Inside the Mind of Senta: A Psychoanalyst's View

Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman,* as always, carries complex elements of the human experience, including passion, jealousy, avarice, love and longing. In the San Francisco Opera 2013 production, Senta's dream of the Flying Dutchman takes center stage. During the overture, we see her gazing into the portrait of the Dutchman and we feel her dreamy rapture through the music. As I studied the libretto, I began thinking about teenage girls with posters of male icons on their walls, gazed at with the same dreamy rapture Senta shows. Psychoanalysts might interpret these deeply felt though impossible loves as a developmental passage, a way the girl can safely, in fantasy, explore her own emerging sexuality and yearning. The passionately desired and loved idol can safely contain her love for her father, without plunging her too quickly into the real world of developing boys. We can even see in Senta's recognition of her wish to save the Dutchman a wisp of the illusion that she is the special one, the woman who is perfect for him, better than all the other women who have failed him, an allusion that shows to a psychoanalyst, the girls' identification with her mother and also her wish to outdo her mother by realizing in herself the ideal woman for her father. Then we can also observe her position as a girl, tied to hearth and home, with no real scope for her romantic and passionate longings. All of us can identify with the search for true meaning in our lives and this is one of the ways Wagner brings us into sympathy with Senta. All of this we can see in Senta, but I propose there is something more, something that grows beyond a transitional developmental stage of her life into a genuine capacity to submerge her own subjectivity into the others' desperate need. I will describe this more fully below.

Early on we learn that Senta, to the dismay of the housekeeper (her mother

figure), languishes in sorrow and pain, thinking of the Dutchman's agony, doomed as he is to sail forever unless the curse is lifted as she gazes into his portrait. The workaday world encircles her but she is absent-minded and in another universe, dreaming of the tragic fate of the Dutchman. Then she begins to sing of him in a beautiful, lyrical ballad, enchanting her audience with his story. We understand that she is enchanting herself as well as us. We are focusing here on Senta, not the Dutchman's character, his arrogance and grandiosity that landed him in such trouble: later we will touch on the redemption theme embedded in Wagner's retelling of the old legend.

Introduced by the powerful and compelling theme of the Dutchman, Senta sings the tragic tale. Her audience is deeply moved, as is she. All bemoan the fate of the Dutchman and Senta is struck with inspiration: she will be the one to rescue him! Here we see her transported by the glorious idea of being the one true woman who can save him from eternal pain. Some have interpreted Senta as being mad.[1] Others might take for granted the sacrifice of a woman to a man. I argue for a fuller understanding of Senta, one that includes a human capacity to transcend the narrow interest of the self at times of great crisis or danger.

1. Boston Lyric Opera, 2012.

San Fraancisco Opera 2011 © Corey Weaver photo

Lise Lindstrom as Senta. In the 2013 San Francisco Opera production, Senta not only stares at the portait of the Dutchman, but also she creates the portrait. Here she is seen leaning on her easel that holds her portaint of the Dutchman.

First we see the realization of Senta's dream of romantic love when her father brings them together, glibly and coaxingly introducing them as they gaze at each other both struck to silence. He finally notices and leaves them. They sing together in a beautiful romantic duet, reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*: "O. She doth teach the torches to burn bright!...Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night."

There is a first hint of Wagner's redemption theme in this duet as the Dutchman cautions Senta about her terrible fate should she love him. She of course brushes this aside and claims her place as the woman who will save him! Another Shakespeare play comes to mind: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed and I loved her that she did pity them." (Othello, speaking of Desdemona).

Senta's passionate desire to save the Dutchman grows as she meets him in reality and they fall in love. Emmanuel Ghent, a psychoanalyst, describes surrender, not as defeat, but as a transcendent experience that is with "all one's heart, with one's soul, and with all one's might."[2] For me, this captures the ecstatic certainty Senta brings to her betrothal. Of course, other issues are present, such as Senta's avaricious father who plans to sell her to the highest bidder. Also present is her local suitor, Erik, who would tie her to a life of drudgery as we witness in the women of the household if he can come up with the bride price. We can understand the attraction of the mysterious stranger and blame young recklessness and romanticizing. Wagner takes the story beyond these more recognizable and ordinary themes. In giving herself to the Dutchman, Senta becomes a hero herself, the one woman who can save him from his sad, despairing wandering and the recklessness that brought the curse on his head; this through her ultimate sacrifice.

In our modern culture, the idea of self-sacrifice is usually deemed masochistic and unhealthy. We can hardly fathom a sacrifice such as Senta's and can easily fall into the trap of thinking of her in modern terms, a girl who fails to think of her own interest, who doesn't see the danger to herself, who is blinded by passion in her acceptance of the Dutchman. We live in an age where the self is idealized, and recognition of the claims of the other on us is considered masochistic. I would argue that Senta's pity for the Dutchman, her passion to release him from his endless sailing through her love can be seen in the transcendent terms of surrender, the surrender of her narrow self-interest in life to the sublime wish to save her lover. She doesn't know that her sacrifice

2. Eigen, Michael. "The Area of Faith in Winnicott, Lacan and Bion." International Journal of Psychoanalysis (1981) 62: 413–433. Quoted in Ghent, Emmanuel. "Masochism, Submission and Surrender: Masochism as a Perversion of Surrender." Contemporary Psychoanalysis (1990) 26:108–136.

will bring him relief and unite them in heaven, but she boldly and freely casts herself over the cliff with belief, not knowledge, and Wagner unites the lovers as the ghost ship disappears sending all who strove into peaceful oblivion.

Returning to the idea sketched briefly earlier, that Wagner's libretto carries a theme of redemption in the Dutchman's emerging ability to think of Senta and not just ruthlessly (as he always had done in the past), but understanding she was sacrificing herself to his hopeless longings. Though he was angry at first when he overheard Erik courting Senta and believed her to have betrayed him, something happens, something changes, in the Dutchman and in the music. He sings to Senta that too many have died for him and he cannot bring himself to condemn her to death and everlasting torment. He is glad that she is not bound by the curse since final vows had not been taken. Here is a touch of empathy and identification with Senta as a separate person for whom he can feel love and give up something of himself. In the past, he has ruthlessly used any woman he encountered to attempt his release from the curse without concern for her terrible fate. Now he sings that he is glad she has been spared this fate even though it is so harsh for him, returning to the endless seas. Perhaps he even feels a touch of remorse?

Wagner argues in this libretto for passionate surrender and for love, as Senta casts herself from the cliff, ending her earthly life and joining with the Dutchman in a final transcendent unity.

—Eileen Keller

Wagner Wrote...

I forswore my model, Beethoven; his last Symphony I deemed the keystone of a whole great epoch of art, beyond whose limits no man could hope to press, and within which no man could attain to independence. Mendelssohn also seemed to have felt with me, when he stepped forth with his smaller orchestral compositions, leaving untouched the great and fenced-off form of the Symphony of Beethoven.

From the Autobiographic Sketch *(included in the volume titled "The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works," (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) pp9, 10. Translated about 1895 by William Ashton Ellis.*