Emerson: Individuality in Women

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson explains that it is easy to live after the world’s opinion and conform to ideals and norms. A great man, however, is the one who keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude in a midst of a crowd. Yet, as a nonconformist, the world will whip you with its displeasure. This paper will address the essence of self-reliance Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks about. I will be examining the struggles of Edna Pontellier and Kate Chopin as the artist of her story, *The Awakening*. This will show how both women are criticized for finding their genius. I will explain how they did as Emerson spoke of and showed their independence in a midst of a crowd by analyzing the ideals of society in the setting of the story. I will analyze the lack of opportunities females had that caused Kate Chopin and Edna to be criticized for their artistry. Thus, this will explain the similarity between Edna and Rena from *The House Behind The Cedars*, as she too is opposed by society but in a different time period. This will prove that although both women die in their stories and Kate Chopin was criticized, the fact that they are nonconformists and sought what is true to them in a controversial time, shows their true genius and that is better than conforming.

Individuality is a rare and valuable trait for a person to acquire throughout his or her life. Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed the idea of self-reliance, the belief that men should be the authority figure of their own respective lives based on their own intuition and creativity. He explains that the great man is not one who lives after the world’s opinion or who lives after his own in solitude, but one who in a midst of a crowd maintains the sweetness of solitude. Emerson constantly refers to the genius of men in regards to finding individuality; however the same is applicable for women. Throughout history, women have been presented with the struggle of expressing their equality in comparison to men. Overall, women who followed their own gleam of light and sought individuality during a time that restricted them became examples of Emerson’s philosophy.

The struggle for human equality between men and women lasted many centuries. Society viewed women as the inferior sex and restricted their role in society as it pertains to marriage and motherhood. One of the most important movements in history that emphasized these restrictions was the Napoleonic Code. The Napoleonic code was created in 1804 by a French man named Napoleon Bonaparte, and it was a set of principles that originated in France and was eventually followed by society in America. It defined women in marriage and motherhood. According to an article titled “Napoleonic Code,” the code stated that a woman was obliged to live with her husband and to follow him wherever he judges it appropriate to leave. She was forbidden to buy, sell, sign contracts, have a bank account, or exercise any independent occupation without the authorization of the husband. It caused double standards in infidelity in marriages by threatening to send an adulterous wife to prison, while an adulterous husband would receive a monetary fine only if he entertains a mistress in his matrimonial home. In terms of motherhood, a woman was seen unfit to support their own child. This would allow fathers to gain custody of their children

during the marriage. In addition, a woman did not have a choice concerning reproduction, as they were criminally responsible for abortion (Sartori para 2, 3). This explanation of the Napoleonic code describes the struggles women faced for over a century as well as the consequences they would face if they rebelled against the standards in society. This social construct of women not only restricted them as a gender, but also made them property of their husbands. However, these principles did not last forever as many began fighting to redefine women by expressing the rights they should have.

Feminism is the social, political, and economic equality between men and women. It was the advocacy for many movements that attempted to give women opportunities that they were not given due to the restricting standards for females. Throughout the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, the opportunities that were focused on included education, employment and marriage laws. “In the United States, the first women’s rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. In 1869, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony founded the National Woman Suffrage Association and demanded not just the right to vote but marital reform as well. The exclusion of male members and the request for marital reform, instead of focusing solely on the vote was frowned upon by some” (Darity para 6). This excerpt shows the desire and resilience women showed in spite of society wanting to keep them restrained. It also shows the disapproval many people had of such movements that were meant to enrich the lives of women. The attitude that these feminist leaders showed is described in Emerson’s philosophy. “A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as, if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he” (Emerson 4). The desire for gender equality strengthened feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and allowed them to face the opposition of society as it tried to strain their efforts, just as Emerson states in his essay. The efforts of feminists soon resulted in the introduction of new opportunities for women in the work field as well as education. The introduction to these new opportunities as well as feminist studies empowered women to seek even more opportunities. “Having tasted independence, career options, and good pay, women were no longer content to be housewives. The publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxieme sexe* in 1949 reminded women that there was still much work to be done”(Darity para 8). This shows how women acknowledged the need for more changes as they strived for equality. Eventually, this desire led to one of the most redefining movements for women, the sexual revolution.

Liberation is one of the many rights women did not have in terms of sexuality. From an early America, one of the standards for women was to restrain their sexuality unless it was expressed in marriage. However, the sexual revolution changed the norms in society in the 1960s by introducing birth control to women. “The modern consensus is that the sexual revolution in 1960s America was typified by a dramatic shift in traditional values related to sex, and sexuality. Sex became more socially acceptable outside the strict boundaries of heterosexual marriage. For example, studies have shown that, between 1965 and 1975, the number of women who experienced sexual intercourse before marriage showed a marked increase. The increased availability of birth control (and the quasi-legalization of abortion in some places) helped reduce the chance that premarital sex would result in unwanted children. By the mid-1970s, the majority of newly married American couples had experienced sex before marriage” (Boundless para 2). This excerpt from the article titled “The Sexual Revolution and the Pill” shows the monumental shift in society as women were beginning to be redefined from being housewives to a gender of long overdue sexual liberation. The implementation of birth control gave women the opportunity to express themselves sexually while avoiding marriages and

pregnancies. The Pill was one of the most popular forms of birth control and soon after being legalized, college attendance and graduation rates increased for women as they became more career-oriented with their newfound liberation (Boundless para 8). In addition to the rise of education for women, pre-marriage intercourse saw 40% of women experiencing it in the 1950s compared to 10% in the Roaring Twenties (Cohen para 4). This shows the steady rise of sexuality and success in women as it neared the sexual revolution.

The sexual revolution, as empowering as it was, had many critics in religious followers, who saw that birth control distorted nature as it interfered with the relationship between sex and procreation. However, the opposition did not stop women from seeking what they thought they rightful deserved, sexual liberation. This thought is expressed in Emerson’s philosophy. He states, “what I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think” (Emerson 4). This excerpt applies with women throughout the whole essence of the sexual revolution. Through all of the adversary and the criticism, women had to seek their individuality and sexual liberation as a gender by disregarding what people thought of them. They did not always have this freedom and were once crucially punished if they tried to embrace it. “Before the revolution, the whims of men determined the reputation, if not the fate, of women; female desire was contained within the closet of marriage; and men retained their traditional sexual privileges and discretely enjoyed their sexual liberties. After the revolution, women, if they chose, could dispense with men or with marriage altogether without giving up sex, or children, or a lifetime loving relationship. Of course, most women continued to love men, marry men, and have children with men. The point, however, was that for the first time in human history, women had a choice” (Cohen para 7). This shows how women had no alternatives prior to the sexual revolution. Women became an example of Emerson’s philosophy by achieving what he calls greatness. They achieved this by

only concerning themselves with the opportunities that the sexual revolution brought to them, while overlooking those that were against their newly found freedom. This resilience and act of greatness was not simple, however, before the sexual revolution began. While society still restricted women and was under the influence of the Napoleonic Code, seeking individuality for them was one of the most difficult challenges they have ever faced. Literature expresses the struggle as either the characters in stories or the authors or sometimes both suffered consequences while seeking their genius.

Kate Chopin was an author who created one of the most controversial pieces of literature, *The Awakening*. In this story, the main character, Edna Pontellier, is a married mother of the age of 28. She is a Kentucky Presbyterian in a Creole French royalty environment. Edna is presented as handsome with noble beauty; one would need to look at her with more feeling and discernment to notice it. The distinction between her and other women is made clear from the beginning of the story. “In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The motherwomen seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 12). In the story, she is described to be jaded without any reason. She is not very attentive of her own children or her husband. As the name of the story suggests, Edna awakens and begins to understand why she is so unhappy living in what would be the ideal home for a mother-woman. She begins to understand herself as an individual amongst those around her. “A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it. At that early period it served but to bewilder her. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy

anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears. In short, 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. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight-perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman” (Chopin 17). This gleam of light that comes upon Edna and helps her find her individuality is one of Emerson’s focal points in his essay “Self Reliance.” He states “a man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages” (Emerson 1). Ultimately, Edna’s awakening in this story becomes an example of Emerson’s philosophy of self reliance, while Edna’s life becomes an example of the struggle women faced before the sexual revolution.

Following the gleam of light that flashes her mind, it is stated that Edna begins to understand life relationships as well another focal point in Emerson’s philosophy. “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life-that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin 18). This excerpt from the story shows that Edna begins to understand the two distinctive universal sides of an individual, the outward, which conforms to ideals of society and the inward, which questions the true nature of an individual. Emerson expresses this when he states, “to believe your own thought, to believe what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost” (Emerson 1). This philosophy generally foreshadows that those that begin to accept their own individual genius soon emit that onto the world. Edna’s genius leads her to acknowledge that, although Leonce, her husband, may be the ideal partner, there was no trace of passion in their

marriage, which leads her to grow fond of him. She also admits to growing fond of her children subconsciously; one moment she would gather them passionately, the next she would forget them (Chopin 23). In addition, she falls in love with a man named Robert, while being a married mother, which results in her wanting to escape her marriage as well as her children. The reason this story is so controversial is because it was published in 1899. “When ‘The Awakening’ by Kate Chopin first appeared in 1899, it created an uproar. The novel gave the reader a candid and sympathetic portrait of a married woman named Edna Pontellier, who embarks on her own quest for self-fulfillment: she falls in love with another man, has a passionate fling with a local roue, and ends by drowning herself in the ocean. One critic complained that ‘its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent.’ Another characterized the book as ‘sad and mad and bad.’ A third concluded that it was ‘too strong drink for moral babes, and should be labeled 'poison.' ‘The novel was out of print for more than 50 years, and was only rediscovered during the 1960's when growing interest in women's writing led to a renewal of interest in its author “ (Kakutani para 1). This excerpt of a New York Times article titled “Book of The Times; A Woman Who Portrayed Adultery and Paid for It” shows the negative reviews Kate Chopin received and the consequences she suffered by having *The Awakening* discontinued until 1969. It depicts a married mother wanting to escape her marriage and children during a time before the sexual revolution and in a setting that follows the Napoleonic code strongly.

Edna’s awakening allows her to accomplish and acknowledge many things, unlike ever before. She learns how to swim in the ocean. She decides to never take another step backward. She understands the trap marriage has set for her, calling it one of the most lamentable spectacles on Earth. She resolves to never belong to anyone but herself. This leads her to move out of her home and into a new place, abandoning her husband and children. Edna’s inevitable death

becomes necessary in the story. She must die in the story because, historically, she is living in a time that restricts her happiness. Her desire was to escape from the possession of men and the ideals of marriage and motherhood. She wants to be with Robert, but in his perspective, the relationship still correlates with possession, something that she could not escape due to the restrictions on married women caused by the Napoleonic Code. Therefore, instead of resolving to conform as she once does in the beginning of the story, she needs to die in order to not take a step back. She dies as an individual; free from the possession of anyone.

If Edna were similar to Madame Ratignolle, who is described as an eccentric character that does as she pleases, Edna might have died regardless. As Madame Ratignolle states, “to be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. The soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 68). Frank Norris’s story called *McTeague*, describes a woman who dared and defied by the name of Trina. In the story, she marries a dentist named McTeague, whom she falls madly in love with. After, she wins the lottery for $5000. As the story progresses and money becomes an issue, Trina reveals her true motives to not spend a penny, and claimed the money to be hers, not theirs, even though they are married and are living together. “It’s mine! It’s mine!It’s mine! It ain’t any more yours than it is mine. Every penny of it is mine” (Harris 143). This excerpt shows the courageous soul Trina had that caused her to defy her husband. Her assertiveness in regards to possession and power against her husband shows how daring she was. In return, the greed took over and McTeague kills his wife for not giving him a penny in a time of desperate need and also steals the money. If Edna had been any more courageous and dared and defied just as Trina did, her death would have happened anyway because a woman was not meant to have power during the time period of the story. The

Napoleonic code caused women to lack ownership and power in a marriage and Edna had already defied the standards for women in the story.

Charles W. Chesnutt depicts a similar situation as Edna in a woman named Rena in the story, *The House Behind the Cedars*. Rena is born into a black family of mulattoes, people of mixed white and black ancestry, during a time when the enslavement of black people is beginning. Her brother, John Warwick, is a person who has already passed as a white man in society due to his skin color being white, his cunning intelligence and early desire to become a lawyer. He returns home to get Rena in order to help her pass as white as well, which would include plenty of luxury as well as the main goal she and her mother have for her, marriage. She is pitied in society because everyone in her environment knows she is black, although her appearance is white, and from an early age she had the opportunity to pass like her brother, however, she never did. She begins to pass for white away from her home after being taught and finds potential marriage with a wealthy white man named George Tryon. However, her deepest fear becomes a reality when she is discovered in her neighborhood by Tryon in North Carolina, as she returned to take care of her ill mother. “His emotions were varied and stormy. At first he could see nothing but the fraud of which he had been made the victim. A negro girl had been foisted upon him for a white woman, and he had almost committed the unpardonable sin against his race of marrying her. Such a step, he felt, would have been criminal at any time; it would have been the most odious treachery at this epoch, when his people had been subjugated and humiliated by the Northern invaders, who had preached Negro equality and abolished the wholesome laws decreeing the separation of the races” (Chesnutt 107). This excerpt explains the effect of subjugation of black people in America during the Civil Rights era. It shows his overall

disgust based on the believed differences between black and white people at the time. Her discovery led Rena to awaken and arrive to the decision to give herself to her people.

Like Edna, Rena also has no other way to be happy but death. She had the opportunity to pass as a white woman, yet she returned home to take care of her mother. Her brother, John Warwick, is successful at passing because he moves away and never comes back to his home prior to his visit for his sister. He began his life with no need to return and grew up a genius from his attachment to books. Rena, however, has been raised to stay home and cater to her mother. This explains why those who knew her secret pitied her because she had the opportunity at first, just as her brother. Rena died being chased by two men whom she could not return to in order to avoid any pain and suffering as she experienced when she was discovered. Similarly, Edna could not return to her husband and children because she did not want anyone to possess her.

In conclusion, Ralph Waldo Emerson stressed the need for men to be individualistic, to detect the gleam of light that flashes across their minds and accept their own individual genius among a crowd of contrary beliefs. History has shown that women also apply to Emerson’s philosophy. Being restricted, defined, and possessed by men through the Napoleonic code, women have been introduced with the struggles that Emerson speaks of. In addition, through constant resilience of feminist movements and the integration of privileges given to women through the sexual revolution, women have proven that they have accepted their genius in the midst of society, and have handled the opposition by seeking what they believed was true for them, just as Emerson promoted.

Kate Chopin, Charles W. Chesnutt and the respective main characters of their stories, while following Emerson’s philosophy of awakening, suffered the consequences. Chopin suffered through terrible criticism of her artistry because Edna Pontellier, the main character of

her story, rebelled against the norms of society in 1899. She expressed sexual liberty and the option of seeking individuality by abandoning her marriage and children. Chopin, as the author and creator, was viewed as an offender of the standard of society for women by creating such a controversial character. This happened because as Emerson promoted, nonconformity leads to the world whipping an individual with displeasure. In present day, Chopin and her story would be more than welcomed now that feminism has been embraced in society. This is why her book returned to bookshelves in 1969 and is now being viewed positively compared with the past.

Similarly, Chesnutt’s career was affected as he created stories that expressed humanity in black slaves during a time when slaves were looked as property rather than human beings. Kate Chopin, a female, and Charles W. Chesnutt, a male, both created two works of literature that were viewed as controversial due to the time frame in which they were both released as well as the messages they promoted. As both authors expressed their genius and their inmost through their work, they both prove that Emerson’s philosophy is not only true for men but for women too. Overall, both genders have the potential of achieving what Emerson promotes and seek individuality. Although society has proven that it can show displeasure for a person’s genius as it did for Chopin and Chesnutt, their characters escaped conformity and both authors were eventually known for their genius. Two of the most controversial authors prove that they were ahead of their time through their work. Men and women can achieve their genius even through criticism and death.

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