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Subversion of Virtuousness, Conjugal Duty, Guilt and Bad Sex in Kate Chopin's "The Storm"

The "passionless woman", in relation to the 19th century standards of acceptable womanhood is categorized by a lack of sensuality, desire, and sexual drive, during which "a new system of gender relations emerged in the nineteenth century in which middle-class women lost their association with lust and were instead invested in the quality of innate purity" (D'Emilio and Freedman, 56). Kate Chopin's "The Storm" directly tackles this, effectively turning it onto its head, by offering the narrative of a woman whose sensuality is exhibited and matched for the first time in her life in an extramarital sexual encounter. With its feminist critique of the established 19th century sex-gender system of repression, I posit that Chopin's "The Storm" successfully decenters the "passionless woman" structure through its undermining of virtuousness and conjugal/womanly duties, the thematic and textual emphasis on pleasurable and female-specific climax, the endorsement of a guiltless aftermath and resolution, and its rejection of biological-essentialist notions concerning "desire-lacking" and "passive" women. This text opens up opportunity for Derridian "freeplay" to take form within the structure, thereby creating a rupture within the "passionless woman" norm and our conception of it by rendering mobile, fluid, and flirtatious the unyielding austerity of the transcendental signified -- sanctimonious, sexless women. The apparent "dormancy" of women's sexual desires was thought by nineteenth century "moralists" to be "awakened, perhaps, by their husbands" -- already stripping the overarching sex-gender structure of limited sexual understanding/activity of mobility in its implication that a woman could only be pleased by her husband, nothing more. (D'Emilio and

Freedman, 70). Even the scientific literature argued this. Chopin's literature, however, attests to a different truth altogether, with protagonist Calixta effectively reclaiming her sexual intensity, womanhood and subsequently, her identity in her momentous affair. The belief that the woman was endowed with a natural purity in opposition to her male counterpart pervaded nineteenth century society, in which moral wrongdoing on the part of the woman was not even conceivable, let alone punishable -- pre-nineteenth century moral transgress in the form of sexual impurity was rectifiable with repentance, but in the nineteenth century, however, "...because woman allegedly occupied a higher moral plane than men, her fall was so great that it tainted her for life" (D'Emilio and Freedman, 70). Virtue was attributed to the woman who needed protection, baseness to the man who needed saving -- and thus, the notion of the "passionless woman" was born. The text's purposeful articulation of gendered interaction lies in Calixta's departing from virtuousness altogether, resulting in what Derrida would refer to as "when the structurality of structure had [begun] to be thought" (916). In understanding the course of events in the story, it would be prudent to first point to the approaching storm, with "...sinister intention from the west" (Chopin, 557). We come to realize that the storm functions as a threatening symbolic manifestation of what would come to be the sexual act between Calixta and Alcee -- but dually as a rupture in the transcendental signified -- or center -- of the overarching structure of a very specific expectation for women. The structure is restrictive, especially if it is totalized -- allowing little room for mobility and interpretation -- and stepping outside its confines would presuppose deviance and promise punishment. Nevertheless, whatever is transcendently signified -- in this case, the sexual passivity of women -- is logocentric and of the essence, positioning the oppressive as fact. The virtuousness of the woman naturally would place

restrictions on their actions -- of course adultery is BAD, but having so much as an inkling of sexual desire is impermissible too, and it is in this manner that the structure is in "full presence". But with Calixta's eyes "that unconsciously betrayed a sensuous desire" (559), the incantation is complete. "Betrayal" is the appropriate word to use, considering the unacceptability of her desires within the episteme. Her passionlessness is immediately subverted and transformed into something that is greater than herself altogether, decentering a status quo she is probably only vaguely aware of. The text undermines virtuousness through its consistently positive tonality and plot structure. The fact that happiness is achieved by everyone in the story in all its resolute glory is telling, because, after all, impiety need not imply punishment. The worried-sick hometender that once was metamorphoses into a tender wife and mother, BECAUSE of her brief abandonment of religious rigidity and "frozen-overedness" (which Anne Koedt would take issue with given Calixta's never being pleased), effectively condemning the implied "virtue-equals-passionlessness" center of expected womanly behavior at the time. Even "conjugal duties" are brought into question post-rupture -- with Clarisse Laballire's feeling relieved at the idea of staying an extra month, granting her the serendipitous restoration of her maiden days -- "Devoted as she was to her husband, their intimate conjugal life was something which she was more than willing to forego for a while" (561). This comes as a surprise to the average reader who is inundated with heteronormative ideals of the value of marriage -- cue ethical dilemma, or, in this case, more rupture: shouldn't we want to please our respective partners in the best way we know how? Isn't pair-bonding good and natural? How can you be glad and suspicion-free at the thought of being given "space"? As a woman? We are frustrated, unable to shake the cognitive dissonance -- "From then on it [is] probably necessary to begin to

think that there was no center, that the center would not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center ha[s] no natural locus...” (Derrida, 916). But the text creates this effect with deliberation, problematizing the idea of the fully-naturalized system of perceived passivity in women, whose “only” desires consist in the home, the family, and the pleasure of husband. The rupture, however, eschews the desire for social change -- for life continues as usual. But this does not pose a threat to the institution of marriage after all. It merely critiques it, in a manner as healthy as the familial relationships would come to be following the act.

The very presence of female orgasm within the text is revolutionary. Expectation governed the necessity (or lack thereof) of orgasm for women, given that men were providers and soothers and were not necessarily expected to help their spouses achieve climax. The text recognizes this reality through its focus on the female orgasm, specifically Calixta’s -- “Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the world” (559-560). It is implied here that Calixta has achieved orgasm for the first time, despite her years of being married. Calixta is sexually attracted to this man, and it is determined that they have a history “Do you remember-- in Assumption, Calixta?” (559). Nevertheless, perhaps the reason she is able to achieve orgasm is because of the mental stimulation she received through being attracted to Alcee. Anne Koedt articulates this phenomenon in “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” -- “Aside from physical stimulation, which is the common cause of orgasm for most people, there is also stimulation through primarily mental processes” (1). Additionally, Alcee is not just thrusting away furiously, ignoring her experience altogether -- rather, there is foreplay and touch involved; the *écriture féminine* is invoked through gentle language and the ekstasis associated

with female climax. Calixta's flesh is compared to a "creamy lily", her passion to a "white flame", her mouth to a "fountain of delight" (560) -- diction that is utterly beautiful and deliberate in its presentation of the artistically and exclusively feminine experience of orgasm. Female-centric orgasms, according to Koedt, have been subject to disregard for much of history due to the underlying patriarchal power structures assuming control over women's bodies to "keep them from straying", the preference for vaginal intercourse (which is un conducive to female orgasm), the fear of male expendability in the woman's looking to other sources of pleasure, and prioritization of male egos and interests over women's own interests. Nevertheless, the textual emphasis on Calixta's orgasm rests on her ability to create a disruption in the passionate versus passionless woman dichotomy -- effectively deconstructing it by pointing to the fact that no such dichotomy even exists because nearly all women are passionate and sexually charged when given the freedom to be. The other reason why such a distinction does not exist is because of the norm of sexual passivity that governed the woman's being-in-the-world -- she could not act otherwise, materially, for fear of punishment. Passionlessness could also in some ways be equated to the "frigidity" of women, which includes an incapacity to achieve vaginal orgasm -- and the psychologization and pathologization of an anatomical miscommunication, where men were just not "delivering" is challenged as well: "Rather than tracing female frigidity to the false assumptions about female anatomy, our 'experts' have declared frigidity a psychological problem of women" (Koedt, 1). Furthermore, Calixta's orgasm denotes the most prominent event of the operation of freeplay within the text -- it is precisely here where the the center of "womanly passionlessness" is made completely null, and the structure is forced to fall apart, with the utterance of a few sensuous words and the reciprocity of

raunchiness, rendering the structure fluid and movable, “when language invade[s] the universal problematic, and everything becomes discourse” (916). Something had to have existed within this structure to render it vulnerable to collapse -- or else it would have been totalized completely. Perhaps the very interaction with Alcee, the exchanging of words and his (linguistic) capacity for knowing that a sensuous desire could be reciprocated by a female love interest was what led to the decentering of the transcendental signified through one way or another. After all, his receptiveness is what deems him separate from Bobinôt, Calixta’s husband -- who is regarded as being not so bright. Everything becomes discourse indeed, and text utilizes “discourse” to dispel this no longer working belief in structural truth in all its (wrong) conviction.

Biologically-essentialist modes of thinking would dictate that passion is not something that is inherent to the virtuous, God-fearing, emotionally-and-intimately concerned woman. Man, however -- as we come to understand him time and time again through a fixed grand narrative of human and gendered existence -- is highly sexual, aggressive, and willing to copulate with anything due to fully-naturalized myth biological predisposition. The story suggests otherwise, pointing out the inherent fallaciousness with this conception of the world given Calixta’s being full of passion, whose “full figure” retained a certain “vivacity”, and whose “hair kinked more stubbornly than ever...” (558). This erotically-charged language helps the reader visualize her lustful inclinations, thereby dismantling the nineteenth-century sex-gender structure of an essentialist quality. Judith Butler in “Gender Trouble” addresses the gender and sex constructions dictating how exactly a sexed being ought to behave and deconstructs their ontological reality, arguing that they are, indeed, both constructions. Her discussion of “gender performativity”, which is the involuntary mimicry of gender conventions in a repetitive fashion which

subsequently shapes conceptions of gender and sex, is applicable to the story in that this performativity is challenged with agency and volition. Gender performativity -- which cradles the notion of passionlessness on behalf of the woman and assertive sexuality on behalf of the man -- undergoes a reversal within the contents of the text, when Calixta is certainly construed to be “passionate” by the sensitive and “love-making” Alcee -- “If she was not an immaculate dove in those days, she was still inviolate; a passionate creature whose very defenselessness had made her defense” (559). The gendered and sexed social order is not rooted in any kind of biological or natural reality:

“Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are **fabrications** manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, 2497).

Calixta, therefore, makes the autonomous decision to assume responsibility for herself and her being hailed as a lower-class, married woman by dictating the limits of her sexed and gendered freedoms when engaging in passionate intercourse with a married, upper-class man. Thusly, the relic of “passionless womanhood” is negated once more with her morality and identity assuming a mutable quality, of which she is the master. Deconstruction as a school of thought espouses the idea of a shifting identity that we are in control of. Instead of subscribing to imposed moralism and other purported modes of “correct being” without question, reclaiming agency in the determination of identity is an imperative we ought to familiarize ourselves with. If gender really is a social construction, there is no correct way of being -- “...there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts

of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction” (Butler, 1990). We are bricoleurs, according to Derrida -- the builders of our own moral and personal identities. Bricolage is useful to us -- we use a variety of tools at hand -- old tools -- borrowing from different kinds of structures, across disciplines -- use them creatively in constructing a truthless conception of the world, where concepts and words are intertwined, from which language is inseparable; exposing its limits, abandoning it if necessary. Thus, the “ruined” or “less coherent heritage” (920) may allude to our discarding of old, non-functioning ideas in order to depart from established, lofty, and often incorrect assertions of “truth”, and our borrowing of functional ideas to piece together a holistic and relative conception of existence.

Derrida’s recommendation to us in looking at the past is grounded in Nietzschean affirmation and freeplay, which involves -- “...the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation...” (925). Instead of catastrophizing, lamenting, and reveling in nostalgia in the Rousseauist mode, the decentering of a structure must not be viewed as a loss, but rather a substitution, in the most optimistic of ways. Nevertheless, the text is of the same sentiment. Calixta laughs, the text laughs, everyone laughs. There is no need for impunity -- “So the storm passed and every one was happy” (561). The structure has been destabilized, but life resumes as usual. Why? Well, the way I take it, this is exactly the intention of the text -- we can sit around and mope, awaiting moral rectitude, souring everyone’s moods with our own moral highness -- or, we can laugh about it, not taking ourselves too seriously, even though our worlds may be shattered (ruptured) from the ground up. As Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*:

It would be backsliding for us, with our susceptible integrity, to lapse entirely into morality, and actually become virtuous monsters and scarecrows, on account of the over-strict requirements which we here lay down for ourselves. We ought also to be able to stand above

morality, and not only stand with the painful stiffness of one who every moment fears to slip and fall, but we should also be able to soar and play above it! (Nietzsche, 107).

The very fact that moral rectitude is not delivered speaks volumes about and satirizes literature, which has a tendency of taking itself far too seriously, because it is "...linked to notions of the sacred, to a sense of hushed respect" (Bennett and Royle, 94). But uptight literature is incapable of producing structural collapse. Instead, it upholds it with the same, static graveness with which it "lets the center go". The "positive finality" with which the text ends is indicative of this collapse. Guilt is left at the door, and sexual freedom for women is regarded as a positive.

However, it is important to note that the text does not condone adultery, nor does it condemn the institution of marriage -- rather, an incorrect norm about passionless women is taken, set into motion, removed from its truth-bearing vehicle and disassembled, allowing the vehicle to move about freely. In a way, this deconstruction is absurd to us -- we cannot fathom its disgruntling manifestation in the bleak *illusion* of reality. Viewing it through the lens of modernity, we are different and not -- adultery is still a moral wrong, we still expect women to behave and men to romp, we still revere the institution of marriage (though less), *patriarchy and the medicalization of bodies as a structure* in the twenty-first century reigns supreme -- but we can glean from "The Storm" what we will about the needlessness of moralization and the inherent violence we do to women when we attribute a "natural" grand narrative of sexed and gendered functioning to them. We are forced to reconsider our identities, even if for a split second -- "In the engulfment of laughter, we lose a sense of who or what we are...Every pretension to mastery or superiority collapses and dissolves" (Bennett and Royle, 101). And, we are forced to get off our moral high horses and rejoice -- the system has been toppled! What do? Have a laugh, of course.

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