

Milestones in a Woman's Life in the Works of Kate Chopin and Zora Neale Hurston

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In this essay I introduce the representation of women's life around the turn of the nineteenth-and twentieth century through two novels: *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston. I discuss the similarities and differences of the protagonists' lives in view of their belonging to different ethno-racial blocks. I highlight the milestones in their lives and observe how these milestones affect their character. I also intend to prove that both novels offer a *Künstler* and *Bildungs* reading.

I believe, there are four major milestones in the life of the two protagonists, and the paper is divided into four sections to separately discuss them. First, I analyze Edna's and Janie's teenage life in terms of the environment they grew up in, how they imagined their future life as young women, what their dreams were, and what their attitude to marriage was. Secondly, I discuss their marriages and explore which of their youthful dreams materialized and failed. I also introduce marriage as an institution. And what it really offers to women at the turn of the century. Thirdly, I analyze the awakening of the two characters, the process by which they realize that marriage does not satisfy their needs, and their attempts to break out of their "prison". Nature plays a significant role in their awakening, therefore I also analyze how natural elements symbolize this process. Finally, in the fourth section I demonstrate how the two women fight for their independence, what obstacles they meet, and how they gain their independence in the end.

The Awakening and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* both belong to women's literature. Literary history examined the woman as a writer, a protagonist, and as a reader as well (Bollobás 262).¹ At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, female authors

wrote specifically from a woman's point of view and about women's issues, such as getting married, having children and finding love. However, just like male authors, they showed the generally human and the universally valid side of these issues, and by doing so, female authors questioned the fact that only men can represent universal human values in literature. American women writers created the most important novels of the period from a social point of view, since these novels discuss women's social, political, sexual, intellectual, and spiritual equality. In addition, in 1929 Virginia Woolf indicated that a female writer wanted to change contemporary values or standards: she presented issues that were irrelevant for men, and at the same time she also showed the trivial side of those things which were important in men's eye (qtd. in Bollobás 263).

Bollobás claims that after a long and painful self-examination, the New Woman realizes the failures in her life, such as the limits of her marriage, the impossibility of the fulfillment in her sexual life and in her human self-realization, and her reduced circumstances to express herself in the form of literature (264). This realization brings forth a struggle against misogynist stereotypes. Bollobás states that the new generation of female authors do not offer escape from reality to a schematic fantasy world. These authors make readers think by making the plot less predictable, by guiding them into unknown dimensions, and by not promising easy solutions for complicated situations (Bollobás 264).

To categorize *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as novels in a narrower sense, Bollobás brings in two concepts: Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman. According to Abby H. P. Werlock, "Bildungsroman [. . .] takes as its main subject the moral, intellectual and psychological development of a protagonist. Usually such novels trace the maturation of a youthful protagonist into adulthood" (88). While "Künstlerroman means 'artist novel'. The Künstlerroman is an important subtype of the Bildungsroman. The Künstlerroman is a novel that depicts the development of novelists or other artists into the stage of maturity in which they recognize their artistic destiny and achieve mastery of their artistic craft" (Werlock 387).

Bollobás claims that in Bildungsroman, the woman is the subject of works, she is the one developing psychologically, morally, and intellectually (264-65). In Künstlerroman the woman can express herself in the field of art, she can develop her creative skills, and thus in Künstlerroman she goes through a kind of artistic growth. The concept of individualism extended to women appears as a brave innovation in both Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman. Authors of Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman took part in creating a new psychological language, in which they described the inner world of their characters, their way of thinking and how their consciousness worked. These authors also took part in creating a new ideal, the autonomous and creative woman, which foreshadowed the mentality of modernism (Bollobás 265).

At the end of the nineteenth century, female Bildungsroman is radically different from its male counterpart, Bollobás argues (265). In men's literature, men's development is accepted by society in many ways: creativity, sexuality, new fields of knowledge or doing something meaningful for the community, while these opportunities are not available for women. If female protagonists try to do something similar, they will either be excluded from their family and/or society, and in a graver case their punishment will be death. Therefore, the most common topic of Bildungsroman in women's literature is women's rebellion against social rules. These novels also suggest that women trying to deconstruct stereotypes will either become "monsters" or they will be self-destructive (Bollobás 265). The self-sufficient woman, who considers her marriage the greatest obstacle on her way to reach spiritual independence will also appear in these novels. This type of woman rejects unequal relationships, therefore she often steps out of marriage, and just like male protagonists, she dedicates her life to search majestic values, such as

love, passion, or self-expression. Since, however, most of the time this journey is unsuccessful, she escapes into suicide (Bollobás 265).

In my understanding both Edna of *The Awakening* and Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* become self-sufficient, since both of them leave their marriage behind in order to seek real love and passion. They do not tolerate being oppressed by their husbands, instead they both search for their true identity, they want to get to know their true self. But this quest may fail. Edna feels that she cannot be a mother and an independent woman at the same time, because these roles are incompatible, therefore she escapes to art. This is where Bildungsroman meets Künstlerroman, since one of the most important possibility of self-realization is art (Bollobás 265). Bollobás highlights that the female protagonists of Künstlerroman are stuck in the conflict of domesticity and creativity, and the cause of their common failure is the impossibility of their independence from their family and society (Bollobás 265-66).

A new kind of novel was born with Chopin's *The Awakening*, the so-called "awakening novel", since the protagonist is fighting for her inner emancipation and liberation after being married for many years (Bollobás 266). *The Awakening* was written in 1899, after more than a hundred short stories and two novels. It is about the 28-year-old Edna Pontellier who lives in a rather traditional marriage with her husband, Léonce Pontellier, a successful businessman from New Orleans. They have two sons. Just like many other husbands at the time, Léonce considers Edna his property whose most important task is to help her husband on his way to success. Edna eventually commits adultery twice, and leaves her husband. *The Awakening* confronted its readers with universal problems the nineteenth century, Bollobás says (273). With its autonomous protagonist, who sees marriage as a prison, the novel completely clashed with the norms of the period (Bollobás 273).

Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* takes place in southern Florida in the twentieth century and, according to Henry Louis Gates, the novel was not well received in the beginning because of its "rejection of racial uplift literary prescriptions" (11). But later it became a major work in both African American literature and in women's literature as well (Gates 11). Donna M. Campbell says in *The Slave Narrative* that a journey from oppression to freedom characterizes the traditional American slave narrative (qtd. in Jordan n. pag.), which in my understanding applies to Janie's journey to freedom through her three marriages. At first, when she marries Logan she feels the most oppressed because she does not know how marriage works, and she does not know what she should do, how she should behave in marriage. But she listens to her heart and dares to step out of this marriage in hope of a better future. Every time she gets married she learns something new, therefore her marriages will be better and better. In the end, however, she realizes that she does not need a man to live a full life. She takes actions according to her own will, therefore she becomes completely free.

In my reading, *The Awakening* is a mixture of Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman, while *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman, and slave narrative at the same time. For this reason, their narratives are not entirely the same, but they do share common features. Both novels work with similar motifs, since both use natural images as symbols, and the point of view is similar. Both novels use third person narration. The main characters are in the state of constant change in both of the novels. Edna and Janie are motherless, which is typical for Bildungsroman, and both of them experience something traumatic in their youth. Finally, the novels convey the same message, that it is possible for a woman to reach her independence and live according to her own will. If we look at the characteristics of Künstlerroman, one might argue that only Edna does some artistic work-, she paints-while Janie does not. However, in my opinion both women can be considered artists because for them life and freedom itself

is a kind of art they constantly try to improve and achieve. The social background of the two protagonists is a radical difference: Janie's ancestors (her grandmother in particular) were slaves, therefore we can find the characteristics of the slave narrative in the novel as the slave past of the family affects Janie's life, especially through Nanny's (Janie's grandmother) character.

In "Professions for Women," Woolf calls the Victorian woman "the Angel in the House." She borrowed the term from Coventry Patmore's poem which celebrates domestic bliss. Although Woolf uses this term for British women, in many respect it is applicable to the lives of American women too. Woolf describes the Angel in the House as:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. (2007)

At the time, the main tasks of a woman were to be sympathetic, tender, and flattering. Having an opinion herself about the world was highly disapproved of. "Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own" (Woolf 2007-8). Woolf says that if a woman wanted to free her mind, if she wanted to see the truth about her body, about her passion, if she wanted to understand herself, then she had to kill the Angel in the House—a part of her, a mask which society forced her to wear (2008). She claims that killing the Angel in the House was only the beginning. Women gained their freedom, and for the first time in history, they themselves could choose how they wanted to live their life.

But this freedom is only a beginning—the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? These, I think are questions of the utmost importance and interest. For the first time in history you are able to ask them; for the first time you are able to decide for yourselves what the answers should be. (Woolf 2010)

The Angel in the House appears in both novels. Edna is a typical housewife at the end of the nineteenth century, and her most important task is to be pretty. The Pontellier family has attendants who do most of the work at home instead of Edna, therefore she has a lot of free time, and she is bored. In her case, her rebellion, the process of the killing of the Angel in the House is more visible than in Janie's. But the notion also appears in Janie's second marriage, since Jody treats Janie as some kind of an ornament. Eventually, the awakening of the two protagonists will mean the death of the Angel in the House.

1. "Sometimes a Dream Turns into a Dream": Illusions and Delusions in a Teenage Girl's Life²

Becoming a teenager is a difficult time in everybody's life: the person is not a child anymore but not yet an adult either. Young people start to wonder why things happen the way they happen, why they are here, what the meaning of life is, and they try to find their place in the world. Edna in *The Awakening* and Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God tell us their stories starting with their youth, which is important to be analyzed here as it influences their future lives.

One day when Edna and her friend Madame Ratignolle go out to the shore of Grand Isle to relax and watch the sea, the waves make Edna remember her youth and she starts to tell Madame Ratignolle some of her childhood memories. The waves remind her of a wide green meadow where she was running when she was about twelve years old. She recalls that perhaps she escaped the usual Sunday service. When Madame Ratignolle playfully asks if Edna keeps escaping these services even today, Mrs. Pontellier answers that she does not do that anymore. She notes that she used to be a foolish child, who did what she wanted without much thinking. She tells that she was trying to find her place back then, an aim that she could fight for, and that she was feeling very lonely at that time. After she got married, she learnt to control herself. That was what her family and the whole society expected her to do. She also became a mother soon, thus she could not act like a child anymore, because she had to show good example to her children.

The scene when Madame Ratignolle holds her hand to caress her is symbolic of Edna's relationship with others. A flow of memories comes to Edna's mind again. She finds this open way of showing caring and love quite strange since she has not really experienced it herself. Her relationship with her sisters was not a loving one. Their mother passed away early and, because of this, her older sister, Margaret had to take over the role of a housewife. She was responsible for the duties around the house and also for the upbringing of her two little sisters. Since these things were women's duties and because Margaret was the oldest of the girls, she automatically became the mother figure at home. Edna wished to have a sister-like sister more than a "spare mother." Even if Edna "lost" a sister, she could still have another one, but Edna was fighting with her younger sister, Janet all the time. Moreover, most of her friends at school were rather self-contained, and Edna was not sure whether her reserved character had anything to do with this. Janie shares her childhood memories with a loving friend—Pheoby—she has missed all her life after coming back from Everglades. The two women start to talk about what happened, about why Janie came back to Eatonville. Pheoby does not really understand Janie's reasons, and that is why Janie starts to tell her story.

Similarly to Edna, motherlessness is also present in Janie's life. Her mother was raped by her school teacher and that is how she was conceived. When Leafy gave birth to Janie, she ran off leaving the child to Nanny—Janie's grandmother—, and she brought up the girl. She did not really have friends at school either as her classmates ostracized her because of her race, and she played with the white Washburn kids instead.

Another important similarity between Edna and Janie is how they think about love in their youth. Edna talks about the men she had loved before she got married. Her very first love was a soldier who resembled Napoleon. Then, when her family moved to Mississippi, she fell in love with a man who was visiting his betrothed on the neighbouring plantation. Her final and deepest teenage love was an actor. Whenever she had company, she was telling everyone how talented, how wonderful he was. She kept a framed picture of him on her table, and when she was alone she sometimes secretly caressed and kissed it. Janie created her theory about love through nature, by watching the dance of bees around the flowers of her favorite pear tree. While she was waiting for her own bee to show up, she met Johnny Taylor, a young womanizer, and he gave Janie her very first kiss.

Beauvoir says that a young woman's self-worship and her wish for a man always appear together (259). The subject of her admiration and her fear is the man (Beauvoir 266). Usually, she does not want to accept her destiny easily and therefore she escapes from reality (Beauvoir 271). This is clearly visible in Edna's case. In my understanding, the fact that Edna's first love resembled Napoleon shows that she was attracted to cha-

rateristics she learned from romance novels, where the hero is handsome, authoritative, strong, and proud. I believe teenage girls usually choose this Platonic or fantasy kind of love because they are afraid of a real relationship, since it may have many flaws while an imagined love causes no real harm.

According to Kaitlyn Hook, the pear tree under which Janie spent all her free time at the age of sixteen is an important symbol in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She says that it is the symbol of blossoming love (Hook n. pag.). This was the place where Janie was thinking about the great questions of life, about the why-s, when-s and how. It was also here where she formed her own theory about marriage: “She saw a dustbearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage!” (Hurston 15). This symbolizes Janie’s belief in love “a perfect harmony between two people” (Hook n. pag.).

Just like the blossoms, Janie was waiting for her own bee to come. One day she saw a young man, Johnny Taylor coming up the road, and he gave Janie her very first kiss. Unfortunately, her grandma spied what happened, and after this, Janie’s life changed completely. In her grandmother’s eyes, she was no longer a child but a woman. But in my understanding, Janie did not want anything from that man, she was only curious about love which she was thinking about a lot. I personally see this kiss as an innocent and completely normal way of familiarizing herself with love. The grandmother’s reaction is completely understandable, since Janie’s mother was raped by her school teacher in her teenage years, and that was how she was conceived, and Nanny was afraid that something similar would happen to Janie as well when she started to be interested in men.

Both Edna’s and Janie’s youth is filled with waiting for a man to come. Beauvoir states that a young girl imagines that she can only live a full life with a man, and that a man will make her feel safe. As Beauvoir also says, a woman believes in the superiority of a man from the start, which has both economic and social causes, but besides these, the parents of a young girl encourage her to “bow” before men (246-47). Janie experiences double oppression, one deriving from her gender, the other from her race. As her grandmother says: “Honey, the white man is the ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out” (Hurston 19). In my opinion, this sentence implies that Janie will have to be prepared for a much harder life, as opposed to an “average” woman like Edna, because of her race.

In addition to the belief in male superiority, waiting is also related to passivity. A teenage boy can constantly question the things in this world and rebel against them, while a teenage girl has to bear her fate passively, as Beauvoir points out (250). At the turn of the century, both Edna and Janie have to accept their family’s will, no one asks them how they would like to live their life or what their goals are, as it would not conform to contemporary social practices. As I see it, they have to live a life which their family imagined for them. They cannot rebel against this because their environment, and the whole world basically makes them believe that a woman alone is not capable of anything. A young girl cannot intervene in the changing of the world and therefore she thinks that the world is unchangeable, Beauvoir continues (250).

Beauvoir also echoes Woolf when she says that young women can hardly leave the house, their comings and goings are kept under strict supervision (254). A teenage girl is not encouraged the least bit to organize her pastime herself, and doing so would be highly disapproved of (Beauvoir 254). When Edna misses the usual Sunday service and runs out to the meadow, or Janie’s very first kiss, and how her grandmother reacts to the situation are clear examples for this. Uninhibited behavior is considered very improper. Propriety compels a woman to control herself all the time, which infiltrates in her na-

ture and makes her suppress her feelings. That is why women seem to be constantly bored and strained (Beauvoir 255).

Beauvoir says that sooner or later every girl learns that if she wants to be appealing for men, she has to give up her independence (255). Every honest manifestation of her own self will make her less feminine and less attractive. Thus, a young woman finds herself asking the question: I know that I can only fulfill my destiny as being only the “other,” but how could I give up my own self? She is drifting between lust and disgust, between fear and hope, and because of this endless doubt, she will sort of “burn out” by the end of her adolescence. However, after longer or shorter resistance, the young girl usually accepts her fate. In order to be able to be possessed by a man, she has to become an object. Her own self will double and one half of herself will look at her other self from the outside (Beauvoir 258). This is clearly represented in the novels, when Edna and Janie find a husband, they realize that they have to give up their romantic and passionate dreams about love as love in their marriage turns out to be completely different from what they had imagined.

A teenage girl’s behaviour is determined by the fact that she refuses her destiny but she accepts it as well at the same time (Beauvoir 275). She is afraid of the future but she is not happy about the present either; she wants and does not want to become a woman, and it annoys her that people still consider her a child. She passes time, but she does not really *do* anything, and because basically she does nothing, she is nothing herself. She cannot *do* anything, but she must *exist*, and this feels like a curse for her (Beauvoir 276). Her value is not the result of her own effort, but it is determined by public opinion and social expectations. The “inner life” of a teenage girl is much deeper than that of a teenage boy, because boys pay attention to things in the world while girls pay more attention to what is happening in them, and thus their emotions are much more subtle and much more complex (Beauvoir 279).

Everyone in a young girl’s family agrees that her most important task is to find a husband, a protector as soon as possible. If she wants to break out from her family, the easiest way for her is not active fight, instead she should passively and submissively give herself to another “potentate” (Beauvoir 247). This is very clearly shown in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Jennifer Jordan supports Beauvoir’s argument by saying that “through the first half of the novel, Janie struggles to free herself from the expectations of her slave grandmother, who sees marriage as a haven from indiscriminate sexual exploitation (as opposed to the particular abuse of a loveless marriage) and as a shelter from financial instability” (109).

As we have seen traumatic experiences play a significant role in Bildungsroman. Something radical happened both in Edna’s and Janie’s childhood, which made them realize that they were different from others, and it also affected their teenage life. Janie did not know her father and her mother. She was raised by her grandmother and by the white people her grandmother worked for. They lived in a little house in the Washburns’ backyard. She says she did not know that she was black until she was six years old because she always played with the Washburn kids and thought that she looked just like them. She realized that she was different when she saw a picture of the family, and everyone was laughing at her because of this. In Edna’s case this cruel recognition happened when she realized that she did not mean anything to the man from the neighbouring plantation because she was only a child.

Another important characteristic Beauvoir mentions, and which again concerns both Edna and Janie, is the fact that young women are not allowed to rise above other people in a sense to broaden their possibilities. The competitive spirit so characteristic of boys, is almost completely missing from them. Competition is nothing more than a passive comparison in women’s case (Beauvoir 249). In *The Awakening* Edna mentions

that her best friend used to write quite praiseworthy essays in school, which she secretly admired, and she tried to reach that level and creativity too. In Janie's case competition is rather racial. Her classmates constantly made fun of the fact that she had been living in the backyard of white people, and some were simply annoyed by Janie's black presence. She got the spare clothes of Mrs. Washburn's children but, as Janie says, these clothes were still better than those which the rest of the black children had. When her grandmother noticed that Janie was not happy, she decided to move.

Beauvoir claims that if a woman feels offended, she is not allowed to stand up for herself like a man, she cannot physically hurt her opponent (250). She notes that aggression is the most tangible proof of the fact that people can accept themselves, their temper and will (250). It is horrible if someone is deprived of their ability to show their emotions to the world (Beauvoir 250). This is more noticeable in Janie's case, in the scene where she cannot really defend herself when her classmates make fun of her. Beauvoir says that since the decree which says that a black person can *never* hit a white person, has come into operation, black people are obliged to live their life completely passively, and this decree determines their emotions, their actions, how they see themselves and how they try to fit in (250).

To sum up, what affected both Edna's and Janie's youth most significantly were rebellion, motherlessness, and loneliness. These factors influence their lives, most importantly their marriage.

2. "Nightingale in a Golden Cage": Marriage as an Institution

Following adolescence, the second major turning point in women's life is marriage. Here I offer a detailed analysis of Edna's and Janie's marriages and demonstrate how they experienced married lives. I also explore what this institution provided for women at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century. It is important to mention that three men play an important role in both Edna's and Janie's life, and they all represent the same values. Léonce and Logan stand for protection, Robert and Jody offer love, and Alcée and Tea Cake embody passion. There is no man, however, in the novels who would have all these values, and probably this is the reason why both Edna and Janie decide to live without a man in the end.

Jonathan Bennett states that "marriage [was] the destination assigned to women by society, the prospect they [were] brought up to, and the objective they [were] intended to pursue" (17). Beauvoir says that in the past usually every society demanded that women should be taken care of by men (311). This demand made women keep the house in order and satisfy their husband sexually as well. Society saw women's duties as services they do for their husband, and for their services their husband had to give something back in the form of presents or maintenance. Therefore, the community compensated women for society's demands through men (Beauvoir 311-12).

Montaigne claims that people did not marry for themselves but for their family's and offsprings' sake (qtd. in Beauvoir 316). Beauvoir talks about the fact that there were often calculation, despair, and forced acquiescence behind marriage rather than enthusiasm, therefore, people usually did not marry because of love. The aim of the institution was to serve the community with the economic and sexual uniting of the couple, and not to provide individual happiness. It was inadmissible for society to base something so important on capricious feelings and desires (Beauvoir 316). This way, marriage was inevitably a failure (Beauvoir 366).

It is deemed a failure since it deprived women of their identity. As Beauvoir says, women had to “maim” themselves in order to be able to become proper housewives (366-67). In my interpretation, this “maiming” is related to the fact that the woman lost her own name and had to live under her husband’s name. She also had to give up her dreams she used to have when she was young, and she had to dedicate her life to the boring and repetitive tasks of a housewife: taking care of the house, the kids, organizing parties (in the case of upper middle class women), supporting and entertaining her husband, and being pretty. There were women who accepted their fate silently and lived according to the expectations of their husbands and society. They were either satisfied with this lifestyle or they were scared to break out of it since marriage gave them economic and social protection. They were aware that due to their lack of education and profession their children would have probably starved to death without their husband’s support. But there were also women who dared to stand up for themselves if they did not feel comfortable in marriage.

Some women tried marriage only once and realized that it was not made for them, and some women went from one marriage to another until they found what they were searching for: love, passion, understanding and freedom. Edna is a woman who tried marriage only once. She did not want to get married, it was her father’s and sister’s decision and she acted according to their will. She got married, moved to her husband’s house, had two sons and she lived as a typical housewife in the nineteenth century. She never had financial problems, she gave life to two children—however neither her nor the narrator mentions if she ever wanted to have kids or not—, and she belonged to the upper class women of New Orleans. But she desperately missed something, and she did not realize what it was until the family’s trip to Grand Isle.

Janie experienced marriage three times. Her first marriage was her grandmother’s wish after she saw her kissing with Johnny Taylor.

“Yeah, Janie, youse got yo’ womanhood on yuh. So Ah mou ez well tell yuh whut Ah been savin’ up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away.”

“Me married? Naw, Nanny, no ma’am! Whut Ah know ‘bout uh husband?”

“Whut Ah seen just now is plenty for me, honey, Ah don’t want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches, lak Johnny Taylor usin’ yo’ body to wipe his foots on.” (Hurston 17)

“[S]ince Janie’s mother is absent, her grandmother, Nanny, is Janie’s only source of matriarchal wisdom” (LaVonne R n. pag.). However, neither her mother, nor her grandmother were ever married, so basically Janie knows almost nothing about marriage, except maybe the image from the Washburns, in addition she is bombarded with social expectations and stereotypes. For this reason, she tries to understand the concept of marriage through nature. The fact that Nanny wants Janie to marry is quite ironic for two reasons. Firstly, because Nanny has never been married herself, so she does not really know what marriage would exactly give (or not give) to her granddaughter. However, she argues that she is aware of how marriage is valued by society because she had probably been bombarded by the very same social expectations. Secondly, Nanny does not believe that Janie could live her life as a single woman, while she took care of both of them all by herself despite the challenging circumstances. According to LaVonne R, it is even more ironic that “Nanny’s reason for herself not having married is the same one that she gives to Janie to get married: protection” (n. pag.). Rachel Blau DuPlessis highlights this paradox: “Social decency, straight paths, reductions of impulse all are the desired end: Janie, her Nanny decrees, must ‘marry protection’” (14). “Protection ironically

takes the form of a man; self-sufficiency is not and cannot be a thought, although Nanny herself has [. . .] achieved it” (110).

We have seen so far that marriage was believed to provide protection for women. But what about love? What kind of love does marriage provide? Beauvoir says that instead of love, women would feel respect and affection for their husband (327-28). In the nineteenth century romantic writers advocated that every woman has a right to love. Beauvoir points out that people started to ask whether is it possible to attune marriage and individual feelings. In the end they invented the term: “marriage love.” “Marriage love” had nothing to do with love, it was business, and the object of this business were women (Beauvoir 319). Society did not promise love for women, it promised happiness and a harmonious life.

Edna and Janie experienced love in marriage and (in Edna’s case) outside marriage. “[Edna] 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” (Chopin 63). Throughout the story, Edna does not show great affection for her husband, and neither does Léonce for her. Since Edna feels the lack of affection in her marriage, she escapes into Robert’s arms, where she finds love, and into Alcée’s arms, where she finds passion. Edna’s love for her husband and for Robert are different. She only likes her husband without any traces of passion. She does not love him the way a woman loves a man, I would say she likes him as a relative. This relationship represents nothing more but responsibility to Edna. She has to act as if she really loved him since she is his wife and they have two children, and this is what society expects her. Her love for Robert, however, is passionate, and it is without any responsibility. She feels for Robert the way she felt for the actor when she was young.

Beauvoir claims that we may accept our body, our past, our present, but love is a different question (359). Love, like friendship, can be called love for real if it is based on free choice. It is the exclusive right of the individual to keep his or her choice or to change it. The feeling is free only if it does not depend on an external order, conventions, and if the subject experiences it honestly in its whole, without any fear. As opposed to this, the conventions of “marriage love” suggest lying or pretence, and the oppression of this feeling. Above all, “marriage love” prevents the couple from really getting to know each other. A husband does not consider the virtues of his wife as her own merits since they are guaranteed by society and they come from the institution of marriage. Moreover, he knows even less about her dreams, her secret wishes, about that intellectual-spiritual atmosphere in which she lives or wishes to live. But a wife does not know her husband better either (Beauvoir 359-60).

“Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so. Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant” (Hurston 28). Janie always gets married for the same reason: she hopes to find love (LaVonne R n. pag.). After she marries Logan Killicks, her first husband, she visits her grandmother to ask for some marital advice, which is ironic since Nanny has no real experience in the field of marriage, she cannot say anything supportive, instead she confuses Janie even more. Since “Nanny and the olds folks had said it,” Janie believes that she will fall in love with Logan when they are married. At first she thinks that she just needs time and it will happen. Janie does not understand, even after several months, why she does not love Logan, and so this marriage comes to an end. She does not realize for a long time that her love for Logan is only “marriage love.”

Janie feels the most comfortable in her third marriage. When she sees Tea Cake for the first time, she thinks: “he could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God”

(Hurston 142). Just like Edna, Janie wants to experience passionate love. When she first sees Tea Cake she notices his body and how he walks, her senses are awakening, and she is yearning for this kind of love. But, unfortunately, “Janie, like the blossoms and aromatic herbs, will be the one Tea Cake crushes” (LaVonne R n. pag.). Their relationship is far from being perfect, most importantly because “for this couple, love and violence are intertwined and almost indistinguishable” (LaVonne R n. pag.). In my opinion, fighting fuels their love but, at the same time, it also worsens their love for each other. Clearly, it is a complex relationship.

In addition to the fact that society expects women to act as if they loved their husband, it also encourages them to give birth. Society makes women believe that their real independence is provided by their children into whom they can pour their whole life; that a child is the essence of a woman’s life; that a woman will become a fully valued human when she is a mother (Beauvoir 370). The source of her infinite happiness, the justification of her existence is said to be the child. The mother will be manifested in and through her child. Marriage also exists because of children, it will serve its purpose fully through children (Beauvoir 370).

Edna does not only try to escape from her marriage, but from her motherly duties as well. “Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman” (Chopin 51). Edna passes her motherly responsibilities to others. Whenever the children appear in the story, it is always the quadroon who is taking care of them. When she moves out of her husband’s house, Edna sends her children to live with their grandmother and she visits them only once. She regrets leaving them, but she does not bring them home, even though she could. This means she cannot live with or without her children. Naturally, she loves them, but she would never give up herself for them. She says: “I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give up my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 97). She constantly suffers about this contradictory feeling because she knows that she should live for her kids, and they should be the meaning of her life—according to social expectations—but she knows that she is more than “just” a mother and a wife. She can escape from a marriage, but once she becomes a mother, she can never escape her motherly duties, and this prevents her from being able to find her true self.

The question of motherhood is different in Janie’s case, since she has no children. Even though she gets married three times, she never produces an offspring. We do not know whether she is infertile or not, it simply does not happen, so we might call it fate. It is even more surprising that “none of Janie’s husbands seem bothered by [this]; none long for a son, which is what a chauvinistic male of the period would be expected to do” (LaVonne R n. pag.). On the other hand, she does not seem to want to have children either.

In conclusion, we saw that marriage provided social and economic protection for the two protagonists, but they did not experience deep and passionate love and care. I believe, however, that their experiences in marriage strengthen their character. They realize that they do not need to follow their family’s will anymore—since they became grown up women after all—, and that they do not need to adjust themselves to the expectations of society. In marriage, both Edna and Janie became aware that they can take their lives into their hands and control it according to their own will. In the following I introduce the process of their awakening in more detail.

3. “For Nature Hates Virginity, I Wish to Be Touched”: Sexual Awakening through Natural Images

Nature plays an important role in the awakening processes of the two protagonists.

Edna lives the life of an average housewife; her tasks include taking care of the house and the kids, organizing parties and dealing with the social life of the Pontellier family, entertaining her husband, and being there for him if needed, and, of course, being pretty. She does not realize that she wants something more from a relationship until the family's trip to Grand Isle. She starts to sense the dysfunctional nature of her marriage when her husband scolds her for not taking good care of her children.

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way. (Chopin 48)

Edna feels deeply humiliated by his words, because they imply that Léonce knows their children better, while he hardly meets them because of his work. In my opinion, if he asked Edna kindly to check if Raoul had a fever because he thought so, there would not be any problem. But Léonce insists that Raoul has a high fever and does not believe his wife when she says that their son is fine. He does not treat Edna as an equal person, more like as if she was his servant, his possession. "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood" (Chopin 49). This "mood" is the first sign of her awakening. She goes out to the porch to cry, where she can hear the "everlasting voice of the sea", and its "mournful lullaby" hints at the upcoming obstacles, which she has to fight in order to break out of her marriage.

Janie's awakening begins in a slightly different way. She starts to open her eyes near the end of her first marriage. She is yearning for love, and since the people around her tell her that love usually comes with marriage, she is waiting for the feeling from the moment she marries Logan. But Logan is the complete opposite of Janie since, on the one hand, he is old and ugly, while Janie is young and beautiful and, on the other hand, he represents the antithesis of Janie's notion of true love. "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston 34). When Janie realizes that "Nanny and the old folks" lie about love, she threatens Logan with leaving. He did not take Janie's words seriously. He got scared, but he did not show it, and to Janie it looked as if he did not care about her. She did leave him and eloped with Jody.

LaVonne R calls attention to the fact that trees in general play an important role in Janie's romantic life since, in addition to the pear tree and its symbolism—I mentioned in the first section—, when she meets Jody for the first time she is "enjoying the shade of an oak tree" (n. pag.). Another reference to trees is Tea Cake's last name, "Woods," suggesting that he will be the one who can fulfill Janie's dreams and desires she had under the pear tree when she was young. Besides trees, nature manifests in many forms in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. After Janie and Jody get married, they watch "the sun plunge into the same crack in the earth from which the night emerged" (Hurston 44). "[L]ike the beautiful sunset that seems to unite sun and earth as one, Janie and Joe's marriage begins as an act of beauty and harmony. Like the sunset, however, darkness soon emerges from the Starks's union" (LaVonne R n. pag.). This darkness starts when Jody becomes the mayor of Eatonville and he becomes intoxicated with the power in his hands. From this moment on, he wants Janie to act like a mayoress, he objectifies and mutes her. Basically, he treats her as an ornament, in his jealousy, he forces Janie to wear head-rags to cover up her hair.

The symbol of the horizon is connected to the symbol of sunset. When Jody dies, Janie feels as if her grandmother had “put the horizon around her neck to choke her” (n. pag.). In my interpretation it means that after her second husband’s death, she gains so much freedom that she does not know what to do with it. She is relieved when Jody dies, because she was deeply oppressed in their marriage, but she is also afraid of the upcoming possibilities. Freedom is a gift and a burden to her at the same time. The horizon becomes an important symbol after Tea Cake’s death, too. This time, freedom is again a burden to Janie, but not a choking one, since with Tea Cake she learns how to take care of herself. “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see” (Hurston 259).

Nature also shows her darker side in the novel which affects the development of Janie’s character. When the hurricane comes, it is the first time when nature becomes Janie’s enemy, since until that moment nature had only taught her lessons of love (La Vonne R n. pag.). Most of the people go away from the hurricane, but because Tea Cake decides to stay and fight with the powers of nature, we can interpret his illness and then death as a punishment. Nature punishes not only Tea Cake but Janie as well, because she acts according to social conventions which does not allow her to defy her husband. She trusts Tea Cake’s opinion about the weakness of the storm and not her own natural instincts, which tell her to leave.

In *The Awakening*, the sea is the most important natural symbol. The narrator mentions that it was really hard for Edna to learn to swim, that she was struggling with it through the whole summer (73). She always needed someone beside her in the sea, who could give her a helping hand if she started to feel insecure. But one night she manages to fight off all of her fears of the water and she succeeds.

But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water. A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (Chopin 73)

Chopin uses a perfect metaphor when she relates Edna’s feeling of joy to a child’s excitement when she starts to walk. In my interpretation, Edna begins to see the opportunities in life, and she wants to show that a woman can reach her aims if she really wants to, without any help, meaning without the help of a husband. She wants to live her life like no other woman did before.

The metaphor of a child comes back at the end of the novel when Edna commits suicide. In my understanding, Edna’s suicide can also be interpreted as birth, since baptism and cleansing made water the common symbol of rebirth. Before she walks into the sea she takes off her clothes, and she stands there naked like a newborn baby. She swims into the sea not knowing what will happen to her, just as when a baby is born, completely unaware about the world around her. The sea represents fear of the unknown and the feeling of independence at the same time.

Rich Christie discusses the symbolism of the sea in detail. In his view, the sea is the “abstract and metaphoric symbol of the temptation that Edna finally gave into,” but, at the same time, it is the only thing Edna can turn to in the end because only the sea understands her (n. pag.). Basically, she is running from her own temptations which are personified in Robert and Alcée, but in the end she has to face them, and therefore

she escapes into the sea. “The thrill of danger entices her, which is shown throughout the story as she begins to become more independent” (Christie n. pag.). The sea plays an important role throughout the story, and in the end “it symbolizes her liberation but also her isolation where she felt the most comfortable, which is in her own introverted world” (Christie n. pag.). Even the narrator says that Edna has always liked to be alone: “even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself” (Chopin 57).

She escapes into the sea because she realizes that she cannot find her place among nineteenth-century women and she cannot get what she has yearned for. Edna has always thought of the sea as something that contains pleasure and pain, birth and death. “The intense imagery of the sea and its metaphorical value” shows that she does not belong where she is, and her only choice is suicide (Christie n. pag.). “Giving herself to the sea was her last venture into the world of passion [and] her last encounter with the sea provided her with a sense of security and satisfaction that no man could provide her” (Christie n. pag.).

According to Beauvoir, one of women’s favourite area to discover is nature (544). For a young girl who has not given up everything, nature is what a woman is for a man: the subject, and its denial, a separate kingdom and hideaway. There are very few women at the turn of the century who try to discover nature in its purest, who try to understand its strange manifestations, and who forget about themselves to be able to unite with this different kind of reality (Beauvoir 544). But, both Edna and Janie belong to these women.

Awakening to natural elements also requires an analysis of the process of Janie’s and Edna’s sexual awakening. Janie’s sexual awakening started much earlier than Edna’s, since Janie was only 16 years old, while Edna was a married woman at the beginning of this process. Janie’s recognition came under the pear tree, which has another symbolic meaning in addition to the one I discussed in the first section. Andy King claims that “the pear tree symbolizes Janie’s ideal marriage, a marriage of equality and pleasure between the partners” (n. pag.). According to King, when Janie is observing the bees’ dance around the blooming tree, it seems that the pear tree is experiencing an orgasm when it is touched by the bees, and seeing this, Janie wants her marriage to be filled with such pleasures (n. pag.).

As King says, Janie’s marriage with Logan fails because of the lack of equality, which is supported by Janie’s answer to Logan when he asks her to help him in some work outside: “You don’t need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo’ place and Ah’m in mine” (Hurston 42). Both Janie and Logan work, but one of them works outdoors, and the other one in the kitchen. At this point it seems like Janie subscribes to conventional women’s roles. Logan fails the pear tree test, offering no fun and no sense of togetherness, and that is why Janie leaves him and his sixty acres behind (King n. pag.). Despite the fact that Janie’s marriage with Jody begins with laughter and fun, there is no equality in it either. Unlike Logan, Jody is a very social person and Janie is always around him, taking part in the fun Jody has, but “usually by wallowing in it, rather than participating actively in it” (King n. pag.). She is mainly observing the fun Jody has with the people around them, so he also fails the pear tree test. In Janie’s third marriage, there is pleasure and equality as well, so it satisfies her ideal relationship in the end. Janie and Tea Cake have a great time together from the beginning, they are laughing all the time. Moreover, while Jody never lets Janie join the fun he has, Tea Cake teaches Janie how to play checkers and how to shoot, which “set an equal relationship up between them” (King n. pag.). Since both Janie and Tea Cake have fun *and* they have it together, Tea Cake passes the pear tree test. They share pleasure with each other, and Tea Cake is the first man in Janie’s life with whom she experiences true sexual satisfaction. Still, since fighting is an essential part of their love for each other, this relationship is not perfect either, and probably this is the reason why Hurston kills Tea Cake and makes Janie continue her life alone.

Edna's sexual awakening started years after she was married. We are informed of this process by her relationship with Alcée Arobin and Robert Lebrun. "Edna's relationship with Alcée Arobin describes how Edna initially realizes her deficiency in sexual passion, how she seeks to fulfill her sexual desire and integrate it into the rest of her being, and how she eventually finds that the fulfillment and integration of her complex desires is impossible" (Aeranth n. pag.). Alcée's first description explains why Edna is attracted to him: "He possessed a good figure, a pleasing face, not overburdened with depth of thought or feeling; and his dress was that of the conventional man of fashion" (Chopin 128). His personality shined through his looks. He also had "a perpetual smile in his eyes" and "good-humored voice" (Chopin 127). It was obvious that his charming personality appealed to Edna, but this alone would have not meant anything, if Alcée had not been attracted to Edna as well. "He admired Edna extravagantly" and he wanted to spend more time with her (Chopin 128).

The episode in which Edna discovers a scar on Alcée's wrist is of vital importance in Edna's sexual awakening. "She touched his hand as she scanned the red cicatrice on the inside of his white wrist. A quick impulse that was somewhat spasmodic impelled her fingers to close in a sort of clutch upon his hand" (Chopin 130). Edna stops quickly, but Alcée kisses her hand warmly before he leaves. After this, Edna knows that "his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her" (Chopin 132). And she also becomes aware of her awakening sensuousness which is missing from her marriage (Aeranth n. pag.).

Margaret Culley explains that Edna's "sexual awakening now leads her to seek the deliverance of the flesh" through her relationship with Alcée (qtd. in Aeranth n. pag.). Aeranth highlights that "after finding Arobin physically attractive and discovering that he reciprocates her longings for intimate contact, Edna lets down her barriers and allows herself to share in physical expressions of her sexuality with Arobin" (n. pag.). Their first kiss "was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Chopin 139). Edna finds all the passion in Alcée she misses from her marriage. "After she finds this outlet for her passion, however, she realizes that she does not love Arobin the way that she loves Robert" (Aeranth n. pag.). Yet, she cannot concentrate fully on her love for Robert because she is constantly thinking about her children.

Since Edna and Léonce have basically nothing in common other than their two children and their last name, Edna realizes that she has to seek emotional fulfillment from another man, and she finds it in Robert. When they discover that their love for each other is requited, Edna says to Robert: "Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other. Nothing else in the world is of any consequence" (Chopin 168). "When Robert leaves her, Edna's heart breaks because Robert is not willing to risk social disgrace by loving her sexually" (Aeranth n. pag.). She finds sexual fulfillment in her relationship with Alcée, but she cannot find the emotional fulfillment in him, because "Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her" (Chopin 132). "Her relationship with Arobin also lacks in permissibility by society's standards, even if it makes up for a lack of emotional depth with burning sexuality" (Aeranth n. pag.). Edna realizes "the insatiety of fleshly desire" which, according to Culley, "foretells the impossibility of such deliverance for Edna" (qtd. in Aeranth n. pag.). In the end, she finds her relationship with Robert and Alcée just as dissatisfying as her relationship with her husband. None of these men can give her what she wants and that is why she turns to the sea. It is the sea that can provide the passion, satisfaction, and the feeling of security she wishes for.

Edna's and Janie's sexual awakening is the first step on their way to reach independence. In the next section I explain how they fight for their independence, what obstacles they have to face, and how they manage to gain it in the end.

4. “Show Me Myself without the Shell”: On the Way to Independence

After analysing the awakening of the two protagonists, I demonstrate how Edna and Janie attempted to step out of marriage and live their lives according to their own will. I highlight what obstacles they had to face and also how they became independent women in the end.

In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir states that the only thing to provide absolute independence for women is work (511). Through work they will not be very different from men anymore. From the point when she is not a dependant woman, the system, built on her dependent state, crashes down, and she will not need the man to mediate between her and the world. If she produces or creates something, she can gain back her transcendence, her subject will be proved through her plans, she will not be an object anymore, and her attitude to her aims, money and her rights gained will wake up the feeling of responsibility in her (Beauvoir 511-12).

Both Edna and Janie follow the course Beauvoir suggests as they both work. However, while Edna starts to work only after she realizes that her marriage is coming to its end, Janie works during her second and third marriages. When Edna realizes that she gave up most of herself in marriage, she decides to fulfill one of her old dreams and begins to paint. She sells her paintings and thus earns an income which is only hers. The first dream of women towards their independence is a home, which is only theirs (Beauvoir 517). This is clearly visible in Edna's case since, according to Kaplon, after she receives the money for her paintings, she immediately buys a house, the “pidgeon house” as she calls it. “[it], is a place far away from any reminders of her family life” (n. pag.).

It is interesting to see how other characters react to Edna's changing attitude. When her husband notices this change, he asks for advice from the family physician, Doctor Mandelet. The doctor thinks that the cause of Edna's changing attitude is an affair, but he does not share this with Léonce, instead he suggests that he should not control Edna and let her do what she wants. When Edna decides to move to her own house, her husband is away on business, so she writes a letter about her plans to Léonce. When he gets the letter, he forgets about Doctor Mandelet's advice and he “immediately [writes] her a letter of unqualified disapproval and remonstrance” (Chopin 150). He knows, however, that he would not be able to change Edna's mind about her plans, so when he sends the letter he also hires workers to refurbish their house and to build a new room in it. “He was simply thinking of his financial integrity. It might get noised about that the Pontelliers had met with reverses, and were forced to conduct their ménage on a humbler scale than heretofore. It might do incalculable mischief to his business prospects” (Chopin 150). “Furthermore, in one of the daily papers appeared a brief notice to the effect that Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier were contemplating a summer sojourn abroad, and that their handsome residence on Esplanade Street was undergoing sumptuous alterations, and would not be ready for occupancy until their return. Mr. Pontellier had saved appearances!” (Chopin 150-51). Clearly, Léonce is not interested at all in what Edna goes through, how she feels and what she wants. In my understanding he also asks for advice from Doctor Mandelet only to show that he cares for his wife when in fact he does not. Yet, Edna agrees to take part in his game and she “[avoids] any occasion to balk his intentions [. . .], she [is] apparently satisfied that it should be so” (Chopin 151).

I mentioned earlier, Janie works in her second and third marriage as well. She works in a store when she marries Jody, and later she works together with Tea Cake on the muck. Mary Helen Washington “[is] equating Janie's ‘search for identity’ with her recognition of her Blackness” (qtd. in J. Jordan 113). Jennifer Jordan argues that “Janie's par-

ticipation in field work is a sign of her immersion into the community” (113). Therefore, in Janie’s case, the racial experience also contributes to her work, while Edna does not experience anything like this.

Even though work is the first step on Edna’s and Janie’s way towards independence, it does not exempt them from doing the housework (Beauvoir 512). The majority of women having a job cannot break out of the traditional “woman-world.” They do not get that indispensable help either from society, or men, with which they could effectively become equal to men (Beauvoir 513). However, in Janie’s case Tea Cake does help her cook after she starts to work with him (J. Jordan 111). Janie really enjoys working on the muck with Tea Cake because they are equal there. Both do the same thing regardless of their sex. They are having a great time there “romping and playing” (Hurston 178). This probably explains why— after Tea Cake’s death—she does not go back to the muck: for her it meant Tea Cake and he was not there anymore. The field workers accept her as a working single woman, and they invite her to stay on the muck after Tea Cake’s death, but she refuses because it is not the same experience as it was with Tea Cake.

A woman who manages to be independent of men still does not belong to the same moral, social, and psychological state as men (Beauvoir 514). How she commits herself to her career, and how she sacrifices herself for it is connected with the global state of her life, therefore when she becomes an adult she does not have the same past behind her as the man, society sees her differently, and she herself sees the world from a different perspective. Being a woman is a special problem for an autonomous human being, and if a person has a will of their own, that counts as eccentricity (Beauvoir 514-15).

Both Edna and Janie are considered to be eccentric women. Edna has a husband and two “lovers” at the same time which is eccentric in itself. When Edna “sees that men are allowed to live lives of sexual fulfillment, while not being expected to bear or care for their children, and develop a personality and individual self through participation in the business world,” she begins to act like a man (Kaplon n. pag.). She first starts to feel masculine freedom when Léonce goes to New York, and when her children go to Iberville to their grandmother’s. She begins to gamble at horse-racing and sell her paintings. Painting and gambling compliment the sudden change in her lifestyle. Painting is a form of work as well as a means of true self-expression. She is playing a dangerous game, since she wants to be independent from her husband and from society as well. When she meets Alcée at the horse-race, she risks not only her marriage, but also her reputation. She wins at horse-racing, but we do not know how she will succeed in her life at this point. Entering the world of capitalism is a big step for Edna on her way to reach her independence (Kaplon n. pag.). Until this point she had been like any other woman in the nineteenth century: “the sympathetic and supportive bridge between the private realm of the home and the almost exclusively male world of the public marketplace” (Papke 10). Moreover, her relationship with Alcée is also masculine, because in this affair Edna tries masculine sexual freedom. In the end, however, she does not feel that this masculine lifestyle would fit her.

The most eccentric action in Janie’s case is that she gets married three times. She knows what she wants and she stubbornly follows her own theory about love. Just like Edna, she does not care about what people think or say about her. In my understanding just as Edna, Janie also finds masculine lifestyle appealing. She really enjoys when Tea Cake teaches her how to shoot, and she feels proud when she can do it better than Tea Cake himself. Guns are common symbols of masculinity and destruction. As Janie learns how to shoot, she enters men’s world which makes her feel strong and confident.

It may also count as eccentricity that both Edna and Janie find true love with a younger man. In Beauvoir’s view a man is irrevocably like what he has become, he is unchangeable (525). Only young men have something magical and promising in them.

Without doubt, a woman can find a partner among these young men who can increase her self-esteem and value her friendship (Beauvoir 526). Tea Cake is twelve years younger than Janie, and the age difference between Edna and Robert is two years. Since Tea Cake is much younger than Janie, people are worried that he will exploit her, take her money, and then leave. At the beginning of their marriage Tea Cake does steal money from Janie and he goes away for a night which scares Janie. But he returns and says that he never meant to leave her. Later they promise each other that they will share their opinions and experiences in the future. They move to Everglades and there they start to work together.

The question of equality between men and women in terms of relationships also needs to be addressed. If two free people live together, both of them will gain something from that relationship (Beauvoir 257). However, it is always the woman who bears the burdens of creating harmony at home. It is natural for men that the woman is the housekeeper, and that she alone is responsible for the upbringing of the children (Beauvoir 527). Jody sees Janie as his possession and “as a possession she is denied any self-defined goals and even the expression of her own opinions” (J. Jordan 109). She does not tell him her feelings for a long time, but one day when Jody starts to mock her with her age and figure in front of other people in the store, she bursts out. “Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout *me* lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (Hurston 106). With these words she destroys Jody’s “illusion of irresistible maleness” (Hurston 107), and she metaphorically kills Jody (J. Jordan 109). At this point, Janie loses her defencelessness; she starts to take an active role in their marriage by being proactive rather than passive. According to S. J. Walker, Tea Cake and Janie’s alliance is “a relationship between acknowledged equals” in which the two partners “share resources, work, decisions, dangers, and not merely the marriage bed” (qtd. in J. Jordan 111). Furthermore, both of them live on the money that they earn individually, that is Janie does not depend on Tea Cake financially.

Motherhood is another factor that affects the question of independence in *The Awakening*. Kaplon highlights that Edna is never completely able to forget about her being a mother (n. pag.). When Léonce goes to New York and her children go to their grandmother’s, “she talked immediately [to the doggie] about Etienne and Raoul” (Chopin 126). Even though she is excited about her freedom, she cannot help but thinking about her children. Then, after she confesses her love to Robert for the very first time, she goes to buy some sweets for her kids. She experiences love for the first time outside marriage, but still, she is thinking about her kids and reminding them of their mother’s love. Finally, after moving to her own house, she misses her children so much that she goes to Iberville to visit them even though, she is aware that she cannot spend much time with them simply because she is not a “mother-woman.” “All along the journey homeward, their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul” (Chopin 152).

“Edna is fighting against the societal and natural structures of motherhood that force her to be defined by her title as wife of Leonce Pontellier and mother of Raoul and Etienne Pontellier, instead of being her own, self-defined individual” (Kaplon n. pag.). Edna sees two paths in front of her: Adele Ratignolle’s and Mademoiselle Reisz’s. She realizes that both of these paths lack something, and she “begins to see that the life of freedom and individuality that she wants goes against both society and nature. The inevitability of her fate as a male-defined creature brings her to a state of despair, and she frees herself the only way she can, through suicide” (Kaplon n. pag.).

Papke states that “women [can] either become wives and mothers [. . .] or exiles” (39). In Edna’s world, women can either be defined by men, or live their life separately from society. Adele Ratignolle represents the male-defined wife and mother, she is one

of those “mother-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” (Chopin 51). Furthermore, Adele is constantly talking about her pregnancy, and Edna finds it inappropriate. Mrs. Ratignole is very proud of her being a mother, so in my opinion becoming a mother was her biggest aim in life.

The fact that Edna needs a role model, either the model of femininity or the model of the artist, is a typical characteristic of Bildungsroman. When she realizes that “the life of the mother-woman fails to satisfy her desire for an existence free from definition” (Kaplon n. pag.) she feels sorry for Adele. According to Kaplon, Adele represents all four attributes of True Womanhood which is defined by the Cult of Domesticity (n. pag.). The “four cardinal virtues [were] piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman” (Welter qtd. in Papke 11). “[Edna] was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium” (Chopin 107). Edna does not want to follow Mrs. Ratignolle’s example, yet she envies her. When she tries to explain Adele why, Adele cannot understand her search for identity, so Edna has to look for empathy somewhere else.

Mademoiselle Reisz represents “the exile in the novel” (Kaplon n. pag.). She avoids motherly duties and sexuality because she dedicates her life to music. Music is her passion. Mademoiselle Reisz says that “the artist must possess the courageous soul [. . .] the soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 115). She also believes that “only through a life of solitude and a disregard for society can an artist define herself and create real art” (Kaplon n. pag.). Mademoiselle Reisz is not exactly an attractive woman, and she does not seem to have a no romantic past, present, or future. Her outstanding characteristic is her extraordinary talent in playing the piano. She plays for herself, unlike Adele, who can play the piano as well, but she plays mainly for her children’s sake. Adele plays the piano to please her kids and her husband, and to entertain others at parties, while Mademoiselle Reisz plays for artistic reasons. She encourages Edna to become a painter. Edna enjoys Mademoiselle Reisz’s friendship, but “she finds the lonely artistic lifestyle to be imperfect due to its lack of sexuality. Edna cannot imagine herself living the asexual, artistic lifestyle of Mademoiselle Reisz, even if it might be a way to find the individuality that she is searching for” (Kaplon n. pag.). Papke highlights that for Edna “to be a mother-woman is to abjure self for the sake of others; to be an artist woman is to live celibate, to give all one’s love to expression” (82). Edna wants a physical relationship, thus she also rejects Mademoiselle Reisz as a role model.

It is intriguing that Edna desperately needs a model to follow. The reason behind this is that she is not self-assured enough to reach her aim, and if there is someone around her who has made it, that person can inspire her and give her strength. Since she does not find either Adele’s or Mademoiselle Reisz’s lifestyle appealing, she is left alone and, since she cannot fight the constant conflict in her, she commits suicide. Although she commits suicide, she gains her independence because she gives up her life, but she never gives up her true self. She is a woman who cannot fit into society, its morals and expectations, and she does not want to live a life in which she cannot be herself. Instead, she unites with the sea, the only one to understand her fully. She gains independence by giving herself to it. This way she does not belong to anyone anymore, only to herself.

There are some scholars who argue that Janie does not gain her independence by the end of the novel because she cannot really live without Tea Cake.

The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing,

commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. (Hurston 258-59)

In my opinion, she does gain independence, and her life gets only richer with the hundreds of memories about her life with Tea Cake. She can stand up for herself when Tea Cake wants to shoot her, and she chooses life by shooting him first. She can make decisions on her own and does not need a man to do it for her. Clearly, Tea Cake's death shocked her much more than Jody's, but I think she needs some time to be able to deal with the thought of losing Tea Cake, and then she can start to live a full life.

5. Conclusion

Both Edna and Janie are artists of life in a good sense and thus, serve as perfect examples to Mademoiselle Reisz's words: "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 brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (Chopin 115). They strongly believe that reaching independence is possible, they are brave enough to fight for it, and both of them gain it in the end.

Even though *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* were written about a hundred years ago, their moral is still valid now in the twenty-first century. Through the character of Edna and Janie, the novels show that if we are confident, persistent, and determined enough, we can reach our aims in life regardless of what sex, race, or class we belong to. The works also indicate that this process may be very hard and frightening, but once we reach our goal, we will realize that it was worth all the suffering and we must never give up fighting for ourselves.

6. Notes

¹ All quotes not available in English are my own translations.

² Section titles include quotes from various Nightwish lyrics.

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