

Character development in *Madama Butterfly* and its precursors

Puccini's librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa were able to convey Pinkerton's cultural insensitivity and dishonourable intentions in a few telling strokes. His scorn for the little Japanese house in which the action is set is reflected in his description of it as 'frivolous' and 'a house of cards'. He is interested only in the location of the marriage chamber. He praises the fawning Goro as 'a pearl of a broker' but is impatient with the admirable Suzuki. 'How she chatters' he says, 'it's the same the world over'.

Pinkerton tells the American Consul, Sharpless that he has leased the house for nine hundred and ninety-nine years - with an option to cancel the contract on a monthly basis. Applying the same rule to his Japanese marriage, he declares that, 'according to custom' his marriage is for nine hundred and ninety-nine years but he is free to go his own way after a month.

He acknowledges that Butterfly's 'delicate wings might get crushed' in the course of their relationship, but he brushes aside the Consul's concern, assuring him that the 'sweet delights of love' will be sufficient to make her happy. Then, he joyfully anticipates the day of his real wedding, 'when I shall marry a real American wife'. When Butterfly discloses that she is fifteen years old, the Consul remarks with misgivings that this is 'the age of playthings'. For Pinkerton, it is the age 'of confectioneries!'

In David Belasco's one-act play, the opening scene involves Butterfly and Suzuki. They are awaiting Pinkerton's return and, at Butterfly's insistence, are speaking only in English, although their pronunciation is comical: 'O, how we waste my husband's be-aautiful moneys! Tha's shame! Mos' gon.' They continue in this vein, which modern audiences would find wearisome and objectionable. Fortunately, in the opera they speak perfect Italian.

In the play, the marriage broker makes his first entry accompanied not, as in the opera, by Pinkerton but by Sharpless. Pinkerton arrives much later, by which time he is married to his American wife Kate who has learnt about the child from the meddling broker. 'My Kate's an angel' Pinkerton tells Sharpless, 'she has offered to take the child'. Butterfly's feelings, it seems, are of no consequence. Pinkerton admits that he had briefly considered returning to her but had told himself: 'Don't do it; by this time she's ringing your gold pieces to make sure they're good. You know that class of Japanese girl...'. His remedy is to offer her more money, or rather to ask Sharpless to give her the money on his behalf, for he hasn't the courage to face Butterfly and flees the room before she enters. It is left to Kate, who arrives looking for her husband, to break the news to Butterfly. In the end, it is also Kate who urges a reluctant Pinkerton to return with her to collect the child.

In the opera, Pinkerton gradually mellows under the influence of Butterfly's innocent charm, and starts to display greater sensitivity to Japanese values. When she tells him that her statuettes ('puppets' he had called them) are the spirits of her ancestors, he hastily replies that he meant no disrespect. Almost in spite of himself, he begins to experience feelings of genuine tenderness, and the first act draws to a close with music of passionate splendour.

The first part of the second act is marked by Butterfly's strenuous efforts to convince herself (as much as anyone) that Pinkerton will return, and by her violent reaction to any thought that he will not. She even threatens to kill Suzuki (and later Goro) for suggesting that foreign husbands don't come back. This detail is taken straight from the sources, along with her determination to behave like an American wife, her insistence that the Consul address her as Madame Pinkerton, her inquiry about the nesting habits of the robins, and her rebuff of Prince Yamadori.

Eventually, in the opera, Pinkerton returns with his American wife. He is consumed by remorse and haunted by a vision of Butterfly's gentle face. Nevertheless, as in the play, he is unwilling to confront his Japanese bride and freely admits his cowardice. Kate asks Suzuki to break the news to Butterfly and to request that she hand over the child. Thus, it is Suzuki who is given this terrible responsibility while Kate, now a somewhat cold and aloof figure, converses with the heartbroken Butterfly from a distance. Kate is the only character who is less interesting in the opera than in the original sources, largely as a result of cuts made after the first performance.

John Luther Long's original short story gives Butterfly the same mangled English ('I egspeg I ought be sawry?') that disfigures Belaso's play. However, it does throw additional light on some of the details of both the play and the opera. For example, it explains how Butterfly came to name her baby: 'She named the baby, when it came, Sorrow. Every Japanese baby begins with a temporary name; it may be anything, almost, for the little time. She was quite sure he would like the way she had named him Sorrow - meaning Joy. That was his own oblique way. As for his permanent name... that was for him to choose when he returned. And this event was to happen, according to his own words, when the robins nested again'.

Long's story also provides information about the knife that once belonged to Butterfly's father, which bears the inscription (quoted in the opera): 'To die with Honour when one can no longer live with Honour'. Her father was on the emperor's side in the Satsuma rebellion before committing ritual suicide at Jokoji, a point given weight by Prince Yamadori when inviting her to be his bride. There is only a brief mention of her father's fate in the play, and an even briefer one in the opera.

The important role of the Consul, Sharpless undergoes some changes of emphasis between story and opera. His complicity in the deception of Butterfly, for example, is more calculated in the earlier versions. However, generally speaking, his is the voice of conscience, warning Pinkerton of the consequences of thoughtless behaviour towards Butterfly and Japanese society, and preparing Butterfly for her inevitable disappointment. He can see all sides of the drama, and his perspective on the impending tragedy is also our own.

Long's short story, like the opera, begins with Pinkerton and Butterfly's first days together. It illustrates Butterfly's determination to acquire American status by adopting Pinkerton's name, although she has difficulty pronouncing it: 'I nobody's daughter; jus' Missus Benja - no ! Missus Frang-a-leen Ben-ja-meen - no, no, *no!* Missus Ben-ja-meen Frang-a-leen Pikkerton'. Readers in 1898 would have chuckled at such a characterization, although they were less amused by the depiction of a US naval officer as a cowardly cad. The author received 'savage letters' on the subject.

A real-life 'little teahouse girl' called Chô-san or Miss Butterfly provided the inspiration for Long's short story. In both the story and the play she elicits pathos, but her character barely rises above the exotic. In Puccini's opera, on the other hand, Butterfly is a tragic heroine of real stature, dominating each of the acts. From a naïve girl infatuated with a handsome stranger, she becomes a noble woman reconciled to her fate - a mother who asks her child to look closely at her face and remember it, before following her own father in death with honour.

Peter Bassett