You Free?



Spider Woman and Valentín
(Sonia Braga and Raúl Juliá)

Now we can start looking for patterns:

As we've seen, liberation plots regularly show an underdog turning the tables on a wicked master, tyrant, or gang: Douglass vs. his masters (esp. Mr. Covey); Odysseus vs. monsters and suitors; Moses vs. the pharaoh; Jesus vs. the Roman and Jewish authorities; Ripley vs. the alien queen and the corporation; Medea vs. Jason; Balram vs. his employers; and – mostly complexly – Sethe prevailing (maybe) against all odds.

This larger turnaround often involves temporary role reversals: Odysseus takes orders from his son and plays his wife's guest; Jesus allows himself to be judged by the authorities; Balram starts feeling like Mr. Ashok's wife; Denver ends up mothering her mother; Ripley and Sethe become warriors to defend their maternity. Some plots end with the establishment of a new and juster order: Odysseus restores his kingdom; the liberated Israelites form a nation; the Last Judgment impends; Ripley vanquishes bugs and suits.

Other plots do not restore order so neatly: witness Medea, Balram, Molina, and Valentín.

Kiss of the Spider Woman has two underdogs who reverse roles with each other more than with the oppressors: The dreamer Molina dies for a cause, while the activist Valentín ends up spinning out romantic fantasies in italics. They haven't dented the power of either the state or the equally authoritarian revolutionaries. Whether the reader sees defeat or liberation in Valentín's and Molina's outcomes may depend on how s/he has read the competing paths to liberation: imagination (films – or are they just escapism?), science (footnotes – or are they just distilled prejudice?), revolution (or is it just another face of power?), and, of course, ♥.luv♥.

Please answer one of the following questions, which try to provide leverage on the big question of “how liberatory?” by focusing on a single character or making a comparison to *White Tiger*.



Ripley as Sleeping Beauty

One: The Kiss of the Panther/Spider Woman

One way to get leverage on this larger question is to ask how V & M each actually perform the roles they have taken over from his cellmate. To start with V:

- **How does Valentín's final fantasy (chapter 16) culminate the five films that Molina has rehearsed and confirm their liberatory power or, alternatively, show how Valentín has been “taken in”?**

Another way to pose the question is ask whether the final fantasy kiss works like the prince's kiss for Snow White or, by contrast, like the kiss of Judas or of the panther woman.

Two: The Trickster

We know that tricksters are slippery characters, not least in terms of gender (e.g., Odysseus) and hard to judge. To get a firm and manly ending, the *Odyssey* transforms Odysseus from trickster to warrior. Plots with protagonists in suspect categories (e.g., women and slaves) take pains to keep them from seeming tricky: Douglass, Sethe, Ripley. The protagonist who is still up to his/her old tricks at the end probably undermines the sense that order has been restored, since tricksters are always undermining those hierarchies and rules. Odysseus cannot be both king and trickster, and in Euripides' *Medea* is still a witch as she goes off to Athens (where she will marry her host Aegeus and try to get him to kill his son, Theseus).

Molina is elusive: We can never be entirely sure of his motives when he's speaking and, by the time he takes decisive action (chapter 15), we have to read between the lines of a police report. As I recall, we never reached a firm conclusion on where Balram ends up.

- **Compare how Balram and Molina end or do not end their roles as tricksters and, accordingly, how they each leave us in a position to see them as having achieved some sort of meaningful liberation.**

Three: Into the Light

From the Gospels onward, liberation plots favor the imagery of "seeing the light": "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined (Isaiah 9.2).

A variation on the trickster question (#2 above) is to compare *Tiger* and *Spider Woman* on a more thematic basis. Balram uses the passage from the Darkness into the Light to figure liberation, and *Spider Woman* traces a more complex movement from darkness (where Molina, Valentín, and the reader all are at the start) into daylight and, for Molina at least, into the real world. Puig probably also riffs complexly on the figure of "coming out of the closet."

>Compare how *Tiger* and *Spider Woman* vary and question the traditional liberatory parable of passing from the darkness into the light.



Kiss Gone Wrong
"Cat People" (1942)

Four: The Truth Shall Set You Free

The footnotes on sexuality leave off as V & M move from theory to practice.

- **Have the analyses in the footnotes, especially in chapters 10 and 11, been confirmed or superseded by what happens between Molina and Valentín? That is, do the final turns in the plot establish the truth of what the footnotes end up claiming or, rather, do those developments suggest the irrelevance and error of the theoretical analyses?**

You don't have to account for the proliferation of different views in the footnotes, just the positions in the final footnotes that seem telling.

Intellectual honesty:

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