
Identity and Desire in John Steinbeck's "The Harness" (1938)

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Abstract. Emma is portrayed in the nuptial relationship which situates her to be conditional upon her husband power. She seemingly portrayed as a stereotype figure of a married woman. In fact, the closely reading gives us another insight of Emma where we can see her identity from another angle. The feminist angle in literary works was regarding patriarchal society which dominates the women's portrayal of that time. The patriarchal flourished the society's perception which considers that is men who ruled and controlled over women. This tradition had been stumped the women desire for approval of their existence. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the female protagonist identity and her desire portrayed and focused in "The Harness." In order to reveal Emma's identity and her desire, the study focus not only on Emma only but also Peter is analyzed as well, analyzing the relationship between the couple. Emma appears to be strong and independent. Although she is portrayed as a little skinny old woman who lies sick most of her lifetime, she can direct Peter not only to wear the harness but also to run and keep both their house and their farm as she wants them to be. Emma, in this sense, is very powerful and "masculine" from a modern gender point of view. Her identity seemingly is far from feminine in its reality.

Keywords: Identity, desire, The Harness, masculine, patriarchal

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INTRODUCTION

“The Harness” which originally titled “The Fool” appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in June 1938 before being included into *The Long Valley* in the same year. The protagonist of the story, Peter Randall, is depicted as one of the most admirable men in the Salinas Valley. He is a man who is wise in business and very reliable in his judgment. His strong, reliable personality is reflected in his upright and unbending physical posture. His neighbors often follow his decisions making, imitating his actions because they consider his decision as “a good, safe conservative thing to do.”

Peter is a respected farmer and a mentor in his community. He gains the respect which emanates from his outward posture viewed from his fellows and the society; his well-kept home, his conservative marital life, and his good posture even in his fifties. We can see his posture by the following portrayal; “He was nearing fifty, his manner was grave and restrained, and he wore a carefully tended beard. He was tall and broad. He held his shoulder back as though they were braced, and he sucked in his stomach like a soldier. Inasmuch as farmers are usually slouchy men, Peter gained an added respect because of his posture.” These points mentioned above seem to combine and create the society’s respect for Peter.

He lives with his wife, Emma whom he has married for twenty-one years but they remain childless. They live in a well-kept home that is “unscarred, uncarved, unchalked.” Steinbeck tells us that they have the “framed picture” and the “books of a sturdy type.” All is in its place tells us that their home and their marital life are prim and proper. Things in their home are well-ordered and regularly, comfortably, and neatly maintained. The couple is considered to have a “flawless” life unless the only imperfection lies on Emma’s constant ill health. However, she endures the withered, ill condition, which makes the community admire her for her endurance in the very hard time of illness.

The female protagonist in *The Harness* (Emma) is depicted in a little skinny feature portrayed being treated unfairly by Peter through his annual dissipation out of town. Though, she says nothing but she is well aware of the betrayal. However, Peter bends to her wills and she seems controlling over him. She makes her husband keep wearing a web harness over his stomach to make him act with upright demeanor, and unbending physical posture. As a result, Peter gained respect by his posture, and his neighbors often follow his personal decision making and mirror his action. Indeed, Emma is the power behind the town’s respect.

Emma is portrayed in the nuptial relationship which situates her to be conditional upon her husband power. She seemingly portrayed as a stereotype figure of a married woman. In fact, the closely reading gives us another insight of Emma where we can see her identity from another angle.

The feminist angle in literary works has started its action since the 1960s and early 1970. It was regarding patriarchal society which dominates the women's portrayal of that time. The patriarchal flourished the society's perception which considers that is men who ruled and controlled over women. This tradition had been stumped the women desire for approval of their existence. In the mid 1980s, some feminist scholars such as Hellen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray have lead the portrayal of women turning into the subject of interpretation (Rivkin and Ryan, 1998). They are considered to be the mothers of poststructuralist feminist theory.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the female protagonist identity and her desire portrayed and focused in "The Harness." In order to reveal Emma's identity and her desire, the study focus not only on Emma only but also Peter is analyzed as well, analyzing the relationship between the couple.

METHODOLOGY

Dealing with the identity and desire of the female protagonist, the qualitative method is required to get the objective and reliable description. To identify Emma's identity and desire, textual and contextual analysis is applied. This analysis is applied through the "close reading" of the story while examine the textual elements and its attempts representing the female identity and desire in "The Harness." Moreover, contextual ananalysis is conducted to specify Emma's identity and her desire as a wife and as a woman from the gender point of view.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

1. Emma and Peter

Physically, Emma is a thin, sickly woman who is portrayed in a physical feature that is seemingly aged beyond her years. She can exert her will and desire over her husband and their household, though she is very weak and sick. She is a woman with an iron-will that is poignantly represented through the harness Peter is forced to wear. Steinbeck portrays her in the following;

Concerning Peter's wife, Emma, people generally agreed that it was hard to see how such a little skin-and-bones woman could go on living, particularly when she was sick most of the time. She weighed eighty-seven pounds. At forty-five, her face was as wrinkled and brown as that of an old, old woman, but her dark eyes were feverish with a determination to live. She was a proud woman, who complained very little. (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 77)

She is thus depicted as physically small and weak, meanwhile she has a very strong determination to live. In her long, terrible illness, Emma's eyes tell about her great intention to live on; "but her dark eyes were feverish a determination to live... It was two months before the dark, sharp bird eyes veiled, and the sharp mind retired into consciousness." (*LV*, 77, 80) Emma is a tremendously strong woman with fragile physical features. She is a tough-minded woman who refuses any help from her neighbors or home nursing care during her prolonged dying.

The text portrays Emma as a "bird", "The good neighbors took cares to the Randall farm, and they tiptoed into the sick room, where the little skinny bird of a woman lay in a tremendous walnut bed." (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 79) Emma's existence is thus portrayed as a little skinny bird. Bird connotes freedom, Emma is physically a little woman but very free of any power from outside, for she can accomplish her wills and intentions over her husband and her neighbors. In her prolonged dying the doctor says that she needs a help of a nurse but she refuses it; "The doctor's suggestion that a nurse be employed met only beady, fierce refusal in the eyes of the patient; and, ill as she was, her demands were respected. Peter fed her and bathed her, and made up the great walnut bed." (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 80)

Emma and Peter are antithetical physically and mentally. Outwardly Peter has a social effecting power as he is a mentor in the society; "It was no wonder that Peter Randall was respected by his neighbors and that his seldom spoken words were given attention even when they were about the weather or the way thing were going." (Steinbeck, 1995. p.78) He is one of the most highly respected farmers in Monterey County and the respect is derived also from his good physical posture. Concerning the physical comparison with Emma, Peter is a man with a physical strength which is reflected in his tall, broad, and good posture. But inwardly, his inner identity is being repressed as we see through the following sentences; "People knew there was force in him, but force held caged. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, his eyes grew sullen and mean, like the eyes of a bad dog; but that look soon passed, and the restraint and probity came back into his face." (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 78)

The opening paragraph of the story mentions that there is a visible force and invisible control by others that is so invisible in Peter Randall and his inner life. We are told that Peter's manner is "grave and restrained," and even his beard is "carefully tended." Peter's shoulders are carried as "though they were braced." Through those lines it comes upon our mind that Peter's perfect physical appearance in his nearly fifty is forced or carefully controlled, and seemingly not by his own intention. The web harness Emma forces him to wear symbolizes this repressed existence of Peter.

It may also be said that he is repressed by two things; much expectations of society and the iron determination of Emma. She insists or orders him to keep wearing a web harness to make him act with upright demeanor and unbending physical posture. It might be said that the web harness is for "correcting" Peter's physical posture. He seems to be subjected to this device, while disliking to wear it, as he says, "When she was alive, even when she was sick, I had to do things she wanted, but just the minute she died, it was—why like that harness coming off! I couldn't stand it. It was all over. I'm going to have to get used to going without that harness." (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 83) Peter is addicted to Emma's control upon him even she has already died, thus he lets himself haunted by her spirit. To see more on the fact of Emma's domination over Peter we discuss one matter that is dreamed by Peter to do during his wife lifetime though Emma never allow him to do is that growing sweet peas in his garden.

2. Why Peter Wants to Grow Sweet Peas after Emma's Death

Peter is a successful farmer who can run his farm without any fail under Emma's directions. He is considered to have a definite authority on crops in his community. His fellows in the valley judge him having special insight about the crop and he is followed by them in every planting time. During Emma's lifetime Peter wishes to see his forty acres of fertile land covered by the color and the scent of sweet peas. He knows that Emma never allows him any chance to plant them, but he hungers for the fragrance as well as the color; "I thought how it would be nice to have my whole river flat in sweet peas. Think how it'd be to sit on the front porch and see all those acres of blue and pink, just solid. And when the wind came up over them, think of the big smell. A big smell that would almost knock you over." (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 85)

Sweet peas are typically considered as a risky crop since it can make a farmer goes broke. They are the most difficult crops to cultivate in the farming world as the wind,

hot weather, rain, and bugs could easily destroy the pods and farmers could never have any hope for their harvest. The farmers know this well and Emma seems to follow the news and wisdom around the crops. She never allows him to plant this crop, as Peter says to Ed Chappell; “She won’t let me do things. She’s worried me all year about those peas.” (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 91)

Once Emma passes away, Peter has a chance to make his dream on sweet peas come to reality. He passionately tells his long held-caged desire to Ed Chappell, his nearest neighbor on the night Emma dies; “‘I don’t give a damn,’ Peter shouted. ‘I want a lot of everything. I want forty acres of color and smell. I want fat woman, with breasts as big as pillows. I’m hungry, I tell you, I’m hungry for everything, for a lot of everything.’” (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 85)

At first, Peter lets the valley dwellers wonder over his plan for this year crop. The local farmers are questioning his plan but soon discover Peter has a courage to plant forty acres of sweet peas, a touchy crop, a quite a gamble crop as it is perceived by the local farmers. First his fellows assume Peter must be “touched in the head since Emma died” and predict disaster for his crop. Unpredictably, the sweet peas grow magnificently, and he gets big returns.

When the sweet peas are growing, he enjoys his land every afternoon, sitting “on his porch in a rocking chair every afternoon. He looked down on the great squares of pink and blue, and on the mad square of mixed colors. When the afternoon breeze came up, he inhaled deeply. His blue shirt was open at the throat, as though he wanted to get the perfume down next to his skin.” (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 88) We are told that Peter wants to grow the sweet peas mostly for fulfilling his held-caged desire rather than the profit it would make. One day, he says to his trusted valley fellow, Ed Chappell, “‘I’ll hate to see the petals drop off.’ ‘Well, I’d be glad to see’em drop. You’ll make a lot of money, if nothing happens.’ Peter took out a bandana handkerchief and wiped his nose, and jiggled it sideways to stop an itch. ‘I’ll be sorry when the smell stops,’ he said.” (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 89) We can see how Peter is upset as he thinks of the time when the sweet peas petals would drop off, when the smell and the color would go away. (Schultz and Li, 2005) state:

Peter becomes more garrulous and speaks of future plans for planting sweet peas down by the river, mostly for their color and smell and also because Emma had never allowed him to consider such a risky and impractical crop. He also plans to keep company with chubby, big breasted women, because ‘I’m hungry for everything, for a lot of everything.’ It is as if a dam had burst inside him, spilling out a torrent of repressed feelings held in by the trap of his 21-year marriage.

Why Peter Wants to Grow Sweet Peas after Emma's Death? For Peter sweet peas is considered to be a fulfillment of his long held-caged desire controlled under the invisible power of his wife. Emma is clearly superior to him in the sense that she can exert her controlling power; "I don't know how she got me do things, but she did. She didn't seem to boss me, but she always made me do things." (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 82) Anyhow, Emma's domination over Peter has the beneficial effect as well as the backwash one. To live a life under Emma's directions places Peter in gaining respect and being a good and wise man, which forces him in doing anything before and even after Emma's death. He finds that he is "addicted" to Emma's control. He has been repressed to follow all of Emma's forces and directions and after she dies Peter feels very free to fulfill all of his desires.

Perhaps Peter's hunger for planting sweet peas is a revelation of his hidden rebellious feelings. He wants to change his farmland by secretly sowing the sweet peas in his whole land of forty acres of color and fragrance, which can be indicated as his attempt to resettle his life after Emma's death and bring his own likings setting to the ranch which has been rigidly controlled for so many years.

Schultz and Li point out that the harness is an unambiguous symbol of Peter's enslavement. For twenty years he has been controlled by Emma. Peter has been married to Emma for almost twenty-one years. During these years he lives a strict, controlled-life which makes him search for a way out of his tedious routines. The conflict in the story is caused by Peter's desires against controlling determinations by Emma. While it seems that Peter bends to her intentions, we know even after Emma's death Peter suffers from a self-imposed order to wear the harness. Peter is repressed by Emma's overwhelming power which emerges as his "manager," rules his life, and arranges a new way of life for him except for his annual dissipation trip. Emma is a force for Peter that cages him in an arranged, well-planned life as well as conventional, conservative, and passionless life.

After Emma's death Peter does not want to live in any pretense anymore. He tells Ed Chappell that he will lead his life on the contrary to Emma's wishes, for example, bringing dirt into the house, having a housemaid, planting sweet peas, and bringing the whiskey home that has been hidden in the barn. As (Schultz and Li, 2005) tell, "the crop of beautiful, difficult flowers represents Peter's outward manifestation of his desire for freedom from Emma's influence, and of being able to make his own choices and

demonstrate his worth without his constant guidance.”

To specify the how Emma’s being means a lot to her husband, the other fact is explained thoroughly. The fact that Peter cannot release himself over Emma’s spirit is represented by his failure taking the harness off his stomach.

3. Why Cannot Peter Take the Harness off even after Emma’s Death

Peter’s neighbors stand behind his words and actions; “His fellow valley dwellers hang on his every word, to the point where, when Peter announces, “I am going to kill a pig on Saturday,” nearly all of his neighbors do precisely the same things. He appears in a very masculine figure in his community. However, the text tells about his “feminine” aspect, since Emma can urge him to do housework, to obey her words, and to do things as she wants, which are considered as feminine from a gender point of view. On the contrary, Emma is portrayed in a somewhat masculine figure; thin, weak, and dependent, but apparently overpowering character which is deeply embedded in her character. She can make Peter do things as she wants, such as working in the farm under her directions, doing the domestic chores, and taking care of her, which could be done by a nurse whenever she lies sick. Emma’s figure in the marriage changes from feminine to masculine. For this reason we can say that the couple’s gender role is converted and exchanged. Emma is a ruler, an oppressor, and a “husband” who can make Peter, a real husband, obeying her words. It can be said that Emma is a patriarch at their home in their marital relationship, and Peter is a follower.

The night Emma dies Peter unfolds his deep, dark secret to his close neighbor, Ed Chappell. He physically unburdens himself by stripping down to his underwear and removing the web harness, a device that pulls his shoulder back. He then emotionally unburdens himself by confessing that his business trips to San Francisco are for bars and whores. He admits he needs the trips to keep him from exploding his deepest desire out of his repressed and conventional way of life. He needs this kind of way out to maintain his ordered, regular life with his ailing wife; “I’d’ve busted if I hadn’t got away.” (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 84) In Peter’s deepest mind, the trips are necessary for escaping from the controlling wife.

Though Emma says nothing about his trips to Peter but she knows well about the reality of the trip and his transgressions, which makes her illness gets worse. Seemingly, her most powerful aspect is her getting worse which results from the trip and makes her

husband feel guilty. He feels bad when she is worsening her sickness, and he does what she wants him to do. When he does what Emma wants, he has a deeply restraint and repressed feelings. Therefore he must go to town and release his desires for pleasure and sexual activities. However, he seems not to be happy with this temporary escapes. When he returns to the ranch, he surely can feel a guilty feeling inside him that that we know from his another fixing in the home; “The furniture and woodwork were freshly varnished once a year. Repairs were usually made after Peter came home from his yearly business trip.” (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 79) As a kind of penance he always makes home repairs after each trip. Those lines above tell us that the furniture and woodworks are annually varnished. Peter “bends” to Emma’s feelings and desires the more when he feels guilty and shame. Finally he is caught in a tight-knit, vicious circle of his conditions, and his guilt makes him unable to escape from Emma even after Emma’s death.

With the incident of Emma’s death, it seems to Peter that he is finally freed out of that tight control which for so long has been bounding him. Shortly after Emma’s funeral, Peter lets the mantel clock, which has always been a sign of Emma’s control in the house, run down. He does not like the mournful, stressful reminder of the clock. Thus, he chooses a small, fast ticking alarm clock. He also fetches the whiskey so that he can drink at home, always before her death the whiskey has been hidden in the barn.

But even after Emma’s death Peter is unable to give up his trips to San Francisco. He still goes to the city for one week each year to release his desires to drink and have sexual pleasures. Although he keeps these annual escapes, he still suffers tremendous guilty feelings which force him to keep on wearing the harness. When Ed Chappell meets him, Peter is drunken at the hotel in San Francisco. Peter tells him about his plan to install electric lights in his home when he returns home. Installing electricity into home is what Emma always wants. He says to Ed Chappell; “‘She didn’t die dead,’ he said thickly. ‘She won’t let me do things. She’s worried me all year about those peas.’ His eyes were wondering. ‘I don’t know how she does it.’” (Steinbeck, 1995. p. 91)

Thus, Peter is never able to free himself from Emma’s powering control. It seems that he always, even after Emma’s death, flees to the city for a brief sensual satisfaction. Furthermore, he keeps at home the strictness and wisdom Emma forces him to follow during her lifetime. He might be wearing the harness even after her death since he is being “controlled” by Emma’s spirit. In other words, he cannot be relieved nor escaped from Emma’s controlling identity over him. (Schultz and Li, 2005) agree to say that “Peter has

constructed his own harness in his mind, as restrictive as the one his dead wife insisted he wear. Peter, like many of Steinbeck's characters, cannot break free from his personal of behavior, nor the pressure of social conformity, in order to realize his vision of happiness, not matter how flawed the vision might be."

On the night Ed Chappell meets Peter in San Francisco, Peter swears that he will not wear the harness anymore. However, he is heavily drunk when he says his determination. In fact in the story he keeps his life almost as same as when Emma is alive. Emma's figure is portrayed as a bird. We can say that the bird here connotes two things, first it refers to her existence which can be imagined as a free existence, a being of "free" identity, and second it refers to Emma's domination over Peter continuing even after the death, from the high above in the sky.

The harness is more than mere clothing for Peter. Visibly it is a means to "fix" his body to be upright even in his fifties. Invisibly the image of harness represents Emma's incredibly strong moral strength that governs Peter's life and controls his mind even after the death. This moral harness is for fixing Peter's desires, and for leading him blamed for what he does He keeps the ranch with her ordered strictness and installs electricity into the house as a penance of his annual dissipation. (Fontenrose, 1976) makes the paradox clear in the following passages;

Peter is happier as a hardworking farmer whom his wife dominates than as a wholly free person. He cannot be happy except in harness.... That is the way he wants it: to live an exemplary life all year except in his one week of moral holiday, from which he will return to repentance and expiation: for drinking and whoring he will an electric lights, which Emma had always wanted.... There is just one Peter who needs Emma, alive or dead, to govern him, to save him from the sinking into the chaos of instinct and sensual appetite.

4.Emma and her Strong Spiritual Strength

Emma appears to be strong and independent. Although she is portrayed as a little skinny old woman who lies sick most of her lifetime, she can direct Peter not only to wear the harness but also to run and keep both their house and their farm as she wants them to be. Peter accepts and yields to her directions, even after her death. Peter is portrayed as a "weaker" being, who cannot escape from Emma's wishes and desires, and from her long domination. Emma, in this sense, is very powerful and "masculine" from a modern gender point of view. Her identity seemingly is far from feminine in its reality.

CONCLUSION

Emma directs her husband to run their farm as a pseudo “husband,” but Peter, the real husband, seeks for his own aesthetic feelings even under her strong controlling. She causes her husband to visit the fancy houses to satisfy his sexual desire and make his husbands’ sexual desires quite unsatisfied. Emma maybe shows us her attempts against the cultural repression of masculine society. It can also be said that she tries to reveal her own identity as an individual woman who has her own values and wants her life in her own willing way.

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