

Name

Professor

Course

Date

Role of Women in Society: Perspectives from Kate Chopin and Ernest Hemingway

For the longest time, women had accepted the role of being the housewife that performs house duties while men went to work to provide for the family. However, different historical events have led to extensive changes in the perceptions of gender and gender roles. This might be attributed to various authors including Kate Chopin that decided to exclude themselves from societal perceptions. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, there is a high disapproval of the way gender operates in contemporary society. In various parts of the text, aspects such as motherly obligations, women's sexual activity, and marriage customs are challenged. Similarly, there seems to be a questioning of the society's default gender setting in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* that demonstrates that the gender labeling of male and female by society was not a very good concept and has been changed by historical events.

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, there is an inclination towards the concept of natural affection of a mother to a child instead of the constraints that are enabled by maternal commitment. This is apparent in the text:

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes and the sand out of his mouth, and go on playing. Tots as they were, they pulled together and stood their ground in childish battles with doubled fists and uplifted voices, which usually prevailed against the other mother-tots (Chopin 8).

Edna's children have the capacity to depend on themselves rather than look for their mother's help. This shows that the mother is biologically responsible instead of maternally accountable for the child's welfare and this opposes the conventional thinking that recommends maternal devotion. Moreover, this resistance against societal rules regarding gender roles is exhibited in the next paragraph, "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women 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" (9). It is important to realize that the author has put the words "mother" and "woman" apart with a hyphen. This implies that there might be a harmony between the two, but they are separate entities. Chopin presents the ideology that being a woman, mother, or both should be a matter of personal choice and not societal compulsion.

Another theme concerning the dynamics of gender in *The Awakening* is around offering gifts to a spouse. In the first pages, Leonce, Edna's husband is immediately characterized as a staunch supporter of consumerism as he goes outside to light a cigarette fixing "his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail's pace from the beach" (2). Leonce is the everyday consumer of household products, holding his cigar with pride, and letting the smoke diffuse into nature. When Edna comes back from the ocean "burnt beyond recognition," he has her rings and returns them to her, reminding her of the world's actualities: marriage and consumption (8).

The time Leonce is away from home and busy in New Orleans, he also reintroduces her to the glamorous consumerist society. He sends her a box "filled with friandises, with luscious and toothsome bits—the finest of fruits, pates, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance" (8). The women that live close to their home are attracted to the scene "selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all declared that Mr. Pontellier was

the best husband in the world” (8). The cosmopolitan world defines this as an indication of contentment in marriage, offering treats to women to inflate their worth, and this portrays women as beautiful dolls that accept their spouse’s consumerist inclinations. Edna opposes the consumerism concept as she does not eat the sweets in the box and excludes herself from the ladies leaving them to enjoy the treats. This is important because it is demonstrating that there is separation from traditional codes to new laws concerning the actions that are anticipated from each gender.

In *The Awakening*, there is a different attitude to the relationship between gender and strength. The author opposes the evolutionary concept that portrays men as superior to women. The moment Edna starts to understand how to swim, she is highly encouraged by her new abilities and begins to swim further into the waters. However, when Edna goes too far from the shore, “to her unaccustomed vision, the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome” (32). Although Edna is gripped with the fear of death which immobilizes her, she pushed her failing capacities and swam to the shore. At this point, she exhibits a resistance to Darwinian principles and the current society that is in favor of men:

Edna went at once to the bath-house, and she had put on her dry clothes and was ready to return home before the others had left the water. She started to walk away alone. They all called to her and shouted to her. She waved a dissenting hand, and went on, paying no further heed to their renewed cries which sought to detain her (Chopin 32).

Additionally, the women at the beach are surprised of Edna’s random character.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* also demonstrates the changing nature of gender in the modern world in the relationship between Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley. Hemingway explores how the industrial revolution led to the distortion of the gender roles of women and men. Furthermore, in *The Sun Also Rises*, the female and male characters are usually obstructed by the societal separation of gender, which is why they transcend the gender delineations of woman and man. Therefore, Hemingway tries to test out the likelihood that there are different genders in society.

The numerous masculine features that Brett possesses would make most men shied away from her in the 19th century, but in our current period, her traits would increase her sex appeal. Brett is exhibited as having short hair and preferring to wear men's clothes. Interestingly, most of the men are not insulted by her masculine outlook as apparent in the line:

Brett was damned good-looking. She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She started all that. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey (Hemingway 21).

Brett's masculine appearance makes Jake become deeply attracted to her curvature which does not seem to lessen her womanhood. Rather, this provides Jake with a stimulated cognizance of the womanhood that Brett is attempting to ignore. In a way, changed gender roles maintain the concept of the gender binary. A New York Times article revealed that it is essential that society accepts gender identity as a complex phenomenon that comprises social influence, genes, and hormone. However, the article supports that it is hard to modify the biological restrictions on the ability to reconstruct the body and highlights the significance of comprehending these constraints (Friedman). Fundamentally, Jake is still able to observe Brett's female features irrespective of the efforts she puts into being manly. Perhaps the vital question is not the range of gender

identity but the extent that different methods to adjust natural features and behavior align with the gender that will give the individual the contentment they pursue.

Brett is not the typical 19th-century woman as she can always dominate her surroundings providing her with alternatives that women had not encountered. Her indulgence in casual sexual relationships seems to assert her independence. She does not feel sorry for her conduct when she reacts to Jake's allegations that she has several love partners and this is apparent in the discourse:

"You've made a new one there," I said to her.

"Don't talk about it. Poor chap. I never knew it till just now."

"Oh, well," I said. "I suppose you like to add them up."

"Don't talk like a fool."

"You do."

"Oh, well. What if I do?" (Hemingway 21)

Brett's behavior in this scenario increases the respect that Jake has for her since he is familiar with her masculine style of romance. Nevertheless, Brett's promiscuity goes against the anticipations that society has for her. In the Victorian Era, male impersonation and cross dressing were the recognized ways of crossing gender boundaries. There were only two ways a female break the gender restrictions: becoming a male impersonator that performs on stage or to cross-dress and look like a man, the latter being highly detested (Degórska 147). Although these approaches sprung from the concept of one sex wearing the clothes of the other, forced labor and imprisonment were the consequences of the latter (Degórska 147). The relationship between Brett and Jake is unusual since they cannot bear children. This is because Jake had war injuries and this made Jake perceive Brett as more of a sexual object. Consequently, the friendship

between the two is centered on the support that they give each other emotionally. As a result, it becomes hard for the two to accept the conventional ideals of society.

The gender changes and the resulting behavioral adjustments that Brett and Jake experience can be explained by the effect of the industrial revolution on sexual roles. The industrial revolution restructured the peasant populations in America and Western Europe into a modern industrial workforce (Barthel 1171). This historical event led to changes in the sex functions, reshaped family relations, enabled new forms of thought, created new identities and generated new types of social injustice. Additionally, it led to the birth of a new sexual framework exemplified by various forms of stratification, political disagreement, and sexual entities (Barthel 1172).

The Sun Also Rises and *The Awakening* provide the idea that the gender and sex roles placed by society should continually be assessed. Both texts reveal that there is a relationship between societal changes and individual adjustments as seen through the characters. Kate Chopin suggests that no woman should never be entrapped by the demands of society while Ernest Hemingway reveals the underlying causes behind the current reversal of gender roles in modern society. Nonetheless, the inescapable fact is that society will always change and the people will always keep up with the resultant adjustments.

Works Cited

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