

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 3

Article 9

2011

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Recommended Citation

Thacker, Stetson (2011) "Hopelessness: A Byproduct of Femininity, and Chopin and Dickinson's Struggle Against It," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol3/iss1/9>

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Hopelessness: A Byproduct of Femininity, and Chopin and Dickinson's Struggle Against It

By Stetson Thacker

The late nineteenth century allotted few freedoms to women, restricting them largely to domestic duties and treating them as a subordinate group. One of the few mediums women had to combat their oppression and break from the gender roles was writing; thus, female authors often became bold but subtle advocates for their sex. Kate Chopin and Emily Dickinson are undoubtedly counted among these progressive female authors. They specifically are concerned with the feeling of hopelessness, resulting from their lack of personal agency in their phallogocentric society. Chopin's *The Awakening* and Dickinson's poetic works as a whole illustrate Chopin and Dickinson's despondence through their treatment of matters of love, life, and death; however, Chopin and Dickinson respond differently to this feeling of hopelessness. Chopin uses her protagonist to openly rebel against the patriarchal society the author feels herself confined in and suppressed by, while Dickinson adopts various voices to critique the oppression of women in patriarchal marriages.

Love figures prominently in Chopin's *The Awakening* as Edna struggles against the traditional, male-defined conventions of relationships in an attempt to consummate the desires of her heart—that is, to obtain Robert Lebrun's love and affection and become liberated from her husband. Edna's husband, Léonce Pontellier, represents the patriarchal male notions about the duties of women and their subordinate status in society, which is evidenced in the way he treats her. Chopin's first description of Edna and her husband's interaction, in which Edna, fairly sunburned, comes to Léonce after spending an afternoon at the beach, has Léonce saying "You are burnt beyond recognition" as he is "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (536). In addition to

Léonce's objectification of Edna, he pays little attention to her own desires and needs, but expects her to dote upon his every word. For instance, one evening at Grand Isle, Léonce deserts his wife to go gamble with his friends, after she had asked him specifically to come to dinner. Later, Léonce comes home very late and wakes Edna to gloat about his winnings. However, he finds it "very discouraging that *his* wife" shows "so little interest in things which concerned him and valued so little his conversation" (538). He then proceeds to scold her "habitual neglect of the children", when he falsely believes Raoul, his child, has a fever (538). After obeying her husband, Edna begins to cry for a reason unknown to her, which is an experience "not uncommon in her married life"; Chopin attributes Edna's "vague anguish" to "an indescribable oppression" (539). Edna's wounds from patriarchal oppression are torn deeper and wider, when Robert leaves her for Mexico as soon as she begins expressing her feelings for him. This is the beginning of Edna's feelings of despondence, which she eventually vehemently rebels against.

Edna returns to New Orleans with despondence weighing heavily upon her soul. Her social obligations exacerbate this despondence; thus, Edna begins to shirk her feminine duties, refusing to answer callers on her "reception day[s]" and leaving the house spontaneously for unexplained sojourns into town, which only serves to annoy Léonce (573). Consequently, Léonce admonishes for failing to "keep up with the procession" and "observe *les convenances*," which he insists she must fulfill as part of her duties as a wife so that his reputation and business prospects stay up (576). However, Edna is "under the spell of her infatuation" (576) with Robert and has resolved to live life on her terms by "casting away" her "fictitious self" (579). Edna, coincidentally, becomes the antithesis of the traditional, subordinate female by becoming a fervent artist, a talent which she uses to gain some economic independence; visiting Mademoiselle Reisz frequently to immerse herself in passions evinced by Reisz's music and read

the letter Reisz receives from Robert about Edna; striking up an adulterous liaison with New Orleans' Casanova, Alcée Arobin; and moving out of Léonce's home to her own abode.

Edna's restlessness is temporarily suppressed by the return of Robert from Mexico. After a few strained, chance meetings, Edna expresses herself to Robert in an "unwomanly" way, which even leads to the mutual recognition of their love; however, after Edna is called away from their moments of passion, Robert realizes the true weight and social consequences of their illicit relationship and leaves Edna (617). When Robert leaves her, Edna comes to a realization that Robert was not vastly different than Léonce or any other man. She would always be under their control and authority, but "she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (597); she cannot even love a man because a man would expect her to surrender her autonomy. Moreover, even the women expect her to surrender her independence; Madame Ratignolle, a hypochondriac, calls Edna to her sick bed and away from Edna's precious moments of reciprocated love with Robert to tend to her, and before Edna parts from her, she instructs Edna to "think of the children" (614). The phallogocentric conceptions of women as a subordinate gender without the faculty for independence are ubiquitous in Edna's world; she recognizes her only escape and she takes it. Edna drowns herself in the very substance, the sea, that metaphorically helped liberate her soul from "an appalling and hopeless ennui", and offered her a "taste of life's delirium" (578). Her suicide is a final act of rebellion, ultimately a defiant refusal to fall prey to man's oppression.

Dickinson's response to her anguish is far less extreme. Issues of love figure prominently in Dickinson's poetry, similar to Dickinson's *The Awakening*. Dickinson, who never married, led a life full of a series of abortive romantic relationships, in which she evidently felt powerless. Dickinson felt that she had little control over her relationships' fates and terms. The poem "I'm Wife" ostensibly presents the helpless position a woman

occupies in a romantic relationship, especially marriage; the lines “How odd the Girl’s life looks/Behind this soft Eclipse” (81) express the tainted perspective on life that a romantic relationship fosters in women. Dickinson asserts with these lines that to be a single woman is to have a clear, enlightened perspective from “Heaven”, but to belong to a man is to have a much narrower perspective only from “Earth” (81). This limited perspective on life evidently refers to biases encouraged by a patriarchal society. Beyond perspective, Dickinson also indicates that there is at least a power over oneself in being single, which seems to defeat the feelings of despondence and “pain” that she associates with being a “wife” (81). Consequently, Dickinson’s romantic life is restricted by male-defined social codes, which she suffers from passively in her single life but rebels against cleverly through her verse.

We see such a rebellion in a poem like “Wild Nights,” a poem in which Dickinson adopts a masculine persona. The male voice allows her to equate romance with “Rowing in Eden” and express her romantic and sexual desires, which would be inappropriate for her to do from a feminine voice (82). Her persona gives her the power to conquer her submissive state and assert that “the winds” are “Futile.... To a Heart in port” and brazenly entreat, “Might I but moor – tonight- In thee!” (82). Dickinson’s rebellion in verse is evident but much more subtle than Edna’s rebellion described by Chopin; furthermore, Dickinson does not entirely liberate herself from her oppression the way that Chopin has Edna liberate herself.

Hopelessness and powerlessness also characterize Dickinson’s verse in “Because I could not stop for Death.” She personifies death as a male suitor, who has chivalrously stopped to take her on a twilight ride in his carriage. She does not particularly want to ride in his carriage, but has no power or daring to protest. This submission to “Death” because of his undeniable “civility” expresses Dickinson’s acknowledgment of the male world’s dominance, which is evidenced by her

relief that she “had put away [her] labor and [her] leisure” (86). It is exhausting for Dickinson to combat a world that is fundamentally male dominated—the “Sun” is attributed masculinity in her poem, which is a metaphor that addresses her perception of man’s authority and inescapable ubiquity in her world — but she is willing to work against it, which is why she initially “could not stop for Death” (86). Unfortunately, Death having caught up to her seems to indicate that Dickinson sees little hope that for improvement in gender equality. Dickinson may be “a Loaded Gun” with feelings of revolt against female powerlessness, but she is frequently disarmed of this pugnacious spirit, and often fails to entirely break her shackles and defend her sovereignty of her actions and fate.

Many of Dickinson’s poems suggest that her writing was her only medium of coping with these feelings of hopelessness, while Chopin’s work suggests, with her character Edna, that choosing death can be a denial of patriarchal bonds. However, Dickinson still resists the powerlessness she feels by adopting masculine personae in some of her poems and taking clever jabs at the flaws of patriarchal assumptions and expectations. Chopin openly acknowledges that men oppress woman and induce despondency in them; ostensibly, her battle against these discouraging emotions in *The Awakening* is prominent. Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Dickinson’s poetry as a whole reveal an internal process, undergone by each author, to combat and cope with feelings of powerlessness and oppression induced by a domineering male society, which expected women to fulfill certain roles, and if these roles were not filled satisfactorily, women were ostracized, deserted, and disliked. Ultimately, both authors’ works serve to subvert and attack the internalized gender beliefs and expectations in hopes of achieving personal happiness and improving social, economic, professional, and political prospects for women.

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