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ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

The Female Body and Voice in U.S. Prose Fiction

Ženské tělo a hlas ve vybraných dílech americké prózy

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Declaration

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I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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ABSTRAKT (CZ)

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá konceptem ženského těla a hlasu a jejich transformace v dílech vybraných amerických spisovatelů a spisovatelek. Díla mužských autorů zkoumána v této diplomové práci jsou *Washington Square* od Henryho Jamese, *The Sun Also Rises* od Ernesta Hemingwaye, a *The Crying of Lot 49* od Thomase Pynchona. Analýza děl vybraných amerických spisovatelek se bude zabývat literárními díly *The Awakening* spisovatelky Kate Chopin, *The House of Mirth* od Edith Wharton, povídkou “Good Country People” od Flannery O’Connor, a románem *Blood and Guts in High School* od Kathy Acker. I přesto, že se jedná o díla ženských spisovatelek, tato práce není stavěna na předpokladu, že tato díla jsou nezbytně více “ženská” či se zásadně liší v jazyce, kterým je ženská zkušenost literárních hrdinek zprostředkována, a práce je proto koncipována chronologicky.

Hrdinky vybraných románů se nachází v životní fázi, kdy si začínají uvědomovat svou nespokojenost s dosavadní rolí submisivní dcery, milenky, či manželky, a začínají se bránit snahám mužů a společnosti si je podřídit. Navzdory pokusům o odpor jsou však tyto ženské literární postavy čtenářům zprostředkovány buď skrze mužský pohled, nebo skrze jazyk, který je maskulinní a výhradně v rukou mužů.

Tato práce zkoumá, jakým způsobem se společnost staví k vývoji pozice ženy v kulturní, politické a sociální sféře. Je důležité identifikovat stereotypy, které ženy vězní v podřízené roli a které ženy samy začaly považovat za přirozené. Analýza bude prováděna v kontextu francouzské feministické teorie, jež je reprezentována třemi hlavními osobnostmi - Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous a Julií Kristevou. Cílem je prozkoumat traumata, které si vybrané literární hrdinky nesou a které jim brání vymanit se ze závislosti na mužích, sledovat, jaký vliv má dominantní patriarchální společnost na ty členy společnosti, kteří jsou považováni za méněcenné, v tomto případě ženy, a jakými prostředky se ženské hrdinky mohou bránit patriarchální agresi. Speciální pozornost bude věnována jazyku, který je zásadním nástrojem pro vyjádření těchto traumat a pro artikulaci ženské touhy a ženského nitra, který je ovšem v absolutním vlastnictví mužů a zároveň je tedy nástrojem mužské nadvlády a ženské oprese.

ABSTRACT (EN)

The present MA thesis explores the concept of a female body and voice and their transformations as presented by various American writers. The chosen male authored works include *Washington Square* by Henry James, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway, and *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, for these writers delineate their heroines Catherine Sloper, Lady Brett Ashley, and Oedipa Maas in a turbulent period of their lives when they attempt to break with the obsolescent roles of passive and obedient daughters, partners, and wives. These fictional agents use different kinds of resistance, but as women, they are, nevertheless, mediated through the dominant male and masculine discourse that pervades the fictionalized societies in which these female agents appear.

As for fictional work by female writers, without the assumption that the gender of the writer makes any literary work more or less “feminine”, I have chosen *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, a short-story “Good Country People” by Flannery O’Connor, and *Blood and Guts in High School* by Kathy Acker. The female heroines of the selected literary works bear a number of traumas women have had to endure under the patriarchal order and this thesis will address those traumas, their manifestation in the female psyche, and how the female characters cope with them.

French feminist, psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous is employed in order to explore those traumas, the effect of the male-dominated society on the female voice and body, and the ways women have tried to subvert the restrictive and dangerously authoritarian order. The particular French theorists have been chosen because of the way their works interact and when taken together, they allow for a complex discussion of the role of women in society, of the importance of female language, and of the treatment of the female body in representations of a capitalist society based on the exchange culture of women among men. Together our theorists make up what Toril Moi calls “the new holy Trinity of French feminist theory”.

This thesis will analyze the changing role of women in their fictionalized societies with special focus on the role of language. Applying relevant theoretical strategies and close reading of the selected literary works, this thesis will address the complexity of female experience in a patriarchal order, which has oppressed the feminine and its radically creative potential.

Table of Contents

Declaration	ii
Permission	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
ABSTRAKT (CZ)	v
ABSTRACT (EN)	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Women Caught in a Tradition	12
2.1 <i>Washington Square</i>	12
2.2 <i>The Awakening</i>	20
2.3 <i>The House of Mirth</i>	32
Chapter 3: New Era, New Opportunities.....	47
3.1 <i>The Sun Also Rises</i>	47
3.2 “Good Country People”	54
3.3 <i>The Crying of Lot 49</i> and <i>Blood and Guts in High School</i>	63
3.3.1. Oedipa Maas	63
3.3.2. Janey Smith.....	69
Chapter 4: Conclusions	77
Works Cited.....	82

Chapter 1: Introduction

The position of women in the society is from the very beginning determined by the dominant patriarchal culture, which not only deprives women of their own identity and self-realization within that culture, but also denies the very existence of the female voice and of its right to be heard and acknowledged. The reason for undermining the female voice can be traced as far back as to Plato's 'Symposium', in which woman is considered to lack a full soul, which was thought by Plato to be necessary for the origin of thought; further than that, in Aristotle's metaphysics, the rational is associated with masculinity while the feminine is linked to ideas of incompleteness and of imperfection¹; therefore it does not come as a surprise that women are predominantly associated with emotionality, passivity, and their function was seen in many contexts as exclusively maternal.

However, in the last century women began to question these stereotypical assumptions and discovered that the inferior role imposed upon them is only a cultural phenomenon constructed by men. Their attempts to subvert the patriarchal organization of the society happen in various fields but before women can change anything, they at first have to be allowed in the discourse and they have to be given a voice.

Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray are the most prominent representatives of the contemporary French feminist, psychoanalytic theory, and are often discussed together. As Kelly Oliver says: "in the United States when we

¹ Virpi Lehtinen, *Luce Irigaray's Philosophy of Feminine Being* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2010) 47.

think of French feminists we think of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva.”² Despite their differences, they share a confessional and poetic way of writing³ and they create a broad, theoretical framework which creates space for exploring the position of women in the society, in the intellectual and cultural history of mankind, and in the phallogocentric mode of discourse.

Instead of focusing on the specificity of female experience, the French feminists address the issues of female sexuality and identity, of female voice and desire, and of the power of language to perpetuate the dominance of the patriarchal order and the oppression of the female. The theory may be perceived as intellectually elitist and abstract, yet it is theory that can open new pathways of thinking of what it means to be a woman, to be a female speaking subject, and to imagine a different social order where the feminine is a creative force, instead of being a mere complement and the other to the masculine order of being.

In the introduction to *New French Feminism: An Anthology* its authors Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron describe the objective of those feminists who follow the psychoanalytic tradition, including mainly Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous, as follows:

Those who follow the psychoanalytic tradition speak not of the penis but of the phallus. Their attempts to find a discourse that is not governed by a prime signifier – a discourse compatible with rigorous atheism, a discourse that is not God centered – are in fact attempts at decentering the reigning phallus from its dominant position in the symbolic order. They refuse ritual acts of obedience to the phallus, they refuse the inevitable oppression of women described by Freud and Lévi-Strauss as the *sine qua non* of

² Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) 163.

³ Kelly Ives, *Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva: The Jouissance of French Feminism* (Kent, UK: Crescent Moon Publishing, 1998) 28.

human culture: the obligatory journey from clitoris to vagina; the inevitable exchange of women.⁴

They argue for a discourse where there is no one authority and criticize the culture of commodity exchange in which women are traded among men as commodities, which is the foundation of capitalist society and ensures its proper functioning.

Since language is for many “the condition for the meaningful existence of all other practices”⁵, its role in the social order and its structuring is often the topic of the work of the French feminists. Language has the power to shape one’s identity and subjectivity, to stereotype or condition one’s perception of the world and of oneself, and to mirror the socio-cultural context. Kristeva herself “adheres closely to an Althusserian framework, whereby the subject is a function and effect of the socio-symbolic order. The speaking subject is not merely an individual producer of texts, an ‘author’, but is *symptomatic* of a social organisation.”⁶ The female heroines discussed in this thesis are not only a reflection of the female struggle in a patriarchal society, they reflect a number of social symptoms and traumas, and confront the reader with the failings of the society and with his own.

In the introduction to *Feminist Literary Criticism*, Mary Eagleton discusses the differences between Anglo-American criticism and the French one and stresses the importance of *l’écriture féminine*:

The French insistence on *écriture féminine* – on woman as a writing-effect instead of an origin – asserts not the sexuality of the text but the textuality of sex. Gender difference, produced, not innate, becomes a matter of the structuring of a genderless libido in and through patriarchal discourse. When the French talk of ‘l’écriture féminine they do not mean the tradition of women’s writing that Woolf and Showalter have laboured to uncover, but a certain mode of writing which unsettles fixed meanings.⁷

It is part of the discussion of language and also why particular authors of the literary works discussed in this thesis do not play that significant a part, since the focus is on the characters and on their positions within discourse and social

⁴ Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980) 36.

⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989) 39.

⁶ Grosz 41.

⁷ Mary Eagleton, ed. *Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Longman, 1991) 10.

structures. One of the aims of this thesis is to consider how the phallogocentric order structures the female voice and manipulates female bodies, and how it contains and even defuses their creative potential. Especially helpful in this regard is Luce Irigaray and her work on the operation of representation in language:

Her concepts of the body and corporeality refer only to a body that is structured, inscribed, constituted and given meaning *socially* and *historically* – a body that exists as such only through its socio-linguistic construction. She renders the concept of a ‘pure’ or ‘natural’ body meaningless. [...] Whether male or female, the human body is thus already coded, placed in a social network, and given meaning in and by culture, the male being constituted as virile or phallic, the female as passive and castrated. There are not the results of biology, but of the *social and psychical meaning of the body*.⁸

Language is a powerful tool and also a means of subjugation as proved by female experience throughout history. Irigaray does not necessarily offer a strategy that would transform the discourse, so firmly rooted in masculine power and domination, instead she brings another understanding of how language works and of all the challenges it poses to women.

One of the basic claims of French feminist theory is that there is no such thing as a women’s language; Xavière Gauthier, a French feminist critic and journalist, offers a clear explanation of the issue:

[...] certain qualities are attributed to women, and are seen as particularly “feminine” (intuition, sensitivity, etc.); but it is men who render these judgments. Therefore the writing of ‘woman’ will respond to their expectations and will reassure them. This is a masculine point of view. In the second case, woman (though slightly retarded) is considered to be “like” a man or is in-the-process of becoming a man. This point of view is equally masculine and reassuring – it is one that can emanate only from a phallic system – and many women give in without any problem at all.⁹

⁸ Grosz 111.

⁹ Xavière Gauthier, “Is There Such a Thing As Women’s Writing?” *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980) 162.

Even when women attempt to write, to express themselves, to bring into the open female sexuality and experience, they do so in a language that is not their own, but instead is constructed and owned by men. Women are alienated to such an extent that they are blind to the oppressive and foreign nature of the language they speak, a language based on and which revolves around the phallus. It is exactly this crucial issue, the phallogentricity of the only available language and means of expression and representation that serve as an impetus for the theories of Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray, and inspire their work on representation and discourse.

Women's mode of writing is impossible to define according to Cixous, as it exists beyond the realm of the phallogentric discourse, yet it can be glimpsed in women's waves, floods, outbursts.¹⁰ Irigaray shares the same concerns, especially in relation to female sexuality: "For Irigaray, the problem for women is not the experience or recognition of female pleasure, but its representation, which actively constructs women's experience of their corporeality and pleasures."¹¹ Unable to express their pleasure or displeasure, their desires or needs, women are more and more alienated from what would enable them to create their own language; they are caught in a male-defined system that only perpetuates their subjugation and the culture of exchange of women among men.

A safe haven for women and a free space rich with creative potential is the maternal space, which underlies the paternal order, and challenges the symbolic with its pre-oedipal, semiotic energy. Cixous believe in the maternal as something which creates space for the love of the other; more exactly, her mother symbolizes "the passage to life, in and through love"¹²:

Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was "born" to her.¹³

¹⁰ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", *Signs*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) 876.

¹¹ Grosz 116.

¹² Sal Renshaw, *The Subject of Love: Hélène Cixous and the Feminine Divine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009) 112.

¹³ Cixous 881.

The maternal represents a different economy of love, of power-relations, and of nourishment. It could provide an alternative to the patriarchal order, yet one has to beware the reduction of woman only to her role in the procreation process.

Besides, as the maternal is a metaphor, it is accessible to both sexes as a cultural and political alternative to patriarchy as a system of oppression and masculine dominance. It is the semiotic that has the power to cause upheaval and rupture within the symbolic, patriarchal order. Kristeva sees the mother

[...] as a threat to the Symbolic order in two immediate ways. Her jouissance threatens to make her a subject rather than the Other against which man becomes a subject. In addition, she not only represents but is a strange fold between culture and nature that cannot be fully incorporated by the Symbolic.¹⁴

As such, maternity contains a certain creative, subversive potential that is yet to be realized. Instead motherhood has become another weapon in the hands of the masculine that tries to contain it and exercise absolute control over it.

While the French theory does not focus on the female experience per se, the female characters discussed in individual chapters find themselves in a distinct socio-historical environment that portrays female experience in opposition to male experience; accordingly and in this light, this thesis tries to balance the account of female experience, such as the complexities of motherhood, the economic subjugation of women, the issues of female sisterhood or the challenges women had to face in everyday reality, with a theoretical approach that addresses more abstract, yet equally important issues such as the position of the female within the male-dominated order, the fragmentation of the female body, both literal and

¹⁴ Oliver 50.

figurative, or the structure of the patriarchal order and its effect on the female body and voice.

The thesis is structured chronologically, examining literary works written by both male and female writers, but without the assumption that the works by women are distinctly different or “more female” in their structure and style. The argumentation is based on the feminist theory of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, and on close reading of the texts themselves. The main focus of the thesis is the position of the female heroines in patriarchal systems, the forces that work against them and shape their lives and language, and the way they face their oppressors.

The first three sections of chapter two address works that were written in the late nineteenth century, while the next three sections of chapter three focus on works written from the first half of the twentieth century, covering thus a hundred years of concise literary history. Chapter two analyzes literary works that were written in a more traditional style, and in their representations, pay more attention to female experience in completely patriarchal and male-dominated societies. Chapter three explores works in which both the style and the language reflect the changing positions of women as well as men in the new social order, where women enjoy more freedom, yet still bear the traumas of not having access to their own language, and thus not being able to voice what is part and parcel of their center of gravity.

The sub-chapter on *Washington Square*, a short novel written by Henry James, and first published in 1880, explores a father-daughter relationship, an issue that has been given a significant amount of attention by psychoanalysts, writers, and theorists, due to its crucial effect upon the psychological development of womankind. Whether a father is present or absent, loving or neglectful, his

daughter will always carry his imprint upon her soul and often upon her language, or his if you will, as is well documented by Catherine Sloper, the female heroine of the novel. Catherine is constantly belittled by her father, and her trauma is manifested in her inability to achieve a stable self, and a language of her own. Hers is a strong example of the exchange culture of women, and the use of Irigaray's theory and of a close reading of the novel allows for an understanding of Catherine's position in the nineteenth-century society and of the choice she makes at the end of the novel.

The Awakening, composed by Kate Chopin and published in 1899, is something of a breath of fresh air with the female heroine, an artist and a rebel soul, Edna Pontellier. Chopin was the first major female writer who dared to portray an extra-marital affair, a mother whose desires went far beyond being only a mother, and whose heroine reclaimed the right to make her own decisions. The novel poses crucial questions about the institution of motherhood and how to balance woman's inner desires and needs with the demands of motherhood and the society's expectations of women to be perfect mothers and to find complete fulfillment only in that role, which is at the same time used by men to domesticate and to imprison women at home and to establish the idea that it is "natural" to women. Another key issue the novel brings up is female sexuality and its position in a patriarchal order, where only male sexuality is considered the norm while the female one an anomaly. The section on *The Awakening* discusses both and aims to expose the various sides of the female psyche that coexist within a woman yet are irreconcilable under the firm reign of patriarchy.

Lily Bart, the ever so vivid and remarkable heroine of *The House of Mirth*, a novel by Edith Wharton, published at the turn of the century in 1905, portrays how deep the idea of being a beautiful commodity runs in a woman and how

destructive an effect it may have on her status and mode of being. Lily is torn between her external self, the one enforced upon her by the masculine oriented society, and the internal one, barely alive in her unconscious, but struggling to make itself heard. The conflict between her need to fulfill the desire of others and her own growing need to make her own decisions is unsolvable in a capitalist society dominated by men that does not allow for the free expression of female sexuality and desire.

The House of Mirth is a perfectly constructed depiction of a society which deliberately creates competition for men among women and which thus alienates them from one another, and prevents the creation of healthy female bonds and strong female role models. Lily is betrayed both by men and women and draws attention to the inner workings of the society that aims to isolate women, weaken them, and turn them into easy prey. The sub-chapter focuses on all the above-mentioned issues and explores the complexity of the female psyche and of the society that tries to diminish it completely to nil to ensure the stability and perpetuation of the patriarchal regime of power.

Lady Brett Ashley continues the tradition of strong female characters with distinct personalities, and marks her territory and claims all the attention in a strongly male-populated novel that is *The Sun Also Rises*. Ernest Hemingway created what many call “the new woman” yet the section on *The Sun Also Rises* looks at the novel via the lens of the French theorists and in so doing rethinks Brett’s position in the fictional society that Hemingway delineates; it aims to offer a fresh perspective on the character and to discuss all the restrictions men impose upon women to keep them in their servitude and in silence.

The last section is dedicated to two post-modern novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, published in 1965, and *Blood and Guts in High School*

by Kathy Acker, published in 1984. The postmodern novel is a perfect literary form to express the struggle of the female body within the dominant patriarchal order. The shifting perspectives and settings, fragmentation and the pastiche of narrative voices and strategies, so characteristic of postmodern writing, create a space free of limitations and expectations, as well as of authority and order. Both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Blood and Guts in High School* are exemplary postmodern artworks that address the chaotic, fragmented reality and the position of women within that society. Each author approaches the topic differently, but together, combining male and female perspectives, they offer a more complex and multilayered portrait of female conditions in the postwar fictional accounts of a social universe. The focus of the section is the fragmentation of the female body and the traumas of the patriarchy women bear both on their bodies and souls. In the case of Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*, attention will be paid to the nature of reality and its relation to women's freedom or lack thereof. More than that, the section on Pynchon and on Acker will ponder the question of how to achieve the balance between what is considered male and female within one's subjectivity and whether the border between the two is anything more than an artificial construct meant to create a chasm between the two sexes.

Using the feminist theory of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, the thesis aims to trace the steps of remarkable and outstanding female heroines and answer such big questions as whether they are courageous enough to explore the darker, destructive, yet liberating side of their psyches, and whether they manage to break out of the traditional discourse and repossess their bodies. It is the fragmented self, so often appearing in literature that psychoanalytic feminism sees as "an opportunity to create a new self in the freedom of

isolation'¹⁵, and the body of the language constructed by both male and female writers that will reveal the complexity and true nature of woman.

¹⁵ Deborah L. Madsen, *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 2000) 98.

Chapter 2: Women Caught in a Tradition

2.1 *Washington Square*

The first chapter of *Washington Square* by Henry James strangely starts with a description of doctor Austin Sloper, a distinguished physician living in New York; a man of great character, intellect and wit. While the story later on revolves around doctor Sloper's daughter, Catherine, who is keenly awaited by the reader, she is introduced almost as a mere after-thought later in chapter one. It is at first the future Mrs. Sloper, Miss Catherine Harrington, who is introduced and praised as a graceful, elegant, and rich girl, who later makes a charming wife and brings into the world "a little boy of extraordinary promise"¹⁶ for whom doctor Sloper has high hopes, but who dies at the age of three, only to be later replaced by "an inadequate substitute"¹⁷ of a girl. When Mrs. Sloper dies a week after the birth, all that doctor Sloper has left is the poor girl, a replacement of the dead son and of the dead mother whose name she bears. It is Catherine's sex that renders her a disappointment from the very beginning, and she cannot ever overcome this fact.

Catherine is partly brought up by her father and partly by her aunt Lavinia, doctor Sloper's sister, who is not much of a thinker herself, but is willing to take up the job. Doctor Sloper does not invest that much of his energy and attention into raising his daughter, since his opinions on the female sex are forever cemented as rather negative:

Save when he felt in love with Catherine Harrington, he had never been dazzled, indeed, by any feminine characteristics whatever; and though he was to a certain extent what is called a ladies' doctor, his private opinion of the more complicated sex was not exalted. [...] His wife had been a reasonable woman, but she was a bright exception; among several things that he was sure of, this was perhaps the principal.¹⁸

There is no chance for Catherine to ever prove her father mistaken since, due to her sex, she will always be thought of as inferior to men. From the beginning, her

¹⁶ Henry James, *Washington Square* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Classics, 1986) 29.

¹⁷ James 29.

¹⁸ James 32.

character, potential, and future are condemned to always lack that something that could lift her up to the level of her father. No matter what she could become if given the chance, her father has already decided for her that her sex marks her as inadequate and deficient, and thus locks her in the role of a “mere woman”.

Not only is Catherine considered not clever enough, she is also described as having a “plain, dull, gentle countenance”¹⁹. There is very little it seems that could be considered interesting about Catherine Sloper, and she raises no objection to that. However, what her father praises about her is that she is “affectionate, docile, obedient, and much addicted to speaking the truth.”²⁰ In fact, what doctor Sloper likes is that Catherine obeys him and is what women are supposed to be like – submissive and unresisting. Catherine is good and that is sufficient for her father. He does not ask of her to be in any way special or exceptional, because that would not go with his image of a good girl. If Catherine were any different from her father’s own image of her, she would not fit into his world, or into the world of all men, and there would be no other viable role for her in the society.

According to Luce Irigaray, a French feminist, philosopher and psychoanalyst, women have been allowed to enter the discourse only through acts of mimesis: “There is in an initial phase, perhaps only one “path”, the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry.”²¹ It is to be understood and it is exemplified by Catherine Sloper too, that women occupy positions and imitate roles that have been defined and provided by men, since women have not been allowed to create their own. As elaborated in “Luce Irigaray’s Philosophy of Feminine Being: Body, Desire and Wisdom” by Virpi Lehtinen:

Furthermore, the figures and characters that women can imitate in the discourse are either ideals of woman constituted on the basis of masculine needs and desires [...] or else, predetermined ideals of humanity which, according to Irigaray, are forged for man and the masculine.²²

¹⁹ James 34.

²⁰ James 34.

²¹ Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 76.

²² Lehtinen 51.

Women are expected to fulfill the roles men have established for them and Catherine as an obedient, loving daughter fits the role her father has imagined for her. Sloper does not think of his daughter as an independent being with her own desires and wishes, instead he wants her to submit to his own rules and as such, she reinforces his own image of himself as the superior one.

It has been instilled into Catherine, she has been unconsciously convinced by her surroundings that her role is to be inferior, to be a good daughter, and to please and admire her father as her superior, as almost a higher being. It is her role in life and a single thought does not pass her mind that would tell her it can be otherwise:

She was extremely fond of her father, and very much afraid of him; she thought him the cleverest and handsomest and most celebrated of men. [...] Her deepest desire was to please him, and her conception of happiness was to know that she had succeeded in pleasing him.²³

Doctor Sloper likes to think of himself as better and above women and treats his own daughter dismissively. He thus perpetuates Catherine's inferiority and keeps her in her place. He is not willing to let Catherine prove to him that she has potential, and by insisting and enforcing this assumption, he manages to convince even Catherine herself that it is true. As the James scholar, Erik S. Roraback emphasizes: "Dr Sloper's cheap and cruel stereotyping underwrite his incapacity to do justice to Catherine's particularity, to her victorious individuality."²⁴ The reason is that she is a woman and as such, in his mind, she is not capable of ever becoming more. Despite his intelligence and education doctor Sloper cannot rise above the basic chauvinistic attitude that women cannot ever equal men.

Catherine has grown into a painfully shy woman who idealizes her father, is not confident enough to be her own person, and cannot imagine her existence separate from her father. As a result, her ability to express herself equates to practically nothing, and what she can articulate is only what she has been taught by her father. Her verbal deficiency is balanced out by her taste for dress: "Her great indulgence of it was really the desire of a rather inarticulate nature to manifest itself; she sought to be eloquent in her garments, and to make up for her

²³ James 34.

²⁴ Erik S. Roraback, *The Dialectics of Late Capital and Power: James, Balzac and Critical Theory* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) 78.

diffidence of speech by a fine frankness of costume.”²⁵ Not allowed to create a language of her own that would enable her to articulate herself, Catherine instead uses non-verbal means such as clothing to manifest her personality. She is not given the chance and space to develop her style, for she is disqualified from the very start by her father and his dismissiveness, and when she tries to express herself through her garments, even then is she put down: “It made him [her father] fairly grimace, in private, to think that a child of his should be both ugly and overdressed. [...] It simply appeared to him proper and reasonable that a well-bred young woman should not carry her fortune on her back.”²⁶ Catherine is deprived of the right to be different from her father’s own image of herself and she is constantly judged according to the rules set by him. Nevertheless, clothing remains the only way Catherine is able to some extent to express herself on her own terms.

When Mr. Townsend appears at Mrs. Almond’s party, Catherine’s aunt, Catherine is immediately dazzled by his handsome face, and swept away by his sincerity and interest in her. In her goodness, Catherine cannot imagine someone would be interested only in her money and her admiration for her father expands into admiration for Morris, whom she idolizes the same way she idolizes her father. It is her father who has taught Catherine unconditionally and blindly to admire and submit to men so it is no surprise Catherine cannot see through Townsend’s sham and instead falls prey to his plot.

The dynamics of their relationship becomes clear immediately on the first occasion they meet. Morris is overwhelmingly charming and Catherine is not able to resist him. She acts the same way she acts around her father; she does not have access into the language and she can only be quite as she has been taught: “She answered nothing; she only listened and looked at him; and he, as if he expected no particular reply, went on to say many other things in the same comfortable and natural manner.”²⁷ Catherine is not expected to say anything, because as a woman she is not supposed to do so. Her role is purely as a dependent complement to men; in Irigaray’s terminology, Catherine’s position is that of a “man’s woman”, “the idea of woman as it is formed and defined by and through man or the

²⁵ James 37.

²⁶ James 38.

²⁷ James 43.

masculine norms”²⁸. Her function is that of a “support for (masculine) identity construction and self-understanding by affirming and multiplying man’s image of himself.”²⁹ Both doctor Sloper and Morris Townsend use Catherine as a means of ensuring their superiority and masculinity. By being weak, receptive, and emotional, Catherine allows her father and Townsend to define themselves against her as her superior and exact reverse opposites.

Unsurprisingly, doctor Sloper does not favor the idea of another man in Catherine’s life that could threaten his privileged position. He has established himself as the only man in her life, and as soon as another man appears on the scene, Sloper gets defensive and starts to abuse his influence over Catherine. Doctor Sloper sees Catherine as his possession, something that is completely subordinated to him, and over which he exerts utter control. He is concerned about the well-being of Catherine and her wealth that he sees as the only attraction Catherine may possess for other men, but he shows no interest in what Catherine wants. Her father places himself in the position of the one who has the right to decide everything and to choose her future for her. Catherine’s opinions play no role whatsoever and it becomes clear that she is not counted as someone even remotely equal to him, as someone who has the capacity to make decisions.

Catherine is owned by her father, is denied the right to her own critical and expressive voice, and the right to be an active agent when it comes to her own life and future. At first, it is her father who takes charge of her life, and when Morris Townsend appears on the stage, the battle between the two of them begins. They fight over the right to possess Catherine, as if she were no more than an object, a prize. Luce Irigaray describes the position of woman in *The Sex Which Is Not One* as follows:

For woman is traditionally a use-value for men, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. As such, she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standards of their work and of their need/desire, by “subjects”: workers, merchants, consumers.³⁰

²⁸ Lehtinen 59.

²⁹ Lehtinen 59.

³⁰ Irigaray 32.

When Catherine interacts with Morris or her father, she is very often silent, has no distinct personality that would manifest itself against that of the men. She is perceived and treated as a mere commodity, as Irigaray rightly points out, and to Morris she represents power the money would eventually grant him. A woman is expected to be given away when the time comes by her father to her husband, the future owner not only of the material possessions but also of the wife. The process does not go that smoothly in the case of Catherine Sloper, since Townsend is considered a mere gold-digger by her father, who furthermore is not willing to yield his power over Catherine. The negotiations begin between doctor Sloper and Morris Townsend and they confirm Irigaray's abovenoted claim:

‘Are you sure of that?’ asked Morris; ‘are you sure your daughter will give me up?’

‘I mean, of course, you have lost it as far as I am concerned. As for Catherine's giving you up – no, I am not sure of it. But as I shall strongly recommend it, as I have a great fund of respect and affection in my daughter's mind to draw upon, and as she has the sentiment of duty developed in a very high degree, I think it extremely possible.’

Morris Townsend began to smooth his hat again. ‘I, too, have a fund of affection to draw upon,’ he observed, at last.

The Doctor at this point showed his own first symptoms of irritation. ‘Do you mean to defy me?’³¹

While the discussion is supposed to be about Catherine's future, it sounds more like a verbal competition of who holds more power over her, and who is going to win the battle for control and ownership. Catherine is presented as a commodity form that will go to whoever bids higher, and despite her shortcomings that Sloper points out repeatedly during the conversation with Townsend, Catherine is still a highly-valued possession to both men. Sloper does care about his daughter's feelings, but he is determined to break it off between Catherine and Townsend, simply because he wants to prove that he *can*. It only further confirms Irigaray's words: “Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for possession of mother

³¹ James 92.

earth.”³²

Sloper’s assumption about Morris Townsend is proved correct, and once Townsend learns that Catherine will be disinherited if she marries him, he leaves. Catherine is ready to step out of her father’s shadow, but she cannot live in a world without men, and thus she would only end up replacing one oppressor with another, not really altering the dynamics of her life at all. Morris proves himself to be simply an extension of her father, the archetypal man who perceives women only as lifeless ornaments: “Morris bent his head and kissed her forehead. ‘When you are quiet, you are perfection,’ he said; ‘but when you are violent, you are not in character.’”³³ Even though Catherine is not really being violent, the simplest manifestation of having her own mind is enough to mark her as imperfect and a disappointment.

Catherine is not strong enough to take on an active role in her own life, since the patriarchal structures laid out by men are too deeply rooted in her understanding of the world. She wants to live up to man’s expectations of her so desperately that she effaces any traces of her own personality and instead actively positions herself in the role of a passive and submissive figure. The realization that she is only seen as a precious commodity and that without her father’s money she is of no value comes as a shock: “Nevertheless, she felt a wound, even if he had not dealt it; it seemed to her that a mask had suddenly fallen from his face. He had wished to get away from her; he had been angry and cruel, and said strange things, with strange looks.”³⁴

Moreover, Morris’s behavior exposes the existence of deep alienation between women, as exemplified by Catherine’s relationship with aunt Lavinia:

‘Is it you, then, that has changed him and made him so unnatural?’ Catherine cried. ‘Is it you that have worked on him and taken him from me? He doesn’t belong to you, and I don’t see how you have anything to do with what is between us! Is it you that have made this plot and told him to leave me? How could you be so wicked, so cruel? What have I ever done to you; why can’t you leave me alone? I was afraid you would spoil everything; for you *do* spoil everything you touch; I was afraid of you all

³² Irigaray 32.

³³ James 183.

³⁴ James 185.

the time we were abroad; I had no rest when I thought that you were always talking to him.’³⁵

Lavinia competes with her niece for Morris’s attention, and hopes that the victory will confirm her superiority to Catherine. Lavinia has been a bad example for Catherine and her cruelty and indifference toward Catherine’s feelings only confirm that the natural bonds that should exist between women have been severed due to the competition for male attention. Catherine is not only used and abused by men in the novel, but by the member of her own sex as well.

Although Catherine cannot ever escape the patriarchal prison of the nineteenth century, she does manage to resist its pressure to submit to and be part of the commodity exchange of women among men. She refuses to get married and thus to fulfill the expectations of her father, and of the society as a whole, and Dr Sloper does not escape unpunished, as Roraback writes:

Yet for all Dr Sloper’s knowledge capital, he misestimates the true value of Catherine’s psychic system and wealth, her psychic courage and moral counter-capital (i.e., her inner moral intelligence and inward moral riches). This is his sentence: he *loses* his daughter's love.³⁶

Out of the debris of her love life, Catherine builds an existence free of men and of social conventions, dedicating her time to charity and to herself. At the end, she triumphs as she refuses to submit to the will of her father and maintains the right to make her own decisions now:

‘I very seldom think of Mr. Townsend.’

‘It will be very easy for you to go on, then. Promise me, after my death, to do the same.’

Again, for some moments, Catherine was silent; her father’s request deeply amazed her; it opened an old wound and made it ache afresh. ‘I don’t think I can promise that,’ she answered.

‘It would be a great satisfaction,’ said her father.

‘You don’t understand. I can’t promise that.’

³⁵ James 192.

³⁶ Roraback 76.

The Doctor was silent a minute. 'I ask you for a particular reason. I am altering my will.'³⁷

Catherine refuses to bend her own will and to satisfy her father. She maintains as much independence as is allowed to her as a woman and her father's money plays no role in the decision-making process. Dr Sloper fails to understand that material wealth is of no importance when faced with Catherine's self-respect and pride. Townsend as well fails to understand why Catherine never married, but then men never can, because their reality and experience are so different from that of women's. James gives Catherine the chance to remove herself from the patriarchal spectacle and the culture of commodity exchange of women, and she does.

2.2. *The Awakening*

The Awakening, first published in 1899, was not received well by audiences, was strongly criticized and eventually abandoned for its portrayal of an extra-marital affair, and for its challenges to the institution of motherhood. Once her stories displayed more sensuous and independent female characters, it became harder for Chopin to find a publisher for her work. After *The Awakening* was published, critics "violently attacked it on moral grounds. One reviewer considered Edna's love to be so 'sensual and devilish' that the book should not have been written."³⁸ During Chopin's lifetime, female sexuality was still a taboo subject, and her work became a victim of the contemporary prejudice and of patriarchal structures that did not allow for a freedom of intellectual and cultural expression. It was only in the 1960s and the 1970s that Chopin's work and contribution to literature was rediscovered and brought both to the common reader and to the student of literature. Two men behind the revivalist force were the important literary critics Edmund Wilson and Per Seyersted, and their efforts were made easier by the second wave of feminism that elevated interest in women's literature.

Seyersted was among the first who in the 1960s published on the works of Kate Chopin and a result of his long-lasting endeavors was the publication of the

³⁷ James 206.

³⁸ Kate Chopin, *Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) 30.

title, *Complete Works of Kate Chopin* and *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*.³⁹

Seyersted defines Chopin's approach to her work as follows:

As for herself, Kate Chopin concentrated on the immutable impulses of love and sex, and Whitman and Maupassant were two of the authors who spoke most deeply to her, probably because they acknowledged the existence of Eros and because they had helped to extend the literary limits to the treatment of sex. [...] Her ideal was the invisible and impersonal author who wrote with an objectivity coupled with humor and sympathy.⁴⁰

That a female writer would write about love and sex, let alone extra-marital sex, was unimaginable at the time, and Chopin went even further with *Edna Pontellier*. For Edna was a mother and not exactly an exemplary one according to the rigid contemporary ideas of what a mother was supposed to embody. Edna is driven by her impulses and follows their lead regardless of social conventions. What is exceptional about *The Awakening* is that despite Chopin's sympathy for Edna and her understanding of the harshness of women's conditions, she abstains from passing judgment, from portraying one sex as superior to the other one, from taking sides, and from giving a black-and-white picture: "She undoubtedly had her own set of social values, but though they were often at variance with those of the ruthless, money-making Gilded Age, she never preached or advocated any change."⁴¹

The dominance of men in the world of Edna Pontellier is emphasized from the very beginning. The novel opens with Edna's husband Léonce Pontellier, leisurely strolling around his living quarters on Grand Isle exuding the atmosphere of someone who is on the top of the world with the power to do anything he wants. He does not have to take anything or anyone into consideration as he is the provider, the husband, and the man. Léonce is aware of his possessions including his wife Edna: "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal

³⁹ Bernard Koloski, *Awakenings: The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009) 18.

⁴⁰ Chopin, *Complete Works* 24.

⁴¹ Chopin, *Complete Works* 27.

property which has suffered some damage.”⁴² He is used to giving orders while receiving none:

‘Well, send him about his business when he bores you, Edna,’ instructed her husband as he prepared to leave. [...] ‘Coming back to dinner?’ his wife called after him. He halted a moment and shrugged his shoulders. He felt in his vest pocket; there was a ten-dollar bill there. He did not know; perhaps he would return for the early dinner and perhaps he would not.⁴³

It immediately becomes clear that Edna is one of the objects in the Pontellier household and that as a wife, she is not deemed equal to her husband. Léonce likes to make sure that is the case, and to preserve that dynamic of domination in the family. When Léonce comes back from a bar and finds Edna uninterested in his activities, he starts to reproach her for her lack of maternal qualities and care, even when it is obvious that his sole goal is to remind Edna of her inferior position and show her he has the upper hand:

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? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way.⁴⁴

One could almost say that the inattention and neglect is not of the children, but of himself; that Léonce expects Edna to replace his mother in her unconditional love and care toward him that he now requires of his wife. Léonce shows his importance and his conviction that he by far surpasses Edna. Moreover, he does not show any anger or actual alarm, instead he seems to be reproaching her out of habit, for his own comfort.

Edna's reaction is natural, but it also reveals an internal anxiety and unconscious resistance to the oppressiveness of Léonce's connubial love:

⁴² Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 44.

⁴³ Chopin, *The Awakening* 45.

⁴⁴ Chopin, *The Awakening* 48.

She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood. An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood.⁴⁵

Edna is not yet aware of what is wrong with her marriage and what causes the feelings of oppression in her, but they slowly awaken in her and fight their way out of her unconscious. This overall bodily and mental state is connected with her roles of wife and mother, both of which do not quite fit her and satisfy her. She is aware that she greatly differs from other mothers she meets at Grand Isle that summer, that she is not and does not want to be a mother-woman, but unfortunately that role seems the only available and acceptable one for women at that time. All “those“ women “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.”⁴⁶ Edna, however, did not.

Maternity is a subject of great importance for Julia Kristeva and it is her theory on pregnancy and motherhood that helps to illuminate Edna's attitude toward her children and toward her role as a mother. Maternal feelings as such are highly subjective and difficult to categorize, but it is not coincidental that both female writers and female thinkers struggle with the institution of motherhood as such, and with the way the idea of motherhood is used to subject and oppress women. For Kristeva a woman does not play any active role in her pregnancy, and being a mother marks her as a property of men:

A relation with an other/alter-ego who is also not another, the obliteration of an identity that strives for affirmation, maternity is the source of the semiotic and the precondition of the symbolic. It is the site that must be territorialised, marked by a proprietorial name, contained by it, for the

⁴⁵ Chopin, *The Awakening* 49.

⁴⁶ Chopin, *The Awakening* 51.

father's law to be accepted by the child. She must be recognized as his, and regulated by his law – hence the castrating brand etched on her body.⁴⁷

The semiotic in Kristeva's theory is related to the Freudian pre-Oedipal stage, it is the space in which a subject is formed but in which the child is still one with the mother. The semiotic is connected with the maternal language, it is the free space of one's inner drives, impulses and needs, and its uncontrollability poses a threat to the symbolic, the patriarchal language of oppression. As such, the semiotic must be decimated for the paternal order and control to establish themselves in totality in one's identity. The father becomes the authority and the mother is silenced as is the literary case of Edna Pontellier. Léonce diminishes Edna's maternal capabilities and qualities and she realizes her freedom and creativity are annihilated so as not to pose a threat to the paternal order.

What is also likely to have played a significant role not only in Chopin's own life, but in her work as well, were the social changes in American society during the 1870s and 1880s when women started to explore their independence and their creativity, which they often found were in conflict with their seemingly crucial role of mothers: "Motherhood no longer seemed to be the motivating force of writing, but rather it opposite. Thus artistic fulfillment required the sacrifice of maternal drives, and maternal fulfillment meant giving up artistic ambitions."⁴⁸ This conflict is clearly given some critical reflection on in Chopin's work, which is one of many that try to deal with the difficulty women face when they struggle to consolidate their artistic potential with the pressures of motherhood.

Edna herself spends very little time with her children and they spend most of the story of the novel outside her life and her consciousness. The children have a nurse, and Edna's role in their lives does not seem to be all that central. Nevertheless, Edna is torn between loving them and despising them. The role of a perfect mother imposed upon the female part of the society, and in the book represented by Adèle Ratignolle, is too oppressive for many, and Edna is not an exception. She is constantly set up to fail as a mother, and she does not have even a remote chance of fulfilling the expectations of the society and the role she was programmed to consider the only feasible one. It is this abyss between what the

⁴⁷ Grosz 80.

⁴⁸ Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 67.

ideal mother is supposed to be like, and what she is really like that creates a constant pressure on women.

This whole idea of identity formation is endlessly perpetuated not only by men but also by women themselves, who have internalized this predefined idea, accepted it as their own and exert pressure on other women to conform to it. Kristeva does not in any sense renounce motherhood, she does not consider motherhood itself as essentially oppressive, instead she focuses more on the way it can be utilized as an instrument of oppression by men. By implication, therefore, Kristeva's theoretical work calls for a new and independent embracing of motherhood as a creative impulse.

Moreover, motherhood as an essential purpose of woman's life has been defined and required by men who thus, like Léonce Pontellier, achieve the confinement of women to the domestic space. While women are biologically predestined to bear children and it is considered essential and natural to their sex to do so, for a long time, they had not been given the chance to express themselves and the choice to build their lives according to their own rules. Moreover, female characters such as Edna Pontellier struggle against the female capacity for maternity as the sole defining factor of being a woman; Edna is one of the first American literary depictions of a woman who has decided to become an active agent in her own life, and to define her existence through creativity and sexuality.

The image of Léonce Pontellier is unflattering from the very beginning. To put in different words for emphasis again, Léonce puts himself in the position of a possessor of valuable property that is his wife and asserts his superior role through condescension and subsequent display of generosity that makes him look like "the best husband in the world."⁴⁹ His refusal to acknowledge the state of things and the uniqueness of every human being imprisons Edna in a role of a perfect mother and wife despite her need to realize her potential through different means. Nevertheless, Léonce himself is trapped in the patriarchal order that places men in the position of masters and denigrates women as second-class citizens. Interestingly, Chopin does not portray the world as black-and-white only, she does not condemn all men as evil, and she avoids idealizing women as higher beings. Both her male and female characters are flawed in their own ways, no

⁴⁹ Chopin, *The Awakening* 50.

character in *The Awakening* is blameless, everyone has his or her own struggle and suffers from the rigid, patriarchal organization of the society. One can argue that Léonce is a victim of masculine domination as well, for he was not given a chance to think and see things differently in a society that has for centuries been based on the presumption that men are the rational ones, while women are weak, emotional, passive, and sensual.

What Edna lacks and finds in Adèle Ratignolle is a sense of community, togetherness, and eventually sisterhood. What awakens her repressed self is not Robert, a potential lover, but Adèle, a friend, a confidant, and the symbol of the ideal mother that Edna was denied when her own mother died:

That summer at Grand Isle she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her. There may have been—there must have been—influences, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways to induce her to do this; but the most obvious was the influence of Adèle Ratignolle. The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty. Then the candor of the woman's whole existence, which every one might read, and which formed so striking a contrast to her own habitual reserve—this might have furnished a link. Who can tell what metals the gods use in forging the subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love.⁵⁰

Adèle's sensuous beauty, natural charm, and physical ease are in direct opposition to Edna's rigidity and coldness, and it is those characteristics that she admires and seeks in Adèle and that attract her so strongly. However, Elizabeth LeBlanc, the author of "The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*", rightly points out that the community itself at Grand Isle is hardly a female haven:

Instead it becomes a sexually (in)different world, male rather than female. It is an intensely patriarchal, intensely heterosexual community where the 'mother-women' dominate only because they so perfectly represent the

⁵⁰ Chopin, *The Awakening* 57-58.

male construction of female sexuality. The resort is organized entirely around the comfort, concerns, and privilege of men.⁵¹

It is only the intimate friendship between Edna and Adèle that creates a certain feeling of female bond, which is however disrupted with the appearance of men on the stage.

As a child, Edna was aloof, tense, and self-contained, not accustomed to physical relations with her family that manifests in her early mind affairs with various men that never transfer into corporeal reality, and in her later life in her platonic relationship with Robert that Edna dreams about, but has no desire to bring to bodily life. Adèle, on the other hand, represents not only a mother figure but someone with whom Edna feels safe and at ease with regard to her own sensuality. The intimacy she at first cannot tolerate from Robert is natural to her when shared with Adèle. Chopin does not take their relationship far enough to explore the true nature of the love that is mentioned in the quote, but she does hint at the ease and freedom women feel around one another and stresses the importance of female friendship. LeBlanc draws attention to a possible interpretation of Edna's lesbian tendency: "One antipatriarchal theoretical stance demonstrated in *The Awakening* holds that love between women has been deliberately suppressed throughout history so as to uphold male power and privilege."⁵² The issue of the suppression of female bonds is very relevant as it seems to be a deliberate masculine strategy to reinforce its privilege. The alienation of women from one another leads to the weakening of the feminine as will be demonstrated in the following chapters as well.

Once Edna liberates herself from social conventions and barriers and decides to explore not only her awakened sexuality but also her own self, buried so deep under pretense and facades, she attaches herself strongly to Robert who is right at hand. While she rejects him and is not interested in him at first, she soon finds he is by her side all the time, is enchanted with her, and provides enough space for a fantasy affair, and finally decides to let him in. Edna's awakening sexuality is searching for an outlet and Robert simply happens to be in the right place at the right time. The lesbian love Chopin might have hinted at in relation to

⁵¹ Elizabeth LeBlanc, "The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1996): 292, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/464138>> October 2, 2015.

⁵² LeBlanc 290.

Adèle is beyond imaginable, and thus it is Robert who is given the role of the ideal love that would fulfill Edna's needs and desire while at the same time allowing her to explore the freedom she strives to achieve.

However, it is not only Edna's sexuality that awakens in her, but also a new self-awareness, an awareness of her position in the universe and in relation to other people; something that Donald A. Ringe calls "the transcendentalist theory of self-discovery"⁵³ in his article "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*". Ringe argues that while many critics focus on the question of sexual freedom and experience in the novel, there is more that needs addressing and that is "the emergence of the self or soul into a new life"⁵⁴. To talk only of Edna's sexual escapades would mean to reduce the complexity and multi-layeredness of her situation and the choices she makes. It is the juxtaposition of two opposing forces that is at the heart of the novel – female sexuality versus female independence. Edna is torn between the two and cannot achieve equilibrium, harmony, and fulfillment. The consolidation of the two is impossible and results in Edna's failure to construct a new existence for herself.

Edna longs for freedom and for the right to live her life in whatever way she sees fit. Her first attempts at reclaiming her own life are represented by her learning to swim:

Edna had attempted all summer to learn to swim. She had received instructions from both the men and women; in some instances from the children. [...] A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand nearby that might reach out and reassure her. But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. [...] A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before.⁵⁵

⁵³ Donald A. Ringe, "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*", *American Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Jan 1972): 582, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2924655>> October 10, 2015.

⁵⁴ Ringe 581.

⁵⁵ Chopin, *The Awakening* 73.

It is the perfect metaphor for the process Edna is undergoing; she re-discovers herself, experiences her position in the world and learns how to exist in the world as her own person. Like a child, without the reassuring hand nearby, Edna casts away her husband and children that up to this point replaced her existence with theirs. As a person, she was reduced to the roles of a mother and wife, and only now does she learn who she is as a woman. In the discovery of her soul, which is hers and hers only, there is also a danger looming, a danger for those who are pioneers and find themselves alone in their daring. Here Chopin indicates that maybe the time is not yet right, that Edna is a lone female wolf struggling for something that is yet to be achieved, without the strength she needs, but also without the support she will not be able to get from those who could give it to her.

As Edna learns to exist on her own, it slowly becomes clear she is “a solitary soul” to use what was originally to be the title of Chopin’s novel and then even later is thought by some scholars to have been a subtitle to the later title name that we now have. Despite Edna’s enjoyment of solitude, which scares her but also delights her, in solitude Edna also confronts the ultimate fear of death, the threat of the annihilation of her awakening self.

There is always a feeling of a certain disconnect between Edna and those around her, be it her husband, children, or lovers. She cannot relate to anyone and her art and new freedom of mind seem her only consolation. Even at a young age, Edna always fell in love with men who were absolutely unattainable: a visiting cavalry officer, an engaged young man, a great tragedian, who all sooner or later “went the way of dreams.”⁵⁶

Robert Lebrun brings excitement and joy into Edna’s life, and she becomes dependent on him. When he leaves for Mexico, life suddenly seems dull and colorless, and Edna starts to cherish his memory and uses it to pull herself through the difficult process of emancipation. Whatever she does, the picture of Robert is always present and motivates her to keep moving. Her new self-awareness is deeply intertwined with Robert, and it is as if she were following him out of the darkness of her current life into the bright future with him by her side. What complicates the matter is that Edna runs away from her husband because she *does not* want to be anyone’s possession, she wants to be free and independent. In reality, however, she is not able to exist on her own, as her

⁵⁶ Chopin, *The Awakening* 62.

clinging to Robert proves. Her sexual awakening is in direct conflict with her awakening self, and with her need for independence.

Edna defies conventions and follows her impulses, “she was casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world.”⁵⁷ She dismisses what people think she *should* do, think, and say, and instead focuses for the first time on what she wants. Nevertheless, she is still dependent on having a man by her side, either an imaginary Robert or her actual lover Alcée Arobin. At first, her fantasies are sustained by her memories of and longing for Robert. Even though nothing really happens between them, Edna lives on her fantasies of him and her new self is built upon Robert’s admiration and love. Arobin, on the other hand, fulfills her sexual needs and lets her explore her physicality. Edna is both torn between and distanced from both of them. The Robert she loves is a phantom living in her dreams, while Arobin is a fling that somehow happened to Edna and which she considers a sexual adventure devoid of any deep emotional meaning. It is when she is alone that Edna enjoys her new existence and looks at things with new eyes: “When Edna was at last alone, she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief. A feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her. She walked all through the house, from one room to another, as if inspecting it for the first time.”⁵⁸ Yet both her affairs tie her down and trap her in the world she tries to escape, a patriarchal world in which she is an object of man’s desire.

Edna falls prey to the reproductive mimesis, as defined by Luce Irigaray, which allows women access to discourse that is otherwise dominated by men. The cost, however, is that Edna ends up in the position of a man: “a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) ‘subject’ that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference.”⁵⁹ Edna unconsciously mimics men around her, “she was talking like her father,”⁶⁰ “she drank the liquor from the glass as a man would have done.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, it results in her inability to fully establish an authentic, female existence of her own.

⁵⁷ Chopin, *The Awakening* 108.

⁵⁸ Chopin, *The Awakening* 126.

⁵⁹ Irigaray 76.

⁶⁰ Chopin, *The Awakening* 128.

⁶¹ Chopin, *The Awakening* 133.

The failure of her emancipatory struggles becomes apparent when Edna finally comes face to face with Robert. Her fantasies about Robert's return are unfulfilled and she is left with reminiscence of their past. Robert does not act the way she has expected and she desperately tries to keep alive her dreams of their shared future. Robert's return from Mexico reveals the clash between reality and Edna's illusions; while Edna sees Robert as someone who has awoken her real self and has set her free, Robert's behavior betrays his selfishness and a typical male ego that Edna has been for so long struggling with in her husband. Robert is offended when he finds Arobin's photo in Edna's apartment. And when Edna defends her independence, Robert lacks any understanding of Edna's behavior or motivation:

‘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; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both.’ His face grew a little white. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked.⁶²

Robert is attracted to Edna, may even be in love with her, but for the wrong reasons. He does not understand the new, real Edna, and her independence and strength scare him. Robert's behavior also undermines Edna's awakening itself; Edna admits that Robert has awoken her and that she has been dreaming of their future all along, but that goes against her emancipation and refutes her so-called independence. Edna is never really free and when she reaches the realization, she decides to end her life.

Edna's imprisonment is more abstract than concrete and it is Adèle Ratignolle who reminds her: “Think of the children. Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!”⁶³ It makes Edna see that she will never be free because the society will not allow her, that she will never have power over her life. There is also an implied doubt about her actions regarding her children: “I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right – except children, perhaps – and even

⁶² Chopin, *The Awakening* 167.

⁶³ Chopin, *The Awakening* 172.

then, it seems to me – or it *did* seem-.”⁶⁴ The turmoil in Edna’s feelings and thoughts lead her one last time to Grand Isle and the final moments of her life on the beach reveal her inability to accept loneliness, which is a constant companion to all women who decide to go against the tide:

There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days.⁶⁵

Edna also cannot accept motherhood as a defining element, motherhood as such in all its demands and limitations, and also motherhood abused by the society and used to subordinate and imprison women.

There is a thin line between understanding or condemning Edna’s giving up and committing suicide, but the choice always belongs to the woman and the right to judge to no one; it is the message Edna leaves for the reader that women should be given the right to make decisions for themselves without any judgment hanging above their heads. Despite the tragic end, Edna has been an inspiration to many female writers, and she managed to draw attention to the oppressive forces embedded in patriarchal society, which imprisons women and leaves them no other choice than an extreme one when they start to long for the right of self-determination.

2.3. *The House of Mirth*

The House of Mirth is a story of gradual social and moral decline of its unforgettable heroine Lily Bart. Its author Edith Wharton oscillates between realism and romance, and the question of female identity and of its formation takes Lily Bart on a journey full of hardships and human failings.

Lily Bart is slowly approaching the age of thirty, the hush-hush time of spinsterhood, is unmarried and without means, and thus reveals a female world

⁶⁴ Chopin, *The Awakening* 171.

⁶⁵ Chopin, *The Awakening* 175.

that usually remains hidden to the reader. *The House of Mirth* breaks with the tradition of portraying young women in their quest for love and for marriage, and instead poses a question what happens when a woman for various reasons does not fit the limited role the society has created for her. Lily Bart is a character full of contradictions, both the Perfect Lady and a rebellious maturing woman; many questions remain unanswered, possibilities unfulfilled, and Lily's mind and character veiled by social pretenses and imposed patterns that Lily is unable to break. Lily's journey gives the reader a chance to witness the challenges women have to face in a patriarchal society and the dysfunctional relations both between women and between the two opposite sexes.

Lily's role in the society is purely ornamental and she knows nothing else. She is used to adorning and looking beautiful and it is the only role available to her. She is met with rejection, condemnation, and punishment whenever she tries to step out of that role and is too weak to succeed on her own. Interestingly, Wharton offers a critique of both the way men treat women and the way women treat one another; the comparison is striking and helps to throw light upon a society in which men dominate not only the social scene in general but have the power to shape female communities as well. In Lily's case, as is the case with women in general, the root of the problem lies in Lily's childhood and in her relationship with her parents.

Lily is from an early age conditioned by her mother to exist as a being of pleasure and luxury. Her beauty is praised as the sole defining factor of her existence in the world and being beautiful as her sole purpose in life. Lily's early life is dominated by her mother while her father lives in shadows, a figure unclear and of very little importance; as a man he is reduced to the role of the breadwinner and has no other distinct identity, representing men removed from the private sphere and confined to the public one with heavy expectations laid upon them, the first example of the way men are treated in *The House of Mirth*:

Ruling the turbulent element called home was the vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags, while the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the clocks. Even to the eyes of infancy, Mrs. Hudson Bart had appeared young; but Lily could not recall the time when her father had not been bald and slightly

stooping, with streaks of grey in his hair, and a tired walk. [...] In this desultory yet agitated fashion life went on through Lily's teens: a zig-zag broken course down which the family craft glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need—the need of more money. Lily could not recall the time when there had been money enough, and in some vague way her father seemed always to blame for the deficiency.⁶⁶

It is clear from the excerpt that the worlds of men and women are alienated as are individual characters. The marriage of the Barts can hardly be thought to be based on love, instead it is money that draws women to men and a semblance of luxury and the need of social pretenses that draw men to women. Men and women of *The House of Mirth* live in separate worlds that never meet and their lives never collide. Mrs. Bart expects only money from her husband and instills in her daughter that that is what men are there for. The situation of her husband is worse since he gains nothing from his marriage, being far removed from his home and from the familial affairs, and lives under constant pressure to perform as is expected of men.

Lily grows up with no tangible father model and thus when she later deals with men, her behavior manifests a lack of knowledge of the world of men and of what to expect of them. As a child, she is not equipped with any practical knowledge that would later help her survive on her own but at the same time, instead “she had been brought up in the faith that, whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be what Mrs. Bart called "decently dressed.”⁶⁷ Unfortunately, Lily is left to live in a ruthless society where there are no allies or friends, where one has to be cunning and skilled to make it out alive, and where being decently dressed is an expensive hobby and is still not quite enough.

More than that, Mrs. Bart ascribes so much importance to Lily's beauty, a trait so fleeting and fickle, that Lily does not think of herself in any other terms or of a future in which her beauty will start fading away as it always does. Lily's unhealthy fixation upon her physical appearance is caused by her upbringing and only perpetuated by the patriarchal society in which woman's beauty is the only

⁶⁶ Wharton 47-48.

⁶⁷ Wharton 48.

currency she possesses. Irigaray opens a chapter called “Women on the Market” from her tome *This Sex Which Is Not One* saying:

The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women. Without the exchange of women, we are told, we would fall back into the anarchy (?) of the natural world, the randomness (?) of the animal kingdom. The passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo.⁶⁸

This is exactly what Lily is being prepared for by her mother, who herself was part of the exchange when her husband-to-be purchased her to be his, offering protection and financial security. Mrs. Bart readily accepts the necessity of the above-mentioned exchange because that is what she knows and because there is simply no other way around it. As Lily Bart slowly learns throughout her decline, to try to go against the established order is to face punishment and doom.

Lily Bart has been on the market for eleven years when the reader meets her through the eyes of Lawrence Selden at the Grand Central Station, another man that fails Lily due to his superiority and cowardice:

She stood apart from the crowd, letting it drift by her to the platform or the street, and wearing an air of irresolution which might, as he surmised, be the mask of a very definite purpose. It struck him at once that she was waiting for someone, but he hardly knew why the idea arrested him. There was nothing new about Lily Bart, yet he could never see her without a faint movement of interest: it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions. [...] He declared himself entirely at her disposal: the adventure struck him as diverting. As a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart; and his course lay so far out of her orbit that it amused him to be drawn for a moment into the sudden intimacy which her proposal implied.⁶⁹

The opening of the novel reveals important information about the society Lily Bart lives in; Lily is introduced through the eyes of a man for men decide the

⁶⁸ Irigaray 170.

⁶⁹ Wharton 25-26.

value women have and they objectify women for their pleasure. As a woman, she is also exposed to all judgment and speculation without any means of protecting herself and her reputation. Lawrence sees himself as a spectator and that is the general role of men in *The House of Mirth*, they lead separate lives from their wives but they observe women, judge their value and purchase them when they find the female “object” desirable enough. It also shows the ignorance and indifference on the part of Selden as to how Lily’s visit with him may affect her reputation and future prospects and it is exactly this point that changes the course of Lily's life. Men have the freedom to do as they see fit and they do not have to fear the consequences of spontaneous behavior while women are imprisoned in a cage that men have constructed for them and that does not allow them the same freedom. Lawrence rightly notices that “She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.”⁷⁰

The fatal mistake Lily makes of daring to enjoy a few moments of spontaneity with Lawrence Selden comes to haunt her, costs her any future prospects of a marriage, and brings to her life a hope of something better that confuses her head and heart but never becomes a real possibility. First, it is a woman scrubbing the floors and then Mr. Rosedale, surprisingly, the only sympathetic, if only too cunning, male character in the novel, who spots her leaving a bachelor’s flat. The problem is not only that Lily lives in a 19th century society, but that the society is still strongly patriarchal, treating women solely as beautiful objects and which is based upon the exchange of women and all it entails. The more obvious challenge is that Lily throws her good reputation in jeopardy and her reputation is all she has besides her beauty. To have any value she needs to maintain her ethereal beauty and spotless reputation that make her an expensive and coveted prize.

The less obvious reason, the one that Irigaray clarifies clearly in her work, is what underlies the culture of exchange:

Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier, a “likeness” with

⁷⁰ Wharton 29.

reference to an authoritative model. A commodity—a woman—is divided into two irreconcilable “bodies“: her “natural” body and her socially valued, exchangeable body which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values. [...] The commodity is thus a dual entity as soon as its value comes to possess a phenomenal form of its own, distinct from its natural form: that of exchange value. And it never possesses this form if it is considered in isolation. A commodity has this phenomenal form added on to its nature only in relation to another commodity.⁷¹

It is not only Lily’s beauty, but also the social value she possesses in comparison with other women that surround her. She is extraordinary and highly-valued as long as she maintains her sense of being untouchable and beyond the reach of most men. Lily must remain virginal and innocent so as to reflect men’s needs and desire, and to be available as a commodity article to be exchanged between men or groups of men. Lily, in particular, has been long successful at making herself a luxurious and enchanting object to be around, to speculate about, and to evaluate. She has thus far played her role well as a commodity awaiting its exchange, thus keeping the society in order, and the order in the right balance. However, her lying to Mr. Rosedale is only one of her transgressions against the established order and it results in the exposure of the deeply patriarchal and ruthless workings of the society.

At the age of twenty-nine, Lily is slowly approaching the point in her life at which she is supposed to get married and disappear from the exchange market. She herself is well aware of it: “I’ve been about too long—people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry.”⁷² Yet, her behavior reveals a split in her personality, in what she supposedly wants on the outside and in what stirs deep in her mind and unconsciously challenges the patterns in which she is supposed to act and exist. Most of the time, she is the Perfect Lady, as Elaine Showalter titles her in *Sister’s Choice*, “her skills and morality are those of the Perfect Lady. [...] In every crisis she rises magnificently to the occasion as we see when Bertha insults her, her aunt disinherits her Rosedale rejects her.”⁷³ She is constantly aware of every detail of her behavior, of her physical appearance, and

⁷¹ Irigaray 179-180.

⁷² Wharton 31.

⁷³ Showalter 87.

of her surroundings. She patiently endures being used by her female friends in exchange for their hospitality, entertains the most boring of her acquaintances, and silently accepts the inevitable faith of being traded for by men around her.

On the other hand, Wharton subtly portrays the way the role of the Perfect Lady limits Lily's growth and identity formation, prevents her from achieving a true self, and from overcoming her narcissism. Moreover, some of Lily's actions call into question her complaisance and subordination; there is a doubt in Lily as to what she is to expect of life, to what is expected of her. When Lily visits Selden in his flat, they touch upon the topic: "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?" She sighed. "I suppose so. What else is there?"⁷⁴ Lily's response suggests that even though she has been perfectly trained in what is expected of her, she is not quite resigned to her fate but gropes for something different that would show her a way out. As the story progresses, there are many instances that show Lily's unconscious sabotaging her conscious attempts at fulfilling her role of a mere commodity.

During her encounter with Percy Gryce, a rich, yet timid and mediocre heir, on a train to Belmont Lily shows her masterful social skills:

She questioned him intelligently, she heard him submissively; and, prepared for the look of lassitude which usually crept over his listeners' faces, he grew eloquent under her receptive gaze. [...] She had once more shown her talent for profiting by the unexpected, and dangerous theories as to the advisability of yielding to impulse were germinating under the surface of smiling attention which she continued to present to her companion.⁷⁵

Lily's behavior is most of the time acting, pretending to be someone she is not, repressing the unconscious stirrings of her soul. Moments like this one make it difficult to make one's mind up about Lily Bart; on one hand, her every word is skillfully planned to a detail and she tries to sell herself to the richest bidder, on the other hand, the little insights one gets into her mind imply she is tired of the pretending, but is bound by social practices that have been drilled into her ever since she was a child:

⁷⁴ Wharton 31.

⁷⁵ Wharton 40.

She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce—the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice—but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life. It was a hateful fate—but how escape from it? What choice had she?⁷⁶

Can one expect Lily to be any different? To overcome the shadow of the Perfect Lady requires courage but can women have the courage to do so knowing they will be shunned and left with nothing? *The House of Mirth* perfectly illustrates the complexities of woman's situation at the turn of the twentieth century; Lily Bart deep down craves a different fate but she is at the same time conditioned to obey and to follow the path of other women. Not that she has any other choice because there simply are no opportunities for women of her class. Yes, Lily is spoilt and desires luxury, but the question remains whether that is what she really wants or what she has been brought up to want without questioning it.

One can look for answers again in Luce Irigaray's *Sex Which Is Not One: Woman*, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is now her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything even asking for more, so long as he will 'take' her as his 'object' when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants.⁷⁷

Lily Bart is a blank canvas upon which men project their fantasies and desires and she mirrors them back in order to assure them of their own existence, correctness, and power. Is that her wish? The conflict between her conscious and unconscious selves is constant and her wish never quite becomes clear. Lily is trapped by that part of herself that has fallen prey to the ruthless patriarchal society that needs her to obey and prostitute herself to keep the world spinning and to preserve the

⁷⁶ Wharton 44.

⁷⁷ Irigaray 25.

superiority of men. She cannot fully know what she desires because her desire has been replaced by the male one.

The symbolic order, the world of language, is painfully insufficient and limiting and so much more for women because the language they adopt and speak is not theirs, it is the language of men, alienated from female experience. Lily speaks the language of her oppressors and it fails her; she never finds the words to express herself, to verbalize what she wants, who she *is*. She is mute and her muteness serves well men around her because she cannot defy them.

Lily's constant going back and forth on her future is due to her inability to find her own words and language and also due to the men around her who silence her in order to overpower and to conquer her. As a woman, her voice is worth very little, less than her body, which has at least the *exchange* value, and Lily has learnt that trying to use her own language has far-reaching consequences. She is torn between the prospects of a comfortable future and her negligence to act on the opportunity and to top off her previous efforts. Lily acts on her plans to charm Percy Gryce and to persuade him she is the best article to be purchased, and thus she conforms to the demands of the ruthless patriarchy:

But Lily had known the species before: she was aware that such a guarded nature must find one huge outlet of egoism, and she determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it.⁷⁸

Lily desires to be part of the world that eventually crushes her to death and she seems willing to play the game as long as she is recognized for the precious commodity she wants to be. Nevertheless, she sabotages her own efforts to be part of that society and draws attention to the impossibility of her situation. Lawrence Selden distracts her and tempts her with words that promise freedom but in reality are devoid of any actual, tangible base; he cannot offer her any prospect of a future in which she is more than a beautiful object. Moreover, Lily does not know what she wants. Her desire has been crushed under the patriarchal order and her desire has become man's desire; she lives with the impression that she *wants* to be purchased by a wealthy man who will make her his most valued possession but she has very little space to think differently.

⁷⁸ Wharton 65.

Lily is aware that for some reason her behavior and fate are impossible to explain and understand logically:

Had she shown an undue eagerness for victory? Has she lacked patience, pliancy and dissimulation? Whether she charged herself with these faults or absolved herself from them, made no difference in the sum-total of her failure. Younger and plainer girls had been married off by dozens, and she was nine-and-twenty, and still Miss Bart. She was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself. But what manner of life would it be?⁷⁹

Lily's mind reveals she has had thought of defying the social order and of liberating herself from the expectations of men, yet it is only the presence of Lawrence Selden that brings about changes in Lily's life. It is for Lawrence Selden that Lily neglects the necessary steps she needs to take in order to become Gryce's wife; she yields to what her heart and her unconscious urge her to do:

She had an idea that the sight of her in a grey gown of devotional cut, with her famous lashes drooped above a prayer-book, would put the finishing touch to Mr. Gryce's subjugation, and render inevitable a certain incident which she had resolved should form a part of the walk they were to take together after luncheon. Her intentions in short had never been more definite; but poor Lily, for all the hard glaze of her exterior, was inwardly as malleable as wax. Her faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings, if it served her now and then in small contingencies, hampered her in the decisive moments of life. She was like a water-plant in the flux of the tides, and today the whole current of her mood was carrying her toward Lawrence Selden.⁸⁰

Lily throws away a chance at marrying the wealthy Percy Gryce who would provide her with everything she supposedly desires. She follows her heart and seeks out Lawrence Selden. Yet, the above-mentioned unpredictable current of her mood confirms Irigaray's claim that women no longer know what they want, they have no language of any sort that would enable them to formulate their very

⁷⁹ Wharton 56.

⁸⁰ Wharton 68.

own wishes and desires; Lily follows Selden because she knows she is the reason he has showed up at Bellmont. What does *Lily* want though?

Lily's mood is unstable and prone to extreme change, yet her mood is, as is her existence, dependent upon men. Selden awakens in her feelings of budding love, of hope their love would give her life and would widen the horizon of her future. It is love Lily feels for Selden that brings "a sense of lightness, that glow of freedom"⁸¹ and it is Selden's presence that gives Lily the reason to consider herself and her life in a different perspective, one in which she would be a more active agent. Lily very well understand her position in the society but she also thinks for herself and manifests a surprising degree of self-awareness: "If you mean that a girl who has no one to think for her is obliged to think for herself, I am quite willing to accept the imputation."⁸² When on her own, Lily's weakness and loneliness dawn on her, and she cannot resist the tentacles of the patriarchal order, yet with a glimmer of hope she is willing to look beyond the immediate need of luxury and beauty:

She leaned forward with a responsive flesh. 'I know – I know – it's strange; but that's just what I've been feeling today.'

He met her eyes with the latent sweetness of his. 'Is this feeling so rare with you?' he said.

She blushed a little under his gaze. 'You think me horribly sordid, don't you? But perhaps it's rather that I never had any choice. There was no one, I mean to tell me about the republic of spirit.'⁸³

Lily sees Lawrence as an ally, as someone who could lead her out of the trap that everyone else around her has laid for her. What complicates the matter is Lily's supposition that Lawrence and she are in the same boat, but men in *The House of Mirth* have no capacity to function as equal partners to women and they fail to become more than mere spectators.

Men are deaf to what women have to say to them; they own the language and so they twist it and abuse it as they like, maintaining their superiority in every sphere of life. Men "congeal, freeze" the female voice until it is paralyzed and "subject women to a language that exiles them at an ever increasing distance from

⁸¹ Wharton 78.

⁸² Wharton 81.

⁸³ Wharton 81.

what perhaps they would have said [...] were already whispering”⁸⁴ to them. Lily’s confession of doubt has very little effect on Selden’s perception of her and serves as a source of amusement instead:

His attitude had been one of admiring spectatorship, and he would have been almost sorry to detect in her any emotional weakness which should interfere with the fulfillment of her aims. But now the hint of this weakness had become the most interesting thing about her. [...] From whatever angle he viewed their dawning intimacy, he could not see it as part of her scheme of life; and to be the unforeseen element in a career so accurately planned was stimulating even to a man who had renounced sentimental experiments.⁸⁵

The quote reveals two crucial information about Lawrence Selden that define his relation to Lily Bart; Selden approaches Lily as an object of study rather than a human being, he is intrigued by someone who lives in a different universe and enjoys observing her without getting involved. Secondly, Selden does not realize the complexities of woman’s situation and the utter lack of freedom they struggle with. He is incapable of overcoming his limits, looking at the world from a perspective of a woman, and at least trying to comprehend the impossibility of woman’s position in a patriarchal society. He entertains himself by taunting Lily and seducing her with false promises and silent temptations without giving consideration to the possible consequences of his actions. Moreover, Selden sets up his expectations of Lily ruthlessly high and thus he can always consider himself superior and *better* than her, while she confirms to be the failure he always expected her to be.

Impossible demands on women in general set them up for a failure before they even try to fulfill them; women must be beautiful and amusing, virginal, yet willing to prostitute and to sell themselves. The rules are so hazy and shifting that they keep women constantly on their toes and dependent on men to judge and decide *for them* what is good and bad. Woman is never allowed to be too sure of herself, to ever assume she can decide things for herself. Woman’s dependency on a man is a requirement and a cornerstone of the patriarchal society resulting in complete male domination and female subjugation. Moreover, the story abounds

⁸⁴ Irigaray 112.

⁸⁵ Wharton 82.

in double standards for the sexes and emphasizes the corrupted nature of male morality; as Lillian S. Robinson describes in her essay “The Traffic in Women: A Cultural Critique of *The House of Mirth*”: “Young men in this world are considered highly suggestible, and whether or not they can also be suggested off the primrose path [...] the blame for their straying invariably rests with the woman. And the only consequences that are commented on are monetary, rather than moral.”⁸⁶

While Selden’s affair with Bertha Dorset never becomes an issue, Selden judges Lily harshly for her affair with a married man and writes her off. Gus Trenor is never approached or sneered at for supposedly cheating on his wife, while Lily is faced with complete abandonment by everyone around her. Yet, her mistake is judged mainly in monetary terms rather than moral. The importance of preserving one’s wealth overrides everything else and the reader learns just how little a woman is worth as a human being, friend or companion. Human relationships are reduced to material transactions with men as buyers and women as commodities, and women must preserve themselves for the best buyers and keep the culture of exchange going.

The language of the market is omnipresent in the novel, is used to capture the nature of human relationships and only multiplies the general feeling of the story as a story of trade in women. In the scene, in which Gus Trenor demands his reward for helping Lily, it is the dirty language of money exchange, Trenor’s insolence, utter lack of respect for women, and his assumption that he is completely entitled to demand sexual favors that shock and disgust the reader. Wai-Chee Dimock, the author of an article called “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*”, captures the nature of the scene: “The most brutal moment in *The House of Mirth* dramatizes not so much the centrality of sex as the centrality of exchange. Sexual favors are what Gus Trenor wants, but his demands are steeped in – and legitimated by – the language of the marketplace, the language of traded benefits and reciprocal obligations. Odious as it may seem, Trenor’s speech merely asserts what everyone assumes.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Lillian S. Robinson, “The Traffic in Women: A Cultural Critique of *The House of Mirth*”, *The House of Mirth: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 345.

⁸⁷ Wai-Chee Dimock, “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*”, *PMLA* (1985): 783, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/462098>> November 5, 2015.

When Lily approaches Gus Trenor about possible investments, it is clear to the reader that Lily is interested in a straight business transaction but also does know that Trenor's willingness to help stands on her attractiveness, rather than on fraternal intimacy. However, she is convinced she knows how to handle men like Trenor and disregards potential commission Trenor may expect of her: "He was a coarse dull man who, under all his show of authority, was a mere supernumerary in the costly show for which his money paid: surely, to a clever girl, it would be easy to hold him by his vanity, and so keep the obligation on his side."⁸⁸ Lily underestimates man's pride and superior complex that give him the feeling of absolute control and domination over women, and overestimates her own worth.

The world of women in *The House of Mirth* is no less ruthless and unforgiving than the world of men. Wharton skillfully shows how women themselves perpetuate the culture of exchange of women and their own subordination to men. The situation is twofold; on one hand, women have created their own world where men play only the role of sponsors and where women enforce their own rules and hierarchy, on the other hand, women are alienated from one another due to the competition among them that has been inflicted by men: "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs."⁸⁹ Lily lives off of her wealthy friends and relies on their friendships but at the same time, she admits at the beginning of the novel to Lawrence Selden:

"You don't know how much I need such a friend," she said. "My aunt is full of copy-book axioms, but they were all meant to apply to conduct in the early fifties. I always feel that to live up to them would include wearing book-muslin with gigot sleeves. And the other women—my best friends—well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me."⁹⁰

Women are completely dependent either upon their husbands or upon the support of their fathers. Judy Trenor can dominate the society thanks to her husband's money and she uses her power to manipulate women and maintain her superior

⁸⁸ Wharton 83.

⁸⁹ Cixous 878.

⁹⁰ Wharton 30-31.

position. She is best friends with Lily for as long as she does not encroach upon her privileged position.

It is not Lily's affair with Gus Trenor that enrages Judy, it is the threat to the financial well-being and high position of Judy that turns Lily into a social outcast. Lily's female friends let her fall because she allowed her reputation to get tarnished and her possessions disappear. Moreover, Lily starts to pose a threat to everyone's husband and her beauty becomes her curse.

Lily's descent into damnation and ultimately death is lined with friends' betrayals, impotency of men and powerlessness of women. Dimock in his article sees Lily as a sort of rebel, but a rebel not strong enough:

Lily is clearly caught up in the ethos of exchange. And yet her repeated and sometimes intentional failure to find a buyer, her ultimate refusal to realize her 'asset' – as her mother designates her beauty – makes her something of a rebel. She is not much of a rebel, of course, and that is precisely the point. For Lily's 'rebellion' in its very feebleness and limitation, attests to the frightening power of the marketplace. It attests as well to Wharton's own politics, to her bleakness of vision in the face of a totalizing system she finds at once detestable and inevitable.⁹¹

The novel explores the complex situation of women who have been conditioned to perceive themselves as commodities yet who struggle with it and try to envision a different fate for themselves. They cannot rely on the help of other women for they have been alienated by the exchange culture that posits them on opposite sides and forces them to compete with one another for the attention of men. Wharton does not offer a satisfactory alternative for Lily and Lily's death confirms the impossibility of creating a life in which woman's body and voice would be her own.

⁹¹ Dimock 783.

Chapter 3: New Era, New Opportunities

3.1 *The Sun Also Rises*

The scholarship on *The Sun Also Rises* has been extensive and varied depending often on the gender of the individual scholars. The character of Lady Brett Ashley suffered the most negligence and misunderstanding and it took a long time for the character to get the attention she deserved. At first, Brett was considered a nymphomaniac or not a woman at all⁹², a negative and self-destructive presence in men's lives, and she existed in the novel only as the other to the main male protagonist Jake Barnes. The misogynistic point of view waned with the emergence of a new field of feminist criticism when the issues of gender and human sexuality were reassessed. Hemingway's misogyny was laid aside in favor of a more complex analysis of his work, as well as of his own personal notion of the male-female relations in the new century. While Lady Brett Ashley was not favored by all female and feminist scholars, there are a few critical assessments of the character that will be taken into consideration in this chapter, and will allow for an exploration beyond the boundaries set by traditional American scholarship. This will also make possible a mode of analysis that will build upon French thought as well, and will cast a different light upon the character.

The important concept that was constantly brought up in connection with Lady Brett was that of the New Woman formulated by Wendy Martin in her essay "Brett Ashley as New Woman in *The Sun Also Rises*". This idea of the New Woman is essential for the understanding of the character and its explorations, because all the subsequent criticism uses the concept to some extent and it offers a historical context of the 1920s when *The Sun Also Rises* takes place. While Lady Brett is a fictional character, she nevertheless reflects the changing role of women in the new century and that change has never come to an end. Hemingway was aware of the new dynamics in the male-female relations, and it can help us understand not only the developments in literary representations of female

⁹² Eisuke Kawada, "Should We Still Call Her a New Woman: A Meta-Analysis on the Critical Reception of Lady Brett Ashley", *UTokyo Repository* (2006): 3, The University of Tokyo <<http://repository.dl.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2261/54815/1/st026004.pdf>> October 26, 2015.

existence at the turn of the century but representations of the existence as well.

After the end of World War I, men went through a period of loss, despair, and cultural and psychological disorientation, as well documented in the representations of men we find in the writings of the lost generation. According to Martin, women were, on the other hand, “undergoing a transformation in the popular consciousness from passive, private creature to avid individualist in pursuit of new experiences. The housebound Victorian nurturer was becoming the modern woman of unprecedented mobility and public visibility.”⁹³ Women were suddenly seen and heard, abandoning the claustrophobic domestic space and venturing out in the public space. Lady Brett frequents places that were before available only to men, such as bars and bullfighting arenas, and there are no limits to her desire to experience and to be part of everything. She pays no attention to social conventions wearing “a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt”⁹⁴ with her hair “brushed back like a boy’s.”⁹⁵ Lady Brett fits Martin’s description of the new woman who “no longer defined herself as a domestic being; openly rebelling against nineteenth-century bourgeois priorities, the new woman rejected traditional feminine ideals of purity, piety, and submission. Instead she insisted on reproductive freedom, self-expression, and a voice in public life.”⁹⁶ The new era brought about changes that gave women more physical space in which to move and in which to enjoy their particularities.

Lady Brett possesses a new aggressive and liberated kind of sexuality, which sets her apart from all the female heroines discussed in the previous chapters. She does not struggle with sexual repressions or limitations that were painfully imposed upon women in the past. Brett’s sexual Eros is unbounded by rigid patriarchal conventions, and no man in the novel has the power to dominate her physically or sexually. Brett is openly promiscuous and it is accepted as a fact by men around her that she will not be owned by anyone and that it is completely her choice how she uses her body.

Yet, while the common understanding of Lady Brett Ashley as the New Woman of the twentieth century was long-lasting, it was refuted with the new

⁹³ Linda Wendy-Martin, “Brett Ashley as New Woman”, *New Essays on The Sun Also Rises*, Linda Wendy-Martin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 67.

⁹⁴ Hemingway 22.

⁹⁵ Hemingway 22.

⁹⁶ Martin 68.

theoretical approaches and feminist theories. The first reconsideration of the character helpful in our understanding of the position of women in the society at the turn of the century comes in an essay called “Should We Still Call Her a New Woman: A Meta-Analysis on the Critical Reception of Lady Brett Ashley” by Eisuke Kawada. Kawada does not take the concept of Lady Brett as the new woman for granted, instead she looks at the historical context of the novel, as well as Lady Ashley’s behavior that goes against the contemporary norms. French theory will also come to play an important role, since it offers a different perspective on gender issues from that of traditional Western feminist scholars.

In a certain sense, Brett does embody a woman aware of her sexuality that does not fear it but reclaims it and offers no apologies to anyone. Yet, what needs to be acknowledged is that Brett is deeply dependent on men around her to provide her with the financial means to enjoy her sexual freedom. Indeed, there is not one moment in the novel when Brett would be alone, on her own, without a man. She needs men to enchant them, to seduce them, and to leave them; as Martin puts it: “Brett is still very much dependent on men, who provide an arena in which she can be attractive and socially active as well as financially secure.”⁹⁷ Kawada ponders Martin’s argumentation, since she advocates Brett as the new woman, yet points out herself that Brett is not liberated from men. Martin does not consider female independence and autonomy as necessary conditions for a new woman, yet for many feminists those are the cornerstones of female liberation. Unless women achieve complete social, financial, and spiritual independence from men, they are perpetually entrapped by male superiority and power.

Kawada raises the question of Brett being a woman with a late Victorian attitude, suggesting that Brett has not shaken off the Victorian attitudes that plagued so many women before her. As clear from the narrative of the novel, Brett has never worked in her life, except for serving as a nurse during World War I. And thus she must have enjoyed the generosity of men who passed through her life, making her “a product of patriarchy.”⁹⁸ As was the case with the Victorian women, not working makes Brett financially dependent on men and puts her in a gold cage from which it is impossible to escape. Sleeping with whomever she wants and letting everyone know may be her strategy to show the men that while

⁹⁷ Martin 69.

⁹⁸ Kawada 47.

her dependency is of an economic character, her body and sexuality are free and are *hers*.

More than that, while Brett is waiting for a divorce, it is only because she wants to marry Mike Campbell, because “she is in love with Mike Campbell, and she is going to marry him. He’s going to be rich as hell some day.”⁹⁹ Brett has never existed on her own, without a man, and while she enjoys her escapades and cannot live without them, she also desperately needs a man who will anchor her and provide her with material comfort and security. At first, it is Jake, later Mike; Brett does not know who she is without a man by her side, and thus she does not exist as a *woman*, only as a product of the patriarchal society. As a result, Brett does not behave as the New Woman of the twentieth century, but as a man instead; she drinks, parties, and has more sex than any other man in the novel.

It is Irigaray’s contention that offers a fresh perception of femaleness and challenges the notion of Brett as the New Woman: “one must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.”¹⁰⁰ Brett fails to do that as she is incapable of breaking free of the path of mimicry. She assumes the masculine role with the hopes of achieving satisfaction and joy in life, only ending up miserable and desperate for male attention, which she hopes would complete her. It comes painfully close to Freud’s theory on female sexuality that posits woman as a lack, that lack being the lack of the phallus, which forces her to abandon her female bonds and turn to men who do possess the power of the phallus. It leads to an alienation among women and to a self-imposed perpetual dependency upon men. Irigaray does not disagree but points out the necessity of considering a broader context of the conditions that women must endure:

Now Freud is describing an actual state of affairs. He does not invent female sexuality, nor male sexuality either for that matter. [...] The problem is that he fails to investigate the historical factors governing the data with which he is dealing. And, for example, that he takes female sexuality as he sees it and accepts it as a *norm*. That he interprets women’s suffering, their symptoms, their dissatisfactions, in terms of their

⁹⁹ Hemingway 38.

¹⁰⁰ Irigaray 76.

individual histories, without questioning the relationship of their ‘pathology’ to a certain state of society, of culture.¹⁰¹

Brett lives in a society that privileges men and grants them phallic power. That Brett desires that power is a result of a long repression of female sexuality and of the female voice that can only be escaped through the phallus, which has been denied women since the beginnings of time. Brett thus represents generations of women that have been silenced and stripped of their powers by patriarchy, and decides to fight that pathology, which is not only hers but symptomatic of women in general, trying to find a place for herself in the world completely dominated by men. However for all that, Brett ends up acting like one of the men. It is wrong and disorienting, but there is no other model for Brett to follow. The incompleteness of that reality and the vanity of Brett’s attempt is clear in her failure to achieve completion and satisfaction and in her need to cling to illusions.

In the end, it is Jake Barnes who triumphs despite the great number of losses he endures during the course of the novel. Jake may be the main character and focal point of the novel, but it is his bond with Brett that defines him and shapes him and his world. Jake’s impotency, a war injury, has prevented him from fulfilling his love for Brett, and his desperate longing for her permeates his every action and every scene in the novel. The reader is constantly aware of the affect Brett’s behavior has on Jake, even though it is only a few moments that reveal the depth of Jake’s suffering, which is otherwise left unvoiced: “There was a crest on the announcement. Like Zizi the Greek duke. And that count. The count was funny. Brett had a title, too. Lady Ashley. To hell with Brett. To hell with you, Lady Ashley.”¹⁰²

Todd Onderdonk, the author of the article “Bitched: Feminization, Identity, and Hemingwayesque in *The Sun Also Rises*” uses the term feminization to describe Hemingway’s approach to men at the turn of the century:

While *feminization* is not a word Hemingway himself uses, the metaphorical representation of men acting or being treated ‘like a woman’

¹⁰¹ Irigaray 70.

¹⁰² Hemingway 30.

– that is, adopting or being forced into states of shameful passivity or disempowerment – is a central concern of many of his works.¹⁰³

This applies to Jake’s incapability to let go of his love for Brett and to his physical disempowerment that deprives him of the phallic power so characteristic of men. Jake cannot use sexual dominance over Brett, and neither can any other male character in the novel. Jake thus represents a new kind of man who no longer relies on physical or sexual dominance over women and instead has learnt to exist in a world that is no longer so completely dominated by male power. Jake faces his impotency, humiliation, and despair and Hemingway goes as far as to show his hero cry over his love for a woman: “Then I couldn’t keep away from it, and I started to think about Brett and all the rest of it went away. I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry.”¹⁰⁴

Jake’s saving grace is his intellectual mastery and literary engagement, his male friendships and his passion for bullfighting. Onderdonk describes Jake’s triumph as follows:

Thus, though Jake lingers long in the discursive position of hapless victim, his feminization ultimately elevates him as one of the novel’s only true men. This is possible in the sense that, both epistemologically and morally, Jake masters his own feminization, not only in his forthright report he provides of its devastations, but as we will see, in the resigned dignity with which – despite exquisite vulnerabilities – he endures it. ... For example, when Brett sexually rejects Robert Cohn after a brief tryst in San Sebastian, for weeks afterward Cohn is in denial about his loss of agency in the relationship; Jake, in contrast, remains acutely aware of the historical reversals represented by Brett’s sexual agency, though it pains him terribly; and for the most part he displays a fatalistic dignity toward it as opposed to Cohn’s romantic delusions and ignoble violence.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Tom Onderdonk, “Bitched: Feminization, Identity, and Hemingwayesque in *The Sun Also Rises*”, *Twentieth Century Literature* Vol. 52, No. 1 (2006): 61, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20479754>> November 15, 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Hemingway 31.

¹⁰⁵ Onderdonk 66.

While Jake is deprived of sexual potency and the power it would give him over women, he is the only man in the novel who does not try to own Brett and that wins her respect and love. Mike Campbell wants to make Brett his wife and tie her down while Pedro Romero, a young bullfighter enchanted with Brett, wants to marry Brett because “he wanted to make sure I [Brett] couldn’t go away from him, he said. He wanted to make it sure I could never go away from him.”¹⁰⁶ Jake remains stoical and accepts the necessary change of balance within the society. He represents a new kind of masculinity that does not suffer when faced with the liberation of female sexuality but instead is transformed into something greater that can coexist with the new societal conditions.

Hemingway, nevertheless, makes Brett the object of male desire and of the male point of view. The reader always perceives Brett through the eyes of a man and her existence is valorized only through being the mother and the prostitute, trying to salvage men through her sexuality as is the case with Robert Cohn, while on the other hand, scorning him “for his inability to accept episodic or casual sex.”¹⁰⁷ Cixous emphasizes the importance of writing:

I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as *marked* writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak – this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.¹⁰⁸

In this one sentence, Cixous captures the issue of the omission of the female voice from the discourse of *The Sun Also Rises*; despite Brett’s courageous reappropriation of her sexuality, she is still objectified by the male gaze and is put

¹⁰⁶ Hemingway 242.

¹⁰⁷ Martin 70.

¹⁰⁸ Cixous 880.

into the traditional, repressive roles of the mother and the prostitute. Brett is never given the space in the novel where she would stand on her own, where she would have her turn to express herself, and where she would be liberated from the male gaze.

Brett is kept in the maelstrom of disorientations that Cixous calls “the place reserved for the guilty”¹⁰⁹: “guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being ‘too hot’; for not being both at once; for being too motherly, and for not being enough.”¹¹⁰ It is this place that deprives Brett of her voice and portrays her as a failure no matter what; she is too cold for Jake, but burning hot for Romero; she is motherly towards Jake but refuses to play Romero’s mother, a nineteen-year old boy. Yet, she is guilty of not living up to the expectations of the men in the novel and in the end, she fails herself and admits her desperate need for self-illusion. Brett fails to fulfill the role of a new woman free of patriarchal judgment, and of the critical, existential, and female power of her own voice, even though she tries hard and owns her physical body. Brett is still imprisoned by the male gaze and in the old patriarchal order that does not allow her to own her voice and an existence that would subvert the established patterns of female inferiority and dependency.

3.2. “Good Country People”

Hulga, the main character in a short-story called “Good Country People” written by Flannery O’Connor, is a great example of a human being who tries to escape her gender and her being defined on the basis of her female body and its flaws. This chapter not only uses Kristeva’s theory of abjection, but also Judith Butler’s theory of the abject and of performativity, for despite the differences of approach to theory between American and French theorists, the combination does provide for an interesting analysis.

To name is to grant an identity, to appropriate, and to demarcate the named one. The one that names invests his or her own vision and the right of possession into the one that is given the name. Joy, the main character in the short story “Good Country People” by Flannery O’Connor, was at birth given a name; she

¹⁰⁹ Cixous 880.

¹¹⁰ Cixous 880.

could not accept it or refuse it, it simply happened. Living in a small, provincial town in the South, she is expected to live up to everything her name signifies, to bring joy and happiness, to be joyful and carefree. Joy's mother, Mrs. Hopewell, chooses the name on the basis of her own idea of what her daughter should be like, and thus attempts to establish her identity from the very beginning, and to possess a certain power and authority over her daughter. The name functions as a site of identification for the nameless child whose identity is to be shaped according to her mother's wish. When, however, Joy decides to change her name to 'Hulga', it is not only a way to rebel against her domineering mother, it is also an attempt to define herself in her own terms. The name 'Joy' is not merely an arbitrary, empty word, it has the power to limit the bearer of the name with a great impact on her identity and self-perception. Joy, being crippled since the age of ten, cannot be the girl her mother imagines and does not want to be. Her mother's love is too oppressive and restrictive, so Joy changes her name when away from home without telling her mother. She chooses to do so this way as it excludes her mother from the new site of her identity and shatters the power Mrs. Hopewell holds over her daughter.

Joy chooses the name 'Hulga' on the basis of its ugly sound, but she also considers it "her personal affair."¹¹¹ It functions as a shield, which her mother cannot penetrate. Mrs. Hopewell is not capable of using the name because it has destroyed Joy, the daughter she has envisioned, and instead, she has to face Hulga, who reminds her of "the broad blank hull of a battleship"¹¹². The name enables Joy to become who she wants to become and chooses to be. Joy's mother's refusal and inability to pronounce the word 'Joy' only intensify Hulga's satisfaction. Freedom and a feeling for self-determination are, however, marred by the nosy Mrs. Freeman. Mrs. Freeman is the wife of the tenant Mrs. Hopewell has taken, and "she's got to be into everything"¹¹³. She meddles in everyone else's affairs and is always quick with her response. She knows how to use language to firmly establish her authority and to have her own way with everything. Mrs. Freeman refuses to accept anyone's right to privacy and the right to oppose her. Hulga, with her determination to be different and to resist Mrs. Freeman's

¹¹¹ Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1983) 182.

¹¹² O'Connor 180.

¹¹³ O'Connor 181.

authority, uses her intellectual superiority, but Mrs. Freeman realizes the power of language and words:

She did not call her that in front of Mrs. Hopewell who would have been incensed, but when she and the girl happened to be out of the house together, she would say something and add the name Hulga to the end of it, and the big spectacled Joy-Hulga would scowl and redden as if her privacy had been intruded upon [...] it was as if Mrs. Freeman's beady steel-pointed eyes had penetrated far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact.¹¹⁴

As implied by the extract, one's name is a precious possession, and can play an important role in the struggle for authority. Judith Butler draws our attention in *Bodies That Matter* to Jacques Lacan's remark on the name: "naming constitutes a pact by which two subjects simultaneously come to an agreement to recognize the same object."¹¹⁵ Joy has changed her name to break the mother's spell over her identity, and to recognize and to establish her true self. The pact is broken off between the mother and the daughter, and Hulga leaves the position of being a mere object. Mrs. Freeman, however, senses the motivation behind Hulga's action, and re-gains control by using Hulga's new name against her.

Hulga also identifies with her name due to her "vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called."¹¹⁶ This extract suggests that Hulga 'cross-identifies'¹¹⁷ with a male character and assumes the position of a male. When around women, Hulga avoids talking and holds aloof from them. Only when she meets the Bible salesman Manley Pointer does Hulga open up and the reader learns more about the workings of her mind. What Hulga desires is power, control, and also understanding. What Manley tells Hulga and what makes her meet him again remains a mystery, but what draws Hulga to him is his health condition – she thinks they both may die soon and suddenly; hence she feels they have this in common. Moreover, her dreams about their meeting suggest that she wants to play the role of the superior one:

¹¹⁴ O'Connor 179.

¹¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993) 154.

¹¹⁶ O'Connor 182.

¹¹⁷ Butler 144.

During the night she had imagined that she seduced him. She imagined that the two of them walked on the place until they came to the storage barn beyond the two back fields and there, she imagined, that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse.¹¹⁸

Hulga assumes the position of a man and escapes her gender. She crosses the artificial boundaries set by the society and liberates herself from the expectations of the others. She is not the object that is trapped and seduced, she is the one who seduces and lays down the rules, at least that is what she imagines. Even though this is what is perceived as negative and not productive by French feminists, it does allow Hulga to embrace the part of her that is male and that is a natural part of her identity.

A Southern woman is defined in clear terms by traditions that have been laid down by men. Women themselves, however, have kept those traditions alive. The artificial norms are to keep the society in order and they are enforced through discourse. The rules and expectations of what is feminine and what is masculine have come into existence through citation and repetition and as such have been built upon the ground of arbitrarily constructed notions and ideas. Mrs. Freeman, the proud parent of the two so-called fine girls, defines her daughters through their sexual value. Their value is established through the number of their admirers, or via their marital status, and through repeating these facts of social capital on a daily basis so that they are taken as the truth: “Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant.”¹¹⁹ When Joy/Hulga is introduced, she is defined through having an artificial leg. It is implied from the very beginning that Hulga is not a typical girl and accordingly she is not described in the usual manner. The cited quote also encourages the feeling of pity for Hulga due to the fact that she has an artificial leg and no admirers to brag about. Moreover, it lends a certain arrogance to the behavior of Mrs. Freeman, whose daughters have no such flaws that would make them less valuable as objects of male admiration and desire. As if to provoke them even more, Hulga intentionally defies the expectations of the people around her by earning a doctoral degree in philosophy, and by demanding recognition of her

¹¹⁸ O’Connor 196.

¹¹⁹ O’Connor 178.

self-perceived singularity: “If you want me, here I am – LIKE I AM.”¹²⁰ Hulga refuses to fit into the restrictive categories of gender and identity that would impose limitations on her as an independent human being, and which she would fail to meet if only because of her artificial leg. She rejects the traditional discourse that squeezes all women into one category – that of an object of male desire. Hulga has managed to change the discourse by changing her name, which grants her the moral right of self-definition. She has also suppressed anything that would make her feminine, as defined by the masculine, phallogocentric order – she wears “a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it”¹²¹, and she has grown “bloated, rude, and squint-eyed.”¹²² She negates every assumption of what a woman should be like, and thus stresses the arbitrariness of those assumptions.

Hulga’s course of life is decided for her by an accident during her childhood when her leg was blasted off. From that time on, she has been defined by the lack and has been judged by what is missing in her, not by what she possesses. Although she is thirty-two years of age, it is because of her artificial leg that Hulga is still perceived as an overgrown child; in fact, nothing else seems as important and defining for the construction and constitution of Hulga as her missing leg:

It was hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child was thirty-two now, and that for more than twenty years she had had only one leg. She thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any normal good times.¹²³

Under normal circumstances, motherly love is a bond extremely strong that needs to be loosened up at a certain point in anyone’s life. Hulga, however, faces a situation more difficult; for she has to live with her mother because of her weak heart; this overall situation makes Hulga dependent upon her mother. This dependency is deepened through Mrs. Hopewell’s tendency to pity Hulga and to restrict Hulga’s dire need for space and for personal growth and independence.

¹²⁰ O’Connor 181.

¹²¹ O’Connor 184.

¹²² O’Connor 184

¹²³ O’Connor 181.

Mrs. Hopewell permanently comments on Hulga and on her artificial leg, and by repeating this fact she gives it more power than it would normally have. Hulga is constantly defined by her mother and her discursive practices that push her into the position of a cripple. As Judith Butler points out in the introduction to her seminal work of gender theory, *Bodies That Matter*: “Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names.”¹²⁴ The power of the phrase “artificial leg” is performative in that it brings down the whole of Hulga’s existence to the simple fact that she has an artificial leg. Hulga is defined by that phrase and by its constant repetition.

The complication Hulga’s artificial leg raises, is that of her sex. Sex, as the gender theorist of note Butler describes it:

is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls. [...] “sex” is an ideal construct.¹²⁵

In Hulga’s case, the power of sex is confused not only due to Hulga’s attempts to escape the limitations of gender as well as of sex, but also due to the discourse created around her in her social existence. Hulga’s own approach to herself and to her body shows that she tries to neutralize all she can that may in any way emphasize her sex or gender. She wears ugly, sexless clothes that hide the material body that could possibly give away her actual sex. As far as gender goes, it has been already discussed that Hulga intentionally leaves her gender and tries to establish her identity regardless of any gender expectations. However, Hulga as a female is constantly defined against other women in her surroundings and as a result, her sexual difference is confused and unclear.

The narrative story about Hulga is accompanied by the second narrative about Glynese and Carramae, the daughters of Mrs. Freeman who constantly informs the Hopewell household about the well-being of her pregnant and soon-to-be-married daughters. The comments about Hulga and the daughters provide a striking contrast and emphasize the essential differences between the girls. The

¹²⁴ Butler 13.

¹²⁵ Butler 1.

talk about Glynese and Carramae revolves mainly around their male admirers and wedding plans; here is one example from the story:

Carramae said when her and Lyman was married, Lyman said it sure felt sacred to him. She said he said he wouldn't take five hundred dollars for being married by a preacher. [...] She said he owned a '55 Mercury but that Glynese said she would rather marry a man with only a '36 Plymouth who would be married by a preacher. The girl asked what if he had a '32 Plymouth and Mrs. Freeman said what Glynese had said was a '36 Plymouth.¹²⁶

The constant praise of their fineness and common sense is so often repeated and emphasized that it eventually becomes true, although clearly their common sense is rather doubtful. Glynese and Carramae are perceived as the perfect models of womanhood and femininity, and it is enforced by the discourse created around them. On the other hand, Hulga does not fit the category of femaleness as defined by Glynese and Carramae. She is excluded from the very beginning due to her artificial leg that does not pair well with the ideals of female beauty and of the female sex, and she is not thought of as a woman, but predominantly as a child: "It was hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child was thirty-two now and that for more than twenty years she had had only one leg."¹²⁷ When Hulga is talked about, it is mostly about her quirks and her *not* being like a woman, therefore her sexual difference is negated by the discourse and her treatment is that of a being with neither sex nor sexuality.

Butler explains the confusion of sex as follows from *Bodies that Matter*:

The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of "sex", and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge.¹²⁸

This above-noted extract points to the process Hulga has gone through and that defines her status in the community. Hulga's refusal to yield to the normative category of sex has excluded her from the domain of acceptance, and has ousted

¹²⁶ O'Connor 192-193.

¹²⁷ O'Connor 181.

¹²⁸ Butler 3.

her into the domain of abjection. Hulga poses a threat to the community that can exist only within clearly defined boundaries that suppress anything that could endanger its stability. The need to explain and categorize Hulga results in her repudiation. Hulga is used by the others, such as Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, as a line that they cannot cross and being behind the line makes them desirably normal; or, as Butler describes this phenomenon,

This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life.¹²⁹

Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell use the power of discourse to mark Hulga as an “abject body” due to her artificial leg and to her weak heart and it at the same time masks their need to confirm their own normalcy. It is only the constant commenting on Hulga's handicap that turns into something that defines Hulga as a human being, and that from the very beginning expels her from the category of the female sex. Hulga must be repudiated because her existence threatens what is considered normal and desirable to the community that is based on the heterosexual imperative. She cannot be labeled “female” as she does not fulfill the now empty expectations of what “female” is supposed to be like, but understandably, the second category of “male” is also out of the question. That is why people are obsessed with her artificial leg, because it serves as an obvious pretext to cast somebody out without having to offer another reason.

Hulga's body is thus manipulated through discourse, and her artificial leg takes on a different role, not only that of a natural phenomenon, but also that of a social value. In Hulga's case, we can see that her material sex has been displaced, and she is judged on the basis of her gender-wandering, albeit the materiality of her body is used as a support to attack her unwillingness to fit into one of the two categories of sex and gender that society so rigidly requires of its members.

Abjection for Julia Kristeva is something different and infinitely complex, yet useful for our understanding of Hulga: “It is thus not the lack of cleanliness, or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the

¹²⁹ Butler 3.

composite.”¹³⁰ Hulga disrupts the normative rules of gender and identity, and thus disturbs the order upon which the world around her is constructed. She is in between genders and eludes definition. Hulga is not only Butler’s abject body, she is also Kristeva’s abjection, “what the symbolic must reject, cover over or contain.”¹³¹ Hulga exposes what lies at the borders of the subject, its corporeality and mortality. She is that which needs to be expelled because it is disorderly and *wrong*, she is “the fading, instability or even the disappearance of the subject.”¹³²

Hulga draws attention to the tenuous concept of gender and embodies a challenge to this social construct by subverting it from the inside. She escapes a simple definition, disrespects a position that was assigned to her as a ‘woman’, and thus functions as the in-between that disturbs the imposed gender identity forced upon the female by patriarchy. Hulga also acknowledges the abject within herself, recognizes the impossibility of defining herself as this or that, as female or male, and reveals that even despite her struggle against her own mother, the maternal, pre-symbolic space in which she was just *one*, opposes the paternal, phallogocentric order, so perilous to the female, and is the space where women are safe and powerful.

When the Bible salesman Manley Pointer comes into town and meets Hulga, she yields to his temptation under the false pretext of their sameness. She is not interested in him as a male human being, but more as a person to whom she can relate on the basis of their similar heart condition. She is under the impression that she has found in him someone who is also an outcast and with whom she can share an existence in the domain of abjection where they are liberated from the long-evacuated categories of sex and gender.

The artificial leg represents to Hulga her exceptionality and her power; it is a metaphor for the phallic power Hulga tries to obtain with her behavior. Kristeva’s understanding of sexual difference means “the dissolution of all sexual identities and converts the feminist aspiration of establishing an identity for women into a dispersed process of sexual differentiation relevant to both sexes.”¹³³ Hulga is a perfect example as she embraces herself as she is, both male

¹³⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4.

¹³¹ Grosz 73.

¹³² Grosz 72.

¹³³ Grosz 100.

and female sides of her, and presents herself as a human being without trying to conform herself to a certain sexuality, instead defying reductive sexual differentiation.

With Manley, Hulga imagines herself in a superior position from which she can control the situation and she feels invincible. Her artificial leg is both her strength and her weakness, and it is something she feels can empower her: “But she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her eyes turned away.”¹³⁴ When Manley steals her artificial leg, Hulga loses her independence and herself: “Without the leg she felt entirely dependent on him. Her brain seemed to have stopped thinking altogether and to be about some other function that it was not very good at.”¹³⁵ She also loses her phallic power, which puts her both literally and figuratively at the mercy of a man. Manley’s arrogance and self-assurance are a proof that men use the object bodies to ensure their imaginary subjecthood and integrity. It also proves that men will not allow women to try to possess the phallic power, which gives men the false idea of being superior to women. It is not the first time Manley robs a woman of what is absolutely essential to her, before Hulga he stole a woman’s glass eye.

Like an archetypal man, Manley wants to bring women down, to humiliate them, and to prove to them that they are inferior and can never outsmart a man. And so it is a reminder that to achieve equality, for women to win the right to own their bodies and voices, men have to change their perceptions of women as well, that the sexual difference between the two sexes needs to be reconsidered and a new ground must be laid by both men and women.

3.3. *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Blood and Guts in High School*

3.3.1. Oedipa Maas

The first few pages of *The Crying of Lot 49* present Oedipa Maas as an archetypal suburban housewife that perfectly fits into the role assigned to her by

¹³⁴ O’Connor 203.

¹³⁵ O’Connor 203.

the society, visiting Tupperware parties, tending her own herb garden, and dutifully preparing dinners for her husband Mucho Maas. The only thing that from the very beginning clashes with this polished-up depiction is the fact that Oedipa dated someone like Pierce Inverarity, an eccentric California real estate mogul. Oedipa decides to get married and settle down in the end, but when asked to execute Inverarity's will, she sets out on a quest for knowledge and for selfhood that will turn her world upside down, yet she will emerge victorious.

The first conversation between Oedipa and her husband Mucho reveals that Oedipa puts herself into the position of someone of lesser importance than her husband and also reveals the shallowness of her husband and the way he fails her, which is a recurrent theme throughout the book:

'Mucho, baby,' she cried, in an access of helplessness.

Mucho Mass, home, bounded through the screen door. 'Today was another defeat,' he began.

'Let me tell you,' she also began. But let Mucho go first.¹³⁶

Oedipa feels her voice is not quite strong enough to be deemed important and Mucho himself pays little attention to his wife. Moreover, he is portrayed as lost and sensitive, too weak to provide any support or help to Oedipa; he used to be a used car salesman, but he had to quit because he was too sensitive

seeing people poorer than him come in, Negro, Mexican, craker, a parade seven days a week, bringing the most godawful of trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, out there so naked for anybody, a stranger like himself, to look at, frame cockeyed, rusty underneath, fender repainted in a shade just off enough to depress the value [...] he could still never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life.¹³⁷

Mucho is not the kind of man that has been repeatedly portrayed in the novels discussed in the previous chapters, he is emasculated by the system that has turned

¹³⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 12.

¹³⁷ Pynchon 13-14.

people into blind slaves, that has mechanized the natural processes of life; Mucho does not believe in anything and tries to fill the hole in his life by sleeping with female teenagers and by resorting to drugs. Mucho is a victim of what Stefan Mattesich calls the industrial production of subjectivity in his work on Pynchon called *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon*: “To be a person is to experience complicity in a world that effectively depersonalizes, reduces to caricature, to outline, to silhouette. What this means is that the subject in its activities, processes, or consciousness can experience its difference only as generality.”¹³⁸

Oedipa is exposed to male sexual predators and as such is perceived only as a sexual object and prize. Dr. Hilarius, Oedipa’s psychotherapist, tries to hook her up on pills and make her dependent on him and her lawyer Roseman makes a clear attempt to seduce her, playing footsie with her and asking her to run away with him. The men around her do not see Oedipa as an equal, independent human being, they do not take her seriously, and do not trust her to be capable of more than the society allows, to both them and to the culture in which she finds herself, she is a mere sexual object. Yet, while Oedipa becomes her own hero, her own savior, and the bearer of knowledge, men fail to deal with reality and choose to escape instead.

Oedipa’s quest takes her on a road to self-discovery and to a new definition of femaleness. She has to confront her own deficiencies and imperfections, and she also has to overcome the shallow construct of gender that ties women to the restricted roles assigned to them by the patriarchal order. The world Oedipa encounters outside the artificial suburban construction, which aims to silence women, is disorienting, based on illusions, and on the hegemony of masculinity, power, and control, and in which Oedipa is an outsider. That is why, even though Oedipa penetrates the secret postal organization, she still feels lost without men:

My shrink, pursued by Israelis, has gone mad; my husband, on LSD,
gropes like a child further and further into the rooms and endless rooms of
the elaborate candy house of himself and away, hopelessly away, from
what has passed, I was hoping forever, for love; my one extra-marital fella

¹³⁸ Stefan Mattesich, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002) 43.

has eloped with a depraved 15-year-old; my best guide back to the
Trystero has taken a Brody. Where am I?¹³⁹

It is hard to break free of the patriarchal stereotypes that position women on the edges of the society where they are the followers, not the leaders. The society in Pynchon's novel is based on the patriarchal order which perpetuates phallogentrism and deems women dependent. Nevertheless, when Oedipa is alone and on her own, she does not fail, she rises, appropriating the best from both sexes, and faces the future in which women have to manage *as woman*, on their own.

One of the issues raised by Cixous is that the logocentrism of the patriarchal rule divides into and subjects everything to opposition, and thus creates a reductive system of binary oppositions that privileges the male side. Women are always perceived and described as opposed and thus inferior to men in their passivity, sensitivity, and pathos.¹⁴⁰ It is the concept of the traditional woman, the one constructed by patriarchy and silenced by the masculine discourse, the one that does not really exist, that Oedipa refutes on her quest embracing the side of her which is other, both masculine and feminine, infinite, and transcends the empty masculine construct of a passive woman.

Cixous argues:

In philosophy, woman is always on the side of passivity. Every time the question comes up; when we examine kinship structures; whenever a family model is brought into play; in fact as soon as the ontological question is raised; as soon as you ask yourself what is meant by the question "What is it?"; as soon as there is a will to say something. A will: desire, authority, you examine that, and you are led right back – to the father. You can even fail to notice that there's no place at all for women in the operation! [...] Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist. What is left is unthinkable, unthought of. She does not enter into the opposition, she is not coupled with the father (who is coupled with the son).¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Pynchon 153.

¹⁴⁰ New French Feminisms 91.

¹⁴¹ New French Feminisms 91-92.

Pynchon, on the other hand, goes against the tradition of putting a woman on the side of passivity; instead he sends Oedipa on a quest that makes her the explorer, the bearer of knowledge, the heroine. The Tristero, W.A.S.T.E, Pierce Inverarity – all metaphors for the omnipresent and omniscient father – are questioned throughout the novel, their existence and power are challenged, and in the end brought down by Oedipa. Next to them, Oedipa is supposed to feel inferior and unimportant; she often struggles to understand the world around her, but it all proves an artificial construct, something that has been built to silence women, something that has only as much power as she grants it, something she has to deconstruct, Oedipa learns.

Yvonne Klose, author of “How Had It Ever Happened Here: A Constructivist Reading of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Its Role in the Pynchon Canon” draws links between Pynchon’s work and the constructivist theory of knowledge, and to understand the connection, Klose describes its nature: “Constructivism does not deny ontological reality, but it states that we have no means of acquiring objective knowledge about it because, as a cognitive process, knowledge is always a construction.”¹⁴² As such, the world Pynchon has created and which Oedipa tries to navigate is a construct, not only literary, but on some level a microcosm of the actual world, which people inhabit and which gives the power to men to dominate and to shape it, yet whose superior position and power are empty and carry no relevance or truth. More than that, the foundation of the patriarchal order and its assumptions that women are passive, sensitive, weak, and exist only as a complement to men, are another such construct that *The Crying of Lot 49* exposes and destroys with its heroine Oedipa Maas.

Oedipa herself, though, is not perfect, and the solution, even though within her reach, remains elusive. According to Klose:

Our heroine is looking for the signified behind what she labels the Tristero (sometimes also spelled Tryster) which, for her, has a connection to the symbol of a muted post horn, which, again, is suggested to be closely related to the acronym W.A.S.T.E. She is struggling with the inflation of the signs that she connects with the Tristero and the dissemination of their

¹⁴² Yvonne Klose, “How Had It Ever Happened Here: A Constructivist Reading of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Its Role in the Pynchon Canon”, *American Culture*, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012) 11.

meaning, while still mainly thinking in logocentric terms. Even as she does come to doubt the epistemological relation between the signifier and the signified, she never quite manages to break through her logocentric mode of thought.¹⁴³

Oedipa has internalized too strongly the assumptions and expectations of the world created by the masculine order. She fears the power of the WASTE system, the power of the father, and it paralyzes her: “The night’s profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication, was their way of beating her up. They knew her pressure points, and the ganglia of her optimism, and one by one, pinch by precision pinch, they were immobilizing her.”¹⁴⁴ Oedipa cannot fully overcome the patriarchal barriers that prevent her from acknowledging that it may all be just a hoax.

Despite Oedipa’s failure to move beyond the logocentric form of thought, she does succeed at overcoming the false idea that some qualities and attitudes are male while others are female. Oedipa goes from being a suburban housewife to being a part of the Trystero, a secret postal organization, and all that on her own, without any real help from men. She explores the secret underworld and becomes a part of it, which allows her to be the mediator between both the underworld and the visible world of American capitalism and of gender hierarchization. It is Oedipa’s achievement that she has managed to overcome the oppressive concept of gender and sexual differentiation and has embraced all sides of herself. It is well manifested in her being torn over the existence of the Trystero system; Oedipa believes in the necessity of such a system, she slowly internalizes the knowledge, yet she cannot reach the bottom of it, for it goes beyond mere human logic:

She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America. [...] Though she could never again call back any image of the dead man to dress up, pose, talk to and make answer, neither would she love a new compassion for the cul-de-sac he’d tried to find a way out of, for the enigma his efforts had created. [...] Yet she knew, head down, stumbling along over the

¹⁴³ Klose 52.

¹⁴⁴ Pynchon 124.

cinderbed and its old sleepers, there was still that other chance. That it was all true.¹⁴⁵

In the end, it is not important to discover whether Trystero exists, whether Oedipa is right or wrong, or whether it is all just a scam. Oedipa reclaims herself as a whole and achieves completeness. According to Cathy N. Davidson, the author of “Oedipa as Androgyne in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*” Oedipa “rejects her cultural inheritance along with its restrictive definition of ‘womanliness’ [...] finally refusing to be fractured by societal definitions of what she, as a woman, should or should not be.”¹⁴⁶ Oedipa is courageous enough to go face the bidder at the crying of lot 49, to face the world of men who are surprised she “actually came”¹⁴⁷. Oedipa Maas is Cixous’s bisexual woman, she finds within herself the location of “the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the non-exclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this “permission” one gives oneself,”¹⁴⁸ To embrace both sexes within oneself means to subvert the masculine, binary oppositions that reinforce men’s superiority and domination over the feminine. As a result, Oedipa continues the legacy of those women before her who did not achieve their goals, yet who made someone like Oedipa possible and imaginable.

3.3.2. Janey Smith

Blood and Guts in High School by Kathy Acker is one of the most painful and pressing stories about the effects of a destructive patriarchal order upon the female body and voice in the history of literature. The all-disturbing journey of a ten-year old Janey through one patriarchal prison to another is extreme, and mirrors a number of traumas women have gone through for generations.

The opening sentence of the novel lays down the essential conditions of Janey’s life, and heralds the development of the story: “Never having known a mother, her mother had died when Janey was a year old, Janey depended on her

¹⁴⁵ Pynchon 178- 179.

¹⁴⁶ Cathy N. Davidson, “Oedipa as Androgyne in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*”, *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 18, No. 1 (1977): 39, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207849>> October 7, 2015.

¹⁴⁷ Pynchon 183.

¹⁴⁸ Hélène Cixous, “The Newly Born Woman”, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers (London: Routledge, 1994) 41.

father for everything and regarded her father as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father.”¹⁴⁹ The absence of the mother figure in Janey’s life will later help us understand why Janey is incapable of escaping the oedipal entrapment and her desperate need to have a man in her life. Without a mother, Janey is completely dependent on her father and the order of roles Janey assigns to her father Johnny Smith points to her incestuous feelings toward her father that are a little later explicitly materialized. More than that, Janey’s dependence on her father is not only of a sexual character, but of an economic one as well. Janey is only ten years old, and so her father exercises absolute control over her and she has no way of resisting.

The dialogues between Janey and her father are composed as drama, and they immediately reveal that Janey oscillates between acting like an adult and suddenly going back to being a lost child:

Janey: You told me you were just friends like me and Peter (*Janey’s stuffed lamb*) and you weren’t going to sleep together. It’s not like my sleeping around with all these art studs: when you sleep with your best friend, it’s really, really, heavy.

[...]

Janey: I love you. I adore you. When I first met you, it’s as if a light turned on for me. You’re the first joy I knew. Don’t you understand?¹⁵⁰

Janey’s likening of Johnny’s relationship with Sally, “a twenty-one-year-old starlet”¹⁵¹, to her relationship with her stuffed toy emphasizes on the one hand her childhood innocence and ignorance of the nature of adults’ relationships, and on the other hand, the chilling confession of her promiscuity at such a young age and her ignorance of how it has damaged her. More than that, the quote reveals that Janey has never really perceived Johnny as her actual father, as she talks about first meeting him; Janey has been exposed to abuse for so long that her perception of a father figure is completely distorted and almost absent from her understanding of the familial structure.

Janey’s deformed, asymmetrical relationship with the first man in her life affects all her subsequent relations with men and instills in her a sense of

¹⁴⁹ Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1978) 7.

¹⁵⁰ Acker 9.

¹⁵¹ Acker 7.

inferiority and of dependency on men: “How will any man ever love me? How can I be happy if a man doesn’t fuck and love me?”¹⁵² Janey’s father makes himself the center of her universe and then he abandons her, and thus he steals her own existence, her voice and her body; throughout the novel Janey keeps looking for her father in every man she encounters, reenacts her own humiliation and perpetuates her own victimization.

Janey’s self-destructive and sadomasochistic tendencies are unleashed once she moves to New York where she, for a short period, attends high school; that does not last long, and Janey becomes a member of a gang and begins her path to an earthly inferno:

Daddy no longer loved me. [...] I was desperate to find the love he had taken away from me. [...] We got drunk. We used drugs. We fucked. We hurt each other sexually as much as we could. The speed, emotional overload, and pain every now and then dulled our brains. Demented our perceptual apparatus. [...] I hated myself. I did everything I could to hurt myself.¹⁵³

It is not only a commentary on Janey’s situation but on the situation of the whole generation, on the America of the second half of the 20th century, its rising capitalism and the abandonment of traditional values of family and community. Susan E. Hawkins, the author of “All In the Family: Kathy Acker’s Blood and Guts in High School”, points out Acker’s use of her work to draw attention to political issues as well:

Her [Acker] political analysis, always informed by national and international critique of late capital, utilizes the distortions of family structure as a micromodel for the discursive and actual asymmetries within this larger political frame. Capital’s deformative failures and violent disarticulations reveal themselves within the family, just as family structure models the inequities and oppressions of capital.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Acker 93.

¹⁵³ Acker 31-32.

¹⁵⁴ Susan E. Hawkins, “All in the Family: Kathy Acker’s Blood and Guts in High School”, *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 45, No. 4 (2004): 639, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593544>> December 15, 2015.

Janey's father benefits from the economic, political, and social power he is given as he is part of the masculine order, which at the same time reinforces his superior position in relation to Janey.

A ten-year-old Janey is all alone in the world, and each and every man that passes through her life sexually abuses and brutalizes her. Janey is the victim of a society that is ruled by heteronormative, masculine power, which deprives women of their agency and imposes its own expectations on them of who a woman is and what role she is to play in such a society.

Janey's body is violated and irreparably damaged by the ruthless patriarchal order, by actual men who use her to prove to themselves their own superiority, and by a disease, which is a physical testimony to the masculine dominance over and invasion of Janey's body. The fragmentation of her body and psyche is literal and embodied in the structural and linguistic fragmentation of the text itself. First is the cover of the book, which portrays Kathy Acker with a "slashed, disfigured face"¹⁵⁵ and is followed by a number of fragmentations, disfigurements, and breakdowns in the character of Janey as well as in the book's design. The first part of the book contains a number of drawings of male and female genitalia that are quite disturbing and even more so when accompanying Janey's story about sexual abuse. The story also contains repetition, a drawing of a map of Janey's dreams, poems in Persian, excerpts from Janey's diary, and vertiginously shifting settings, perceptions, and voices.

The result is a text that abandons literary traditions and their limitations, authority or higher truths, and blows up the authoritarian, masculine idea of a text that dares construct female identity and sexuality and defines them solely in masculine terms. Helene Cixous says in her famous essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

It is well known that the number of women writers has always been ridiculously small. This is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of female writers we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which

¹⁵⁵ Pamela B. June, "Fragmented Female Body and Identity: The Postmodern, Feminist, and Multiethnic Writings of Toni Morrison, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Gayl Jones, Emma Pérez, Paula Gunn Allen, and Kathy Acker", *Modern American Literature: New Approaches*, Vol. 56 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010) 113.

either obscures women or reproduces the classic representation of women (as sensitive-intuitive-dreamy, etc.).¹⁵⁶

Acker can be accused of no such thing, as she is writing women in their rich complexity and in their impossibility to be pinned down. Yes, Janey is a victim of sexual abuse and never manages to move beyond the primal trauma, but Acker through her literary strategies dismantles that patriarchal authority and creates a female character that has multiple, fluid identities, voices, and sexualities. Janey cannot be pinned down and defined in any available terms and embodies a female sexuality that is not one, but many, and eludes the patriarchal structures and constraints. In that she also differs from previously-discussed female writers.

Cixous continues:

I shall speak about women's writing. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.¹⁵⁷

It is exactly what Acker does; she writes about women embodied by one character of Janey Smith but being infinitely complex and multilayered, and Acker uses a number of narrative strategies and voices that encompass that complexity, richness, and suffering of the female body. Literally imprisoned by the masculine order when in slavery to Mr. Linker, the Persian slave trader, Janey Smith defies authority by rewriting the ultimate example of male writing and male construction of female experience, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, by writing a story unbounded by masculine authority and by shouting out the hypocrisy and frustrations of the polished-up words. Janey takes the character of Hester Prynne and gives her a depth that not only liberates female experience otherwise reduced by the masculine perspective, but also expresses liberated female sexuality that is not shunned out, but out in the open, expressed in the *female* voice, with no veil over it. It is writing that Cixous sees as "*the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement

¹⁵⁶ Cixous 878.

¹⁵⁷ Cixous 875.

of a transformation of social and cultural structures¹⁵⁸, and it is the ultimate political achievement of *Blood and Guts in High School*.

The novel well portrays how destructive masculine sexuality is for women upon whom it has been imposed. Janey struggles with its effects until the body starts to resist it violently in the form of a disease such as cancer that Janey has. Yet, there is no other alternative that would not be so malignant. As Pamela B. June rightly points out:

Therefore, I want to suggest that Acker's work, unique in this study, emphasizes the total absence of female collectivity as the entrance point for the patriarchal rule, the symbol of which is the diseased, mutilated, wounded female body. Women's bonds are effectively precluded in these settings, and recognition of shared wounds thus becomes impossible. In an environment of complete patriarchal rule, bereft of female bonds, the female body becomes a fragmentary site marked and marred by masculine dominance.¹⁵⁹

Janey grows up in complete absence of the maternal and that first crucial bond with the mother is never formed. Later, Janey has no female figure to relate to or to identify with. There is no alternative to the cruel, masculine order that victimizes her. There is also no one that would stand up and protect her. With a mother, Janey would be able to escape the oedipal structure as she would in the end identify with the mother and enter the symbolic order without the oedipal shackles. Cixous sees the mother as "a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes."¹⁶⁰ Unfortunately, without such a mother, Janey remains trapped within the oedipal prison and never achieves a stable, female identity. Instead, Janey is first possessed by jealousy and rage when she finds out there is suddenly competition for her father's love in the form of Sally, Johnny's mistress, and later she never builds any meaningful female bonds that could pose as an escape from the patriarchal order.

When Janey ends up in an Egyptian jail, she starts to realize that no man can save her, that it has always been up to her. Nevertheless, the forces are

¹⁵⁸ Cixous 879.

¹⁵⁹ June 107.

¹⁶⁰ Cixous 882.

stronger than her and Acker blames not only patriarchy, but its tool of oppression that is capitalism:

Having any sex in the world is having to have sex with capitalism.

[...]

Mr Knowckwurst: The slave Janey stinks. My God. Workers are pigs, women are worse, but she's something else. I arranged to have her steal from the homosexual she lives with so I could have her locked up for the rest of her life, but now she's convincing criminals and prostitutes they're people. If they think they're people, they'll revolt against us. What are we going to do about her?

[...]

Mr Knockwurst: The terror is upon us. Our workers hated us. We denied their expectations. We limited their space and time boundaries so we could get more work out of them. They began to hate everyone. The world. They want to destroy the world. Themselves. They're about to commit mass suicide. Look at Janey...¹⁶¹

Power and oppression become irretrievably linked in *Blood and Guts* and Acker points out how the masculine dominance is woven into the basic societal structures and how money and an asymmetrical balance of power perpetuate female oppression.

Cixous advocates writing

from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem.¹⁶²

Acker's outrageous and postmodern writing is what stands out in *Blood and Guts in High School*; Janey never escapes the oedipal trap and dies and the world goes

¹⁶¹ Acker 135.

¹⁶² Cixous 881.

on, but Acker does create a text that demands attention to female oppression and fragmentation by patriarchal power and her technique offers an alternative and challenge to the social construct of the female gender and to the masculine voice and traditions imposed upon all writing. Acker has a strong female voice and a fragmented female body in the form of a novel that she offers to share with her female audience hoping they together can heal the wound.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

Luce Irigaray opens her famous chapter “The Sex Which Is Not One” in a book that bears the same title claiming “female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters.”¹⁶³ The foregoing analysis of the chosen literary texts has proved that true, as well as one of the presuppositions of the present thesis that not only female sexuality, but the female voice as well, is conceptualized on and structured by masculine parameters, which leads to women’s incapability to reclaim their own language, and thus to enter the social landscape, something wholly dominated by the masculine discourse. Not able to express their own desires, needs, and thoughts, women are kept in a subordinate position from which there is no escape. It has been wrong and undemocratic to define female sexuality as based on a lack, as being inferior to male sexuality, and to perpetuate woman’s submission to the patriarchal order, in which she is not deemed equal to men.

The works of the discussed French feminists have widened our understanding of woman’s conditions as portrayed in literary works across a hundred years, starting in 1880 with the publication of *Washington Square* by Henry James and closing in 1984 with the publication of *Blood and Guts in High School* by Kathy Acker. The progress is evident; in our literary representations, the female voice has grown louder and more prominent, and the female heroines of the chosen novels have become more daring in their demands to be heard, and in their attempts to expose the repressive nature of the patriarchal system and the annihilating effect it has had upon the female psyche.

When Hélène Cixous claims that “it is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her – by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow”¹⁶⁴, it is clear that one has to go back in history to understand where women are now, what they have achieved, and where they have failed. Looking at the novels and their major female characters chronologically traces a certain development in the way writers approach their female characters and their positions in the society of our selected artistic worlds.

¹⁶³ Irigaray 23.

¹⁶⁴ Cixous 878.

Catherine Sloper of *Washington Square* is a victim of an asymmetrical, unhealthy and archetypal father-daughter relationship, which demonstrates the destructive potential a father holds over his daughter, especially when taking place in a society which is strongly patriarchal and in which there are no healthy female role models a maturing woman could follow. The character of Catherine demonstrates the perpetual trap of not having access to language, since this lack not only prevents her from voicing her desire to others, it also means her desire can never manifest itself in Catherine's own consciousness. While Catherine successfully removes herself from the market of women *as commodities*, she does not succeed in overcoming the obstacles of the patriarchal order and in establishing an existence that would defy or even subvert the system.

Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, defied the system to the extreme by committing a suicide. She left her husband, established her own little household and let her creative potential flourish. Edna did not entirely fail, neither did she succeed. The character of Edna proves the difficulty of understanding female sexuality when it is only expressed in masculine terms over which women have no control. Her awakening sexuality is in conflict with her awakening self because it is foreign to her and she cannot understand or reclaim this desire that has been silenced in her for so long by the patriarchal regime of power.

Edna is trapped between what she herself wants and what men want of *her*, which she cannot resist since it has been instilled into her that men are to be pleased. The difference is, however, that Kate Chopin lets us into the mind of her character while the mind processes of Catherine Sloper have remained obscure to the reader. Edna's confusion is hers only, men around her are only complements to the whole picture, and it is Edna's consciousness that dominates the whole novel and expresses a woman's pain over a lack of freedom, a lack of understanding, and over the limitations and expectations laid upon a woman who starts to realize those are not hers, but are only imposed upon her by the society.

In both *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*, the female character dies and the system goes on. Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth*, nevertheless, remains true to her budding self-consciousness, pays off her debts, and ends up penniless. She never fulfills her role of a mere commodity, neither does she sell her virginity and become part of the system. The analysis of the novel demonstrates that there are forces within the female psyche, instilled into women by the masculine order,

which are hard to fight and overcome, and that the female body as a precious commodity is hard to reclaim without a language that would belong to women. Also, the importance of female bonds could not be overstated. It is an issue that arises constantly in all the novels and due attention is paid to the disruption of female bonds that could otherwise serve as a supporting net, but which are missing from the female world. There are practically no rounded female characters in any of the novels that would guide the major characters through the snares of the coil of patriarchy and that could offer an alternative to the existing repressive system. As a result, it leads one to realize the extent of alienation among women that has been caused by men for their own benefit. Women are taught to compete with one another for man's attention and that is what in the end dooms Lily Bart to death.

Lady Brett Ashley of *The Sun Also Rises* and Hulga of "Good Country People" do not achieve the independence they seek either. They both represent the problematic nature of the dominant masculine logic that reigns over female sexuality. Irigaray believes that ancient civilization

would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language...

Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks.¹⁶⁵

The dominant masculine logic has made it impossible for women to escape the web of male sexuality that is posited as superior and the only right one. Lady Brett never escapes the masculine gaze that perpetuates her status of a commodity, while Hulga gets entrapped by the language over which she has no control, as she had at first thought, and her humiliation by a bible salesman is a proof of that.

It is *The Crying of Lot 49*, a postmodern novel by Thomas Pynchon, which has granted its female heroine Oedipa Maas a sort of independence from men, and if not independence, at least a realization of the power women may possess if they overcome the belief in the weakness of the female sex, fueled so strongly by men. The language of Pynchon does not represent *l'écriture féminine*, yet there is potential for a writing that does not repress the feminine; the chaotic, ambiguous nature of the novel text suggests reality is arbitrary and that there is an underlying

¹⁶⁵ Irigaray 25.

world where the masculine fails. It is Oedipa who becomes the bearer of knowledge, who penetrates the underworld, yet who does not lose the connection to the capitalist society, which men, such as her husband or her psychotherapist, cannot comprehend and flee from in the end. One reading would suggest that capitalism has swallowed its creators and the latent feminine can rise and achieve a new consciousness growing out of the isolation. As has been demonstrated by the analysis of the chosen literary works, the potential has always been there.

The closest writing gets to a point where the masculine exerts no control or dominance over it is the writing of Kathy Acker in *Blood and Guts in High School*. Acker blows up all the niceties, expectations, and limitations of literary writing, and creates an original voice that is impossible to define, to dominate, or to submit to any authority. Her language defies tradition and explores female experience in all its complexity. Hawkins perceives Acker's violent language as "a liberatory rhetoric that argues in favor of renegotiating or reformulating or resisting, if only momentarily patriarchal constructions of 'feminine subjectivity'."¹⁶⁶ Janey Smith bears traumas of masculine domination and her body is a feminine manifesto against the repression of female sexuality and against the destructive effect of the masculine order. Janey does not achieve liberation, is not set free, and dies of the disease of the masculine order. Her character, however, is so loud in her accusations, and her language struggles so hard against the manacles of the patriarchal order that the existence of the feminine can no longer be denied or silenced.

L'écriture féminine is a fleeting concept that is hard to achieve by writers, regardless of their gender or experience. Women may never reach the point when a language is theirs and theirs only, but that does not necessarily mean they fail. Irigaray and Kristeva differ in their approach to sexual difference. Irigaray advocates the concept of sexual difference while Kristeva "aims to uncover women's (repressed) masculinity and men's (disavowed) femininity through the acknowledgement of a repressed semiotic, sexual energy or drive facilitation on which both male and female 'identities' are based and to which they are vulnerable."¹⁶⁷ This manifests the contradictions present in feminist theory, and also stresses the importance of thinking beyond a single theory.

¹⁶⁶ Hawkins 639.

¹⁶⁷ Grosz 100-101.

What this thesis has tried to do is argue for an inclusive approach that draws upon those theories that are relevant to female experience as portrayed in the chosen literary texts and that may enlarge our understanding of what limits women in their self-expression and what needs to be conquered before women may claim victory. Kristeva and Irigaray's differences in their positions on sexual difference may seem incompatible, yet characters such as Oedipa Maas prove that women do possess traits such as courage, activity, and intelligence, which had been for long associated exclusively with men, but it does not make women "male", it only proves that human nature is too complex to be put into simple, reductive terms like that. There is a scale upon which one can mark the extent of masculinity or femininity, and every human being can find himself or herself on that scale, but to embrace all the sides of one's psyche and still to enjoy one's particularity means to overcome the limitations of calling one masculine or feminine, and to accept one *as one with infinite particularity*.

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