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21M. 670J: Traditions in American Concert Dance and Gender Autobiography

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3 April 2008

Victorian Society in “Fall River Legend”

Introduction

The dance “Fall River Legend” choreographed by Agnes DeMille in 1948 attempts to recreate the social era in which a Victorian spinster, Lizzie Borden, was charged with the murders of her father and stepmother in Fall River, Massachusetts in August of 1892. The dance is in the form of a ballet, a representation of traditional dance that was respected in Victorian society. Although Lizzie Borden, often referred to as the “Accused” was historically never found guilty for the murders, the dance starts with a narration of the conviction following the trial. This firm confirmation of history’s unsolved mystery serves to set up the theme of how a woman trapped in the Victorian cultural mores could be driven to commit such a heinous crime. If there were any question as to whether or not Lizzie was truly guilty, the theme of the performance would be immediately undermined. This theme of portraying a woman’s frustrations and captivity within Victorian society is then examined throughout the play by recounting the life of Lizzie Borden and what forces propelled her to inherently “un-Victorian” actions at the conclusion of the dance. In Victorian society, the role of the woman was clearly defined to be one that exhibited pure femininity in the form of grace, elegance and innocence (“The Victorian Web” 2). The Victorian woman was to be social, but only with those who were deemed to be acceptable. A woman was only to be emotionally and physically intimate with one man – her husband – and only within the privacy of the home. While Lizzie’s biological mother upheld these standards in the truest regard, Lizzie’s stepmother took on the role of enforcing such values rather than exhibiting them herself. The constant oppression of her stepmother to shape her into a Victorian woman coupled

with Lizzie's emotional abandonment by her father and eventually by her pastor drives her to murder in cold blood. This production by the Harlem Dance Theater illustrates the stringent social and cultural mores of the Victorian era through portrayal of Lizzie's childhood, relationship with the church and pastor, and society's reaction after the murders.

Childhood

Following the official conviction of Lizzie Borden, the flashback on the Accused's life begins with her childhood, when she was arguably the happiest. Lizzie's biological mother and father perform a duet while the child Lizzie watches, holding her mother's revered white shawl. Lizzie's mother wears a white dress with a blue border to signify her purity outlined with sadness, foreshadowing her eventual untimely death. The outline in blue could also suggest Lizzie's mother's own imprisonment within the role of a Victorian woman and mother.

Alternatively, Lizzie's future stepmother wears black, a symbol of darkness and often evil. The use of color to represent disposition relates to cultural identifications of personality during the Victorian era and is even present to a large extent today. The mother's movements are graceful and swan-like, representing the epitome of a "successful" Victorian woman. She makes use of her slender arms to extend upward coupled with her left foot raised horizontally above the ground so that her dress opens in the shape of a half moon. However, a Victorian woman is never complete without a man and it is the father's hands delicately placed on her waist that finishes the Victorian picture. Lizzie's mother presents this pose in a variety of angles onstage, with each transition guided by the hands of her husband. Her husband's guidance represents the inherent male dominance in their relationship due to social norms.

When Lizzie's mother dies shortly after, the turmoil of Lizzie's entrapment in Victorian life begins. Upon notice of her mother's death, she clings onto her father's leg for comfort only to be pushed aside by her future stepmother who also takes away her mother's white shawl. This action symbolizes the replacement of her mother by the "evil" stepmother who captivates the attention of the father in one swift motion, leaving the child Lizzie to grieve after her late mother by herself. The older Lizzie Borden who is observing this flashback begins to move her legs in a clockwise and counterclockwise motion while keeping her feet firmly on the ground, resembling an angry animal about to pounce and attack its prey. As she watches her father fall into the arms of the stepmother, her movements become quicker and more pronounced, eventually forming a crouching pose that is distinctive of an animal ready to charge. There are two instances during such predator-like movements in which Lizzie stretches her arms towards the audience and runs in a forward half-circle in order to elicit sympathy and compassion from the audience due to her unfortunate predicament. These movements that resemble predatory behavior also symbolize the inner turmoil that she undergoes which starts to change her inherent character and shape her into the person that will eventually become a murderer.

When Lizzie enters into her newly structured household, the constraints on her life as a Victorian woman become more apparent and severe; she is not even allowed to look out the window. When the protagonist attempts to appeal to her father, he merely ignores her and looks at his hands in prayer. The frustration that Lizzie possesses with her stringently imposed female constraints are manifested in her unceasing hand gestures, moving up and down the upper half of her body while snapping – an outlet for the energy that has built up inside her. This eventually causes her to run towards the only social place that she is allowed to go as a Victorian woman – the church.

Church and Pastor

During the middle of the play, Lizzie Borden befriends the church pastor and their brief duet together is reminiscent of the duet performed earlier by Lizzie's parents. The pastor's gentle hands guide Lizzie's waist as she glides from each graceful pose that extends her arms and legs outwards. Lizzie's father then quickly disparages this new relationship by ordering her inside their home. However, the pastor later returns with flowers – a symbol of friendship and even love. Lizzie willingly accepts them and then falls into the arms of the pastor. Not only does this exemplify women's apparent dependence on men in Victorian society, but also shows Lizzie's emotional fall into the open arms of her new friend. When Lizzie's stepmother sees this unsanctioned relationship beginning to materialize, she does all that is in her power to prevent it from developing. This most clearly illustrates the stepmother's concern for propriety at the expense of the happiness of others, a cultural more that was common in the Victorian era. In an attempt to impart the "proper" cultural norms onto her stepdaughter, she raises her forefingers to the temples of Lizzie so as to brainwash her into the cultural mores of Victorian society. Moreover, the stepmother never dances throughout the performance. This is because dance in the Victorian era was considered a form of art and beauty – a quality the "evil" stepmother does not possess.

The next scene depicts the church, a cultural center in Victorian society. The women wear traditional long dresses and are adorned with typical church hats that were common in the Victorian era. Moreover, the women wear bright colored dresses to symbolize the inspiration their religious order has given them to reach higher spiritual levels. The men wear traditional suits and are never seen to be fully on their toes as the women ballerinas are. This is due to the

male image of strength and power that does not come along with the instability when standing in such a classic ballet pose. The dance is characterized by both men and women joining their palms and moving side to side in prayer, eventually dropping to their knees in the ultimate religious gesture. Everybody onstage is meticulously synchronized to show conformity that was pervasive in Victorian society. In the dance, all the churchgoers form two lines and begin to dance in a circle onstage with the men leading and the women following as dictated by social norm. Following this, all the men and women pair up and briefly dance with each other, illustrating the heteronormativity that was rampant in Victorian culture. Then, the women form an inner circle, the men form an outer circle and all members of the church kneel down and lift their hands in prayer. The synchronization of the subsequent motions further illustrates the obedience and submission that all members of the community willing endure in the name of religion. Furthermore, when the members of the church stand up and nod their heads all at the same time, it is clear that a lot of the Victorian values and cultural identity comes from the religious sector of society.

Following the piece with the members of the church community, Lizzie and the pastor dance in another duet where the pastor guides Lizzie by the arms back and forth across the stage. The action serves to demonstrate once again how the male figure always serves as the controlling figure, even in such an unorthodox relationship as the one between Lizzie and the pastor. A woman's dependence on man is further entrenched when Lizzie falls backwards into the arms of the pastor who catches her and brings her back up. However, despite such explicit representation of Victorian standards, this duet also displays Lizzie's true inner turmoil and angst in living in such a constraining society. The protagonist shows this by momentarily beating her chest and upper thighs, resembling a war cry. It is also interesting to note that while Lizzie reveals her

inner feelings, the pastor dances in the background by extending his legs upwards and dancing on his toes – movements that are unprecedented by any other male in the whole performance. These less masculine movements, as set forth by Victorian codifications may suggest the pastor's homosexuality or the lack of sexual relationship between him and Lizzie. As the duet progresses, both Lizzie and the pastor's movements become faster and involve more contact with the body showing the growing intimacy they share. There is then a transition back into the church community where Lizzie becomes fully integrated into and begins to find solace through interactions with the community. However, it is important to note that when the men and women pair for one last piece of the dance, Lizzie merely stands in the middle without a partner. This furthers the notion that even at the church in the presence of her fellow townspeople, Lizzie still remains separate from the society and outside the social norms that the Victorian era put forth. This could refer to Lizzie's possible homosexuality. Historical records reveal that Lizzie had at least a two-year affair with a young actress named Nance O'Neil (Troy 3). However, in the Victorian era, homosexuality was not readily accepted, especially among women. Being forced to restrain another part of who she was from society because it was not part of the cultural mores could have caused further grief for Lizzie.

The peace that Lizzie finds in the church is only momentary since Lizzie's stepmother returns to further distance the protagonist from anyone she may potentially love. Once Lizzie's stepmother enters the stage, Lizzie's sharp movements indicate her fear in the presence of such a figure of wicked authority. Lizzie grasps her head in a moment of desperation before quickly falling to the ground, only to be picked up again by the pastor. Lizzie then kneels to the floor with her hands over her ears indicating that she is disturbed by the situation. Then, the stepmother whispers something inaudible in the ear of the pastor that effectively changes the way

the pastor thinks of Lizzie. He then places a hand on Lizzie's forehead, but the demoralized protagonist promptly withdraws. The stepmother then takes the pastor away from Lizzie, thus successful in breaking the relationship between the two. Lizzie exhibits her emotional distress by extending her arms outward towards the pastor who is walking away from her. The circles she makes around herself with her arms stretched out also suggest how lost she becomes without the friendship of the pastor, one of the few people who understand her. The actions taken by the stepmother in this scene were common in the Victorian era as intimate relationships between a woman and a pastor were discouraged. Therefore, it can be inferred that the stepmother may not have been inherently a villainous character, but simply a manifestation of the Victorian norms that prohibited such a relationship to exist.

As Lizzie recalls her stepmother attempting to brainwash her, taking away her father, and now the pastor, the emotional turmoil that she endures translates into anger as she decides to put an end to her misery. The white shawl is again placed on Lizzie's shoulders, an salute to her late biological mother who represented pure and untainted femininity as imagined by Victorians during such an era.

Society After Murders

Upon killing her father and stepmother with an axe, Lizzie changes out of her blood stained clothes and wears blue to signify the grief that she carries with her actions. After a momentarily mournful period, Lizzie runs out to the town and dramatically tells the town of the murders. Upon hearing the news, the townspeople scamper around in panic and hysteria, also shown by the women jumping and twirling in midair to convey a sense of confusion and dramatization. With Lizzie and her comforters standing in the middle, the townspeople encircle

her and bend down towards her, symbolizing their sympathy and sorrow for Lizzie. However, when the bloody shawl and axe are brought out and laid in front of Lizzie, the people immediately recoil away from the protagonist, fearful of her possible guilt. This quick change in feelings towards Lizzie exemplifies the constantly changing attitudes that society has for people based on the most recent events. These actions also demonstrate the lack of loyalty people have when in a group setting. Despite the mounting evidence against her, Lizzie continues her charade of mourning and grief upon seeing the bloody shawl and axe.

However, Lizzie's reputation in society quickly changes as illustrated by the scene where Lizzie runs around the stage and desperately knocks on the doors of townspeople to no avail. Lizzie's quick and jumpy movements, especially with her hands, vividly express her anguish. The pastor then comes in to calm his friend by holding her hands. Thus, even amidst the rumors and social gossip, the pastor remains faithfully by her side. This reveals how deep the relationship between Lizzie and the pastor was in addition to the loyalty that the pastor held for Lizzie. The pastor is contrasted with the rest of the society who walks in pairs (one man and one woman as established by social norm) and condescendingly faces Lizzie before walking away. Throughout this scene, Lizzie's hands are constantly moving, a symbol of both her angst and guilt upon murdering her father and stepmother. When Lizzie reaches out and kneels one last time in hopes of finding comfort, all the townspeople abruptly turn their backs towards her, refusing to listen to her story.

When the townspeople leave the stage, the pastor briefly kisses her on the cheek and then walks away from her as well – the ultimate abandonment of Lizzie by one whom she loves. When Lizzie extends her arms in hopes of calling the pastor back, the pastor continues to walk off the stage, refusing to listen. This ultimate betrayal by the pastor closes the play with the

protagonist looking up towards the sky in agony, as the freedom that she sought was still not attained upon the murders of her father and stepmother. Instead, the role of her stepmother as the authority on social conduct was assumed by the townspeople who scorned her for her criminal deeds, refusing to empathize with her plight. Ultimately, Lizzie's actions in the murders threaten the idea of the nuclear family unit, a value revered by Victorian society. This can be considered ironic since Lizzie's early childhood was spent in happiness while her biological mother was still alive. However, the untimely death of such a pure Victorian woman brought an end to Lizzie's desire to become a Victorian woman. The subsequent negative influences she received from her stepmother, a proprietor of social standards, made Lizzie desire a life beyond what the social mores of Victorian society allowed. The oppression and rigid definition of the Victorian woman that Lizzie feels she is forced to uphold to gain acceptance by her father and possibly by the townspeople translates into anger and frustration, causing her to behave in a most "un-Victorian" manner – murdering in cold blood with an axe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the choreography by Agnes DeMille intensely illustrates the oppressive aspects of Victorian culture that drove Lizzie to commit the murders of her father and stepmother. It is the frustrations and confinement that the protagonist felt throughout her life that caused her mental anguish and torment. The movements throughout the production clearly symbolize a storyline in which Lizzie is the most prominent victim – a victim of Victorian cultural mores that prohibit her freedom. Historical records exclude the emotion and turmoil that Lizzie must have felt during her life and this performance is an attempt to give the audience insight into her motives. The purpose of this dance is not to have the audience exonerate vindicate Lizzie, but merely to illustrate how the culture and Victorian norms may have

influenced Lizzie to commit such an “unwomanly” crime. The cultural norms that furthered Lizzie’s desolation begin with her childhood, are extended into her relationship with the church and the pastor, and conclude with the townspeople’s behavior towards her upon hearing of the murders and her possibility as a suspect. In childhood, Lizzie’s stepmother takes away the comfort of her father thus leaving the protagonist emotionally empty. This emptiness is briefly filled by Lizzie’s relationship with the pastor and the church where she finds peace. However, Lizzie’s stepmother takes that away from her as well, deeming it unfit for a Victorian woman to become so intimate with a pastor. When Lizzie murders her father and stepmother in hopes of gaining her freedom, she simply finds that the constraints her stepmother and father put on her have been replaced by society who convicts her. Thus, this melodrama of a Victorian woman’s quest for freedom concludes with the feeling that in such a culture, a female could not easily attain the freedom she desired.

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21M.670 / WGS.591J Traditions in American Concert Dance: Gender and Autobiography
Spring 2008

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