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The Illusion of Free Will in Yaël Farber's *Mies Julie*

Freedom is a big word, in both theory and application. The ideal to have one's actions be only at the mercy and influence of their own thoughts is sought after and upheld as the true way to be. Whether a situation such as this can be a concrete possibility, however, is almost equally as contentious. Free will is defined mainly under two prerequisites, the aforementioned one of a person's own thoughts acting as their guiding northern star and that "control of ... choices ... (are) exerted deliberately and wholly without intervention by external forces or constraints." (Rescher The Problem Setting). This interplay between thoughts and constraints determining free will are what make it so difficult to achieve. In many an occasion, a person has only been a response to the thoughts and norms of the environment they live in. For this reason, free will is not a common occurrence and is often illusory. The play *Mies Julie* highlights this illusion of free will through its display of the continued social restraints after apartheid, attempts by a central character such as Julie to make what seems to be an independent decision, and through powerful symbolism.

Throughout *Mies Julie*, the social restraints that still exist after apartheid display the outside forces or constraints that intervene with the expression of free will. The largest distinction existing is the fact of John and Julie's race. John, a Xhosa farm worker, and Julie, the Afrikaner daughter of the owner of that farm, are both painfully aware of the distance between

them that was not erased by the Freedom Day they are to be celebrating (Farber 9). John even criticizes Julie for overstepping the bounds of their assigned societal roles when he tells her to not “try to be one of us tonight” (Farber 15). This magnifies the difference in race, that Julie could not be another face in their crowd because she is white and not Xhosa. The imbalance is seen once again with Julie describing her father’s reaction to her being with a black man, that he would “shoot the black man in the head that puts his hands on me. Then shoot me,” (Farber 15). This threat of violence exemplifies how outside factors compound on and inhibit free will. John is also shown to face a threat, in the court of public opinion, as he does not want to be seen consummating his and Julie’s attraction (Farber 22). Neither John nor Julie would be able to be in a socially accepted relationship with the other, as both sides of black and white people would object. This sort of strain would prevent a relationship to occur, even if it is technically legal, because John and Julie would be ostracized and in danger if they were to be together. Attraction and one’s own feelings are not the only factors to be considered, thus acting as the external forces that did not allow John and Julie free will.

Another restraint on the characters free will is the influence of the past. John and Julie, when comparing how many of their ancestors were buried at Veenen Plaas as their claim to the land (Farber 45), show the sway that the past has on the present. Precedent set by previous actions control the behavior and lives of the characters. John’s connection to the past that keeps him on Veenen Plaas is seen when he says that “freedom is not worth shit as long as we must pay honor to ancestors that bind us to this dead land,” (Farber 50). It is not his true will to stay, but rather an obligation to ancestors and the past that keeps him immobile. Julie’s predicament further questions the belief of free will when she declares that she does not have a “self. I haven’t gotten a thought I didn’t get from my father,” (Farber 55). How can one have free will, defined

as when choices are under control of their own thought, when that thought was not self-originated and instead was informed by outside factors? They cannot. The ancestral memories of both Christine and Julie also exemplify how strong this connection to the past is. Julie's superimposed memories are especially interesting. According to literary scholar Marisa Keuris, the vivid scenes Julie depicts of watching "our farms burn" and her children "fade and fly away" in the camps are a reference "to ... the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902)." It is because of them that "Julie's last words are a request to be buried with 'these memories'... affirm(ing) her commitment to her Afrikaner past." (Keuris 53). A century has passed between the end of the war and Julie experiencing those ancestral memories, yet they are powerful enough to determine her final resting place. When the past can impact us to such a level, decisions do not seem to be of independent, free will but as a result of something that was set in motion long before.

The illusion of free will is further explored through Julie's attempt to make an independent decision. Throughout the play, while Julie has a substantial amount of power through the privilege granted to her by her white skin and upper economic echelon, she is also at the overwhelming mercy of her father. Julie's engagement had recently been broken off, but she claims not to be upset by it because "marrying him was my father's idea," (Farber 19), showing how she was about to enter a lifelong partnership and be bound to another person under only the direction of her father. By the latter half of this play, it seems as if she is breaking away and imposing her own will by attempting to convince John to leave with her. She talks about John and her deserving their "own lives" (Farber 35) and starts imagining the hotel that she, John, and John's mother Christine would own and operate. At first glance, this seems like Julie imposing her own will and going after something she truly wanted. When considering, however, the open threat of violence Julie has fielded from her father about engaging in any sort of personal

relationship with a black man, it is not implausible to consider whether this is truly what Julie wants or simply a reaction to save herself from outside factors. If so, it is not a display of free will, but another action controlled by the existing structures that surround her.

Julie and John's behavior also mirrors history. The loop-like nature of events in the story act as a symptom of the illusion of free will. Julie's story ends rather tragically with her death. She commits suicide, much like her own mother (Farber 52, 57). Not only does she take her life in the same room that her mother did, but the same woman who cleaned up the blood of her mother does so for Julie as well (Farber 52, 57). John also repeats a cycle, when at the end of the play he picks up a gun and sickle, puts on his employer's boots, and becomes the next version of his employer. The wearing of his boots and John's last words of "Just pretend you're him," (Farber 57) confirm this passing of the mantle. This repetition of events questions free will, because independent acts do not result in the same continuous manner as the events of this play.

The playwright Yaël Farber also utilizes strong symbolism to further emphasize the illusion of free will and choice. In the beginning of the play, Julie's dog is pregnant with a litter of puppies. Julie is unhappy with this predicament because, as described by Christine, "all the pedigree dogs wanted her" but instead she mated with John and Christine's dog Swartkop (Farber 12). This can be interpreted as a symbol for the other factors that control our will. Julie's dog was not acting on thought (yes, she is a canine, please suspend disbelief for my sake) but was controlled by the biological desire to pass on her genes. Another powerful symbol is that of Christine's fingerprints. When John is trying to express his will, to escape and not spend the "rest of (his) life cleaning ... boots," (Farber 30), Christine shows him her fingers and the fingerprints that had been worn away from the hard labor of her life (Farber 50). It was these prints that

initially inhibited her from voting. An external impeding factor was the constraint, keeping her from being able to express her will with a ballot.

If free will is defined by independent thoughts guiding choices with the absence of outside influences or forces, then it must be much harder to achieve than one is led to believe. On all sides, humans are impeded by external influences that either consciously or subconsciously suggest or enforce a particular feeling or choice. *Mies Julie* by Yaël Farber does an excellent job of exposing how our environment and our past inform our thoughts and actions. Farber was able to use the characters of John and Julie to explore how the remaining relational scaffolding left behind by apartheid impacts current generations of South Africans. We see the limiting factors on following an original desire like John and Julie's attraction for one another. They are held back by a multitude of reasons such as generational trauma, racism, and the desire for retribution. It is due to these that what could have been a blossoming relationship ended swiftly.

Exposing the illusion of free will is the first step to bringing it into fruition. Analyzing the factors that circumvent or weaken initial desires and choices increases awareness as well as criticism of whether those factors are valid in holding back a choice. *Mies Julie*'s excavation of the existing tensions that remain in South Africa is a crucial part of the awareness and critique process that helps put choices into context. Analyzing one's own lack of free will through the safe space of the lives of John and Julie would help South Africans with their goal of reconciliation as they could see whether what they have been doing has truly fulfilled what they want. Overall, it is through these fictional characters that one may be able to achieve the mirage that is free will.

Works Cited

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