

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF OPPRESSION AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN KATE

CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING* AND TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

---

A Thesis

Presented

to the Faculty of

California State University Dominguez Hills

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Humanities

---

by

Kristin Talbert

Summer 2018

Copyright by

**KRISTIN TALBERT**

2018

All Rights Reserved

This thesis is dedicated to my sweet Cam and my little Declan on the way. In your life, you will accomplish many things to be proud of. You are both my greatest accomplishments. This thesis is my third.

I love you,

Your Mama

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
COPYRIGHT PAGE.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. CONFINING SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS.....	6
The Role of the “Mother-Woman” in <i>The Awakening</i> .....	6
Defying the Social Norm in <i>Sula</i> .....	10
Social Expectations Defined by Familial Connections.....	12
3. RELATIONSHIPS AS A CONFINING FACTOR IN DISCOVERING SELF.....	15
The Internal Drive for Independence and Self-Autonomy.....	15
Self-Awareness Confined by Relationships.....	19
4. SEXUAL FREEDOM AS A MEANS TO GAINING INDEPENDENCE.....	23
Obligatory versus Desired Sexual Relationships .....	24
5. ISOLATION AS A NECESSARY COMPONENT TO SELF-OWNERSHIP.....	29
Isolation Leading to a Greater Connection to Self.....	29
Self-Expression as a Necessary Component to Identity.....	36
Maintaining Ownership Beyond Boundaries.....	39
6. CONCLUSION .....	44

PAGE

WORKS CITED .....47

## ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* illustrate the negative implications of a patriarchal society as their female characters are compelled to sacrifice their identities to conform. Although they are from different time periods, settings, social backgrounds, and races, Sula Peace and Edna Pontellier defy what it means to be women in their respective societies and in doing so become isolated; however, it is in this isolation that both women realize the fundamental need for self-ownership and freedom. This thesis contributes to the ongoing conversation in relation to the conflict of subjugation that women face by comparing the similar predicaments of Sula Peace and Edna Pontellier. Connecting the similar realizations that these two very different women experience demonstrates how authors from differing backgrounds are able to use the unifying theme of confinement based on gender to promote awareness of the oppressive roles that these two women face.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*The problem with gender is that prescribes how we  
should be rather than recognizing how we are.*  
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Viewed by many scholars as feminist texts, *Sula* and *The Awakening* have been reviewed and studied for decades for the message they send about subjugated women. Although the text's protagonists Sula Peace and Edna Pontellier are different races, come from different socio-economic situations, and live in different time periods, the issue of female subjugation remains a central conflict.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* published in 1973 is set in a predominately African-American town known as "The Bottom" a hilly area overlooking the town of Medallion, Ohio, and although the last chapter ends in 1965, most of the novel takes place between the years 1919-1941. The story follows the relationship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace who grow apart as a result of their journeys into womanhood as Nel abides by cultural norms and Sula defies them. Some of the novel's most predominant themes are friendship and betrayal, the coming of age of two young African-American women in search of their identity, and the power of cultural influences on individuals. As Nel sacrifices her identity to fulfill her expected role of wife and mother, Sula rejects cultural norms becoming ostracized by her town yet also becoming independent and strong. The novel begins with Nel and Sula bonded so closely they almost share a single identity, but

as their paths diverge, and the part of their intertwined identity becomes their own, they are left to discover the missing part of themselves.

Ultimately, Sula finds freedom through her sexuality as she rebels against the standards of society in contrast to Nel who never fully finds herself as she conforms to a society which does not encourage female independence. After Sula's death, Nel realizes that the part of her self she shared with Sula has died with her and that because she failed to claim it while Sula was alive, she has lost it forever. In contrast to Nel, Sula claims ownership of herself early in life and therefore leads a life unencumbered of societal constraints. Nel's story is a necessary component to truly grasp the story of Sula as their paths, although leading them in contrasting directions, intertwine on many levels.

Since its publication, this novel has been studied and reviewed as a canonical feminist text as these two women come of age during a time and in a society where gender stereotypes dictated women's paths. The segregated community Sula Peace and Nel Wright come from serves as an important element of each girl's developing personality as one conforms to the ideals of the community and the other diverges. In an interview, Toni Morrison discusses the importance of addressing cultural influences on relationships as she does not want *Sula* to only be regarded as a text defying gender stereotypes:

I think there is a serious question about black male and black female relationships in the twentieth century. I just think that the argument has always turned on something it should not turn on: gender. I think that the conflict of genders is a cultural illness. Many of the problems modern couples have are caused not so

much by conflicting gender roles as by the other ‘differences’ the culture offers.

(Morrison qtd. in McKay 421)

Although this thesis focuses on issues created by gender stereotypes, the focus is not centered around the relationships between males and females but between the two central females. Sula and Nel are products of an environment where race and gender play a significant role in shaping both women’s personalities and ultimately their self-realizations.

Some critics argue that Sula is a selfish character as she isolates herself from her family, community, and even Nel by acting on her impulses and desires without thinking of those who might be affected by her actions. However, she is also considered a strong female character as she lives for herself and rebels against the standards imposed upon women at this time. In contrast to Sula, Nel Wright embodies the role of wife and mother that society expects of her and, in doing so, sacrifices her sense of self.

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, published in 1899, contrasts vastly from *Sula* in that the time periods and setting are different, and the central character is white; however, despite these differences the two central protagonists of this thesis, Sula Peace and Edna Pontellier, come to similar realizations which emphasize the struggle women endure as a result of a patriarchal society. Primarily set in Grand Isle off the coast of Louisiana in the late 19th century, *The Awakening* tells the story of Edna Pontellier who abides by the societal norms of wife and mother only to discover that, despite being influenced to believe this is her calling in life, she is unfulfilled and longing for something beyond her dictated path. She discovers freedom through self-expression and art, but on her journey

also realizes that the people she is tied to restrain and confine her. Also viewed as a feminist text, the novel criticizes how a male-dominated society subjugates women robbing them of their identity.

*The Awakening* connects to Toni Morrison's *Sula* in that both novels address the confines imposed upon women thus robbing them of their identity. The standard role that Nel conforms to in *Sula* is called the "mother-woman" in *The Awakening* where Edna Pontellier fulfills her domestic duties only to feel empty. Although their backgrounds are vastly different, Nel and Edna have similar lifestyles of wife and mother which are dictated by their current society. However, the difference between the two women is that Edna, as opposed to Nel, subconsciously knows that she is not meant for this role. Through introspection, she begins to act upon impulses once constrained and in doing so, discovers a part of herself that she did not know existed.

As Edna begins to reject the idealized life she leads and pursue passions which give her a sense of freedom and self, her husband becomes concerned that she is ill. This reveals the common misconception of the time that women who showed signs of discontent were deemed mentally and emotionally inferior to men and ultimately unstable. Through her internal struggles, Edna realizes that her repressed feelings confine her. Her "awakening" occurs when she begins to embrace and express these suppressed emotions through art and experimenting with sexual relationships beyond marriage. Although a stifling patriarchal society once constrained Edna, she gains a sense of empowerment similar to that of Sula.

However, after finding this sense of freedom, Edna realizes that she will always be bound by society's confining roles for women. It is only through death that Edna believes she can attain full liberation. Because she refuses to sacrifice her newfound self, she kills herself by walking out into the limitless sea. Edna's death symbolizes that in the late 1800s, the only way for Edna to take ownership of her life was in death. Edna "awakens" to the fact that she lacks ownership of her life; therefore, she strives to take it back, only to discover that she cannot be truly free from the constraints of society.

The ongoing conversation of these feminist texts illustrates the plight of women in a society that still holds on to old traditions, values, and stereotypes. It is through these types of texts that the negative implications of this limiting mindset become evident. Despite their very different backgrounds, Sula Peace and Edna Pontellier grow and learn very similar lessons of what it means to be a woman in their respective societies. This thesis compares their journeys, while also taking into consideration their differences in order to reveal the self-sacrifice necessary for both of these women. It is only through isolation that Sula and Edna can freely express themselves and in doing so attain full independence and self-ownership in societies which restrict and stifle women.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONFINING SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

The setting of each novel plays a major role in illustrating society's confining path for women. Edna and Nel symbolize the restrictions of society which bound women to very limited opportunities as they follow similar paths to that of their conventional mothers. In contrast, Sula's background is unconventional leading her down a path of self-discovery and independence.

#### The Role of the "Mother-Woman" in *The Awakening*

Edna's notions of romance and love are dismissed at an early age as she realizes that within her society, those are not the defining factors in a marriage. Having several instances of romantic interests and attractions in her youth which did not lead to any kind of relationship, Edna chooses to marry Léonce Pontellier who flatters her with affection despite her ironically being "in the midst of her secret great passion" for "the tragedian" (*The Awakening* 32). This infatuation with a man she never knows shows her naiveté and youth as she romanticizes; yet, this also shows her imagination and her ability to feel great desire despite the minimal opportunities she has to actually make them a reality. Because she feels she cannot marry for love or passion, she concedes to marry Léonce to rebel against her father, whom "she was not very warmly or deeply attached" to (113), as he is against the marriage. She sees their marriage as a partnership as opposed to a loving relationship: "She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable

satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution” (33). Because passion and love can fade over time, Edna feels that her match with Léonce is suitable because she has neither for him. Their marriage is based on suitability and respect, and therefore, she is not concerned that a fading love will negatively impact their relationship. Settling for this type of alliance, one based on mutual respect, seemed customary to her as a marriage of romance such as possible marriage to “the tragedian, was not for her in this world;” therefore, “she [closes] the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (33) as she settles for a loveless marriage and a life of mundanity.

As a woman, “her subjection begins as the daughter of a dominating father and continues in her later role as wife and mother . . . [which] places women in an object position, through their subjection to the dominant ideology of gender roles in nineteenth-century society” (Gray 56). Due to this constructed role for women, Edna’s independence is taken from her as she marries for stability as opposed to love which was customary within her society. In abiding by society’s expectation for women to marry at a young age, she marries before having a chance to fully develop who she is and is therefore robbed of the ability to form her own identity. This restricting path is what Chopin describes as the “mother-woman,” a path that Edna clearly does not fit into as she feels disconnected from her husband and children. “Mother-women were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (*The Awakening* 16); Chopin argues that in order for a woman to fulfill this expectation, she must sacrifice

herself as it is impossible for a woman to abide by this societal standard while developing a true sense of self-understanding. When a woman marries and has children, her identity becomes that of wife and mother as she “effaces” herself by eliminating her individual needs for those of others. In the novel, Edna subconsciously struggles against this expectation and finds herself overcome with sudden grief when alone. She convinces herself that “such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life” (14) in order to suppress any feelings that are inconsistent with the norm. Edna fulfills the societal standard intended for women and does not question it because it has never occurred to her to do so. She cannot control her “sudden bouts of crying” because they are brought on by her subconscious (14). Because she lacks a sense of self, she cannot explain these overwhelming emotions; however, even though Edna does not comprehend them, Chopin reveals their existence and power. Edna often feels herself overwhelmed by “an indescribable oppression, which . . . filled her whole being with a vague anguish” but passed as subtly as a “shadow” or a “mist” (14). This fleeting instance of oppression overwhelms her momentarily but because it passes so quickly, she does not consider it deeply enough to explore the issue. Just as it passes, she moves on suppressing her true discontent. Edna does not cognitively realize the source of her sorrow; however, it is inevitably present as all humans ultimately have an innate desire to be autonomous.

Besides marrying young, another role of the idealized “mother-woman” is bearing children, an obligatory aspect of marriage. The choice to have children was not one that many women consciously considered, as it was deemed part of their purpose. Edna’s

disconnected relationship from her children is a result of them being a product of an obligation as opposed to her want:

[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 . . . Feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief . . . It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (33)

Because she has children before fully contemplating whether or not she wants them, Edna is forced into the role of mother before being emotionally and mentally prepared. Her maternal instincts are to care for their “security” and “welfare”; however, after this obligation of caring for these necessary needs, she feels estranged from her children as she lacks any emotional connection to them. Their very existence confines her explaining why she feels a “sort of relief” in their absence as this absence “frees” her. Chopin questions the societal demands placed upon women as Edna describes her role of mother as a “responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (33) showing that she bore children out of societal responsibility as opposed to actual want ultimately creating this disjointed relationship as well as a deep detachment.

Subconsciously, Edna realizes the snare created for women and is overcome with uncontrollable grief, but she convinces herself that this misery in married life is part of being a woman. Although Mr. Pontellier is also their parent, he too is disconnected from their children, but this is acceptable as he is their father. The father’s role is to support the

family financially, not to provide emotional support as this was deemed the mother's responsibility. Therefore, Mr. Pontellier becomes frustrated with Edna's inattention to the children at times, thinking, "If it was not a mother's place to look after the children, whose on earth was it?" showing his lack of consideration when it comes to the care of children (13). He even goes as far as thinking that something is mentally wrong with Edna as her inattention grows when she begins to practice more of her art, again adding to Chopin's point that a woman must sacrifice her existence to fulfill the role of the idealized "mother-woman."

#### Defying the Social Norm in *Sula*

Similar to Edna, Nel Wright from Toni Morrison's *Sula* allows societal norms to control her life as she falls into a similar trap sacrificing her sense of self to fulfill domestic duties in contrast to the novel's protagonist Sula Peace who rejects the social norms. Nel and Sula live in a town dominated by a strong female presence, but the judgmental views of the community compel Nel to fit into the restraining domestic role in contrast to Sula who becomes an outcast by not doing so. Due to the unconventional paths of her mother and grandmother, who never marry but have open relationships with various men, Sula is never fully welcomed into her community. Therefore, she is never forced into the constraints expected of women in their community; this allows her to freely discover who she is at a young age in contrast to Edna Pontellier who discovers her identity in adulthood and Nel Wright who never has the opportunity to do so.

The relationships that both Nel and Sula have with their mothers play critical roles in their sense of societal and self-obligations. Nel's mother has a dominant presence in her life which stifles her early on as she is taught to be a compliant servant in their community: "Under Helene's hand [Nel] became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (Morrison 18). Helene Wright was raised in a strict and religious household by her grandmother who sought to keep her on the path of piety in contrast to her actual mother who is a prostitute. As a result, Helene fulfills every expectation of society by marrying, having a child, and keeping an upright home: the life she also wishes for Nel. As a young girl battling these constraints, Nel struggles internally against her mother's teachings because she still has a sense of freedom and innocence. These feelings are further emphasized when Nel meets her grandmother who is left out of her life. Morrison's description of Rochelle, Helene's mother, illustrates her vibrancy and richness of character as she shows strong emotion and care towards Nel, attention Nel never receives from her own mother. Meeting her grandmother is a pivotal moment for Nel as she yearns for that vitality which she never witnesses in her own mother. She struggles to gain a sense of self and begins to question her ties to her parents. Her moment of self-discovery comes after this meeting with her grandmother when she realizes, "'I'm me,' . . . 'I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me' . . . Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear" (28). Although she questions these ties and comes close to self-discovery, her mother's influence on her proves too powerful. She ultimately resigns to the life her mother

imagined for her as “her parents succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” (83). Nel becomes bound by society’s restraints as she marries young before ever fully gaining a sense of identity. Her background is similar to that of Edna in *The Awakening* as Edna too marries before establishing a sense of identity; however, whereas Edna eventually breaks free, Nel remains confined. Although Edna shares similar weaknesses with Nel, she has strength similar to Sula which allows her to eventually take ownership over herself leading her down a path of self-discovery.

#### Social Expectations Defined by Familial Connections

Sula, in contrast to Nel and Edna who have someone early in their lives dictating their paths, does not have a traditional family in that both her grandmother and mother have raised children without men. Due to their lack of traditional values, there are no societal expectations placed on Sula at an early age, essentially giving her the ability to explore and discover herself. One component to this non-traditional family is that her mother lacks a strong sense of maternal impulses towards Sula leading to their disjointed relationship, ultimately, freeing Sula from any obligations to her. This relationship contrasts with Nel’s relationship to her mother who dictates and influences the structure of her life. Sula’s lack of parental guidance and maternal support provide her the opportunity to define life for herself as opposed to adhering to the prescribed path of society.

The disjointed mother-child relationship Sula has with her own mother, Hannah, is a result of Hannah’s detached relationship with her mother, Eva. As a young adult,

Hannah asks Eva, “Mamma, did you ever love us?” Eva replies, “No. I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’” (67). She describes her love for her children as “stay[ing] alive” for them (69) not necessarily the maternal and comforting love that society expects from mothers. Instead of a surface level love, the love Eva has for her children is deep and selfless; her role is to protect and “stay alive” for them as she sees them as an extension of herself. However, Hannah misinterprets her mother’s lack of outward affection for a lack of love. This misunderstanding is reflected in Hannah’s feelings for Sula as she loves her but does not form a close connection with her. As a young girl, Sula overhears her mother describe her thoughts towards her, “I love Sula. I just don’t like her” (57). Hearing this frees Sula from any obligation to her mother as it teaches her at an early age that “there was no other that you could count on” (119). Lacking this emotional tie to her mother, she is given an opportunity to discover who she is outside of any constraint. Because she is not obligated to anyone, Sula has the freedom to pursue her needs without the fear of disappointing anyone and as a result is unrestrained. She is indifferent to others’ opinions and expectations leaving her free to pursue life and all of the emotions which come with it. Morrison creates a chain reaction in which Hannah is disconnected and free from obligations to her mother Eva, creating a similar relationship with her own daughter, Sula. Hannah is never tied down to any other character; her disconnected emotions toward Sula free her of the obligation of motherhood while also releasing Sula from enduring any ownership as a result.

While Hannah has many relations with men, she does not have any relationships with them; therefore, Sula never witnesses a commitment between a man and a woman.

Having never grown up seeing this as a standard, she is not compelled to pursue it herself:

The foundation of Sula's character is, Morrison writes, a lack of foundation, a - structureless-ness that affects every thought, every action, and every interaction that Sula has. Formed of a creative formlessness, Sula seeks only her own counsel, leaving her indifferent to or uninterested in any kind of quotidian morality. (Galehouse 341)

Because she lacked a strong structure or set guide to live by, Sula was able to test boundaries and experiment with who she wanted to become. In doing this, she builds a strong personality which is not confined by the ordinary or “quotidian” structure or beliefs of the town. Due to her limited restraints, Sula is unencumbered while developing her sense of self and, in contrast to Nel and Edna, is able to create an identity free of societal constraints. Sula’s freedom comes at the expense of her relationships to others; however, this provides her with the self-knowledge to be a confident individual.

In fulfilling the societal needs demanded of women, Nel and Edna sacrifice a part of themselves before ever having a chance to truly discern who they are. This is a result of following the limited paths defined for them by others and abiding by the beliefs of their societies which ultimately leads to a limited realization of themselves. In never having the opportunity to grow and discover who she is, Edna conforms without realizing the negative consequences. This is in contrast to Sula, who has the freedom at a young age to defy societal standards as she is raised by a family which deviates from society’s prescribed path.

## CHAPTER 3

RELATIONSHIPS AS A CONFINING FACTOR  
IN DISCOVERING SELF

Both authors Chopin and Morrison show throughout their literature that the relationships of their female protagonists serve to stifle their independence as so much of their self is dominated by others. Edna Pontellier's sense of self cannot be realized as the "mother-woman" ideal of the time constricts her to her husband and children. In contrast to Edna, Sula never feels confined by societal demands; however, she is confined by her relationship with Nel. Their strong friendship is a focal point to the entire text and ironically is also what inhibits Sula from attaining full ownership of herself. It is not until Sula and Nel's relationship dissolves, that Sula becomes fully enlightened.

The Internal Drive for Independence  
and Self-Autonomy

In *The Awakening*, Edna is ensnared by her relationships to her husband and children but only subconsciously realizes it. Chopin illustrates humans' internal drive towards independence despite restraints, which are societal in Edna's situation. Part of what restrains Edna is her family; she is bound to her husband and children who stifle her ability to have an identity separate from them. As she struggles with her sense of obligation to her husband versus her want to spend time with Robert Lebrun, a young, attractive man who shows interest in her, Edna realizes that she is torn between two worlds, one of duty and the other of self-fulfillment.

Her relationship with her husband constrains her from developing any sense of self; therefore, she is not consciously aware of her unhappiness until being around Robert inspires feelings that she did not know existed. Chopin describes moments where Edna spends nights crying because she feels “[a]n indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate from some familiar part of her consciousness, [and] filled her whole being with a vague anguish” (*The Awakening* 14). She describes this “mood” as passing through her like a fleeting “shadow” providing her with a glimpse of her internal yearnings; however, because it passes so quickly, she never fully realizes the depths to which she is affected by this unhappiness (14). Her relationship with Robert ignites urges of longing and desire which she does not regularly experience and therefore, does not know she has within her. These feelings revitalize and remind her of the part of herself she had sacrificed years before when she married Léonce. As she and Robert begin spending more time together, she “begin[s] 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” (25). Spending her young adult life in her role as wife and mother, she loses her sense of self. Without her own identity, she forgets what it means to want as she does not experience strong emotions of longing for her husband and children. Any expectation for happiness was suppressed in her youth as she learned “at a very early period . . . the dual life [of a woman]—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (26). As a product of an environment which places men in a higher social order and limits women to the roles of domestic duties, Edna does not have the confidence or awareness to question society. In this description, Chopin addresses the plight of women covering

up internal privation as they fulfill their domestic duties, illustrating the human need for self-awareness and independence. Individuals despite gender all have the need to have an identity for self-fulfillment; therefore, the drive towards self-discovery is something which can never fully be suppressed. Outwardly, Edna suppresses these desires as she has been conditioned to accept her life. However, despite living the ideal life for a woman at the time, she cannot hide her unhappiness and dissatisfaction which she is unable to fully grasp. In a conversation with her close friend Madame Ratignolle, Edna admits that she would give up “the unessential” for her children, such as “money” and even her “life”; however, she explains, “I wouldn’t give up myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (80). Madame Ratignolle, confused by her meaning, responds that she does not “know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential” revealing that lack of self, the concept which Edna describes, is nonexistent to her. Edna’s evolution as an individual becomes more evident as she acknowledges and voices this newfound identity; however, she lacks full independence as Chopin foreshadows that the institutions of marriage and womanhood are binding.

On the brink of self-awareness, Edna yearns to claim her independence; however, she is constantly reminded of her restraints. In a moment of solitude, she stands at an open window only to be overcome with voices “from the darkness and the sky above and the stars,” which “jeered and sounded mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope” (87). This scene is reminiscent of Chopin’s short story “The Story of an Hour”

in which a young woman, upon hearing of the death of her husband, has a similar experience looking out an open window when she sees:

The open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.  
(“The Story of an Hour”)

What this young woman ultimately felt “creeping out of the sky, [and] reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air” (“The Story of an Hour”) was freedom at the thought of her husband’s death. The role of “wife” which confined her became obsolete with his death, and now, she could belong to herself. However, the joy which overcomes her is short-lived when it is revealed that he is in fact alive. With this realization is the loss of her newfound freedom. The irony of the story is that the young narrator herself dies not from the shock of seeing her husband alive, but “heart disease--of the joy that kills” (“The Story of an Hour”). Figuratively, the young woman dies of devastation as this freedom dissolves upon her husband’s arrival. The plight of this woman bound by the institution of marriage described in the short story is similar to that of Edna as she notices outside her open window the “mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope,” which serve as a reminder of her confinement (*The Awakening* 87). Although she has developed a sense of self, she will never own herself as long as she is married. This causes Edna a great deal of inner turmoil as she embraces progress towards self-autonomy yet is constantly reminded of her bondage to society.

After leaving the open window, she throws her wedding ring on the floor and “stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it” but her efforts did not make a single “mark upon [it]” illustrating the binding contract of marriage (87). Because she cannot escape her marriage, she searches for alternative ways to release herself. The “awakening” she experiences “forces her inner questionings to the surface, and ideological conformity becomes a stifling force” as her “growing sense of self-awareness” (Gray 60) leads to her realization that what confines her are her relationships, specifically her confinement to her husband.

#### Self-Awareness Confined by Relationships

While marriage is a major confining factor for Edna, it is not for Sula as from an early age, she never intends to marry. Her thoughts on marriage are shown in a conversation with her grandmother who calls her “selfish” for “floatin’ around without no man” (Morrison 92) to which Sula responds, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). Morrison’s description of marriage through Sula indicates the lack of ownership women have in marriage when both parties are not considered equals. Sula reveals that by marrying, she would be giving herself to someone and “making” them by becoming a part of them. In becoming a part of them, she is sacrificing, or “effacing” herself as Edna describes it, as opposed to “making” herself. Because she did not grow up with married parents, Sula does feel the need to fulfill this obligation which she sees as an institution of sacrifice on the part of the woman. Due to her very different upbringing, Edna grows up witnessing this social institution and never questions it until

she is bound in it herself and realizes that she is not able to find her true self while confined to her husband. Being passed from her father to another domineering male at a young age, the self-sacrifice does not initially occur to her. In contrast to Edna, Sula has a sense of self-ownership due to an unstructured upbringing. In a society which promoted marriage and motherhood as the standard path for women, “Self-ownership [which] connoted a woman’s right to have possession of her own fully realized human identity” (Gray 53) does not exist for women like Edna. However, those who revolt against the standard path, like Sula, are able to attain full “possession” of themselves.

Although the institution of marriage does not confine Sula, she is confined by her relationship with Nel. The strong kinship they shared as children deteriorates as they journey into adulthood pursuing different paths. Ultimately, their relationship is destroyed by the fundamental differences that they acquire throughout their journey into womanhood. When their relationship dissolves, Sula is left alone but free whereas Nel is never able to reclaim her self because her life is so intertwined with others. Her life is entwined with Jude and her children; therefore, once they are gone, she is left with nothing.

By confining herself to the expectations of her mother, Nel marries Jude and has no other sexual relationships; therefore, when Jude leaves her, she loses any sense of a sexual identity. Her limited sexual identity was intertwined with her husband as opposed to being a part of her individual identity, leaving “her thighs . . . truly empty and dead too” (Morrison 110). What further destroys Nel is knowing that “it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left

her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away” (110). As a young girl her identity is interwoven with Sula’s and what was left as a young woman was intertwined with Jude; their betrayal demolishes anything Nel thought she knew about her own identity as her relationships with them defined who she was.

Whereas this event destroys any sense of identity for Nel, it aids Sula in claiming complete ownership of herself. Because her identity is intertwined with Nel’s at such an early age, a part of her is lost to Nel. Morrison describes that the first meeting of the girls was “fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on” (52). This description indicates the dependency that Sula and Nel had upon each other at a very young age. Because of this dependency, neither girl was ever fully free to develop an independent identity. Even as their paths separate, Sula always feels a deep connection and tie to Nel believing that nothing can break their unity. Because Sula feels no ties to men and treats sex casually, it does not occur to her that the bond she shares with Nel could be impacted by having sex with Nel’s husband, Jude. Nel’s reaction to what she sees as a breach of trust surprises Sula who, believing they share a self, does not think that sex with Jude will destroy their powerful kinship:

She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing . . . Marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage . . . she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt so close to. (119)

When this bond is broken, Sula resents Nel as “Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her . . . Now Nel was one of *them* . . . Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways” (120). Nel’s identity which was once connected to Sula is now owned by the town as she “belongs” to it. Ironically, after sleeping with Jude, Sula feels betrayed by Nel never realizing that something so trivial to her, sex, could break their sisterhood. This signifies Nel sacrificing her sense of self by valuing the patriarchal society over Sula. Because Nel’s tie to Sula is such an important part of her self, Morrison shows that with her decision to conform to society, she willingly gives up part of her identity. Seeing that Nel is now a part of this town which defies everything Sula embodies helps Sula realize that the connection they once shared is now gone.

Once Edna and Sula separate themselves from the relationships in their lives, they gain awareness of their sense of self. Edna’s identity was interwoven with her husband and children, similar to Nel’s; however, Edna is able to connect her strong sense of emptiness with these relations with enough time to separate herself. This is similar to Sula’s experience in separating from Nel. Upon seeing Nel’s full initiation into the society which ostracizes her, Sula realizes that her disconnection from Nel is necessary for her to grow independently.

## CHAPTER 4

SEXUAL FREEDOM AS A MEANS TO  
GAINING INDEPENDENCE

Sula's lack of obligation to others plays into her sexual relationships as she sees sex as a physical occurrence between men and women as opposed to a binding obligation. Because Sula is an active participant in sex using it for pleasure, she does not feel tied down to one partner. Having multiple sexual partners herself, her mother, Hannah, teaches her that "sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (Morrison 44). Growing up, Sula witnesses her mother have "a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (42). From these early observations of her mother's sexual openness, Sula learns that sex does not need to bind individuals together and as a result, she is able to establish a firm sense of identity as a result of asserting herself sexually. In *The Awakening*, Edna realizes her sexual desires later in life as she accepts her attraction towards Robert Lebrun, a young and handsome man who flatters her with attention and flirtations. Although she does not have sex with him, her sexual awakening comes from acknowledging her repressed desires as opposed to suppressing these feelings.

In her book *This Sex which is not One*, Luce Irigaray argues that "female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (Irigaray 23). Because women are seen as objects to men, their purpose becomes providing men with sexual pleasure; therefore, the sexual experience is not intended to provide women

with pleasure. Women were not seen as having sexual needs and were conditioned to think of sex as for procreation as well as for satisfying men.

### Obligatory versus Desired Sexual Relationships

Edna and Nel's sexual experiences are dictated by this societal expectation as their sexual encounters are to satisfy their husbands. Because they lack their sense of self, they see themselves as the object within a sexual encounter, physically being present, however not participating for their own gratification. Because of their detachment during sex, it does not fulfill their needs which they do not consciously realize they have. Sula on the other hand does not have sex out of obligation but to fulfill her own urges. "She went to bed with men as frequently as she could. It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow" (Morrison 122). Her sexual interactions are not just for physical satisfaction but to gain a deeper sense of what it means to be human. She is not seeking fulfillment from the men themselves, but rather fulfilling deeper feelings enabling her to gain a better awareness of herself. In having sex for pleasure, Sula gains awareness of her physical wants and claims ownership of her body as she fulfills her sexual inclinations as opposed to denying them. It is once Edna has a similar sexual awakening that she too can accept her feelings and express as opposed to repress them.

Although Sula's sexual freedom creates self-knowledge, her ignorance of the institution of marriage creates a rift between her and society. Having sex openly with men and not feeling obligated to one sexual partner, Sula fails to recognize the

detrimental effects of adultery. When Sula has sex with Nel's husband, Jude, she does not anticipate the negative repercussions as she lacks awareness of the concept of owning another individual. Because she and Nel are connected, Sula never fathoms that having sex with Jude would have such a profound effect on Nel, one that would end their friendship. The fact that this incident ends their friendship perplexes Sula at first because "she had not thought at all of causing Nel pain . . . [because] they had always shared the affection of other people" (Morrison 119). She realizes that while she defied societal expectations, Nel now embodied them. Nel's belief in the institution of marriage now outweighs that profound kinship to Sula in which they "shared" everything, explaining Sula's perplexity in Nel's anger towards her actions. Sula is genuinely shocked because her friendship with Nel was the most important factor in her life and she believed that Nel felt the same toward her. However, she realizes that "marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available . . . she was ill-prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to" (119). Ironically, the relationship that Sula wants is the relationship with Nel. She does not find a sense of fulfillment in sexual relationships as she never feels connected to her sexual partners, "she had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her awhile to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be- for a woman" (121). Once she realizes that sex will not make her whole and that she is alone due to Nel's conformity to society's standards, Sula is free to search for "that version of herself" which she originally thought was within Nel (121).

Sula's self-discovery as a result of sexual freedom is similar to the "awakening" Edna experiences when she accepts her longing for Robert and then actually takes ownership of her sexuality by having an affair with Alcee Arobin. Edna's seemingly flippant flirtations with Robert ignite deeper desires within her but are unrealized until he departs on a trip to Mexico. Having spent a great deal of time together, Edna has become accustomed to his presence and upon his departure she realizes that "Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything" leaving her "whole existence dulled" (*The Awakening* 77). She only realizes the impact he made on her once he leaves and she realizes the emptiness she feels in his absence. Her feelings for him reignite the passion she had for "the tragedian," which she never thought she would experience again. As she begins to explore her eagerness for Robert in more depth, she is filled with "intensity" as "his existence . . . dominated her thought" (90) pushing her further away from her domestic duties by causing her to question her current life. She confides in her close friend, Madame Ratignolle, that she believes she "ought to work again" as she felt she "wanted to be doing something" discussing her desire to continue her art (92). Because she cannot be with Robert, she chooses to harness her feelings for him and use them to fuel her desire to paint. In making this decision, she turns further away from her husband and domestic duties which infuriates her husband who cannot fathom what could cause this drastic change in countenance.

After initiating a separation from her astounded and perplexed husband, Edna gains a sense of freedom that she has not experienced before. Emboldened by her strength to separate from him, she confronts her sexual desire towards Arobin. Her sexual

relationship with her husband was one of obligation as opposed to desire which she feels upon kissing Arobin, “It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (139). Part of this overwhelming feeling is not just her attraction towards him, but the exhilaration in knowing that she chose him and acted freely. Although twenty-eight years old, Edna has not experienced strong sexual inclination and this moment of rapture extends beyond the physical as it provides her the power of choice. Once Robert initiates this feeling, it builds within her until she is finally in a position to act upon it and choose a person to be intimate with. After this sexual encounter, she “felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life” (140). This sexual experience is not merely the fulfillment of sexual impulses, but rather a greater awareness of her individual wants and needs which she is now able to explore. She feels “neither shame nor remorse” afterwards as she realizes that this experience was not simply about sex, and therefore not about betraying her husband. For most of her life, she had been dishonest with and cheating herself; therefore, this instance goes beyond any obligation she feels for her husband as she now acts in obligation to herself.

Edna’s journey of self-awareness and discovery has built up to this moment where she is able to take ownership of herself and act freely upon her own will. As opposed to being the object of a sexual encounter, she becomes an active participant seeking pleasure and, in doing so, is able to attain sexual satisfaction and equal status to her sexual partner. The experience of using sex for her own personal gain and in doing so seeing herself as

an equal to a man is similar to Sula's experience as Sula uses sex to better identify with herself.

## CHAPTER 5

ISOLATION AS A NECESSARY COMPONENT  
TO SELF-OWNERSHIP

By acting upon her own impulses, Sula maintains ownership of herself even though it isolates her from her family and friends making her a social pariah. Although she dies alone, she maintains her confidence that her choices in life gave her a power that very few women had. Similarly, as Edna begins to acknowledge her true feelings which differ from the majority, she finds power through self-expression and sexual relationships which ultimately lead her to the realization that isolation is necessary to obtain freedom.

Isolation Leading to a Greater Connection  
to Self

From childhood, Sula is so connected to Nel that she “had clung to [her] as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same” (Morrison 119). Because she saw herself and Nel connected as one, she saw no harm in having sex with Jude. Because he was Nel’s and she was part of Nel, she felt that he was also hers. Once she realizes that she and Nel are no longer connected, she leaves the town which ostracizes her not just for her actions but because they do not understand her. The men in the town criticize her because they believed “she slept with white men,” which they believed to be the ultimate betrayal of their race (112). The women reject her because, unlike her mother who they felt “complimented the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without

any excuse,” which they found insulting (115). The town’s anger towards Sula stems from her actions which are the actions of a woman unconcerned with criticism. Their inability to comprehend her audacity creates fear as they cannot ascertain where her sense of confidence stems from. After leaving the town, Sula is isolated; however, it is through this isolation that she is able to become whole. Instead of wallowing in her aloneness, she “lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasures pleased her” (118).

It is also through this isolation that she faces and overcomes the haunting childhood incident of Chicken Little’s accidental death in which she and Nel were complicit. While she and Nel never discuss the incident, it is still very much a part of their beings and it is not until Sula is isolated and left alone with her thoughts that she is able to reconcile “her one major feeling of responsibility” (118). By acknowledging her part in his death, she is able to forgive herself in contrast to Nel who avoids this painful memory. By surrounding herself with other people, Nel avoids dealing with this terrible incident, but Sula without anyone to hide behind, confronts her past in order to take on this responsibility. On her deathbed, Sula reflects on her choices in life and has no regrets as she dies unencumbered to anyone else. During her final conversation with Nel, Sula expresses her happiness with the choices she made in life. She says:

“I sure did live in this world.”

“What have you got to show for it?”

“I got my mind . . . I got me.”

“Lonely ain’t it?”

“Yes. But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you.” (142-143)

So much of Nel’s life is dictated by her husband Jude who ends up leaving her and even after his departure, she fails to regain a sense of individuality. Her identity is intertwined as the counterpart in his life as opposed to established by her own self. She justifies her decisions to Sula by arguing against Sula’s aloneness saying that some men are “worth keeping,” to which Sula responds, ““They ain’t worth more than me”” (143). Sula chose herself over relationships with others resulting in a strong sense of self-identify and a strength which Nel never had the opportunity to develop. In her relationship with Sula, Nel sees herself as the victim and pities herself for having been betrayed by her friend and cheated on by her husband. However, Sula challenges Nel’s view of herself in their final conversation:

“How you know?” Sula asked.

“Know what?” Nel still wouldn’t look at her.

“About who was good? How you know it was you?”

“What you mean?”

“I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me.” (146)

Although Nel feels she is the victim, Sula ultimately believes that Nel is the one who betrayed their friendship. By conforming to society’s standards, she sacrificed the part of herself that she shared with Sula by choosing Jude over her. By hiding behind her role of wife and mother and never taking ownership of her part in Chicken Little’s death, Nel allows Sula to bear the burden alone. Despite the upstanding and moral life she believes

she has led, Nel sacrifices her being to conform. In doing so, she conforms to a society which is immoral in asking women to give up ownership of themselves. Therefore, despite her upright path and self-acclaim, she is the one who is lost not Sula. After this conversation with Sula, Nel's self-realization comes too late as she is left with "a fine cry--loud and long--[with] no bottom and . . . no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" as she realizes her solitude (174).

In *The Awakening*, the sea represents the isolation Edna needs in order to recognize the fundamental value of independence. Testing her boundaries, Edna realizes her abilities as she learns to swim despite the fact that she is an adult. To learn that she is capable of something that had felt impossible her whole life fuels her with self-confidence as she navigates the openness and unlimited terrain of the water. Learning to swim becomes an important element in her newfound freedom as she is drawn to the expansiveness and peacefulness the sea offers.

Edna's strong attraction for Robert serves as a catalyst for her "awakening" as it unleashes passions and emotions she was formerly blind to. During their time together, they spend a great deal of time near the sea which she becomes infatuated with. To Edna, "the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (*The Awakening* 25). Edna is entranced by its expansiveness as it beckons to her and allows her to test her limits. Anytime she is near the water she experiences some sense of freedom. Even in the beginning of the novel, Chopin foreshadows the significance of the sea as it provides a moment of escape for Edna. The

novel opens from Léonce Pontellier's point of view and the audience first sees Edna through his eyes. As he watches her return from the beach, he "look[s] at [her] as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property" (7); this opening description of Edna, places her in a subjugated position as she is described as "property." However, Chopin also introduces the relevancy of the sea as Edna is freed from the constraints of her wedding rings while on the beach. As soon as she returns to her husband, she is "reminded of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach" (7). The wedding rings symbolize Edna's binding ties to Léonce; therefore, this scene in which she is unburdened by them at the beach is significant as it shows her temporary escape from her societal reality. Near the sea, she is temporarily unrestrained by them, yet once she returns to her structured life and husband, she returns the rings symbolizing her binding obligation to him. Jennifer Gray emphasizes the significance of Edna replacing and removing her rings as they show that Edna "is capable of self-ownership, but is at least temporarily subjected by hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Though the scene foreshadows later resistance to interpellation in that she may remove the rings, it displays more prominently a state of subjection" (60). She argues that although the rings primarily show Edna's subjugation, Edna does have the power to remove them which will resurface later in the novel as Edna removes them in an attempt to claim "self-ownership." In the later scene when Edna tries to destroy her rings by stomping them into the ground, she realizes that although she has the power to remove them, she can never be free of them or her marriage. The significance of Edna not wearing her rings at the beach

in this early scene shows the powerful draw she has to the sea as it represents the freedom she seeks.

Her connectedness for the sea grows, as she learns to swim and, in doing so, discovers what she is capable of beyond societal restraints. By pushing her body past the confines which she never thought possible, she is fueled with a passion and drive to seek further independence. Chopin describes the first time she swims:

She was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who all of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, bold and with overconfidence . . . 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 out, where no woman had swum before. (*The Awakening* 47)

The passion she finds in the sea which provides her this newfound opportunity is the freedom she thought she had sacrificed in marriage. Upon marrying Léonce, Edna believes she is “closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (33); through the sea, Edna finds the happiness and passion she thought she lost once she married Léonce. The sea becomes an outlet for her not only to push herself but to gain the confidence to push societal boundaries. However, this feeling of freedom is short lived as she looks to the shore and sees “the people she had left there,” which reminds her of her obligations and responsibilities (48). Before her, she sees the expansive openness of the sea and behind her, in the distance she has swum, she sees the water, which “assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength could never be

able to overcome” (48). In one direction, she sees the open expansiveness of the sea and in the other, the people on shore she is bound to as well as a barrier which impedes upon her ability to explore the openness of the sea fully. This foreshadowing of her inability to overcome the patriarchal barrier within society reveals that the only way she will ever be free is by swimming beyond the barrier and remaining in the open part of the sea where she currently is. As she treads water in this moment and speculates on her predicament, “a quick vision of death smote her soul” (48) foreshadowing that the only way she will be free is by choosing the sea and, in doing so, giving up her life but ultimately claiming her independence. Upon returning to shore, her husband remarks, “You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you” (48), again reminding her, similar to her wedding rings, that as long as she is a part of this world, she can never own herself.

After experiencing the exhilaration of swimming and feeling empowered by the experience, she gains self-awareness and begins attempting to assert herself. A significant example of Edna’s attempt is the night after her swimming experience when Léonce demands she accompany him to bed. She realizes that at another time she “would have gone in at his request . . . [and] yielded to his desire” as part of her daily routine of following his orders. However, after her new gained sense of awareness, she realizes that following his orders does not fulfill her and therefore, she replies, “I mean to stay out here. I don’t wish to go in, and I don’t intend to. Don’t speak like that to me again; I shall not answer to you” (53). In this moment, Edna has empowered herself through her voice of defiance. She vocally rejects Léonce’s orders; however, she is unable to follow through with her resistance.

Chopin shows that although Edna is becoming more empowered, she will never fully be able to own herself in this male-dominated society. Although she attempts to rebel against her husband, she ultimately realizes that her defiance is futile and meaningless as she is still bound to him. Her moment of strength passes and leaves her feeling “like one who awakens gradually out of a dream . . . to feel again the realities” of her life from which she will never be completely free and so she accompanies him to bed (53).

#### Self-Expression as a Necessary Component to Identity

In *The Awakening*, much of Edna’s life is dictated by those around her; however, as she begins to express herself artistically and sexually she acquires self-realization. Despite discovering who she is, Edna realizes that the only way she can fit into society is by sacrificing this new sense of self, which took her so long to uncover. The more Edna expresses herself through art, the more she distances herself from society and her relationships. As a result, she is given the space and freedom to find herself.

After Robert initiates Edna’s sexual awakening he leaves for Mexico, leaving Edna with powerful emotions which she needs to express. Without him to confide in, she searches for an outlet for expression which she finds in her art. She explains to Madame Ratignolle, “I believe I ought to work again. I feel as if I wanted to be doing something” (92). Her intention in practicing art is not necessarily to compose masterpieces, rather to express herself since she is not able to do so verbally. Edna has trouble grasping her thoughts and is unable to verbalize them and also would not have anyone to confide in as

her closest friend, Madame Ratignolle, is an embodiment of the expectations of women at the time. Instead, the practicing of her art provides her with an outlet which, similar to her growth in swimming, allows her to observe her own progress and ultimate growth as an individual.

Edna's self-expression through art creates conflict in her married life though as she begins to isolate herself from her family in the process:

In the novel, the conflict between motherhood and creativity is strongly emphasized. Adele Ratignolle, who is the perfect model of mother-wife, is devoted to her husband and children so all her activity in life is limited to the house, and her productivity exists only through the process of giving birth. In contrast, Mademoiselle Reisz, who is single, childless and a creative artist, expresses herself through music. Edna makes us see this distinction even more clearly. As she takes up painting, she ignores her children and marriage. The more the bond which ties her to home loosens, the more the quality of her artistry develops. (Tercan 680)

Edna cannot fully explore who she is unless she separates herself from her family. Her individual identity is lost to her husband and children; therefore, she needs to experiment with her art and self-expression in order to gain a sense of identity and self. Léonce's anger towards Edna's focus on her art over her family is revealed when he chastises her, "it seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (*The Awakening* 95). Léonce saying that her days would be

“better employed” with her family demonstrates his disregard towards her needs. He sees her time away from the family as a failure in her allotted role and makes her feel guilty for spending time in what he deems is a trivial way. His inability to acknowledge that this time spent with her art is essential to her being illustrates his unwillingness to admit that she has inhibitions beyond being a wife and mother. She is finally able to express herself, yet because he lacks awareness of the significance of her having a self, he cannot fathom that she could possibly need this time. Therefore, he believes that it is her obligation to spend what time she does have caring and providing for their family.

As he attempts to fathom Edna’s distance from him and the children, he seeks medical advice assuming there must be something mentally wrong with her. The doctor’s response to her inattentiveness is that “Woman . . . is a very peculiar and delicate organism” and that what she is going through is surely “some passing whim” that neither man should “try to fathom” (111). The doctor’s dismissive attitude is reflective of society’s attitude toward women during this time as they are not seen as having the capability or capacity for self-identity. The doctor’s advice is reflective of the time period as evidenced in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s experiences as she, similar to Chopin, wrote about the misconceptions of women’s capabilities at the time and illustrated her own personal experiences after giving birth to her child. After being diagnosed with a “nervous disorder,” and being advised to “live as domestic a life as possible” by “never touch[ing] pen, brush or pencil,” Gilman noticed that “her sickness vanished when she was away from her home, her husband, and her child” (Ehrenreich and English 111). Despite her acknowledgment of what caused her “nervous” symptoms, Gilman’s doctor

ignored the root causes of her depression as he refused to acquiesce to the fact that she wanted something beyond domesticity. This is similar to Edna's doctor, who advises Léonce to give her space so that she can overcome this "passing whim" (*The Awakening* 110) and then, once over her temporary folly, recommit to her family. Society's as well as Léonce's inability to recognize her sense of self destroys any notion of her maintaining self-ownership.

Edna's choice to separate herself from this society is foreshadowed during a conversation she has with Mademoiselle Reisz, an independent artist, who describes an artist as someone who "possess[es] a courageous soul . . . [A] brave soul. [A] soul that dares and defies" (106). Edna's artistry is not her ability to produce great art, rather it represents her "courageous soul" which will ultimately "dare and defy" society. The more she practices her art, the more she delves into her true and suppressed emotions, leading her to have the confidence to challenge and reject the patriarchal society which threatens to rob her of her newfound identity.

Similar to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who ultimately "divorc[ed] her husband [and] took off for California with her baby, her pen, her brush, and her pencil," Edna acknowledges the necessity for self-expression (Ehrenreich and English 112). Through her art, Edna is able to defy a society which constricts women and in doing so to discover deeper emotions within herself.

### Maintaining Ownership Beyond Boundaries

As Edna expresses herself through art, the melancholy which once dominated her life is replaced by unexplainable happiness. “She was happy to be alive and breathing . . . [she] seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth” as she is “alone and unmolested” (*The Awakening* 97). Once she frees herself from her family and begins expressing herself, she finds happiness in isolation as she is unrestrained. However, despite her newfound liberation, she is ultimately still cast into the subjugated role of a woman. Upon realizing that the freedom she experiences is just a taste and will never be her full reality as long as she is a member of society, Edna chooses to maintain her ownership through death.

Although Robert initiated her sexual awakening, ultimately he still embodies the patriarchal society which serves to confine her. Upon returning from Mexico, Robert explains that he had to get away from her “because [she] was not free; [she was] Léonce Pontellier’s wife” (117). Even Robert, who she assumes values her as an individual, views her as a piece of property. She corrects this notion explaining, “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (178). By asserting that only she has the power to “give” herself away, she claims ownership and independence; however, Robert still rejects her. Her feelings for him stem from her realization that it was he who “awoke [her] last summer out of a life-long stupid dream” and yet ironically, he still sees her as an object as opposed to the independent woman she has become (179). By the end of the novel:

She becomes someone who knows the joy of being an individual but being refused by Robert, for she is a married woman, she feels that she is defeated by

conventions. Nonetheless, she does not choose to obey the social codes that enslave her and make her give up her essential self. (Tercan 681)

Robert's actions make evident that the "conventions" of marriage will always define and cage her within society. She perceives that despite her newfound self, she will never be free within a society where her role is defined for her. In this instance, Edna and Nel are very similar in that their identities are intertwined with the men in their lives; however, again, because Edna has developed a sense of self, she refuses to allow society to control her. In her final conversation with Robert, Edna expresses herself freely and confidently calling him "selfish" for never "consider[ing] for a moment what [she thinks], or how [she] feels his neglect and indifference" (*The Awakening* 175). This ability to reveal her true feelings exemplifies the strength she has found in her own voice as she is originally unable to express her emotions. She even admits to him that this newfound strength in her self-expression is considered "unwomanly" as women are expected to conform without complaint (175). Claiming herself as "unwomanly" also demonstrates her assertion of power as women are deemed the weaker sex. By proclaiming herself "unwomanly," she defies social hierarchy making herself equal status to men. Although Robert contributes to her finding this empowered image of herself, she ultimately feels betrayed by him as even he abides by the patriarchal order she is victim to:

Edna realizes that . . . even Robert who claims to be in love with her, view[s] her as an object, rather than as a subject, in accordance with patriarchal ideology.

Robert tells her "goodbye" because he "loves" her and implies that he could not "have" Edna unless Léonce "sets her free." Realizing that even Robert sees her as

Léonce's property confirms that he accepts tradition and that he does not truly understand her. He does not realize that she belongs to herself, and soon after she discovers this she loses hope for a fulfilling female role. (Gray 71)

Ultimately, she realizes that "she cannot find a space as an individual in this masculine order" (Tercan 682) and therefore chooses suicide as the only alternative to maintaining her freedom. With her freedom of sexuality and expression came a sense of identity and empowerment which Edna was unwilling to sacrifice even for her children. Before walking out into the sea, she reflects upon the children and, although she cares for them, she sees them as "antagonists who had overcome her, who had empowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (*The Awakening* 189). Her relationship to her children requires self-sacrifice as her responsibilities bind her to them forever. As she begins her journey into the sea, she "thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (190). Whereas earlier in the novel, she looks back to see her family on shore and sees the barriers between them, she now sees the open terrain of the sea and, ultimately, her liberation.

Sula lived freely and died confident in her choices, whereas Edna realizes that there will be no freedom for her unless she escapes the patriarchal society that confines her. Because she cannot overcome social conventions, she surrenders herself to the sea knowing that this is the only way she can truly maintain self-ownership. Both women die alone; however, their aloneness is not intended to be tragic or isolating. Their aloneness

empowers them as it is a result of their independence and their strength to defy societal norms.

## CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSION

*Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture.*  
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* challenge society's misunderstanding and subjugation of women in order to promote awareness of their detrimental effects. By challenging stereotypes through narrative social commentary, the voices of these female writers are essential in conveying the destructive effects of these societal limitations as society and culture move into a more inclusive future.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* sheds light on the power of one woman who defies the cultural norm of her setting and in doing so symbolizes strength and independence in a society which expects women to conform. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* traces Edna Pontellier's journey as she rebels against a patriarchal system which subjugates women. Although Sula's background of detachment from society enables her to form a strong sense of identity early in life, she still takes great risks by pursuing her own personal fulfillment as she refuses to concede to society's criticism. Edna's struggle is very different than Sula's in that her story begins similarly to Nel's. She abides by society's standards and in doing so represses any semblance of identity. However, in contrast to Nel, she has an "awakening" initiated by her repressed desires which inspire her to seek more than the standard life allotted to her. It is in this drive for self-discovery that Edna

finds a boldness similar to that of Sula as Sula's journey deviates from the life she shares with Nel. As Edna separates herself from her confines, she finds empowerment and liberation. Sula and Edna share a similar strength as both of their stories end with their isolation from the rest of society but also their liberation from it as well.

Independence and self-ownership is a defining factor of what it means to be human. When individuals are robbed of these key components of identity, it inhibits their ability to function within any society. A society that robs individuals of these key components stifles not only the progression of individuals but the progression of society as a whole. As the subjugation of women has robbed females of their voices for generations, it is essential to continually study and evaluate works created to educate society on the power and abilities women possess. The continual study of the female voice represented in literature helps culture evolve as it shows that the female identity and voice are essential components to a progressive and democratic society.

WORKS CITED

## WORKS CITED

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminists*. New York: Random House, 2017.

Print.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York: Avon Books, 1972. Print.

---. "The Story of an Hour" *Close Readings: Analyses of Short Fiction*, Jan. 2001, pp. 273-275.

EBSCOhost.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Deirdre English. *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts*

*Advice to Women*. Anchor Books, 2005.

Fetters, Cassandra. "The Continual Search for Sisterhood: Narcissism, Projection, and

Intersubjective Disruptions in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Feminist Communities."

*Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, vol. 13, no. 2, Oct. 2015, pp. 28-5

EBSCOhost.

Galehouse, Maggie. "'New World Woman': Toni Morrison's *Sula*." *Papers on Language &*

*Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4, Fall 99, p. 339. EBSCOhost.

Gray, Jennifer B. "The Escape of the 'Sea': Ideology and 'The Awakening.'" *Southern*

*Literary Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, Fall2004, pp. 53-73. EBSCOhost.

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

McKay, Nellie. "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 24, no. 4,

Winter83, p. 413. EBSCOhost.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Plume, 1982. Print.

Tercan, Burcu. "The Story of a Woman Trapped between the Imaginary and Symbolic Orders in Kate Chopin's *the Awakening*." *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 4, Jan. 2017, pp. 679-682. EBSCOhost.