

Social Conditioning and Fairy Tales: A look at *Fish Tank*

Andrea Arnold's 2009 film *Fish Tank* is a social realist, emotional film based on the life of Mia, a fifteen-year-old living in government-run housing in urban England. Mia takes on a masculine demeanor in order to transcend the patriarchal order in which she has been suppressed and victimized. Despite her efforts, she cannot outdo the patriarchal order that constructs the world around her. From a feminine and psychoanalytic discourse, using the theories from psychologist Carl Jung, I will show that Arnold inundates this film with a fairy-tale leitmotif that illuminates how the artificial constructs in which Mia lives have conditioned her to believe that a man will save her from the socioeconomic and societal disadvantages. These beliefs are subtle in her subconscious and they are the driving force that leads her to believe a male figure will rescue her.

To first understand Mia's motives, one must first examine her consciousness. Many of the symbols that make up ideals and social constructs are so elusive that the conscious mind may not even realize that these symbols are transcending the mind. Psychologist Carl Jung explains that,

Consciousness... is an intermittent phenomenon. One-fifth, or one-third, or perhaps even one-half of our human condition is spent in an unconscious condition. Our early childhood is unconscious. Every night we sink into unconscious, and only in phases between waking and sleeping have we a more or less clear consciousness. To a certain extent it is even more questionable how clear that consciousness is. (qtd in Robertson 83)

Arnold does an excellent job of using subtle symbols of artificial social constructs to demonstrate their prevalence in society. For example, when Connor carries Tyler to bed he calls her "Sleeping Beauty," Tyler watches celebrity show-and-tell programs, which give her the notion that having more makes one glamorous and happy, and when Mia needs money,

she goes to Connor's place of employment. As Mia waits outside, she is unaware of the numerous blue cranes that tower above her. This scene carries depth because it illustrates the artificial social constructs that surround Mia. Her body language is vulnerable and the idea that she seems unaware of these machines reflects the idea that she is unaware that she has been mentally conditioned by culture, yet it looms over her. These cranes are somewhat of a phallic symbol representing a patriarchal order.

Mia's expectations of men and their role stems from social conditioning. Jeanne Dubino writes on the topic of how culture has conditioned females to have expectations of men based on romance narratives, "The hero is *always* older, taller and richer than the heroine, and usually moody, dark, and inscrutable" (Dubino 103). Dubino further explains that the romances lead to eventual marriage. This is seen in the case of Connor: he is much older than Mia and his identity is a mystery. This mysterious identity is what ultimately leads to Mia's disappointment.

When Mia realizes that she cannot have a relationship with Connor when she recognizes he has been hiding the fact that he has his own family and he reminds her of their age difference, this creates hostility within Mia. Mia is upset with Connor for pointing out the cultural constructs that classify their relationship as taboo. When he reminds her that she is fifteen years old, Mia replies, "What does it matter if you like someone?" Connor does not answer her question.

These cultural ideas of love ending in happiness and fulfillment, fabricated by social conditioning, reflect a theme that the audience can identify with. Phonetically, the name Mia has connotations of "me," thus allowing the audience to identify with the protagonist. Mia's name represents the ideas that females are inundated with from social conditioning, many that may not be conscious because they are so subtle. The name Connor also carries connotations. Rendering from the theme of a man rescuing a woman in fairy tales, he has "conned," or misled, Mia into believing that he would bring her fulfillment, love, and security.

Director Andrea Arnold uses elusive elements of the fairy tale and romance motif throughout the film. Connor brings Mia, her sister, and her mother into a pastoral setting.

Like a Shakespearean comedy that moves from the confines of the court to the freedom of nature, the plot deepens as the setting reflects a letting-go of the artificial social order that confines individuals. The song “California Dreamin’” is playing in the car. Musical lyrics also play a role in social conditioning. The lyrics to this song coincide with the ideas of fantasizing of a better life and longing for a place of happiness and fulfillment. As Connor drives the car, this song is playing, which represents the notion of his role of the male hero who will rescue the family from the imprisonment of socioeconomic oppression. Mia’s reflection is seen in the car window as she gazes out. This symbolizes the two identities that she now carries: that of a girl who takes on the male dominance due to her absentee father and a girl that longs for a man to fulfill the role of a father/hero figure who will lead the family to a better life.

Listening to this song is not the first time Mia feels a connection to Connor. When Connor is first introduced on the screen he startles Mia when she realizes he has been admiringly watching her dance in the kitchen. She greets him with hostility and coldness as she feels intruded upon and has a lack of respect, not only for adults, but men in particular. Connor pours three cups of tea, takes two back upstairs, and casually leaves one for Mia. This is the first instance of Connor reaching out to Mia and attempting to gain her acceptance and trust. It is a subtle gesture, but profound in her awareness that he may be a caring, nurturing male figure worthy of her trust.

It is no coincidence that Mia goes directly to his wallet. Not only is she able to understand the identity of this mystery man, who has invaded her home by spending the night with her mother, she associates this male figure with money. As she goes through his wallet she is summing up his worthiness by how much money he has in it. Her little sister, Tyler, also equates the worthiness of this man with money. She does not allow him to finish the descent of the staircase until he pays a toll. Tyler puts her arms up like a gate and does not allow him to cross until he has paid her the proper amount of money. Tyler’s connection with men and financial security is also a product of the social conditioning that assumes a man’s worthiness is dependent upon his ability to provide financial support and security.

Mia's mother, Joanne, exhibits behavior that has influenced the way Mia feels about men. As her relationship with Connor continues, Joanne begins to take on the role of a traditional wife, whereas before she was more concerned with drinking and partying, and seemed to not care if her children had eaten or not. Joanne washes Connor's white dress shirts and hangs them to dry outside the window of her apartment as if they are white surrender flags to patriarchal order. She never speaks of having a job, nor is she seen coming or going from a job, but she tells a friend on the phone of the happiness she has found with Connor and consoles her friend not to worry because "she's gonna meet someone." Jeanne Dubino explains how romance narratives have conveyed the message of patriarchal order that defines rigid gender roles for both men and women: "Romances bolster patriarchal ideology, continuing to affirm the centrality of men in women's lives and to harness the desire of both men and women for a gendered other. And, romances help to reconcile women to their domestic role as houseworkers" (Dubino 109).

Joanne's role is more substantial in Mia's life than just Mia's observational influence of her. The role of a mother is very complex, "Life and death, renewal and destruction, belong together as mutually indispensable opposites. So the life-creating maternal archetype also has a destructive aspect" (Birkhauser-Oeri 26). There is a dark side to the relationship between Mia and her mother. When Joanne pinches Mia's arm while telling her to stay in her room, this suggests a "thorn-prick" which is a characteristic of "dark mother figures" (Birkhauser-Oeri 27). These dark undertones come to a climax when Mia's mother confesses to her daughter that she had an appointment to have her aborted. This confession takes place when the mother is emotionally distressed after Connor leaves Joanne. She projects her anger toward Mia, blaming her for the destructiveness of her life. But this lack of maternal instinct in the mother pushes Mia to leave her home and make a life of her own, "There are some maternal figures that are entirely destructive from a human point of view, and others whose negative effects are followed by change and renewal" (Birkhauser-Oeri 27). This change is seen when Mia leaves her home in search of a better life. Her mother's destructive behavior toward Mia's psyche has become the motivation for Mia to seek out a better life for herself and the only way she can accomplish this is by leaving the setting in

which she lives. She knows that if she stays there her life will replicate her mother's life. Mia does not look at her mother as a role model; she looks at her with disgust. This disgust stems from her behavior, or lack thereof, of a proper maternal figure, but also as a woman who has succumbed to patriarchal order and looks to that structure for identity and security.

Mia certainly demonstrates traces of conforming to patriarchal order in the film. Her expectations of what Connor should be to her are only met with disappointment when he has sex with her, then leaves as if she is an object to be thrown away. But she exhibits boldness when she reaches out to him for answers. She cannot understand why their feelings for each other are wrong, despite their age difference and the fact that he has a family. She displays characteristics that she has been conditioned to believe that the patriarchal archetype of a man should lead to love and security when a sexual connection takes place. This causes Mia to feel rejected, but "it is precisely the repetition of the 'once upon a times' that has helped create women who cannot value themselves" (Wanning Harries 100).

Ironically, the fairy tale ideas have also been set in the mind of Connor's own daughter, Keira. She wears a pink princess dress over her clothes when Mia kidnaps her. The dress symbolizes how girls from various socioeconomic backgrounds are brought up with the same social conditioning of the fairy-tale motif. Mia sets out to destroy Connor's family, just as Connor has destroyed Mia's by taking from her an idea of what a man should represent. Looking deeper into the kidnapping of Keira, it can be argued Mia is also setting out to destroy the fairy tale ideals that her culture has conditioned her to believe. This idea is embodied by the forceful way in which she lures Keira from her home and takes her to a pastoral setting because one must move out of the social constructs of society in order to take upon ideas that may not be accepted by society. It is dark, cold, and has a body of water in which waves are crashing violently. Keira's princess dress is ripped on the fence, signifying a tear in the delicately woven social construct of societal conditioning from fairy-tales. Jung explains, "child motif represents the preconscious, childhood aspect of the collective conscious" (qtd in Hancock 14). Mia's unconscious motive is not to destroy the

young girl, but to destroy the concepts that fairy-tales form young girls' psyches to believe as truth.

The kidnapping of Keira parallels the scene in which Connor brings Mia's family to the lake. Both settings are pastoral, signifying being set apart from the rest of society. Both of these scenes have a body of water where the climax of the scene takes place. This is no coincidence, as Carl Jung states, "Water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious" (Jung 18). Mia follows Connor into the water, symbolizing that idea that she can do the same things as a man. She does not follow "traditional gender roles" which "cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (Tyson 85). But there is a shift in Mia when she cuts her foot. Connor carries her and the camera follows them in slow motion symbolizing the effect this has on Mia. It is a profound moment in the sense that she is experiencing being rescued by a man. This scene is paralleled when Mia cuts her hand on a fence when she is kidnapping Keira. She has no one to rescue her from this injury, so she continues demonstrating a dominant force that is a cathartic way for her to feel that she is in control.

Mia demonstrates destructive behavior throughout the film, from her drinking, violence toward other girls, profanity toward her mother, a lack of respect for nearly everyone in her path, to the kidnapping of Connor's daughter, yet the viewer still sympathizes with Mia. Mia represents the collective conscious. Her rebellious nature toward society and the social conditioning that breeds patriarchal order is something a viewer can identify with. To call Mia a hero, may be a stretch, but she certainly represents the conflict in trying to break outside of the confines of artificial constructs formed by culture and society. Like a fish removed from nature and placed in a tank, Mia feels trapped. She finally feels free when she breaks away from the physical and cultural confines of the council houses. A metallic heart-shaped balloon floats freely above the buildings as Mia leaves toward her newfound freedom. This heart not only represents her physical freedom, but also the letting go of the fairy tale ideas of romance. The shiny, gilded heart fades off into the horizon.

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