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Mr. Kotlarczyk

Idea of the Individual

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Crane and Chopin: Ideas of Transformation

Though Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* are largely considered unrelated novels, they share one major idea: that of the failure of transformation. This is depicted in the respective evolutions of Crane's Henry Fleming and Chopin's Edna Pontellier, each of whom suffers a loss of identity in their respective awakenings. This idea is borne not out of imagination, but rather, the experiences of the authors themselves. Crane created Fleming to satirize his post-war world, while Chopin invented Edna to do the same in her sexually repressive society. Through the unsuccessful evolutions of their protagonists, these authors portray the ultimate impossibility in transcending the boundaries of their respective societies.

Crane portrays Henry's transformation into a veteran in a manner that lends itself to suspicion, which starkly deviates from the style of rest of the book. Often acclaimed as an avid Naturalist, Crane fills his novel with gory descriptions and emphasizes nature's indifference to man: "the line encountered the body of a dead soldier . . . it was as if fate had betrayed the soldier" (Crane 22). However, in the final passage, he gives an uplifting and pleasant description of nature, as Henry reflects on his transformation: "the youth smiled, for he saw that the world was a world for him" (Crane 109). Even more perplexing for the reader is the profundity of a transformation that took place over the course of just one day; how can anyone overcome the "red sickness of battle" (Crane 109) so quickly? This enigma leads to the theory that Crane

employed irony in his ending to make a deeper point about the nature of transformation itself. By placing such a blatantly positivist change towards the end of a text that is founded so deeply in Naturalism, Crane satirizes his opposition and hints that Henry's change may not have been positive at all. This is supported by Henry's extremely descriptive introspection, which seems rather delusory and self-assuring: "Yet he gradually mustered force to put the sin at a distance . . . with this conviction came a store of assurance" (Crane 109). This interpretation suggests that Henry experiences a loss of identity; the pressures of his warring society force upon him euphoric and triumphant feelings. Crane's ironic ending implies that these feelings are not originally Henry's, but rather his natural response to the horrors of war that he encounters throughout the novel. Crane uses the example of Henry to assert the post-bellum sentiment that war not only transforms rambunctious soldiers into responsible veterans, but also has a negative impact on the lives of many, both physically and mentally.

This brings us to Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Chopin's *The Awakening*. Although she evolves profoundly throughout the novel, her final transformation is ultimately fruitless and she, like Henry, undergoes a loss of identity. Edna begins in a state of relative happiness, but her growing dissatisfaction becomes more evident as the early chapters progress: "An indescribable oppression . . . filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (Chopin 8). As the novel continues, Edna pushes more and more forcefully for sexual and artistic expression through her encounters with Robert and Mademoiselle Reisz. Robert serves as the outlet for Edna's repressed sexual desires and emotional needs, which she cannot fulfill with her husband: "She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion . . . colored her affection" (Chopin 18). Mademoiselle Reisz also heavily influenced on Edna's early transformation, inspiring her with the previously unknown exhilaration of artistic expression: "The very first note which

Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent keen tremors down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column" (Chopin 26).

After rebelling and testing the limits of her societal constraints for the entire book, Edna is finally given the chance to realize her fantasies and run away with Robert towards the end. She meets him by chance at a garden café and takes him back to her new house, acknowledging, "I love you . . . it was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream" (Chopin 103). This enables her to finally put her husband in the past and propose a new life with Robert. However, possibly on an unconscious level, Robert still fears the societal repercussions that a committed affair with "Mrs. Pontellier" would bring about for him. When she laughingly boasts that she is "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions" (Chopin 102), his "face grew white" (Chopin 102). The incredible fear that Robert has for these repercussions overcomes his passionate love for Edna, and it causes him to abandon her at a critical juncture in her transformation. With her battle against the male-dominated society lost, Edna ultimately decides to make one final swim, without return.

But the question remains, was this action meant as a submission to societal convention or as the ultimate act of rebellion? One can argue that by giving up her life instead of her "self" Edna truly rejects the norms of society and liberates herself. She ensures that her final actions are a result of her own will and are not determined by those who were for so long "in control" of her life. However, it seems equally likely that Edna's suicide is an act of surrender. She cannot resign herself to living a life of solitude like Mademoiselle Reisz, and takes the path of death to avoid it. Both assertions give rise to a situation similar to that in the *Red Badge of Courage*: a loss of individuality. Let us assume that Edna's suicide is indeed meant as an act of surrender and that it represents the ultimate folly of her evolution. This clearly indicates a loss of

individuality; she fails in securing self-expression and acknowledges the chains of society that keep her dreams forever out of sight. This conclusion applies even with the completely opposite premise that Edna's suicide is an act of liberation from the shackles of convention. If she truly wanted to take a stand for her beliefs, she would have made them public; committing suicide is arguably a private triumph, but one that is unrecognized by others. Regardless of one's interpretation of the novel, it is clear that to a large degree, society *does* triumph over Edna's desire for expression. This results in the surrender of herself, on both physical and metaphysical levels.

In their respective works, though through wholly different means, Crane and Chopin attack the optimistic notions of enlightenment and awakening, deeming them unrealistic as a result of vast societal pressures. In each of the novels, the protagonist experiences a loss of individuality and identity; one through delusions of transformation, and one through surrender to an omnipotent and oppressive society. This pessimistic view of transformation and evolution has its roots in the real life societies out of which the authors themselves are born.

Crane, an author of the late 19th century, was a strong believer in the prevalent ideas of naturalism and realism, and usually tried to "experience" the subject of his book before writing it. In the case of the *Red Badge of Courage*, however, Crane does not try to depict events as realistically as possible. Rather, he uses his novel to recreate and satirize notions of war in America after the Civil War. He takes notice of the seeming conflict between realism and notions that war could transform a boy into a veteran, finding it ridiculous. Is it realistic that a profound transformation can take place in the midst of horrendous warfare? According to Crane, of course not! To reconcile this contrast, Crane invents Henry Fleming, who evolves from the stereotypical

coward into the heroic veteran after only one day of war. With the use of irony, Crane conveys the unrealistic nature of transformation and its effects on identity and individuality.

Chopin, who lived predominantly in the 19th century, grew up in the conservative and often traditionally oppressive Midwest. However, she was raised for the most part by women, and grew up with strong beliefs regarding freedom, sexual awareness, and self-expression, which she communicates in the form of novels. She wrote *The Awakening*, arguably her most famous novel, at the turn of the 19th century. Although it is an outlet for many of her beliefs regarding sexual oppression, it faced large amounts of criticism at the time. Chopin portrays her ideas in an interesting manner; although she advocates the liberation of women, she does so by writing a novel that emphasizes the ultimate failure of such a separation from social norms. In this way, she laments that the difficulty of breaking the shackles of society ultimately leads women to surrender their drive for individuality, which is represented by Edna's suicide.

Although they came from largely different backgrounds, Stephen Crane and Kate Chopin shared a disbelief in the success of profound transformation or evolution. To a large degree, they use Henry Fleming and Edna Pontellier as the vehicles for publicizing this idea. As each of the stories unfolds, the effect of societal constraints becomes clear; the respective awakenings of the protagonists end tragically in the surrender of their individuality. Ultimately, this is what the two novels have in common: the emphasis on the pessimistic view that man and woman alike cannot transcend the boundaries of their societies.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*, Class Handout

Crane, Stephen. *The Red Badge of Courage*, Class Handout