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Sexuality and Independence in *The Awakening* and *The Sound and the Fury*

In the early 20th century, women began an unprecedented battle for their political, social, and sexual rights. The Victorian Age created an incredibly oppressive environment for women, and perhaps in response to that, women in the 20th century really began the physical battle for equality that many had discussed for centuries. Not only did they demand freedom to participate in politics, but women also began to demand freedom from the traditional domestic duties of motherhood and matrimony. The literature of the time reflects this budding movement as writers began to ask themselves what would happen to women and society if the world's mothers tried to have lives of their own. Kate Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening* examines the choices of a domestically and sexually independent wife, Edna Pontellier, and eventually decides that an emancipated woman has no place in society, and can only achieve freedom through death. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* decides that its female protagonists cannot be happy when domestically constrained, but also cannot be happy when independent because society's disapproval will eventually make life impossible to lead. Ultimately, the two novels appear to agree that a sexually and intellectually independent woman could not succeed in the social environment of the time and that women were realizing their individuality faster than society could handle.

The Awakening sets its protagonist apart from the traditional feminine image through the foil of her neighbor, Adèle Ratignolle, emphasizing the difference between the obsolete

domestic woman and the emerging autonomous woman that was beginning to appear in the era. Madame Ratignolle is the quintessential “mother-woman,” something that Chopin explicitly states does not describe Edna. Ratignolle was the type of woman who could be seen “fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imagined, threatened [her] precious brood” (Chopin 540). Ratignolle is obviously beautiful, uncomplicated, and powerfully feminine, with lips “so red one could only think of cherries... in looking at them” (540). Edna is described much more humbly: “She was rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features” (537). Edna’s desire to be her own person makes her appear homely, even masculine. Her features reflect her complex mind, where Ratignolle is concerned only with her children and is therefore simply beautiful. No where in Edna’s physical description does Chopin mention that anyone who did not love her “was a brute, deserving of slow torture” (540), showing that society loved the matronly Ratignolle and, if not rejected Edna, did not love her quite as much. “At a very early period,” Chopin writes, “she had apprehended instinctively the dual life – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (545). Edna is a critical reflector, rather than the simple and content Ratignolle.

Edna also does not care for her children as a “mother-woman” (Chopin 538) should, and society’s disapproval of this is reflected in the voice of her husband, Mr. Pontellier. When Edna refuses to check on her son after Mr. Pontellier claims he has a fever, Mr. Pontellier rebuffs her: “He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth was it?” (538). When she moves out of her husband’s house, she has very little thought for what will happen to her children without their mother. Women were expected to be defined by their children, but Edna is not.

Defying traditional expectations, Edna does not want to belong to anyone. During her sexual liberation, when she develops an emotional affair with Robert and a sexual one with Alcèe, both offer to make her a possession, but Edna refuses. She tells Robert, the man she loves:

You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy', I would laugh at you both. (619)

When Robert found out he could not possess her, he leaves behind a note telling her good-bye. His rejection shows that society abhors an independent woman – the two were passionately in love, but when Robert finds out Edna will not be his possession, he abandons her.

Chopin characterizes Edna as querulous to show how society viewed a woman who wanted to make her own decisions. Edna chose to marry Mr. Pontellier to spite her family: he was a Catholic, something that inspired “the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margeret” (Chopin 548). She refuses to do as she is told, such as when her husband merely asks her to come inside and she remains on the porch for hours. Trying to define herself as an individual in the smallest ways makes her appear childish or rude. Her disagreeable nature is in fact just her way of asserting her individuality, but people would see her behavior as contrary and ungrateful because of their convictions.

Edna's emerging independence is also seen as immoral. Noticing her changing behavior, her husband brings a doctor to the house to observe her. Her husband claims her ailment is mental, saying, “She doesn't act well. She's odd, she's not like herself... She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (Chopin 585). The Doctor concluded that her “warm and energetic” demeanor was due to an affair (589). Attributing Edna's newfound happiness to an illicit affair with no evidence of such an affair shows how

much men feared the independent woman. Edna stopped following her husband's orders and society's expectations, became happier as she developed into her own consciousness, so a medical professional decides that she must be promiscuous, thereby attributing assertive behavior to immorality.

Edna's relationship to Alcèe can be ascribed to her desire to achieve sexual independence as well as personal. When she kisses Alcèe, she feels that it "was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Chopin 600). Before she kills herself, she thinks "To-day it is Arobin, to-morrow, it be someone else" (624) meaning that she will use men in order to spark life within her soul. Her sexual experience is part of her transition from her husband's possession to her own woman; she controls who can touch her and inspire arousal. Traditionally, pure women were not supposed to enjoy the act of sex; Edna's lust for it again shows how at odds she is with expectations of the day.

As a mentally, emotionally, and sexually independent woman, one might expect that Edna would find happiness after bringing her life into her control. But unfortunately, Edna cannot be content in a society that tries to constrain her into the feminine image, so she kills herself. As she walks towards the ocean to end her life, Edna realizes that nothing in her life can give her joy:

There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too... would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her... and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. (624)

Edna's only choice was to remove herself from a world that she did not belong in. She could not support herself like the artist-recluse Mademoiselle Reisz, she could not love her children like

Ratignolle, and she could not be the wife Mr. Pontellier expected her to be. With no other choices, she drowned herself in the ocean that originally inspired her awakening.

Like Edna, the women in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* find themselves conflicting with the progress of their gender. While Faulkner's characterizations of Caddy and Quentin seem to agree that the women were breaking away from the Southern Belle standard of the past, he agrees with Chopin that the world was just not ready for a mentally and sexually independent woman because the Compson family rejects the personalities of Caddy and Quentin. He uses the mother, Caroline Compson, to mock the weak and dependent standard of the old South – she frequently tells her family “I know I an nothing but a burden to you” (Faulkner 40). Faulkner uses Caddy and Quentin's exile to show how their progressive ways did not fit into the outdated lifestyle of their family that Caroline Compson embodies as a useless female. Like Chopin, Faulkner has the men in his novel compare female independence with immorality; both Caddy and Quentin are accused of being promiscuous because they take control of their own bodies.

Faulkner's complicated narrative subtlety empowers Caddy and Quentin, but his characters do not seem to realize it. Early in Benjy's section, their father explicitly tells his children to “mind Caddy, then” (Faulkner 16) and the young Caddy frequently bosses her brothers around. Caddy also controls the eventual downfall of the Compson family honor: her daughter Quentin is responsible for much of the hardship in Jason Compson life, and the novel concludes with Quentin stealing all of Jason's savings (most of which actually belonged to her). In Jason's section of the novel, he fights to control both women: when Caddy returns to town and pays to see her daughter, Jason complies by holding Quentin out the window of a carriage

and driving quickly by Caddy. With Quentin, he controls the money that Caddy sends her every month, pretending to have Caroline burning it but actually keeping it for himself.

Jason's fight to control the two women helps emphasize how cruel it is to withhold a woman's rights. The man is without empathy or compassion, and he is the one trying to control both women. In this way, Jason represents the society that rejects the progressive female: he fights to keep both women under his control but ultimately fails. Because the Compson family represents old southern values (the family is ancient and honorable, but the present generation's clinging to the old ways cause the family to implode), it can be inferred that their rejection of Caddy and Quentin's progressive behavior is symbolic of the incongruousness of the era and women's transition from weakness to strength.

The character of Caddy can be seen as a conflict of the traditional image of the "mother-woman" and the emerging independent woman. Faulkner describes her as a mother figure to the disabled Benjy. In one of his flashbacks, Caroline insists that the five-year old Benjy is too old to be held, but Caddy tells her "I like to take care of him" (41) and tries to comfort the squalling boy despite his mother's apparent indifference. But at the same time, Caddy is a fallen woman, sexually free and ashamed of it.

Benjy, Quentin, and Jason are all obsessed with the virginity of their sister, and their obsessions cause them extreme amounts of unhappiness. It can be argued that their obsessions stand in for society's obsession with female sexuality. Benjy cries on the night Caddy loses her virginity, Quentin kills himself over it, and Jason is convinced that his entire life was destroyed because of his sister's failed marriage. They take their obsessions with her to ruinous extremes, perhaps Faulkner's way of satirizing that obsession is society.

Caddy, Quentin, and Edna all achieve individual freedom through their sexuality, but they are also condemned for it. Caddy's promiscuity is what leads her to be exiled from her family, but this may ultimately be a good thing as she escapes the ruin her family eventually dissolves into. Her daughter Quentin also manages to escape via her affair with the man from the travelling show; she steals Jason's savings and runs off to what will presumably a financially stable life. Edna finally feels connected to her life because of her sexual affair with Alcee.

Because individuality is connected so much to sexuality, several conclusions can be reached. The two novels reflect the entanglement of oppression with purity; women are considered to be "pure" when they are submissive and virginal. Therefore, they are no longer "pure" when they cease to be submissive, and defying men must also make them impure, or promiscuous. Men of the era wanted to keep women sexually submissive, so when women find their own sexual partners, men condemn them as immoral in order to encourage other women to remain submissive. Jason declared Caddy and Quentin to be dishonorable not because they slept around, but because they did not defer to the men in their life. Edna's transition into her own individual person is assumed to be a side effect of an as-yet unconsummated affair. Society associated feminine distinction with immorality, and such distinction can only be achieved through sexual independence, which is viewed as immoral, thus individuality is seen as immoral.

Sexuality is the most pervasive theme in the two novels, but rarely is it discussed by any of the characters. This avoidance of one of humanity's most driving instincts reflects how taboo the subject is. Sex was a private act of procreation, not something to be enjoyed by anyone, particularly women. Caddy's sexuality is never directly referred to in *The Sound and the Fury* –

her brother Quentin comes closest to hinting at it when he asks her about her relationship with Dalton Ames – but no one ever directly states “Caddy slept with a man out of wed-lock and had a baby”. Edna’s sexual experience is entirely private; although she complains about the uncouthness of Creole society, few of her acquaintances openly discuss sexuality.

The avoidance of sexuality, as well as its equation with immorality, further demonstrates how self-sufficient women were considered immoral. While men’s sexuality was blatantly referred to – Alcèè’s reputation is well known and Jason openly corresponds with a prostitute – women’s sexuality is seen as shameful. But Edna, Caddy and Quentin do not see themselves as disgraceful. Although Edna kills herself, she does not do so because of self-hatred, but because she feels her evolved womanhood has no place in her regressive world. Caddy is distraught over the consequences her behavior has on Benjy and Quentin, but never apologizes for being strong and financially secure all on her own. Volatile, resentful Quentin would sooner declare her eternal love for Jason than feel shame. Their pride staunchly defies society’s expectations of shame, and so they must exile themselves from that society.

Edna, Caddy, and Edna inhabited worlds that were not able to accept their progressive lifestyles, and as a result, those worlds rejected them. Society, meaning the people with whom they interacted, expected them to feel shame for their “immoral” behavior because, due to the conventions of the day, their sexual confidence translated into promiscuity. However, they did not face their oppressors with shame for their behavior, did not make apologies for their independence, and instead exited the worlds that did not want them. While the societies in *The Awakening* and *The Sound and the Fury* did not have room for a sexually confident woman, the women in the novels chose to control their own destinies through their actions, rather than let men control their destinies for them.

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