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FIQWS 10108

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09 September 2019

My Thoughts on *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière*

At the right forefront of the portrait, *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière* thereposes a faint woman being supported by a man. And on her left, there is a concerned nurse. But above all, this scene takes place in front of a crowd of men taking notes on the woman. These are postgraduate students at Clark University who are being given a lecture on hysteria. Now, on the right of the faint woman, is an older man, his body is positioned slightly toward the woman but his face is toward the male audience, he is the speaker of the room and a neurologist that studies hysteria. The woman is being studied rather than being taken care of at the hospital. I resonate with this painting, seeing how women are abused and used for men’s advantage.

As a result, I feel indignant because the faint woman in the portrait has these men taking notes on her, and are benefitting from her position but at the expense of her health. I see a woman being taken advantage of, whose well-being is disregarded and neglected because the men are getting the data they need regarding hysteria. The woman is being objectified; a person should not be unconscious while being used as a demonstration for a clinical lesson. They should be awake and able to make objections to any claims made about them. She is placed on display for these men and her personal emotions are not regarded. But, this is typical for hysterical patients, doctors are unsympathetic because they don’t understand the mental illness. They are not a priority, just like the woman in the painting.

Furthermore, I feel like the situation is another example of men thinking they know what’s best. Ultimately in the portrait, a woman’s fate and history are being judged and analyzed by men. Then, the men’s decision will be applied to all hysterical women. But above all, the situation is enigmatic for me because the men gave themselves that privilege over a woman’s life; they don’t have that right. Men have always decided they dictate how women work because they have believed to have superior knowledge over them. As an illustration, it will be as if I, who never had the same experience as another person, would have power and privilege over what kind of life a stranger will have. And this is because I believe I know what’s best for that person even though, I don’t have their experience or knowledge, nor do I care to. This is the reoccurring relationship between men and women, one holds the upper hand while the other fight their whole life to regain power over themselves.

Lastly, I later noticed in the background of the portrait, there is another painting. This one looks like a woman with her body pulling itself up from the ground, her body makes an arc-shape. This is the type of position that happens when your body is reacting to something, like during a seizure or someone poking your back. It is the position usually made during the hysteria, a mental illness which back then, was exclusive for women. Doctors believed hysteria was caused by a ‘wandering womb’ so men couldn’t have hysteria. There was no reason for a woman to be there if her mind is being studied and her unconsciousness shows the men had no interest in what she might have to say about the ordeal.

All in all, I see the portrait as an illustration of everyday issues relating to men and women. Right now, we live in a patriarchal society where women are constantly fighting for their rights but are taken away from men that think it’s for the better. Women are constantly abused by men in superior positions, who gets to decide their fate in a way that only benefits themselves.