The Idea of Womanhood in Contemporary American Literature

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The Idea of Womanhood in Contemporary American Literature

Diplomski rad

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Summary

In the late 19th century Kate Chopin published *The Awakening*, a controversial novel that shed light on numerous social issues of the Victorian era and served as criticism of the harsh patriarchal ideology that measured a woman's worth based on her biological ability to procreate. The author provided two different insights into the Victorian society through the character of Adele Ratignolle, a devoted mother and wife and Edna Pontellier, a radical feminist. The author re-examined the fixed idea of womanhood through the character of Edna Pontellier and shattered the misconception that all women are suitable for marriage and motherhood. Characters such as Edna Pontellier paved the way for the creation of a new character in literature, known as the "New Liberated Woman". In the 1920s Ernest Hemingway brought a new character to the scene, Lady Brett Ashley, who is in contemporary culture referred to as the epitome of the 20th century woman and is one of Hemingway's most complex female characters. Her promiscuous nature, extroverted personality and refusal to conform to traditional social norms provoked anger amongst the critics and readers, but she still remained the epitome of the modern woman. Each of the aforementioned characters will be analysed in order to provide a deeper and better understanding of how the idea of womanhood evolved from the 1890s till the 1930s.

Keywords: *The Awakening*, identity, the ideal of womanhood, the modern woman, Ernest Hemingway, social norms

Introduction

Today women are perceived as individuals with the birth right to decide upon the course of their own lives and act upon it. We have the right to vote, equal educational and business opportunities and the authority to decide whether to conform or not to social norms regarding marriage and love. Most people take that right as a given, while years ago the type of lifestyle we live and have now would be utterly condemned. Although the feminist movement stems from the late 18th century and has continued to fight for women's rights to this day, the focus of this paper will be placed on the changes that occurred in literature in regard to the female character from the late 1890s to 1930s. The gradual evolution of the female character in literature was parallel with the social changes that occurred throughout those periods of time. In 1899 Kate Chopin published *The Awakening*, a controversial novel where she represented two types of women of that era, the devoted mother and wife Adele Ratignolle on one hand and on the other Edna Pontellier, a feminist type who defied popular opinion that women were born to serve their husbands and children. Although her work was heavily criticized, this type of writing set up major changes in literature and it allowed other authors to speak of the same or similar issues or introduce characters that possessed some of the same characteristics.

In the 1920s Ernest Hemingway introduced a new type of liberated woman in his novel *The Sun Also Rises*, Lady Brett Ashley, who would later on embody the 20th century woman. Lady Brett Ashley was strong, sexually promiscuous and her refusal to conform to traditional gender roles would bring to question the boundaries between the male and female sex.

In light of that, the first part of the paper will analyse the idea and image of womanhood in the late 19th century from two perspectives, Adele Ratignolle's and Edna Pontellier's. The second part of the paper will explore the social climate of the 1920s Parisian society, ambiguous gender identities and emergence of the new liberated woman, in the form of Lady Brett Ashley. The social structure, society's standards and norms and overall social climate will be taken into account when analysing each character, in order to provide a better insight into how the idea of womanhood evolved from the 1890s to the 1930s.

1. The Awakening of the 19th Century Woman

Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* was published in the late 1890s and it was considered highly controversial due to the issues it explored. The author successfully conveyed the social climate of the late 19th century Southern society and shed light on certain taboo themes such as divorce, female sexual desire and desire for autonomy. Jarlath Killeen notes that "the reaction to Chopin's *The Awakening* was extreme to say the least. In the weeks following its release in April 1899 the novel had to withstand the onslaught of critics who roundly condemned its apparent justification of immoral behaviour"(413). The community and the critics were harsh in their reviews of the novel because the author openly questioned the social norms and standards of the Southern society.

During the Victorian era women were considered inferior, secondary and a woman's own self worth was measured with her capability to raise children and please her husband. Although a mother herself, Kate Chopin was against this hegemonic ideology where women were objects in their own life and marriage. Kate Chopin's main character Edna Pontellier challenged this 19th century idea of womanhood, where a woman's highest calling was to procreate and act as servant to her husband. Sandra Gilbert explains that "for women, however, the nineties also meant the comparatively new idea of "free love", as well as the even newer persona of the "New Woman", a woman who chose to be politically, professionally, and emotionally autonomous" (14). In light of that, the author presented a new type of woman, capable of creating an identity apart from society and her family. Edna Pontellier openly defied the 19th century social norms where a wife's highest calling was to create children and obey her husband. However, the author also presented a typical Victorian woman in the form of Adele Ratignolle, a character devoid of any identity apart from her family. But, although Adele Ratignolle is perceived as the ideal mother figure devoted to her family and husband, her approach to certain matters showed that this character was not purely an imitation of the Victorian ideal of womanhood.

The Awakening has become part of the contemporary culture, specifically Chopin's main character Edna because she paved the way for the creation of the new liberated women, independent of men and social expectations. As Robert Kohn explains, "*The Awakening* found a more receptive audience late in the twentieth century when it was recognized that Kate Chopin's treatment of Edna Pontellier anticipated the importance that women's issues would play in contemporary literature and popular culture"(137).

1.1. Adele the "Mother-Woman"

Adele Ratignolle represents the ideal of 19th century womanhood, nurturing and loving towards her children and husband, embodying all the necessary Victorian qualities. From the mere beginning of the novel, she is represented solely as a mother figure and wife. She is graceful in her appearance, kind towards her children and husband:

> Many of them were delicious in the role; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture. Her name was Adele Ratignolle. There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams. There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them. (Chopin 12)

From the very beginning at Grand Isle till the end of the novel, Adele is portrayed and viewed simply as a mother and wife. There is no depth to her character and every single conversation involves her children or husband. During their stay at Grand Isle, Edna and Adele form a friendship, and while Edna reveals a different side of her personality, Adele remains a full time mother even at times when she is apart from her family. Most of her monologues involve mentioning her children or husband, as evident when Edna and Adele spend their time on the beach where Edna relaxes and Adele cannot or is incapable of setting aside her mother role for a brief period. Jennifer Gray notes that,

> even in Grand Isle, when Edna convinces Adele "to leave the children behind" for a walk on the beach, Madame Ratignolle cannot be induced "to relinquish a diminutive roll of needlework" (Chopin 15). She begs that "it be allowed to slip into the depths of her pocket" (Chopin 15). A leisurely stroll beyond the duties of wife and mother is not permissible to Adele, the good subject. Her interests and even relaxation are intertwined with her family, and especially with her maternal role. (59)

Adele is a mother-woman, meaning a type of woman who idolizes her children and tends to her child's every need. She is selfless towards her children, carrying them and making clothes

for them even though she is pregnant with another child. As Jennifer Gray notes, "everything about her satisfies the hegemonic ideal of women in her society, from her behaviour to her physical attributes. In fact, her body is seemingly designed solely to attract a husband and to bear children"(57). Taken into account that a woman's highest calling was to procreate, Adele fulfils her role as a women to the fullest, having given birth to four children. Motherhood defines her existence and is a dominating factor in the creation of her own identity. She does not possess a personality of her own but is viewed strictly in relation to her children, husband and current pregnancy. Giving birth and maintaining a family household are her preoccupation and it defines her being: "She was always talking about her 'condition'. Her 'condition' was in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation"(Chopin 13). As Jennifer Gray points out, "the births of her children are her most savoured moments, and therefore, her body is essential to this aspect of her identity. She is preoccupied with her 'condition', since her sense of self depends upon her maternal abilities"(58). Her entire life revolves around her children and her husband; it absorbs her entire being and existence. At first glance it appears that Adele enjoys music and organizes gatherings at their home for her own amusement, but it soon becomes evident that she is interested in music because it is a form of art she can pass on to her children. Jennifer Gray argues that Adele's every thought, interest and action are related to her husband or children so she is unable to create a sense of self or any individual trait or liking to something: "For instance, Adele continues her girlhood interest in music, but only so that she may teach these skills to her children. She has not fully developed her artistic sensibilities; to do so, Mademoiselle Reisz insists, requires a more complete sense of selfhood" (59).

Since the 19th century contraceptive and birth control methods were generally ineffective, the Victorian woman, in this case Adele, was constantly pregnant. After they return to the city and Edna comes to visit, it becomes even more evident during dinner that Adele's needs come second and that she is entirely passive when in her husband's presence. During dinner she listens tentatively to every word her husband says, pausing while eating in order to hear his every word: "He spoke with an animation and earnestness that gave an exaggerated importance to every syllable he uttered. His wife was keenly interested in everything he said, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth"(Chopin 46). Jennifer Gray explains that "much of what Adele does is to fulfil her husband's needs. She 'puts her husband's preferences above her own in all things' (Skaggs 347) and is extremely attentive to his every whim. Their marriage is described by Chopin as

"domestic harmony" (107). Moreover, as already mentioned, contraception was basically non-existent so Adele could not enjoy sex because the result would always be pregnancy, making it impossible for her to escape her 'condition'. Jennifer Gray explains that

> Adele's identity is immersed not only in marriage but also in motherhood. She has no control over her sexual being and is essentially vulnerable to pregnancy with every sexual encounter her husband desires. She is required to be sexually alluring, but also passive, chaste, and pure, in keeping with Creole cultural ideals. Sex for the "mother-woman" is purely an act of passivity and procreation within marriage. (58)

A woman's highest and noblest calling was to procreate, but the mere act of giving birth was never discussed about in public. It was viewed as a product of Nature, a fairy tale that was passed on to generations; because women were sedated with chloroform so many of them did not have any recollection of the mere act of giving birth. The Victorian society supported this patriarchal ideology where men even dictated and intervened in the act of giving birth; creating the illusion that child birth was a painless act. Physicians were men who sedated the young women and afterwards they would glorify this act of birth. Chopin shattered this myth by describing Adele's struggles while giving birth: "She appeared exhausted. The nurse gave her a fresh handkerchief, sprinkled with cologne water. 'This is too much!' she cried. 'Mandelet ought to be killed! Where is Alphonse? Is it possible I am to be abandoned like this-neglected by everyone?"(Chopin 115). Feeling stranded, Adele does not seek her husband, but she asks Edna to come to her side because she believes that she is the only one that can sympathize with her. While Adele was giving birth, Edna was shocked by her screams and the pain she had to go through, because as opposed to Adele she was sedated with chloroform like the rest of the Victorian women. Chopin wanted to shatter this belief and show the agony a woman had to go through if she wanted to remain on the Victorian pedestal. Carole Stone explains that

> in Chopin's era childbirth was considered a woman's noblest act; to write of it otherwise was unacceptable. Thus, the clinical details of pregnancy and birthing remained largely unwritten. As Dr. Mandelet tells Edna in *The Awakening:"*The trouble is that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature to secure mothers for the race. "But Dr. Mandelet's insight is rare for a man because he is a physician. By shattering the illusion that giving birth is a glorious experience,

> Chopin attacks the patriarchal structure which denies women control of their bodies. (23)

Dr. Mandelet explains to Edna this myth that was created around child birth and the misconception that is carried on to generations. But although he sheds light on this issue, it still remains a closed circle because the patriarchal ideology, where women were valued based on their ability to give birth and satisfy their husbands, still prevails. Adele cannot take on an alternative role other than that of mother-woman, because it is the only aspect or field of her life where she feels a sense of accomplishment like most of the Victorian women. Even though Adele is in great pain during her labour, she urges Edna not to forget about her children when changing her lifestyle: "Adele, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: 'Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (Chopin 115). She is a good friend to Edna, but still she cannot escape the patriarchal ideology and the social norms which she upholds. Furthermore, she cannot understand how a woman can assume an alternative role, other that of a mother, because she supplants all her desires before her children's since they are her only legacy.

We could claim that she is a poor soul, devoid of identity or any distinguishing characteristic, but she enjoys her role as a mother-woman. She does not question the social norms, standards or basically any realm of life because in her mindset these rules are binding and never changing. There is no depth to her character, no inner or hidden world, but her thoughts and actions are aimed at pleasing every member of her family. If we apply John Locke's theory of mind to Adele, we can argue that she embodies tabula rasa; she is devoid of knowledge that comes from firsthand experience, because on her blank slate the Victorian men and society have written its rules and ideas about what is morally upright. As an individual she possess the freedom to create her own identity, but she does not feel the need to grow as a person and individual so unlike other people she remains a static figure, a tabula rasa where experience, innate ideas or any glimpses of consciousness are ultimately nonexistent. There is no self when it comes to her character, she does not question any of the existing norms but compliantly accepts her role of mother-woman. Furthermore, Jennifer Gray explains that

> her satisfaction seems to stem from ignorance of the "life which questions" (Chopin 57). She does not seem to realize her existence in the realm of ideology. Chopin portrays this role, through Adele, as only a partially developed identity. Adele has love and connection in her life but has no sense of "individual selfhood" (Skaggs 348). (58)

She is a static and unchanging figure in the sense that throughout the novel she has maintained the same type of lifestyle and has remained true to her views on family. There is no depth to her character or her actions and most importantly she embodies the19th century Creole woman who remains on a pedestal due to her biological ability to procreate. Lastly and most importantly, she serves as a rough reminder of the hardship women had to endure in the 19th century social history and how much the idea of womanhood evolved later on in literature.

1.1.1. The Modern Housewife

Most critics argue that Adele has no identity apart from her family and that she simply serves as a rough reminder of the 19th century social attitude towards women. However, after thorough analysis of the book and taking into account other critical works, we could argue that Adele was not just a mere product of the 19th century society, but a woman that possessed certain liberal views: "Today, more than ever, feminism is about choice, and Chopin, through Adele, offers her readers more than one definition of feminist expression"(Streater 406). Kathleen Streater goes as far as to claim that

> right from the start, though, Chopin toys with feminine stereotypes as the narrator proceeds to celebrate Adele as a "bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams, the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture" (51). The tone is almost silly in its over-the top admiration, undercutting any serious valorisation of Adele . (407)

A few critics including Kathleen Streater, have claimed that the readers as well as the critics have punished Adele for not being as radical as Edna Pontellier. In comparison to Edna, Adele is perceived as a simplistic character, devoid of any distinguishing traits. When taking into account such claims, there is a likelihood that the readers have put Adele Ratignolle in a box, a set frame where there is no possibility of ever perceiving Adele other than the mother-woman. Adele's undying devotion to her family is frowned upon by feminists because her entire being is intertwined with her maternal role, making it impossible for her to create an identity or own sense of self apart from her family. Furthermore Kathleen Streater explains that

> Adele is viewed as lacking selfhood because she has chosen to be a mother, which is exactly the easy stereotyping that Chopin's subtext is rebelling against, not to mention it is an interpretive stance that sabotages an inclusive definition of feminism. Chopin never dismisses Adele's character; neither should her Readers. (413)

As part of the Creole society Adele is introduced to Edna Pontellier during a summer vacation at Grand Isle. At first she is perceived simply as a devoted mother and wife, but through her interaction with Edna Pontellier it becomes evident that she can be open minded at times and remains a loyal friend to Edna till the end:

> 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. (Chopin 18)

While giving birth, she urges Edna not to forget about her children but when Edna moves out of the family house Adele advises her to get some help around the apartment so the community would stop gossiping. She also asks her about her relationship with Alcee Arobin because her husband had instructed her to do so, but when leaving the apartment she tells Edna to forget about her comment, creating the possibility that she was not just someone's wife but had a mind of her own:"Don't neglect me,' entreated Madame Ratignolle; 'and don't mind what I said about Arobin, or having some one to stay with you"(Chopin 101). Kathleen Streater notes that "this suggests Adele's respect for Edna's choices, and it suggests a feminist solidarity that Edna has denied Adele" (411).

Although a devoted mother, she is still flirtatious in nature, keeping a close and questionable relationship with Robert Lebrun for years, but never crossing the line and committing adultery. She is not conservative in those matters of life, but she is aware of the social norms in regarding women' behaviour and is successful in keeping those moments of flirtation and satisfaction well hidden, giving them a humorous tone:

> Meanwhile Robert, addressing Mrs Pontellier, continued to tell of his one time hopeless passion for Madame Ratignolle; of sleepless nights, of consuming flames till

> the very sea sizzled when he took his daily plunge. While the lady at the needle kept up a little running, contemptuous comment:
> "Blagueur—farceur—gros bete, va!" (Chopin 15)

This type of behaviour is the result of years of experience and good insight into the laws of society. She is well aware of the boundaries and she scolds Robert when he flirts with Edna Pontellier, because she realizes that Edna is different in character and unaware of his flirtatious nature: "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (Chopin 24). Moreover, when Edna's father comes to visit and they come to Adele's gathering, Adele flirts and coquettes with Edna's father constantly: "Madame coquetted with him in the most captivating and naive manner, with eyes, gestures, and a profusion of compliments, till the Colonel's old head felt thirty years younger on his padded shoulders" (Chopin 73). Jennifer Gray explains that

> Adele, a "good subject," accomplishes the contradictory balance between purity and sexuality that is demanded of the "mother-woman" role. Nineteenth-century Creole cultural ideology advocates a relaxed tolerance of sexual discussion and an indulgence in sensual beauty, but simultaneously demands an irreproachable chastity of its women. (Seyersted in Gray 57)

As already discussed, the Creole society was hypocritical towards women; they wanted women to appear sensual due to their own sexual needs while on the other hand denying them the right to be sexually free. But, it seems that Adele found a manner in which she could enjoy the male attention she was getting without being scolded by her husband and society. While pregnant, she flirted with men at her parties, dressed sensuously and spoke without reserve about delicate subjects which even shocked Edna at first. It could be argued that Chopin wanted to break down this illusion of the perfect mother-woman, who by popular opinion was devoid of any sexual desires and impervious to men's attention. Kathleen Streater argues that Adele knew how to deal and fight off the male prescribed norms and standards but in her own peculiar way. Furthermore, she explains that

> by allowing Adele's character to introduce and blend confident sexuality in the mother role, Chopin is distorting the role's defined limits. In other words, Adele's character projects the ideal mother-woman image, magnifies its stereotypical qualities, and then,

> by allowing Adele — a pregnant woman — to hint at a sexual identity, Chopin contests the boundaries of Adele's assigned gender roles: is she a mother? a femme fatale? a saint? a wild woman? (408)

Since the author puts Adele Ratignolle on a certain pedestal, making her the ideal of motherhood, certain feminist traits are not evident at first. Her character is contrasted with that of Edna Pontellier, a feminist who defies social norms and laws, making it difficult to view Adele Ratignolle as nothing more than the ideal mother and wife at times:

> Introduced as a "mother-woman," Adele's position as a feminist is difficult for some readers to discern, and this difficulty betrays the double-bind women often find themselves in: to become a wife and mother is, on some level, to capitulate one's self to patriarchal systems, but this should not render a woman's feminism suspect — and yet it so often does. Chopin highlights this feminist tension through her heroine: Edna cannot perceive Adele as a self outside of her societal roles, ironically placing Adele behind the same role limitations Edna herself is attempting to escape. (Streater 406)

Most critics argue that there is no depth in Adele Ratignolle's character, but her actions throughout the novel give an idea that she is not a completely compliant and silent character, but still is not as radical as Edna Pontellier. One cannot deny her liberating influence on Edna Pontellier, although she maintains the image of the perfect mother and saint, even glorifying some of the stereotypical views of that period, concerning the beauty of birth and raising children. Edna Pontellier, who basically never had a female friend, confides in Adele Ratignolle who despite differences in opinion proves to be a loyal friend to the end. By becoming Edna's friend, Adele Ratignolle had a crucial influence on her, as this was the first time in Edna's life that she confided to someone, letting Adele enter her guarded inner world. By talking to Adele Ratignolle, Edna verbalized her thoughts and desires which marked the beginning of her journey to inner self:

> 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 Adele Ratignolle.(Chopin 18)

Adele Ratignolle was well aware of the social climate of that time; she was not as bold and courageous as Edna Pontellier, but she still indulged in certain pleasures. One might think that she is only a plain character, but it comes to one's mind at times that she just might be more subtle in fighting the men's social system. As already mentioned, she is flirtatious in nature and because of her need to socialize she organizes gatherings at their home where music is played. Kathleen Streater in her article "Adele Ratignolle: Kate Chopin's Feminist at Home in *The Awakening"* argues that Adele Ratignolle's feminist qualities are overshadowed by Edna Pontellier strong personality, making it difficult for the reader to notice her rebellious side and ability to successfully cope with society's norms:

> Granted, Adele's subtle rebellion to patriarchal ideology is easy to overlook as she forges her resistance from behind and within masculine parameters, manipulating the male-defined borders of her identity as wife and mother, at once being and contesting the patriarchal ideals. Adele's interior subversion is far less dramatic than Edna's total rejection, yet, as the saying goes, Adele "lives to tell the tale," and thus, through Adele's character, Chopin offers an affirmation of feminist possibility. (406)

Despite Kathleen Streater's arguments, Adele's flirtatious nature and ability to lead a fulfilled life, it is still difficult to claim that she possesses any feminist traits. When Edna Pontellier decided to leave her husband and live her life in the manner that suited her best, Adele Ratignolle, who at that time was giving birth, urged her not to forget about her children proving again that her family defines her existence: "Adele, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: 'Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (Chopin 115). Her children and husband define her entire being and from the beginning of the novel towards the very end she has remained true to her calling.

As already mentioned, it is difficult to claim whether or not Adele Ratignolle possessed certain feminist qualities, and one cannot with absolute certainty claim that she possessed many liberal views. But on the other hand, she could embody the modern housewife who is devoted to her family and husband, but still manages to maintain a somewhat social life where she organizes gatherings and flirts with other men. Kathleen Streater notes that

> since the majority of readers' lives will, on a fundamental level, more closely resemble Adele's domestic situation, not Edna's path of rejection, it becomes important to

> recognize and validate Adele's choice of lifestyle and feminist resistance. Adele's strong, feminist voice at home is realistic, reassuring, and reaffirming. (411)

Lastly, one can analyse and try to add many other liberal qualities to her character, but she still personifies the selfless mother and devoted wife figure of the late 19th century society. She has never actually questioned the world around her or had any desire to seek any form of autonomy outside of her family. One cannot judge Adele for being a selfless mother and wife, but still one cannot believe that she has never felt the need to rebel against the harsh system. According to the aforementioned critics she quietly rebelled against the system, interpreting and using the Victorian norms to her advantage, creating the impression that she was more deceiving and manipulative than men, because she did not in any way share her knowledge with Edna but ultimately punished her for not being a fit enough mother. Given her behaviour throughout the novel, we cannot support the theory of her being a quiet feminist because we would be attributing qualities that she does not possess.

She does possess some liberal traits, but there is no feminist possibility when it comes to her character because Adele is and will be a mother-woman whose children define her existence and her sense of self and accomplishment is equivalent to the happiness of her family. Jennifer Gray concludes that

> she never questions or opposes her lack of sexual self-ownership as nineteenth-century feminist ideology does. Her lack of self-awareness and failure to question her position are integral aspects of her interpellation in the hegemonic ideal of womanhood. Rather than question her station or sense of fulfilment, she especially relishes this aspect of her female role. (58)

1.2. Edna Pontellier - The Floater

At first glance Edna Pontellier's life seems to be the reflection of the perfect 19th century Victorian image of life and family. For twenty eight years she aimlessly walked through life complying with social norms and values. Her environment and family had instilled into her the appropriate social and religious norms and until her arrival at Grand Isle she had behaved according to them:

> I was a little unthinking child in those days, just following a misleading impulse without question. On the contrary, during one period of my life religion took a firm

> hold upon me;after I was twelve and until-until—why, I suppose until now, though I never thought much about it—just driven along by habit. (Chopin 21)

Looking back, her upbringing had a major influence on the creation of her character and overall identity. Edna lost her mother at a young age and afterwards she was not able to form a bond with her sisters or create lasting friendships: "Edna had had an occasional girl friend, but whether accidentally or not, they seemed to have been all of one type—the self-contained. She never realized that the reserve of her own character had much, perhaps everything, to do with this" (Chopin 21). The Colonel, the embodiment of the Victorian men, raised Edna under strict rules not allowing her to question the world around but compliantly accept whatever destiny, society or her family had predestined for her. The Colonel's cold approach, the inability to form lasting relationships and the harsh social norms created Edna's introverted personality and inward behaviour. Jennifer Gray explains that

> her subjection begins as the daughter of a dominating father and continues in her later role as wife and mother. Ironically, this gendered status as a subject of patriarchy is not really a subject position at all. Rather, it places women in an object position, through their subjection to the dominant ideology of gender roles in nineteenth-century society. She is commodified by Leonce during their courtship and later, more completely, in their marriage. (59)

Moreover, Edna Pontellier did not truly love her husband; their marriage was based on her being a passive figure and him serving as protector and provider of the family:" Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (Chopin 22). Edna's marriage was not the result of her deep infatuation with Leonce but it was a mixture of spite and conformity that influenced her decision to get married. Edna married Leonce in spite of her father's disapproval, but overall spite as a motive did not play a huge part because spite as an actual feeling would disturb her passive state. Moreover, Leonce was not looking for a wife with an extroverted personality so Edna's inward behaviour and passive outlook on life pleased him. Edna ultimately agreed to marry Leonce and she basically floated into marriage in the same manner she floated through life: "As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams"(Chopin 22). Her path towards marriage more

likely resembled a path to complete passivity, because later on marriage further strengthened her inner world that sometimes questions and outer world that complies without question.

After floating towards her marriage and being absolutely inactive in her marriage, she floated through the birth of her children, since she was not eager to have children and in the mere act of giving birth she was drugged. Motherhood was never a calling that suited her, but she became a mother in the same manner that she became a wife, it was demanded of her by society and she complied without question. Edna was never able to form a close bond with her children nor was she capable of taking care of them in the long run, so the quadroon took care of the children: "She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them"(Chopin 23). Jennifer Gray explains that "Edna is married to Leonce and bears children but cannot give herself over to them completely. She quietly lives a life of outward conformity, becoming a wife and mother, as she inwardly questions such conformity "(60). Leonce is well aware that Edna is not the example of the caring Victorian mother-woman, because "Edna's children do not cling to her skirts as those of the other 'mother-women' do. Leonce senses, in some way, Edna's unsuitability for her role as mother, and, through this hailing, seeks to shape her into the role" (Gray 61). Leonce was aware of Edna's reserved personality, but he could not accept it so he tried with every force to turn her into the ideal mother- woman and wife. Due to his business, he insisted that Edna throw gatherings at their house on Tuesdays so "the wife has no control over whom she receives and hence has little control over her enjoyment of such socialization" (Gray 62). She was never fond of the idea, but she also never openly protested against her husband's wishes.

The most obvious evidence of her compliant nature was witnessed during her stay at the Grand Isle, specifically during her conversations with Adele Ratignolle. While on the beach, Adele asked Edna a simple question "Of whom—of what are you thinking?"(Chopin 20) and Edna was unable to answer such a simple question because until that moment nobody had bothered to ask her what she was thinking of. Moreover, nobody had ever bothered to enter her inner world nor did she ever question her inner thoughts:

> "Nothing," returned Mrs. Pontellier, with a start, adding at once: "How stupid! But it seems to me it is the reply we make instinctively to such a question. Let me see," she went on, throwing back her head and narrowing her fine eyes till they shone like two vivid points of light. "Let me see. I was really not conscious of thinking of anything; but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts."(Chopin 20)

While on Grand Isle, this conversation amongst many other factors and events will contribute to Edna growing sense of self and it will ultimately mark the beginning of her journey to inner discovery. Unlike Adele, a mother-woman character that never questions the world around her, Edna is "capable of self-ownership, but is at least temporarily subjected by hegemonic patriarchal ideology" (Gray 60). Edna's dominant father, harsh social norms, unquestionable gender roles and inability to form lasting bonds forced Edna into a passive state and until her stay at Grand Isle she watched life pass by from her sheltered cocoon. Edna was a "floater" due to the aforementioned facts but she always possessed this restless soul and feminist consciousness which will prove to play a crucial part in the creation of her identity of the "free woman" but will also be the cause of her emotional and physical downfall in the end.

1.2.1 Edna's Awakening and Downfall

During her stay at Grand Isle, Edna's entire perspective on life and herself changed and her transformation from a conservative and compliant wife to an independent personality began. Before her transformation began, she acted according to social rules and obeyed her husband's wishes, example of which is when her drunken husband Leonce came to the house and demanded to speak to her. After she declined because she was too tired, he lied that their son was sick and accused her of being an unfit mother: "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" (Chopin10). Being submissive as she was, she went to help her son and spent most of the night crying while her husband was sound asleep. At that moment of sadness a spark lit up inside of her. She realized that she was not crying because of her husband, fate or her children. She was crying because it helped her and at that moment she was thinking of herself for the first time:

> 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. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself. (Chopin 11)

This moment started up a chain of events that would eventually lead to her becoming an independent person. Edna is not yet detached from her role of mother-woman and she "does not realize her position in a system of ideology but does feel a growing sense of self-awareness"(Gray 60). Moreover, under the influence of Adele Ratignolle and Robert Lebrun she was able to express her thoughts and needs openly and slowly discover her inner self. Before meeting Adele Ratignolle, she had never had a close friend to confide in and had kept her inner thoughts and desires hidden:

> MRS. PONTELLIER WAS NOT a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature. Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions. (Chopin 18)

After talking to Adele Ratignolle about her previous love interests, her view on marriage and motherhood, she began to analyse those thoughts that were buried for so long. She realised that she was not the maternal type, meaning that she was fond of her children but she never shared the same undying devotion to her children as Adele. As opposed to Adele Ratignolle, Edna was not the mother type, she loved her children but they never defined her existence. Edna Pontellier was fond of her children but she was never a mother type, it was a role imposed upon her by society. She did not love her children unconditionally as Adele did and she did not find fulfilment in motherhood: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me" (Chopin 52). Carol Stone points out in her article" The Female Artist in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening:* Birth and Creativity" that the character of Edna Pontellier served to shed light on the misconception that all women are capable mothers and that child birth is a wonderful God given experience: "But *The Awakening* is even more radical in its treatment of motherhood because it questions the assumptions that childbirth and child care are a woman's principal vocation, and that motherhood gives pleasure to all women" (23).

It did not suit Leonce when Edna discovered her inner strength and voice, because she was no longer the submissive and compliant wife that he knew. She was no longer silent, but started to express her emotions freely. It culminated after a party at Grand Isle when everyone ran towards the sea and for the first time Edna swam in the ocean. It was an eye opening experience, one that would give her further strength to carry on the intended changes:

> A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (Chopin 32)

The sea and the act of swimming had an empowering effect on her because they served as physical as well as emotional evidence that she was capable of achieving any goal. The sea is the site of her awakening to emotional and physical self. Moreover, soon after they return from the sea, Edna is "hailed by her husband as a sexual object. Edna resists this hailing by refusing to go to their bedroom and remaining on the porch for much of the night. Her resistance signifies self-ownership of her sexuality through refusing to have sex with her husband "(Stange in Gray 61). By denying her husband sex, she established her sexual self-ownership and started detaching herself from the mother-woman role. Sexual self-ownership was one of the main goals of the nineteenth-century feminist discourse and by denying Leonce sexual pleasure Edna shook this deeply rooted gender norm where women were obliged to please their husbands.

As already mentioned, the chain of events that occurred on Grand Isle had a profound effect on Edna because she came to the realization that she could exist as a being without her husband, children or society as a whole. Moreover, in the mist of all those new found feelings she fell in love with Robert Lebrun. At first it was an infatuation on her behalf that grew stronger each day until she fell madly in love with him: "For the first time she recognized the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman"(Chopin 50). Carol Stone in "The Female Artist in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening:* Birth and Creativity" points out that Robert had one of the most profound effects on Edna's self discovery and artistic expression as well as on the reawakening of her sexual desires:"Under his influence she speaks to him about her life and it is he who awakens her to the passions of her body" (26).

When Edna and her family went home, the long awaited changes took place. Her transformation was at its peak; she no longer felt the need to keep up appearances and openly defied her husband. She no longer held gatherings at her house on Tuesdays, she began to paint and go out whenever she pleased: "She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked" (Chopin 61). Edna's constant denial to provide her husband with sexual gratification and "resistance to the hailing of reception enables her to abandon the 'mother-woman' role and

experiment with an alternative identity, that of the 'artist-woman"(Gray 62). Moreover, she made the decision to assume the role of a serious artist and started taking up classes: "Painting!' laughed Edna. 'I am becoming an artist. Think of it" (Chopin 68). Neither her husband nor close friends could understand her, it was unimaginable for her to assume or think of a role other than that of a mother or wife. The ideal of the late 19th century woman was so strongly rooted in society that Leonce thought his wife Edna might be insane for changing certain aspects of her behaviour: "It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier's mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself"(Chopin 61). Edna Pontellier was not bothered by her husband but continued her path of self discovery; she was becoming aware of her own self worth, creating an identity independent from society's norms and values. Jennifer B. Gray also points out in her article "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and *The Awakening"* that Edna Pontellier had rejected the late 19th century ideology, where women were objects in marriage and motherhood and had finally found her own identity:

> Indeed, Edna Pontellier's first consciousness of her awakening is described in terms that echo the nineteenth-century feminist concept of female identity: "Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 57). Her awakening makes visible her position in patriarchal society and gives her the desire to seek alternative roles. (53- 54)

After her children went to visit their grandma and her husband away on a business trip, she moved out of the family house to a small apartment of her own. Despite her husbands' revolt she moved out and continued her life as an artist and free individual. She set up her apartment, made a small amount of money from her art and took up classes again to better her artistic work. Edna abandoned the role of the mother-woman and wanted to assume the role of the 'artist-woman' as Mademoiselle Reisz did, but unlike Edna, Mademoiselle Reisz possessed a strong character and extraordinary musical talent which enabled her to assume an alternative role of an artist:

> She is neither feminine nor sexual and is, rather, an alternative female, hardly female at all according to the dominant ideology. For these reasons as much as for her musical abilities, she is deemed eccentric in her society, labelled as "other." Mademoiselle

> Reisz is also given this label because of her strong sense of selfhood. She has a place in her community as an artist of some renown. (Gray 62)

Mademoiselle Reisz, an eccentric individual who lives a solitary life devoted to music, warns Edna that "the artist must possess the courageous soul" and "the soul that dares and defies"(Chopin 68). Edna is courageous but she cannot assume the role of an 'artist- woman' because she lacks the motivation and undying artistic devotion. Edna paints at times, but she cannot commit fully to the artistic calling because she "cannot exist without love, sexuality, and connection. In this role, Edna is interpolated to be eccentric and isolated" (Gray 66). During this period Edna had a love affair with Alcee Arobin, but her infatuation with Robert grew even stronger, because he was the one who brought out her flirtatious nature and long forgotten sexual desire:

> He teaches her to swim, furthering her autonomy, and with easy way of talking about himself, encourages her self-expression. Because he has aroused sexual desire in her, she eventually has an affair with another man, Alcee Arobin, an affair which functions as a rite of passage to sexual autonomy. (Stone 25)

After meeting Robert again at Mademoiselle Reisz apartment, she started romanticising about him and their probable future as a couple. Moreover, after abandoning the role of the artist-woman and having sexual relations with Alcee Arobin, Edna was determined in her decision to assume the role of the 'free woman'. As Jennifer Gray explains, "the 'free-woman' chooses her sexual partners and answers only to her individual consciousness. She is an empowered subject, rather than an exchanged object, and achieves autonomy and self-ownership, the project of nineteenth-century feminism"(66).

During the last evening they spent together, she told him about her growing feelings towards him and he confessed that he felt the same way. She was "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not" (Chopin 113) and she had taken up the alternative role of "the free-woman" who was sexually and emotionally autonomous. However, when she left for a short time to take care of Adele Ratignolle, Robert abandoned her with the explanation that he left her because he loved her. Edna's entire inner world collapsed, she perceived him as an individual with a strong personality, capable of being her lover and partner, while he never possessed any of those qualities. He could never be the man that she thought him to be, because he was a scared boy, afraid of the social repercussions and stigma of him dating a

married woman. Robert Lebrun seemed liberal at times, but he ultimately showed that he shared the same beliefs about gender roles as other men in the Victorian society. He and the rest of the Victorian men rejected any form or type of gender role that diverged from the prevailing social frame or norm. Jarlath Killeen explains that

> it is no coincidence that all the male figures in the novel look absurd next to Edna, from her pathetic husband at a loss what to do now that his wife won't receive the wives of his creditors on a Tuesday, a man importantly absent for most of the novel, to Robert Lebrun whose parochial attachment to Edna is pitied and rejected by her in their final scene together: "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". (Chopin 167)(419)

Edna thought that she loved Robert deeply, but it seems as though her infatuation was simply based on her strong sexual attraction towards him. Rosemary Franklin shares the same opinion in "*The Awakening* and the Failure of Psyche" pointing out that

> Edna does not love the individual, only what she has projected upon him. Edna's infatuation intensifies when Robert, like Eros, flees from her because of his attachment to the conventional world. Her rebellion against the collective is beyond the pale of a creature of his culture, so he retreats quickly. (515)

Edna grows disillusioned with Robert and the world around her and decides to return to Grand Isle. Edna returns to the sea as it is the site of her awakening to self and it is the only place where she experienced absolute physical and emotional freedom. She swam out far for the very last time; she was no longer depressed because with every breath she was more aware of her own strength and courage. Her life came to a tragic end, and one can view her death as somewhat of a defeat under the social pressures, an inability to cope with them or as her last step to absolute freedom. Carol Stone explains in her article "The Female Artist in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening:* Birth and Creativity*"* that death was Edna's only escape since she could not find fulfilment in neither marriage nor motherhood: "Edna drowns herself because she cannot live as a conventional wife or mother any longer, and society will not accept her newfound self. The solitude she enjoys makes for artistic growth, but she is bound to children, home, social duty" (30). Since Edna is not suited for motherhood she tries to find fulfilment

in the artist role, but neither does she possess true artistic talent nor character so she must abandon the role. Lastly, she assumes the role of the 'free woman' but "Edna's search for such an unrestricted, undefined and, ultimately, impossible state—a freedom from identity—ironically deprives her life of meaning (and finally of life itself) "(Ramos 145).

On the other hand, Peter Ramos in his work "Unbearable Realism: Freedom, Ethics and Identity in *The Awakening"* points out that Edna was not the type of person to take on the responsibility for her new found identity and deal with the harsh consequences to the very end, making death from her perspective the only means of freedom:

> But to take on an identity in this way, even if one were to modify it, must also involve confronting, and, ultimately, taking responsibility for the "real" effects and consequences of such a performance. This is especially the case when such a performance occurs in society, in relation to others. But this still leaves some room, even in an otherwise restrictive society, to wilfully modify one's social role or identity. (147)

The central idea of the 19th century feminist movement was "self-ownership" which was plausible in theory but not in practice or real life. Moreover, the whole concept looked idealistic in theory but it could not have been applied to 19th century gender norms that were so deeply rooted. Edna Pontellier sought self-ownership, but she was ultimately punished by the community for assuming alternative roles. Moreover, Peter Ramos also questions whether Edna's suicide is somewhat of a triumph or "are her final actions a defeat—the fatal, inescapable result for any woman who tries to assert autonomy in the face of such debilitating, insurmountable patriarchy (145)?" Edna's suicide could be interpreted as a victory of the hegemonic patriarchal ideology but it could also be interpreted as a last defiant act against the Victorian ideology. Jennifer Gray notes that, "in death, she symbolically enters the realm of nature as she wades into 'the sea', and becomes enfolded in its vast space of innumerable waves. Heroically, Edna escapes oppressive ideology, but tragically, does so only in death" (Gray 72).

One can view Edna Pontellier as a feminist heroine, bold and courageous in her attitudes and actions, a victim of the late 19th century social norms or a delusional selfish woman incapable of neither loving her children nor partner. But still, she embodies the transformation from a compliant wife and mother to an individual being, having evolved from the ideal mother and

wife figure Adele Ratignolle. Lastly, Edna Pontellier paved the way for new female characters in literature to emerge, ones who would be rightful owners of their own identity and destiny.

2. The New Liberated Woman

In the late 1920s Ernest Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises,* a roman 'a clef', based on literal people, "the lost generation" that lived in Paris and spent time drinking in bars and restaurants. The novel dealt with many issues and themes, such as the death of love, post-war wasteland and substitute religions. But amongst other things, Ernest Hemingway presented a new type of liberated woman, called Lady Brett Ashley. She embodied the 20th century modern woman, independent, strong minded and sexually promiscuous. As Lorie Watkins Fulton notes, "Brett is one of Hemingway's richest female characters; her personality gradually emerges as an intriguing mix of femininity and masculinity, strength and vulnerability, morality and dissolution (61). The medieval tradition of courtly love and chivalry was cast aside as there was no longer a lady in distress that needed to be saved. In Lady Brett's presence men became feminized and her androgynous appearance, behaviour and seductive sexual nature challenged the traditional ideal of manhood.

The Sun Also Rises is a novel that portrays the 1920s society, a post-war society where there were no fixed gender roles and a new liberated woman emerged throughout this process. These aforementioned issues will be discussed in order to get a full grasp of the meaning "new liberated woman".

2.1. A Civilization without Sexes

Ernest Hemingway, a proponent of masculine writing and typical man's man, was shocked at first by the 1920s Parisian society. His conservative upbringing was put to the test as he was exposed to unconventional marriages, homosexual relationships and individuals with ambiguous gender identities. Patrick Blair Bonds explains that

> in Paris, Hemingway arrived at young manhood at a time of major historical change, marked by the radical reconfiguration of sexual traditions and assumptions about gender roles. The experimental sentences of "Paris 1922" reflect his sense of those changes—socially, politically, and personally. (132)

In the previous years, marriage was placed on a certain pedestal, while in the 1920s society divorce was quite common. Lady Brett Ashley is a twice divorced woman that cheats on her soon to be husband Mike with various men. While in other societies of the world this

behaviour would not be tolerated and the woman would be stigmatised as sexually promiscuous, this is acceptable in the Parisian society. Moreover, as seen during the first night at the Parisian club, Brett enjoys the company of homosexual men: "A crowd of young men, some in jerseys and some in their shirt-sleeves, got out. I could see their hands and newly washed, wavy hair in the light from the door" (Hemingway 20). The Parisian society was not patriarchal or hegemonic and it became natural for women and men to assume different or alternative gender roles and identities, such as Brett did.

During this period women attended colleges, earned salaries and had become independent in many areas of life. Women chose to be professionally and emotionally autonomous, which led to the inevitable re-evaluation of the men's role and position in marriage and society. Patrick Blair Bonds explains that

> as the war initiated and accelerated a period of sudden, often traumatic change, former structural relations between men and women became increasingly blurred, shaping, Roberts argues, "a civilization without sexes". For many observers, the boundary between "male" and "female" was the most significant casualty of the war. (126)

This change in traditional gender roles is most evident in Brett and Mike's relationship. Brett's title and sexual power grant her the superior position in most of her relationships with men. In her relationships with Mike, she takes the superior roles because she has the economic power. Brett would not be considered a wealthy person in comparison with other people, but when comparing her material status with Mike's, she takes the superior position in the relationship: "She turned to Mike."This is Bill Gorton. This drunkard is Mike Campbell. Mr. Campbell is an undischarged bankrupt"(Hemingway 79). Moreover, during the fiesta in Pamplona, Brett paid off Mike's dues, proving again her economic power in the relationship.

As a result of war, the entire concept of identity was changing, the stereotypical view on gender roles disappeared slowly and a new perspective emerged.

2.2. The Genesis of Androgyny

Brett bore no resemblance to the late 19th century Victorian woman. The Victorian woman had long voluptuous hair and was covered with layers of clothing while Brett had short hair and sometimes wore skirts and sweaters. We are introduced to Brett through Jacob Barnes, the narrator of the story, who meets her at a Parisian club. Brett's character possesses feminine traits, due to her curves, but also masculine traits, due to her short boyish hair: "Brett

was damned good-looking. She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She started all that. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey" (Hemingway 22). As Ira Elliott notes,

> hair, in fact, functions throughout Hemingway's work as the principal image by which gender is made known. In *The Sun Also Rises,* for instance, Brett Ashley, epitome of the Modern Woman, "wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She started all that." Whatever is meant by "all that," Brett, a "damned fine-looking" woman," evokes androgyny and gender ambiguity both in physical appearance (her hair) and attire (her jersey). (77)

Brett's short boyish hair and casual sports clothes are again evidence that she bore no resemblance to the Victorian image of a woman. Adele and Edna had the figure of a woman, while Brett looked more like a teenage girl than a thirty four year old woman. However, during a night out in Pamplona, she wore a black dress that brought to light her feminine qualities, setting aside her masculine characteristics: "Brett wore a black, sleeveless evening dress. She looked quite beautiful" (Hemingway 146).

Brett's behaviour could also be seen as androgynous because in certain situations her actions are man-like. She is an extroverted person that speaks openly about sex, drinks heavily and does not feel the need to act lady-like: "She was smoking a cigarette and flicking the ashes on the rug. She saw me notice it. 'I say, Jake, I don't want to ruin your rugs. Can't you give a chap an ashtray" (Hemingway 57).

Brett's androgynous physical appearance and flirtatious nature were perceived as a direct threat to masculinity. This blurring of gender was not only present in terms of work, but also in women's physical appearance and behaviour, where women, such as Brett, were acting like men and men on the other hand, like girls.

2.3. Brett the Bitch

Soon after the novel was published, Brett lost her title of the Lady amongst the critics. Her promiscuous behaviour, selfish actions and overall destructive power over men, earned her the title of the Bitch:

> Yet after Edmund Wilson first tagged her as “an exclusively destructive force” (238), his perception, for the most part, remained unchallenged for decades. Following Wilson’s lead, critics quickly labelled Brett as a “bitch.” Members of what Roger Whitlow terms the “Brett-the-bitch” (51) school of criticism include Leslie Fiedler, who describes Brett as a “demi-bitch” (319), John Aldridge, who calls her a “compulsive bitch” (24), and, more recently, Mimi Gladstein, who labels her as part “bitch-goddess” (61). Even those who shy away from the actual term “bitch” tend to delineate Brett in other destructive ways. (Fulton 61)

She was given this unflattering title because she perceives men as merely sexual objects; a means to an end, the end result in this case is sexual gratification. She engages in many affairs and when she satisfies her sexual urges, she casts men aside. The only constant in her life is Jacob Barnes, the narrator of the story, an American expatriate, who has been in love with Brett for years. Jacob is madly in love with her, but his war injury has made him impotent, making it impossible for Brett to be with him because he cannot provide her with sexual pleasure. Moreover, Brett is the one that is in absolute control of their relationship, flirting and having sex with other men while always leaving enough room if she wishes to come back. Jacob gives the impression that he is fully aware of Brett’s character, but he still romanticises about her and caters to her every wish:

> "Couldn't we live together, Brett? Couldn't we just live together?"
> "I don't think so. I'd just tromper you with everybody. You couldn't stand it."
> "I stand it now."
> "That would be different. It's my fault, Jake. It's the way I'm made". (Hemingway 55)

Brett is selfish in their relationship, because she does not allow Jake to find love and fulfilment somewhere else. His inability to satisfy Brett sexually makes him passive and effeminate. Moreover, since Jacob cannot satisfy her sexual needs, she goes to San Sebastian with Robert Cohn, a man that she met the first night at the Parisian club. Brett views Robert as a sexual object, a passing fling and she casts him aside after their holiday: “The imperial force in *The Sun Also Rises* is Brett, and the first “territory” we see controlled is Robert Cohn. He falls under the sway of Brett’s sexual power, a new fief for her feudal empire“(Hays 239). After San Sebastian, Robert becomes obsessed with Brett, he wants to be with Brett but she denies him this possibility and she treats him like an absolute stranger: "I just couldn't stand it

about Brett. I've been through hell, Jake. It's been simply hell. When I met her down here Brett treated me as though I were a perfect stranger. I just couldn't stand it. We lived together at San Sebastian. I suppose you know it. I can't stand it any more" (Hemingway 194). Although he is aware of her promiscuous nature, he still cannot fully comprehend that sex or the time they spent together did not mean anything to Brett. Robert rejects the idea of the modern woman and during the fiesta in Pamplona he acts as if he were a knight who came to his lady's rescue. Kim Moreland further explains that

> Cohn's behaviour is not merely sentimental and romantic, for, in a yet more specific sense, his behaviour approximates that of the medieval knight. In the medieval tradition, as C.S. Lewis points out in *The Allegory of Love*, the source of love is physical beauty and its goal is most often consummation. (30)

By naming her *Circe*, it becomes apparent that Robert is aware of Brett's seductive sexual power and her effect on men: "He calls her Circe," Mike said. "He claims she turns men into swine. Damn good. I wish I were one of these literary chaps"(Hemingway 144). Although aware of her nature, he still continues to live out his dream of him being a knight and Brett a damsel in distress, waiting to be saved from the swarm of men. Throughout this entire period, Brett is engaged to Mike and during the fiesta all of her lovers gather in one place to witness the bullfights. As opposed to Robert, her fiancé Mike claims that he is well aware of Brett's promiscuous nature. It seems as though he is not bothered by her affair with Robert, but by his indiscretion. He is angry at Robert's stupidity, his childish assumption that he could be the one to tame and save Brett: "Don't sit there looking like a bloody funeral. What if Brett did sleep with you? She's slept with lots of better people than you"(Hemingway 142). Mike and Jacob are constantly drunk during the fiesta, because it numbs them emotionally. Brett holds the belief that she and Mike have a mutual understanding when it comes to her affairs, so she often brags about her sexual escapades in front of him. But Donald Daiker explains that "Brett is wrong again when she tells Jake that 'Michael and I understand each other' (148), implying that Mike understands and accepts her affair with Cohn when actually Brett's infidelities— first with Cohn and then with Romero— destroy Mike emotionally" (74). The main reason why Jacob and Mike mock Robert and remain silent about Brett's affairs is because they do not want to be perceived as effeminate. As pointed out previously, the 1920s society witnessed radical changes in terms of traditional gender roles, women had taken up masculine characteristics and in this new found situation, men were determined more than ever to

preserve their sense of identity: "With modern masculinity increasingly understood in contrast to its opposite—femininity—men anxiously adopted behavioural traits and attitudes that would demonstrate their manhood and avoid their being perceived as effeminate (Bonds 127). Brett's last affair with the young Spanish bullfighter Romero brings Robert to the verge of an emotional breakdown. He physically attacks not only Jake, but also Romero and it culminates by him leaving Pamplona disillusioned and in tears. In Brett's presence men inevitably become effeminized, Jake and Mike are numb from alcohol and Robert in his last attempt to win over Brett, loses his self dignity.

Although she has a title, she does not act according to any of the norms or laws connected to it. She is twice-divorced and a perpetual drinker who engages in sexual affairs despite the fact she is soon to be married again. Kim Moreland argues in her article "Hemingway's Medievalist Impulse: Its Effect on the Presentation of Women and War in *The Sun Also Rises"* that "though Brett holds the position of lady, again and again she proves herself unworthy of the title, and of the admiration afforded her by the various men who love and serve her "(31).

After the fiesta comes to an end and Brett leaves with Romero, everyone goes their separate ways. The courtly love tradition no longer exists in the modern world and while Brett embraces her new role, men on the other hand are not able to cope with this new set of rules and norms. Brett did not need a man to define her existence, she was the dominant individual in a relationship that set the rules and if men did not act accordingly she would leave them. Peter Hays describes Brett as a colonizer, a woman that

> must be the controlling individual in any relationship, the imperial force, and she can only be that while men are under the sway of her sexuality. When they seek equality in the relationship, or dominance, when they want to call the shots, she ends the relationship, giving up her conquered territory and moving on. (240)

Critics have labelled Brett as a bitch, but one has to bear in mind that throughout the entire novel she has remained true to her character. Brett is a real woman, she is aware of her flaws and virtues and she speaks openly about her affairs and way of life. Although men are aware of her personality, they still try to tame her and when they do not succeed in their attempts, their egos are inevitably bruised and they act like teenage boys.

Lastly, critics have always been harsh in their analysis of Brett and one can always come up with imaginative names and adjectives when describing her character and actions. But, one

must remember that she is a reflection of the modern times and she epitomizes the 20th century modern woman who does not need men or society to define her as a human being.

2.4. The Tip of the Iceberg

Like the critics, Ernest Hemingway has treated Brett with a great deal of antipathy. Hemingway takes on the role of the main narrator Jacob Barnes and Brett's character and actions are viewed from Jake's perspective, thus also being Hemingway's perspective. As previously mentioned, Hemingway's conservative views were challenged during the 1920s, when gender identity was no longer a fixed concept. Brett is a reflection of the 1920s, she embodies the new woman, questions the idea of manhood and in some way represents everything that he resented in that period. During the fiesta in Pamplona, Brett became infatuated with Pedro Romero,

> fifteen years her junior, almost young enough to be her son. She conquers him with sexual fascination, and critics have likened her to the bull controlling others with her moves. She offers him sexual experience with a worldly woman, and he offers her physical attractiveness, the appeal of youth, and, once again, novelty. (Hays 240)

Her infatuation with Romero becomes so strong that she asks Jake to arrange a meeting of a sort so she can introduce herself. She is controlled by her sexual urges and she will overcome any obstacle necessary to fulfil her sexual needs, even if it means losing her self-dignity: "I've got to do something. I've got to do something I really want to do. I've lost my self-respect"(Hemingway 183). Soon after, she meets Romero and they engage in a sexual relationship that resulted in them leaving Pamplona for Madrid. When they reach Madrid, problems began to emerge and they end the relationship. Peter Hays explains that Brett ended the relationship because she could not conform to his traditional views on marriage:

> When he insists, however, that she should grow her hair out and be more womanly, she sends him away. The long hair is metonymic of a conventional Spanish marriage, Brett with long hair under a shawl, Pedro the dominant male in the relationship. That's a situation Brett cannot endure. (240)

If she had accepted Romero's proposal, she would no longer be able to enjoy casual sex with men and would have to assume the traditional gender role of the mother and wife. She was

infatuated with Romero, but she was also very much aware of her nature and the destructive effect she had on men: "You know I'd have lived with him if I hadn't seen it was bad for him. We got along damned well" (Hemingway 243).

Again, one might believe that she was the one that ended the affair, especially if we take into account her previous relationships and independent character. But the fact that Brett called Jacob to come to her rescue in Madrid and the manner in which she spoke of their breakup, leave the impression that Romero left her because he was ashamed of her behaviour and physical appearance: "It was rather a knock his being ashamed of me. He was ashamed of me for a while, you know" (242). Donald Daiker argues that Brett's actions and words clearly show that she is "unable to hold *on to* Romero, to prevent him from eventually leaving her" (75).

It is difficult to determine whether Brett left Romero or not, because we only see her viewpoint. But the bigger picture here is that through this relationship she lost her self-respect. It seems that Hemingway wanted to punish Brett for her rejection of traditional gender roles, multiple affairs with men and lack of morals. Towards the end of the novel, Brett awaits alone and penniless in Madrid for Jacob to come to her rescue. When he arrives, Brett is obviously shaken up, but as the day comes to end, she comes to her senses. She continues in the same manner as she has done so far, determined in her decision to find Mike and mend the relationship: "I'm going back to Mike. I could feel her crying as I held her close. He's so damned nice and he's so awful. He's my sort of thing" (243). The entire situation with Romero hurt her ego a bit, but she stays positive and she does not need a man to take care of her in the long run. Jake and Brett walk down the street and nothing climactic happens at the end of the story; the knight and fair lady do not raid off into the sunset like in the Middle Ages, making it even more similar to real, modern and everyday life.

As already mentioned, Brett embodied everything Hemingway resented in the 1920s society. It seems that Hemingway could not understand that the courtly love tradition was gone; the modern woman had taken up the role of a knight and had successfully taken over territories previously dominated by men. Kim Moreland explains that

> Hemingway's nostalgia for the courtly love tradition results, then, either in the creation of a Brett Ashley-a modern woman who is vividly real though presented unsympathetically- or a Catherine Barkley, a Maria, a Renata- modern women who are one-dimensional though presented sympathetically. This nostalgia suggests *why*

> Hemingway's women are caught in this double-bind, *why* they are seldom both sympathetic and real. (40)

It becomes obvious that Hemingway was not ready for the 1920s social changes and the emergence of the new liberated woman. But these social changes were inevitable and they were occurring in other societies of the world. Modern societies began to question traditional gender roles, which led to the creation of social structures where one could create their own identity or assume a different gender identity without social pressures or possible stigma.

Like a true artist, Hemingway never imposes his subjective views on the reader, but leaves the reader to come to his or her own conclusion. Peter Hays notes that one has to keep in mind that Hemingway "wrote on the iceberg principle, omitting details, even facts, to encourage reader participation and, to judge from subsequent critics, to test readers' awareness's "(238). Brett is one of Hemingway's most complex female characters, but she does not speak much throughout the entire novel, and most of her actions are interpreted through Jake's viewpoint. Lorie Watkins Fulton argues that "what she actually says provides little insight into her character because she communicates largely with pat British expressions, and her words frequently contradict her actions" (63). Hemingway's use of the iceberg theory is most evident when it comes to Brett's character, because only the tip of the iceberg or a smaller fraction of her complex character is presented to the reader. The tip provides us with the basic knowledge, but it is meaningless when compared to the density beneath the surface. If one looked only at the tip of the iceberg, Brett would seem shallow, selfish and promiscuous to the full extent of that word. But when looking beneath the surface, one discovers that she possesses many characteristics that modern women can relate to. Hemingway gives the reader the full freedom to interpret Brett's behaviour and actions and therefore create an opinion. It is ultimately up to the reader to decide whether he will treat Brett's character with sympathy or antipathy. But one has to always bear in mind that she embodies the 20th century real modern woman, who is a complex, self-reliant individual who does not need men or society as whole to define her existence or identity.

Conclusion

After analysing Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* it is evident that the female character experienced major changes from the late 1890s till the 1930s. Amongst other literary works Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* marked the gradual evolution of the female character in literature. The 19th century Victorian gender roles were deeply rooted in society. Men positioned themselves on the top of the hierarchy, while women were positioned on the bottom ranks. The 19th century society was a patriarchal society that viewed men as mighty individuals whose role was to conquer territories and gain material wealth while women were subjected to their needs and desires. The term "mother-woman" stems from this period since a woman's worth was measured by her biological ability to procreate. Adele Ratignolle, one of the main female characters of *The Awakening,* represents the ideal "mother-woman" figure whose children define her existence. She is a character seemingly devoid of identity or any distinguishing characteristic apart from her constant state of being pregnant which puts her in a higher ranking position in the hierarchy. Various authors have provided a different perspective, claiming that she possessed certain liberal traits due to her flirtatious nature and extroverted personality but she still personifies the selfless mother figure in 19th century literature and social history.

Apart from the mother type, we are introduced to another female character Edna Pontellier, the embodiment of the 19th century feminist heroine. This gradual evolution of the female character in literature was parallel with the social changes occurring in history in terms of gender equality. Edna Pontellier in her search for "self-ownership", a central idea of the 19th century feminist discourse, tried to abandon the role of the "mother-woman" which caused a revolt amongst the critics and readers of that time. Unable to find fulfilment in either motherhood or marriage, Edna assumes the extreme role of the "artist-woman" but her lack of artistic talent and refusal to live a solitary life force her to abandon the role. Ultimately she assumes the role of the "free-woman" who is emotionally and sexually autonomous but this proves to be a fatal decision. Her new found identity of the "free-woman" starts to intertwine with her "mother-woman" role causing deeply disillusioned Edna to commit suicide. The 19th century Victorian society did not allow women to assume or question their gender identity and anybody who diverged from the prevailing gender norms was punished. Although Edna's life ended tragically, she still embodies the feminist heroine who dared to defy strict social norms and standards. Female characters such as Edna offered a new possibility that would later on be fully explored by other female characters.

In the 1920s Ernest Hemingway brought a new character to the scene, Lady Brett Ashley or to be precise the "new liberated woman". The 1920s Parisian society witnessed major changes in terms of gender identity and gender roles. Women became professionally and emotionally autonomous and men no longer held their fixed positions of providers and protectors. Lady Brett Ashley was an androgynous character who defied traditional standards and treated men as sexual objects. She was a complex, extroverted individual that shook the boundaries between males and females. The critics termed her "the bitch" and Hemingway himself even treated her with antipathy due to her sometimes ruthless behaviour and attitude towards men. The era of the knight and the damsel in distress was over and a new character emerged on the scene, one that would change society's perception of gender identity and roles. Lady Brett Ashley not only brought about changes in terms of gender identity, but she ultimately embodies the modern woman who is strong, self- reliant and a free individual.

To conclude, the female character experienced many changes through the years, evolving from the "mother-woman", to the "artist" and "free woman" and finally resulting in the creation of the "new liberated woman". One has to be aware of the struggles that occurred in literature in terms of the female character as well as in social history, because then we will be more appreciative of the freedom of speech and choice we enjoy today. The female character experienced many struggles and the idea of womanhood evolved immensely from the 1890s finally resulting in the creation of the female character we know today.

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