

Anila Sinha  
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Professor Melissa Blanco  
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### Gender and Individuality in *The Catherine Wheel*

#### **Introduction**

The final portion of Twyla Tharp's *The Catherine Wheel* (1981), entitled the "Gold section" can be regarded as a vivid exploration of how gender influences both individuality and social relationships. The title "The Catherine Wheel" comes from a type of firework consisting of a powder-filled spiral tube, or an angled rocket mounted with a pin through its center. When ignited, such a wheel will rotate quickly and produce a display of sparks ("Catherine Wheel" 1). For the purposes of the "Gold section, this Catherine Wheel, shown in multiple forms at the beginning of the section, serves to introduce how Tharp describes the relationship between gender and individuality. The uniform energy that the Catherine Wheel gives off enables it to spin and produce fireworks – in a similar fashion, the combined energy of individuals involved in a functional relationship can produce remarkable explorations of the human body that match the phenomenon of the fireworks a Catherine Wheel emits. In the golden section, Tharp deconstructs some conventions of traditional Western concert dance, demonstrates how such a type of dance born in a patriarchic society represses specifically the female body, and then redefines a new kind of heterosexual relationship that can then be symbolized by a Catherine Wheel.

#### **I. Deconstructing Traditional Western Concert Dance**

In order to depict the true beauty of a functionally independent relationship, Tharp starts with depictions of how the male and female bodies have historically functioned in Western dance. The gold section begins with a rendition of traditional ballet where a man and woman dance within the confines of their strictly defined roles: the woman twirls and leaps while the man stands and waits to catch the woman. In one of the following sections, alternating pairs of men and women dance in synchronized movements diagonally across the stage. As soon as the second pair enters, the previous pair promptly leaves the stage. The synchronization of the pairs – first two women, then two men and then finally two women – once again leads the viewer to observe how distinct and separate each gender is defined, yet how uniformly the members of each sex adhere to gender roles. In this sense, Tharp shows how the individualities of both man and woman can be confined in the traditional roles expected in classical dance forms. Doris Humphrey supports this idea of limited creativity by using the example of traditional ballet. She writes ballet is “limited and suffered from arrested development – a permanent sixteen...So well established was the formula over many hundreds of years that, as the twentieth century dawned with its flood of new ideas, there was considerable resistance to any change from the light love story and the fairy tale, and there still is” (Humphrey 15). As female choreographers, both Humphrey and Tharp are able to see such characteristics evident in traditional Western concert dance because of the possible parallels they may have drawn from the societies they lived in.

As a subsequent contrast, multiple men and women dressed differently dance onto the stage using different movements, angles, and directions while keeping the same beat. One man in the front of the stage even wears a skirt and dances in movements traditionally identified with the woman such as continuous twirls and extension of the leg. These expressions of individuality serve to explore the ways in which traditional gender roles can be rejected to create new realms

of choreographic freedom for both men and women. These innovative possibilities can then better express the uniqueness of each dancer's interpretation rather than his or her ability to portray what is expected given their gender.

As a departure from the heterosexual dyad, one movement phrase involves two women and even includes the man leaping by himself in a gesture that highlights his own individuality apart from the choreographic demands of partnering. The explorations of gender roles further expand with the depiction of a trio of men dancing onstage. One man lifts the other man, who then leaps and wraps his leg around his supporter. Simply the presence of three dancers all involved in a common relationship opens up the prospect of other types of "pairing." The absence of a woman in the relationship challenges heteronormativity, a hallmark of classic ballets and traditional dance.

Tharp later reintroduces a trio comprised of two female and one male dancer, that function with a different purpose. While the male dancer slowly yet barely lifts one of the female dancers up to an insignificant height, the other female dancer jumps and extends to greater heights as she dances around the couple. The contrast between the limited nature of the couple dancing with the freedom of the solo female dancer (who has the ability to reach greater heights since she is not bounded by the limiting hands of the male dancer) serves to highlight Tharp's intention of expressing individuality beyond the bounds of traditional Western concert dance. In this sense, Tharp conveys the same message of how the customary roles of gender that produce dance pieces do not utilize the full capability of bodies due to the repression of individuality. An example of the full deconstructive ability that dance has to question gender roles is further developed by Tharp at the end of this section when two female dancers, standing on opposite sides, lift up the male as he decoratively displays his body midair.

## II. Repression of Female Individuality

One of Tharp's messages conveys how specifically the female body is repressed during traditional western concert dance. She choreographically indicates how a woman is shaped by three significant male roles: father, brother and lover. As the three men bend her limbs, she assumes a variety of poses through no will of her own. Tharp uses this to depict how such important men in a woman's life maintain her subversive role both in society and domestically. The section begins with the men passing her from one set of hands to another, symbolizing how a woman living in a patriarchal society gets handed from her father's household to her husband's household in one quick motion. While she is being given away to her next male dominator, the female dancer moves her feet against the direction in which her carrier moves, signifying her possible discontent due to lack of freedom.

Tharp continues to demonstrate how codified gender roles represented through restrictive movements confines the female body. When the man and woman dance steps similar to the traditional Western concert stage dance, her movements are slower and all of her extended limbs gradually move back towards the core of their body. Moreover, the viewer can see the energy of the movements that was once displayed as outward turn inward to replicate the tension between the male and female body. Such movement phrases characteristic of this classic male and female dynamic include the women leaning on the man while she uses her legs to create a variety of poses. The female's dancer's legs are often regarded to be one of the most sensual parts of the ballerina. The woman also slides underneath the man at various points, as if to physicalize the subordinate role of women in patriarchy. Susan Leigh Foster analyzes this by noting that "*She* and *he* do not carry equal valence. *She* is persistently put forward, the object of his adoration. *She*

never reaches out and grabs him but is only ever impelled towards him, arms streaming behind in order to signal her possession by a greater force” (Foster 2). When the woman is finally released from the grasps of the man who firmly holds her in place, her body moves freely and reveals the variety of ways her body moves. This female dancer twirls before bending to the floor and slowly extends back upward so that she can then stretch her limbs simultaneously in different directions. Here, the female body becomes self-enlightened, expressing her individuality that does not necessarily correspond entirely with either roles in classical dance.

### **III. Redefining Heterosexual Coupling**

After the rigidity of observed traditional roles in Western concert dance is deconstructed in the first portion of the golden section, Tharp begins to redefine how a functional male/female duo can create an atmosphere whereby both partners express individuality. In the next section, a male and female couple enters the stage and the woman wraps her legs around the man’s waist while she extends her torso backwards, facing him. Tharp uses this movement phrase to recognize the need for such a relationship to exist so that self-discovery can occur, even outside a romantic relationship. The following movement phrase furthers the idea of a platonic relationship between a man and woman when both the man and woman dance separate choreographies, yet to the same beat. A quick transition suddenly occurs into first a female solo followed by a male solo where each dancer explores the extent of his or her own body’s movements. The female dancer expresses her uniqueness by what may seem to be traditionally feminine movements, but in fact represent her extension of her role as a woman, creating a new style. She characterizes this by twirling with more power as well as extending her limbs farther than before so that her body fully displays the muscles that drive her independent movements. In

a similar manner, the male solo features classically masculine movements such as high jumps and spinning with visibly accumulating speed so as to demonstrate the power and might he holds. However, he also expresses a softer side by momentarily bending down with his hands outstretched in front of him before gliding back up to spin his body angularly. In this transitory step, the man exposes an uncharacteristically delicate side. Other such movements include an extension of the leg upward followed by a bend backward so that his head is unsupported by his neck. Moreover, his torso is no longer linear – a position never required of danseur for a classic ballet performance. These phrases contrast with traditional Western concert dance where “the men keep their heels together and their feet more or less flat on the ground...they are careful to keep their hips stationary, because a man who sways his hips from side to side looks effeminate” (Jonas 19). Thus, the hints of non-classic gender roles behind the individual expression communicate that each dancer is not simply a “man” or “woman” but instead a result of the combination of techniques traditionally identified with one or the other. While the female dancer may embody more “feminine” techniques and the male more “masculine,” this does not exclude the possibility of combinations from both choreographic styles to make individuals unique.

Taking a broader look at these newly defined relationships of a man and a woman the next section incorporates multiple couples who play off each other so that the individuality of each dancer becomes part of a larger context. These couples possess greater energy visible by the increased heights of women when the men lift them off the ground. The couples suddenly break away to do their own individual dances that before immediately coming back together in unison. This structure of movements show how important both interdependence and independence are in artistic expressions of dance.

Tharp illustrates a man's discovery of his own body outside of his role as the supporter for a woman. This male solo consists of a dancer who bends his torso both back and forth and makes use of his knees by bending them towards the ground before jumping back up to full height and extending back. He then spins around with one leg bent backwards and his head pointed upwards. These movements are the opposite of what a danseur would be expected to hold due to the strict requirement of keeping the torso rigid and linear with the head set upright on a firm neck. After the male dancer shatters the expectations of an accomplished danseur, he begins to explore other areas of his body by moving his head, neck and torso in circular motions. He then continues to flail and shake his limbs in an unorganized fashion before reverting back to spinning, allowing a transition to the next solo. The new male soloist makes use of discoveries made by the previous one in order to create a cohesive movement phrase that remains unique yet aesthetically organized.

Once again, Tharp shows her contemporary redefinition of couples dance by illustrating two different ways in which such a relationship can highlight individuality. In a new section, the male and female dancers dance separately before coming together when the woman completely leans on the man in an ultimate demonstration of absolute trust. Then, the woman lifts her own leg in a classic ballerina pose, but the man does not hold or guide her; instead he creates a new pose of his own by extending his arms. This collaborative effort in the expression of individuality despite coupling, results in both dancers reaching their full potential not with the help of their partner, but by the ability of their partner to inspire such expression. The balance in structure is then shown by the couple holding hands and crouching down so that their weight is balanced by one another. This pose shows how no one figure – man or woman – dominates over the relationship; instead, both dancers have an equal freedom in expressing their individuality.

The second couple serves to convey the same message through new choreographic expression. This couple shows the increase in energies that result when two dancers have the ability to control their method of movements and are not constrained to simply representing what is expected. Not only are the lifts of the woman higher, but the choreography extends showing different results that do not end with the woman simply landing back to her feet on the ground. For example, when the man lifts the woman extremely high, she jumps out of his hands and lands with her whole body on the floor. She then performs a floor movement phrase before rejoining her partner. Another deviation from normal lift patterns occurs when the woman is placed on the man's shoulders and she lets her body fall backward against the back of her partner. In the last segment of this duet, Tharp reinterprets earlier phrases of the choreography that showcase the woman jumping and wrapping her legs around the man's waist. However, instead of having a contained strained tension (characterized by the slower and less firm movements), the couple starts to spin around and the woman moves her torso forward and back so that her upper body oscillates as the man rotates. This most directly alludes to how the energies of a couple dancing must be expressed outwardly – similar to a Catherine wheel that exudes fireworks when spun around in uniform motion. As the couple exit, each dancer alternates in running forwards and back. While doing this, the two dancers never lose eye contact with one another, symbolizing the powerful relationship that can occur by playing off their respective partners actions.

## **Conclusion**

The last portion of the golden section brings together all the elements that Tharp has explored throughout the piece. Multiple dancers enter, and either couple to form a redefined

heterosexual relationship, or remain dancing solos. In either case, all the dancers have the choreographic freedom to express their individualities. The increase in tempo combined with explorations of non-typical gender movements creates a new dynamic on which to express the individual dancing body. Furthermore, the presences of trios onstage introduce the possibility of a man and a woman to engage in a non-platonic relationship. Thus, Tharp uses the golden section in “The Catherine Wheel” to deconstruct the traditional heterosexual coupling in Western concert dance, to demonstrate the repression of the female body in the patriarchic society in which Western concert dance was born, and to redefine her interpretation that expresses the dancer’s individuality. In this sense, Tharp encourages her viewers to future choreographers to continue to improve upon this fundamental aspect of modern dance.

## Works Cited

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