An Examination of the Emerging Feminist Voice in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and Kate Chopin's The Awakening

Fran Shultz
Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/980

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EMERGING FEMINIST VOICE IN
ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND
KATE CHOPIN’s *THE AWAKENING*

by

FRAN SHULTZ

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

January 2011

College: College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department: English

Dean of CHSS, Dr. Marietta Morrissey

Date

Thesis Sponsor, Dr. Laura Nicosia

Committee Member, Dr. Riba Jacobs

Committee Member, Dr. Dan Bronson

Department Chair, Dr. Dan Bronson
AN EXAMINATION OF THE EMERGING FEMINIST VOICE IN
ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD AND
KATE CHOPIN’S THE AWAKENING

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of Masters of Arts

By
FRAN SHULTZ
Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ
2010
ABSTRACT: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EMERGING FEMINIST VOICE IN
ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD AND KATE
CHOPIN’s THE AWAKENING by Fran Shultz

Zora Neale Hurston and Kate Chopin lived and wrote in different eras, but each
woman was ahead of her time in terms of her depiction of women’s roles and
responsibilities in the patriarchal societies in which she lived. Due to the similarities in
the feminist themes depicted by the female protagonists in Hurston’s Their Eyes Were
Watching God and Chopin’s The Awakening, this paper will trace the beginnings of a
distinctly feminist voice emerging through these two works. Hurston’s portrayal of
Janie’s journey to achieve autonomy represents the empowerment of the nascent African-
American female voice within the period of the early 20th century. Similarly, Chopin’s
Edna, a white Southern woman in the late 19th century, portrays the journey from
repression to self-expression in New Orleans upper-crust Creole society.

Both authors chart a course of self-discovery and growth in their female
protagonists that lays a foundation for future feminist writers. Ironically, even though
Hurston and Chopin received harsh criticism after publishing these two novels and were
essentially forgotten by the literary world for decades, today they are credited with
contributing significantly to American feminist writing in the 19th and 20th centuries.
However, neither Hurston nor Chopin can be read as representing all Southern women or
even all Southern black and white women. Instead, they give voice to two very different
women, from opposite sides of the segregated South, who both evolve from subservient,
silenced, watchers of life into full participants by claiming their intellectual, emotional,
and sexual powers of expression. Despite being from different races and geographical
locations, with vastly different life experiences, Hurston and Chopin both characterize the "emergence of feminist literary study" in the 1970s and provide a "female alternative to the male-dominated" literary canon (Robinson 157).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION...........................................................................................................1

CULTURAL AND LITERARY INFLUENCES SURROUNDING
*THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*..........................................................................6

THE CRITICAL JOURNEY OF
*THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*.......................................................................18

THE METAPHOR OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN
AS THE “MULE OF THE WORLD”..............................................................................23

NATURE AS METAPHOR AND THE NATURE OF LOVE..............................................37

THE FEMINIST LINK BETWEEN HURSTON AND CHOPIN........................................53

CULTURAL INFLUENCES AND THE LITERARY RESPONSE
TO *THE AWAKENING*................................................................................................57

SEX AND “THE WOMAN QUESTION”........................................................................62

ADELE RATIGNOLLE – THE CONSUMMATE MOTHER-WOMAN
OR AN EARLY FEMINIST?.........................................................................................67

EDNA PONTELLIER: AWAKENING OF A
FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS..................................................................................74

THE FEMALE ARTIST AND EMERGING FEMINISM.................................................83

AN AWAKENING IN THE WATER..............................................................................86

THE CONSEQUENCES OF FREEDOM.........................................................................91

CONCLUSION.............................................................................................................93

WORKS CITED..........................................................................................................99

APPENDIX................................................................................................................108

ADDITIONAL SOURCES........................................................................................109
AN EXAMINATION OF THE EMERGING FEMINIST VOICE IN
ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND KATE
CHOPIN’s *THE AWAKENING*

**Introduction**

Although Zora Neale Hurston and Kate Chopin lived and wrote in different eras and were of different racial and socio-economic backgrounds, they share much in common. Hurston wrote primarily during the 1920s and 1930s, whereas Chopin wrote during the 1880s and 1890s. However, as female authors writing from a female perspective, their lives and work bore many similarities. Each woman was ahead of her time in terms of her depiction of women’s roles and responsibilities in the patriarchal society in which she lived. This begs the question, can Hurston and Chopin be defined as “feminist” authors since their writings were not associated with any organized women’s movement and pre-dates the loose organization of women’s groups into what is today collectively known as the feminist movement? The Encyclopedia Britannica defines feminism as “the belief in the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes” which is “manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (Brunell & Burkett Britannica.com).

Over time, the usage of the term “feminist” has evolved and now evokes several connotations. Perhaps one of the most relevant definitions of feminist literary scholarship as it applies to the commonality found in the writing of Hurston and Chopin appears in Linda McDowell’s *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*:

The key aim of feminist scholarship in general is to demonstrate the construction and significance of sexual differentiation as a key organizing
principle and axis of social power, as well as a crucial part of the 
constitution of subjectivity, of an individual's sense of their self-identity 
as a sexed and gendered person. Feminism stands for a commitment to 
the full appreciation of what women inscribe, articulate, and image in 
cultural forms: interventions in the field of meaning and identity from the 
place called "woman" or the "feminine." But feminism does not imply a 
united field of theory, political position, or perspective. Feminism has 
been identified with a women's movement and it is important historically 
that it should be so. (8)

Whether or not it was their aim, both Hurston and Chopin address issues, directly or 
indirectly, usually ascribed to the feminist movement: women's rights and equality under 
the law, social power, autonomy, self-identity, artistic expression, the power of choice, 
and freedom from patriarchal dominance in the public and private sphere. It is also 
important to remember that Hurston and Chopin did not enjoy the rights and privileges of 
the contemporary 21st century woman. Therefore, their protagonists, Janie and Edna, 
reflect the struggle for the most basic of women's rights: the right to choose their own 
paths in life. As such, their actions should not be viewed through the lens of modern 
feminist sensibilities, but with consideration for the social limitations of the times in 
which the authors lived.

Regardless of whether or not the term "feminist" can be applied to Hurston and 
Chopin as women and authors, it is nevertheless possible to trace the beginnings of a 
distinctly feminist voice emerging through their works which would bring them critical 
notoriety, both positive and negative, in their time. Unfortunately, the controversy
surrounding the publication of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Chopin’s *The Awakening* did not advance their careers, but rather led to a fallow period and obscurity that left their works essentially unread until the feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Robinson 156-7). Ironically, even though both authors were essentially forgotten by the literary world after the publishing of their signature novels, years after their deaths several scholars credit them with having contributed significantly to American feminist writings in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

In his preface to *Zora Neale Hurston, Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. considers Hurston’s work as “central to the canon of African-American and Women’s Literature” noting that “Hurston is the most widely taught black woman writer in the canon of American literature” (ix, xii). Gates also states in the afterword to the 1990 edition that *Their Eyes* is a “bold feminist novel” and that “Hurston became a metaphor for the black woman writer’s search for a tradition” (185). He asserts that the “craft of Alice Walker, Gayle Jones, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade Bambara bears, in markedly different ways, strong affinities with Hurston’s” (Gates 186). Similarly, *The Awakening* has become highly regarded and widely read as a feminist text. Lillian S. Robinson, in “Treason Our Text, Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon,” associates Chopin with Hurston as undervalued women writers whose rediscovery in the 1970s characterized the early feminist literary canon:

> True equity can be attained only by opening up the canon to a much larger number of female voices. Initially, however, the demand for wider representation of female authors is substantiated by an extraordinary effort of intellectual appropriation. The emergence of feminist literary study has
been characterized, at the base, by scholarship devoted to the discovery, republication, and appraisal of the "lost" or undervalued writers and their work. From Rebecca Harding Davis and Kate Chopin through Zora Neale Hurston and Mina Loy to Meridel LeSueur and Rebecca West, reputations have been reborn or remade and a female countercanon has come into being out of components that were largely unavailable even a dozen years ago. (157)

An example of the excitement of this period of discovery is described by Emily Toth in the preface to her biography of Chopin. She describes the fervor with which *The Awakening* was received by feminist scholars in the 1970s: "I was part of a wave of enthusiasm... *The Awakening* was on its way to becoming a classic. Women readers were stunned by the book; students were enthralled; professors embraced it and dissected it" (Toth 9). The slim novel soon became part of the body of feminist writing with dozens of dissertations and essays devoted to it (Toth 9).

In 1985, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English*, edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, was published. Both Hurston and Chopin are included in this anthology, marking their official entry into the canon of English and American female authors. Perhaps one reason the writings of Hurston and Chopin resonates so strongly today is because both authors charted a course of self-discovery and growth in their female protagonists that set the stage for future feminist writing in the decades to follow. Though Hurston's heroine is an African-American and Chopin's is white, they both represent the struggles of women to break free from the male-dominated, patriarchal social order that conspired to silence the feminist voice.
Hurston’s portrayal of her protagonist Janie’s journey to achieve autonomy represents the empowerment of the nascent African-American female voice within the period of the early 20th century during the Harlem Renaissance. Through Janie, Hurston portrays an individual woman in search of self in a very particular time and place in the South: the African-American community of Eatonville, Florida during the Depression of the 1930s. Since *Their Eyes* is written exclusively about a specific African-American community, it becomes problematic to represent Hurston as a feminist voice for all Southern women, or even for all African-American women. Similarly, in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edna, a white Southern woman in the late 19th century, portrays the journey from repression to self-expression in New Orleans upper-crust Creole society. But Chopin, like Hurston, cannot be read as representing all Southern women or all white women. Instead, they give voice to two very different women, from opposite sides of the segregated South, who both evolve from subservient, silenced, watchers of life into full participants by claiming their intellectual, emotional, and sexual powers of expression. In short, they dare to break with the conventions of society and choose for themselves the kind of lives they wish to live.

Janie’s desire to exercise her right to speak and be heard in a male dominated culture is echoed in Edna’s need to create her art and to live independently, free from society’s restrictions and judgments. Both women represent a characterization of personal rebellion against the respective patriarchal social customs that was considered radical, even shocking to reading audiences and critics of their day. Consequently, there seems to be a resonance between the two authors that speaks to the struggle of Southern women to create their own identities and live independently within the forces of the double standard.
that gave men power over women and essentially devalued them as second class citizens. Both Janie and Edna refuse to live within this system and it is through their words and actions that the feminist voice can be heard. In order to identify and recover the feminist echo reverberating in *Their Eyes* and *The Awakening*, it is first useful to examine each novel separately within the cultural influences of the day, before constructing a synthesis of the overarching feminist message in the two novels. This study aims to find a commonality of feminine expression between Hurston and Chopin that transcends race, culture, time, and that challenges the status quo in order for women to make their own choices and lead lives of dignity and equality in both the private and the public sphere.

**Cultural and Literary Influences Surrounding *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

An examination of Hurston’s life and work often presents more questions than answers. During her lifetime, Hurston resisted being labeled a member of any particular social or political movement. Writing in the early 20th century, she was first and foremost an individualist and as such was an advocate of equal rights for women, at least as far as it affected her work and relationships with other writers. But she was sometimes viewed as contradictory in her opinions about the social conditions of African-Americans. In her collected personal letters, *Zora Neale Hurston, A Life in Letters*, edited by Carla Kaplan, Hurston demonstrates her desire to be measured by her worth as a writer and not be limited to writing about racial issues:

Hurston’s letters remind us well of the racial divide that is our American dilemma, and how self-conscious she was about making sure it did not limit her work or her life...She claimed early on that she didn’t “know white psychology,” and as a result she
couldn’t write about certain experiences: “I see white people do things, but I cannot grasp why they do them.” Later, she wanted to break the “silly old rule about Negroes not writing about white people.” She staked out a conservative position on race that grew from her fierce pride in black institutions and her suspicion of any mask unless it was her own. “I tried to be natural and not pander to the folks who expect a clown and a villain in every Negro. Neither did I want to pander to those ‘race’ people among us who see nothing but perfection in all of us...Now as to segregation, I have no viewpoint on the subject particularly, other than a fierce desire for human justice. The rest is up to the individual.” (Kaplan Letters 5-6)

In Their Eyes, Hurston seems to skirt the issue of segregation by concentrating the story on Janie, who has only marginal interaction with the surrounding white community. However, Henry Louis Gates asserts that this is actually one of the strengths of the novel:

Hurston also succeeds where so many of her predecessors failed in shaping a language, and a point of view, that appears to be directed at her black readers, rather than pandering to an imagined white readership responsible for black social mobility or economic and political amelioration. Almost never do we feel Hurston’s hand on our shoulders as we read her text. Given the historical prominence that the propaganda function has necessarily been accorded in the black formal arts, this is no mean achievement. (Gates Hurston Critical Perspectives xiii)
Even though Hurston does not confront racism directly, there is evidence in *Their Eyes* that she is keenly aware of it, but chooses not to make it her main topic. For example, in Chapter 1, as Janie returns to Eatonville at sundown, the people on their front porches watch and talk about her as she passes. It reminds her of the legacy of slavery when blacks were “tongueless, earless, eyeless, conveniences…but now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human…they passed nations through their mouths” (*Their Eyes* 1-2). In this passage, Hurston is making a subtle social comment about the silencing of African-Americans during slavery. Hurston’s comment that she cannot grasp “white psychology,” but later claiming that there should not be any rule against her writing about white people is indicative of the double-consciousness, described by W. E. B. Du Bois, that African-Americans experienced in relation to the dominant white race: “The sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (*Their Eyes* 193).

Another example of Hurston’s oblique use of the omnipresent white culture is in Chapter 2 when Janie discovers as a child that she is not white. Her grandmother, Nanny, worked for “quality white folks” and they lived in a small house behind the main house. Janie played with the four grandchildren of Nanny’s employer and was treated to the same privileges and punishments (*Their Eyes* 7). There had been no issue made among the children concerning Janie’s tawny skin color. For this reason she felt as if she was the same as the other children, perhaps just a little more tan. However, one day a photographer took a picture of all of the children together: “Ah was wid dem white chillum so much till Ah didn’t know Ah wuzn’t white till Ah was around six years old…we looked de picture and everybody got point out, there wasn’t nobody left except a
dark little girl with long hair, but Ah couldn’t recognize dat chile as me. So Ah ask, ‘where is me? Ah don’t see me’” (Their Eyes 8-9). Janie looks at the photograph a long time before she says: “Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!” (Their Eyes 9). The stark contrast of the black and white photo emphasized the darker color of Janie’s skin and hair in comparison to the white children. For Janie, this is her first visual verification that she is different. There isn’t any further mention of this incident, yet Hurston has managed to instill a sense of Janie’s complex psychology and her driving need for an identity that is not defined by others. Hurston does not vilify the whites, nor does she vilify the blacks in Their Eyes. Ironically, Hurston does not have Janie live in a world of only black and white. Hurston seems dedicated first and foremost to telling the story through Janie’s eyes, in full color, including shades of gray.

As a result of Hurston’s apparent conflicting views on race issues, she often frustrated her peers during the Harlem Renaissance period for not taking a stronger position on segregation. After the publication of Their Eyes, Hurston was roundly criticized for her portrayal of African-American life by her colleagues, including Richard Wright, Alain Locke, and Sterling Brown (Hemenway 240-41). Alain Locke of Howard University, whose good opinion was necessary for success in Harlem Renaissance circles, only wrote a one paragraph review in Opportunity, stating that Hurston was guilty of “oversimplification,” that she failed to “come to grips” with important social conditions, and even though Hurston was “talented,” Their Eyes was “folklore fiction at best” (Kaplan 26). Though Hurston was hurt by the criticism of her male peers, she still maintained that her writing was not meant to be ideological. As one of the few female writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston had the added pressure of living up to the
expectations of her mostly male peers while selling books to the white Northern reading audiences, gaining new readership, and establishing herself as a serious writer and scholar (Hemenway 104-5). At the same time she was aware that her representation of African-American women was considered to be shocking in its frank portrayal of a woman living outside of the expected norms of social behavior. Hurston describes the restrictive nature of stereotypical cultural female roles as fitting "like a tight chemise," a situation familiar to most women of her day (Willis 115).

Hurston chronicles Janie's struggle to shed her ill-fitting role as a submissive, powerless woman to illustrate the need for women to become aware of the invisible threads that bind them to their status as second class citizens. As Susan Willis explains in "Wandering: Hurston's Search for Self and Method:" "Women wear their daily lives like a snug and intimate article of clothing, so familiar it's taken for granted. Very often only a significant transformation in situation or consciousness will bring women to scrutinize their daily surroundings and relationships" (115). For Janie, as for most women striving for autonomy, the process is a gradual one, prompted by a series of transformative situations. However, the path to self-actualization is not always linear, and Janie experiences missteps along the way, but eventually stays true to her course.

In Their Eyes, Hurston is perhaps attempting to free herself from the domination of writing for a white audience and the expectations of her African-American male colleagues, or is simply being true to her own experience in her natural surroundings where whites are an afterthought and racism is not the primary concern. Even though Hurston places Janie in the segregated South, a setting filled with socially sanctioned racism and sexism, Hurston uses these conditions merely as a springboard to advance
Janie’s journey from a mute sexual object to a self-reliant woman. To achieve this end, Hurston uses natural images and metaphors from her native Florida, while combining African-American local dialect with local folklore to represent her specific feminine coming-of-age story. Hurston explains her use of her Southern heritage as the foundation for her writing style in her autobiography, Dust Tracks on the Road: “I was a Southerner, and had the map of Dixie on my tongue...an average Southern child, white or black, is raised on simile and invective. What ought to happen to you is full of images and flavor. Since that stratum of the Southern population is not given to book-reading, they take their comparisons right out of the barnyard and the woods” (Willis 110). One of Hurston’s most prominent uses of natural imagery prevalent throughout the novel is the extended metaphor of the black woman as a working mule.

The first reference to the mule in Their Eyes is spoken by Janie’s grandmother, Nanny: “So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Hurston 14). The mule imagery functions as a metaphor on multiple levels. In addition to serving as a symbol of Janie’s silence and subordination, it also represents the black woman in her struggles for recognition within the social hierarchy. The use of the mule imagery allows Hurston’s text to “comment on numerous types of relationships based on an unequal distribution of power” (Haurykiewicz 47). In the social hierarchy, black women are on the bottom rung of the ladder, beneath everyone including black men. Nanny hopes that if Janie marries a man of property, Logan Killicks, Janie will have someone to provide for her and protect her from the worst offences of this inequitable social system. She doesn’t want Janie to
end up as some man's mule. Paradoxically, Nanny's desire to see Janie married to Logan is the first feminist voice heard in the novel. In Nanny's logic, if Janie can escape poverty and brutality through a good marriage, then Janie will at least have a small amount of independence by having some material comforts.

Hurston also equates Janie's life to nature in the first line of Chapter 2: "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (Their Eyes 8). Nanny also uses the image of a tree when she explains to Janie, "You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways" (Their Eyes 15). For Nanny, a tree without roots is unstable, just as people who don't know their heritage and don't have a place to call home are vulnerable and subject to victimization. Nanny wants Janie's tree, Janie's life, to have roots so that she can break the cycle of despair that Nanny has known as a black woman born into slavery. Hurston also uses tree imagery as a literary symbol to measure the growth of Janie's emerging feminine consciousness and the distance from her dreams to their fruition. In Janie's world, a tree is emblematic of the beauties and mysteries of life. It is under a pear tree that she experiences her first feelings of sexuality, and like a tree, Janie eventually blossoms into full womanhood.

Hurston uses the natural imagery of trees, storms, animals, and weather throughout Their Eyes which gives the novel a primal sensibility that is strongly linked to mother-earth and the forces of nature. This relationship between natural forces and feminism is one of the key components of ecofeminism, a term coined by French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne (d'Eaubonne 180). As Colleen Mack-Canty writes in "Third-Wave Feminism and the Need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality:"
Besides reclaiming the female body, ecofeminism specifically includes nonhuman nature in its theorizing, an inclusion that enables it to engage in a more thoroughgoing analysis of the nature/culture dualism than other feminisms. Ecofeminists see the nature/culture dualism and the dominant male model of humanity as leading not only to oppression of women, but also to the destruction of nature and to racism and social inequality. (154)

Hurston’s use of natural images not only echoes the ancient mythological reverence for Mother Earth, it also expresses the metaphysical relationship of the feminine to the earth in modern terms. Even though *Their Eyes* pre-dates the ecofeminist movement by almost sixty years, Hurston demonstrates a certain prescience of one of the directions the feminist movement would take in the late 20th century.

Another way that Hurston grounds the characters in *Their Eyes* close to their environment is her meticulous use of dialect influenced by her research in anthropology. Hurston wrote *Their Eyes* while she was on a Guggenheim Fellowship studying West Indian folklore in Haiti between 1936 and 1937 (*Their Eyes* Chronology 204). Hurston was a trained anthropologist who studied with Dr. Franz Boas at Barnard College in New York between 1926 and 1927 and became the first African-American woman to complete a Masters in Anthropology at Barnard (Kaplan *Letters* 49-50). Being the only African-American anthropologist who was collecting African-American folklore during the 1920s and 1930s, Hurston was in a unique position to be able to incorporate the African-American dialects and folktales she collected into *Their Eyes*. As Cheryl Wall explains in “Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words,” the fieldwork Hurston completed in the South, including her home state of Florida, provided much of the dialect and stories
Hurston used in *Their Eyes* and helped her appreciate her past intellectually. For Hurston, “no longer were her homefolk simply good storytellers, whose values were commendable, superstitions remarkable, and humor penetrating. Now they were part of cultural anthropology. The cultural relativity of anthropology freed Hurston from the need to defend her subjects’ alleged inferiority” (Wall 79). Even though Hurston was criticized for what seems to be a lack of conviction in promoting African-American interests, her “lifelong commitment to bringing African-American folklore to the public is devoted to demonstrating precisely the opposite” (Kaplan *Letters* 51). Hurston combined the analytical perspective she gained from her anthropological fieldwork with her intimate first-hand knowledge of life in the African-American communities in Florida to create the unique blend of dialect and Standard English used in *Their Eyes*. In this way, Hurston gives Janie a natural voice culled from the language of her people, which does not diminish Janie’s feminist voice, but enhances its authenticity. Hurston demonstrates that a strong woman’s voice can come from the working class poor as well as from the more educated classes. The struggle for women’s rights crosses all class lines.

Though Hurston wrote the dialogue in *Their Eyes* primarily in dialect, she chose to use Standard English for the poetic third person voice of the narrator. For example, in Chapter 2 as Nanny is chastising Janie for insolence, the narrator explains in Standard English:

She slapped the girl’s face violently, and forced her head back so that their eyes met in struggle. With her hand uplifted for the second blow she saw the huge tear that welled up from Janie’s heart and stood in each eye. She saw the terrible agony and the lips tightened down to hold back the cry
and desisted. Instead she brushed back the heavy hair from Janie’s face and stood there suffering and loving and weeping internally for both of them. (*Their Eyes* 13-14)

Then immediately in the next paragraph Nanny speaks to Janie in dialect to try to explain her actions:

> Come to yo’ Grandma, honey. Set in her lap lak yo’ use tuh. Yo’ Nanny wouldn’t harm a hair uh yo’ head. She don’t want nobody else to do it neither if she kin help it. Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. (*Their Eyes* 14)

Hurston’s use of dialect and Standard English gives the novel, and the character of Janie in particular, the dual-voiced, double identity previously described. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. sees this purposeful use of two distinct voices in *Their Eyes* as “her great achievement, a verbal analogue of her double experiences as a woman in a male-dominated world and as a black person in a non-black world” (*Gates Their Eyes* 193). In this way, Hurston’s writing is unique in its complexity and blending of the worlds of the rural south and her cosmopolitan northern education, just as Hurston’s life was a unique blend of these influences. Unfortunately, it would take several decades before Hurston’s style of writing and emerging feminist voice would be rediscovered and fully appreciated by a new generation of women writers.

Though Hurston’s books were out of print for many years, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and other African-American female writers looked to Hurston as a maternal
link to the beginnings of Black feminine consciousness from the post-slavery era to the post-Civil Rights movement (Brogan 185-86). After her rediscovery, Hurston was also embraced by white female readers and the larger feminist movement, becoming “the most widely taught black woman writer in the canon of American literature” (Gates Hurston xii). However, it is questionable whether or not Hurston would view her writings in the same way. Gates describes Hurston as a “questioning, independent, thoughtfully sensuous woman” who saw herself primarily as a storyteller, capturing the “timbres of spoken black voices in written form” (Gate Hurston xii). She was first and foremost a fiercely self-reliant, opinionated, passionate woman who chafed at the idea of being pigeon-holed into any particular mold (Kaplan Letters 40-45). Hurston wrote in one of her first published articles: “BUT I AM NOT [sic] tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood [sic] who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal...I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (Wall 78). Perhaps this is the true core of her feminist expression: the courage to write what is neither popular nor safe, or even sellable, but to write from the heart of one woman’s experience.

As an independent, out-spoken African-American woman, Hurston walked a fine line between being an anthropologist and a fiction writer as she continually shifted between the academic world and literary circles. Hurston was a prolific writer, with many talents, yet her most widely read novel is a thin volume that defies easy categorization (Wall 76-8). Is it a romance novel, a cultural study of African-Americans in the deep South, a loosely framed autobiography of Hurston’s life, or an early example of feminist
writing? Wall asserts that critical perspectives of Hurston’s work, inspired by the feminist movement, helped to “correct the distorted views” of Hurston by early critics who tended to dismiss *Their Eyes* as “quaint,” sometimes “charming” folklore (Wall 77). By December of 1979 at the MLA Convention in San Francisco, Hurston was widely read in academic circles and her status as an early feminist author was under discussion. Robert Stepto of Yale University raised the issue concerning “one of the most highly controversial and hotly contested aspects of the novel: whether or not Janie is able to achieve her voice in *Their Eyes*” (Washington *Their Eyes* xi). Alice Walker was also in attendance at this conference and as Mary Helen Washington explains, rebutted Stepto by “insisting passionately that women did not have to speak when men thought they should, that they would choose when and where they wish to speak, because while many women had found their own voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it” (Washington *Their Eyes* xii). Washington maintains that after a lively debate it became apparent that something important had happened: “Walker’s defense of Janie’s choice to be silent in crucial places in the novel turned out to be the earliest feminist reading of voice in *Their Eyes*” (Washington *Their Eyes* xii).

An example of when Janie chooses silence occurs with her second husband, Joe Starks. Janie seems to choose silence as a defense mechanism to avoid conflict and to keep the fights with Joe from escalating in order to protect herself. In Chapter 6, Janie rationalizes her silence to herself: “Ah hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard tuh git along” (*Their Eyes* 54). Another example of Janie’s choice to remain silent is after her third husband, Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods, slaps her in a moment of jealousy. He apologizes and the incident is not mentioned again (*Their
Eyes 140). From a feminist point of view, this scene is puzzling because their relationship is not marked by abuse in any other instance and Janie does not appear to feel fearful of Tea Cake. But the reader wonders why Janie doesn’t defend herself, at least verbally. Janie appears to revert to her previous need for silence as self-protection, a coping mechanism that she developed in her marriage to Joe.

However, what Walker may have been suggesting is that Janie makes calculated decisions, based on experience, that sometimes it is better to keep silent in order to speak another day. Since that MLA convention of 1979, Their Eyes has been categorized primarily as Feminist by critics. Consequently this has been the area where most research has been conducted over the past thirty-five years by scholars including Alice Walker, Mary Helen Washington, Cheryl Wall, and Carla Kaplan. Consequently, Hurston’s pioneering feminist spirit still lives on as new generations of readers discover Their Eyes Were Watching God.

The Critical Journey of Their Eyes Were Watching God

Hurston relied heavily on white patronage and educational grants for her means of support so that she could continue her education, research, and writing (Lucy Anne Hurston 20-1). Hurston wrote Their Eyes in seven weeks in Haiti from early November through December of 1936 while on a Guggenheim Fellowship to study West Indian folklore (Croft xix). She accomplished this demanding task while simultaneously gathering folk tales from the Maroons (descendants of escaped slaves) in Haiti (Kaplan Letters 168). There was much speculation by her early critics as to how Hurston managed to produce what has become her best known novel in such a short amount of time and
whether or not there was pre-planning involved or if the work was an inspiration of the moment (Hemenway 240-243). The novel is relatively short, consisting of twenty chapters in 184 pages, and was published in September of 1937 by the J. B. Lippincott Company, just nine months after Hurston completed the original draft. The original manuscript was handwritten, as Hurston lived in borderline poverty on her Guggenheim stipend and did not have access to a reliable typewriter (Lucy Anne Hurston 23).

Upon publication, Hurston was criticized for her work, which came under much public scrutiny, especially from her colleagues in the Harlem Renaissance movement. Author and critic Richard Wright, in his 1937 review for the *The New Republic*, was particularly harsh:

> The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is “quaint,” the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the “superior” race. (76)

Wright implies that Hurston’s use of dialect and the absence of the larger political theme of racism indicates that Hurston was only writing to please her white audience. Hurston was also criticized for writing a novel that did not take a political stand on the state of the American Negro in relation to society at large, specifically segregation. Some critics felt that *Their Eyes* did not live up to Hurston’s reputation as a serious artist and essayist. As Otis Ferguson states in his review in *The New Republic* (1937), “It isn’t that this novel is bad, but that it deserves to be better...Crisis of feelings are rushed over too quickly, everything is more heard than seen...Dialect is really sloppy, in fact” (78). Another
prominent critic, Sterling Brown, also took issue with the brevity of the scenes and the narrative in his 1937 review in *The Nation*: “Filling out Janie’s story are sketches of Eatonville…many incidents are unusual,” however, “there are narrative gaps in need of building up” (20). It is possible that Ferguson and Brown may have equated length with depth and did not appreciate that the action of the novel is more internal than external. According to Cheryl Wall: “Interior reality was what she wished to probe. In that reality, blacks ceased to be ‘tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences’ whose labor whites exploited; they ceased to be mules and were men and women” (78). Ferguson’s criticism of Hurston’s use of dialect is particularly ironic in that the dialect used in *Their Eyes* was her own, having been raised in the all black town of Eatonville, Florida where Janie’s tale begins. Hurston also returned to Eatonville while doing anthropological fieldwork as an adult which gave her access to the African-American folklore that she uses heavily throughout the book (Lucy Anne Hurston 11).

Even though *Their Eyes* was not critically acclaimed, Hurston persevered and continued to write fiction, essays, and conduct anthropological research of African-American language and folklore throughout her life. Hurston wrote seven novels, including *Their Eyes*, four plays, two volumes of folklore, over fifty short stories and essays and over twenty-five unpublished short stories and essays. She was working on another novel titled *Herod the Great* when she died (Hemenway 355-359). Unfortunately, her books were out of print by 1950 and she died in relative obscurity and poverty in Florida at the age of sixty-nine (Croft xxix).

Hurston was rediscovered primarily through the research of Alice Walker during the burgeoning African-American feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. As
Henry Louis Gates Jr. states in the afterword to the 1990 publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “Hurston became a metaphor for the black woman writer’s search for tradition” (Gates *Their Eyes* 186). Hurston’s works were brought back to public attention by Walker’s article “Looking for Zora” in *Ms.* magazine in 1975 (Walker 297-313). *Ms.* became the platform from which American journalist and feminist, Gloria Steinem gave voice to the second wave feminist movement by featuring feminist writers such as Walker. Founded in 1972 as the first feminist magazine by Steinem, *Ms.* was the perfect forum for Walker’s story about locating Hurston’s grave (Whittier 148).

Walker discovered Hurston in 1970 while doing research about voodoo practices among rural Southern blacks. Walker’s exposé of Hurston’s final days as an essentially unknown and forgotten female author appeared in *Ms.* at a time when public interest in the second wave feminist movement and in feminist writers was growing. The search for Hurston’s unmarked grave was a profoundly moving experience for Walker, who spent months researching Hurston and her native Eatonville, Florida:

> There are times—and finding Zora’s grave was one of them—when normal responses of grief, horror, and so on do not make sense…It was impossible for me to cry when I saw the field full of weeds where Zora is. Partly this is because I have come to know Zora through her books and she was not a teary sort of person herself; but partly, too, it is because there is a point at which even grief feels absurd. (Walker 230)

Even today, Walker acknowledges Hurston as “an important model in her own artistic development” (alicewalkersgarden.com). Thanks to Walker’s efforts, Hurston’s works were brought into the American feminist literary movement.
One of the early critical debates to emerge concerning *Their Eyes* was whether or not it could be taken seriously as a work of feminist literature considering its brevity and the short period of time in which it was written. There was even some discussion that *Their Eyes* was essentially a romanticized reckoning of Hurston’s life (Kaplan 366). The recent publication of Lucy Anne Hurston’s volume of letters and partial manuscripts of Hurston’s works, as well as Carla Kaplan’s *Zora Neale Hurston, A Life in Letters* now provides more access to Hurston’s writing process. One letter in particular, written in March 1936 from Hurston to Mr. Stanley Hoole at Birmingham Southern College, provides evidence that *Their Eyes* had been in Hurston’s mind for at least six months prior to the actual writing of the text. The letter demonstrates that Hurston had a plot outlined that included feminist leanings: “My next book is to be a novel about a woman who was from childhood hungry for life and the earth, but because she had beautiful hair, was always being skotched [sic] upon a flag-pole by the men who loved her and forced to sit there” (Kaplan 366).

Though *Their Eyes* is not an autobiography, elements of Hurston’s struggle as an African-American woman and author resonate in Janie’s struggle for a voice. In the letter to Hoole, Hurston describes her vision of Janie finding sexual freedom in mid-life: “At forty she got her chance at mud. Mud, lush and fecund with a buck Negro called Teacake. He took her down into the Everglades …where no such thing as flag-poles for women existed” (Kaplan 366). Like her protagonist, Hurston had two relationships with men much younger than herself, both of which ended badly. Hurston presented herself as ten to fifteen years younger than her actual age, so these men probably did not realize how much older she was (Lucy Ann Hurston 30). Before writing *Their Eyes*, Hurston had
very recently ended one of these affairs with a younger man and was reportedly feeling very desolate. However, Hurston was accustomed to living independently and did not measure her success as a writer by her success with men (Kaplan 176).

This letter to Hoole also indicates that Hurston was not unaware or uncaring about the plight of African-Americans in the segregated South, but that she simply did not agree that African-Americans had it that much better in the North: “I fail to see the difference between an under-paid cotton-picker and an under-paid factory hand. So why stress Alabama? Nobody would love to see ideal living conditions for everyone more than I, but I sense insincerity when only one section of the country is held up for example” (Kaplan 367). For Hurston, racism in the North was simply covered over by more polite manners. Hurston knew what it was like to be poor in the North as well as in the South and in her opinion, being poor and without opportunities was a universal problem for lower class people, white or black. The letter also foreshadows Hurston’s use of the extended metaphor of black women as “mules” which figures prominently in *Their Eyes*: “I think I must be God’s left-hand mule, because I have to work so hard” (Kaplan 366). Hurston is referring to the way black women had to work like beasts of burden in the fields during slavery and their ongoing subservient social status which continued well into the 20th century.

**The Metaphor of the African-American Woman as the “Mule of the World”**

In Hurston’s *Their Eyes*, Janie’s journey from girlhood to womanhood is also a journey from repression to self-expression. Janie evolves from a subservient, silenced, observer of life to a full participant, with full powers of mental and emotional expression, and unashamed sexuality. One of the ways Hurston illustrates Janie’s journey is by taking
the symbol of the much maligned, ill-treated mule and ironically transforming it into a cleaver trickster. Hurston's use of the extended metaphor of the mule is based on post-slavery folk tales she collected in her field work (Hurston *Mules and Men* 8-10). An example from Hurston's "Talking Animal Tales" tells of a farmer's mule named Bill, who one morning talks back to his owner, refusing to be harnessed: "Every mawnin, it's come round, Bill—come round Bill. Don't hardly git no night rest before it's come round, Bill" (Hurston *Every Tongue* 228). The farmer is so shocked by the talking mule that he takes off running with his dog running beside him. When the farmer stops for breath, he mutters, "I never heered uh mule talk before...I got skeered" and his dog replies, "me too!" (Hurston *Every Tongue* 229). This tale depicts the need for a humorous outlet to accommodate the slaves' natural desire to rebel against servitude to his master. The mule folklore is representative of a socially constructed political system of racism and sexism that was prevalent from Slavery to the Post-Reconstruction South of the late 19th through the early 20th centuries (Hurston *Mules and Men* 1-10). In *Their Eyes*, the mule is a symbol not only of the black woman who carries the burden of black and white society on her back, but also of the larger issue of the black race silenced and burdened by systematic oppression from the dominant white culture.

A key element of being a black woman in the male-dominated world of Hurston's *Their Eyes* is the necessity to remain silent in order to remain safe. Hurston takes this notion to its outermost limit by giving Janie the courage to give up safety, and in return, she no longer needs to remain silent. Like the mule, black women were also demeaned and considered to be "dumb." The word dumb, when applied to the mule, possesses the dual meaning of being speechless as well as stupid. However, the mules of African-
American folklore are neither speechless nor stupid. In the African-American folklore tales, the mule is the trickster “who uses his wits and obstinacy to outsmart those who try to control him” (Haurykiewicz 47). The mule references, in particular the stories about Matt Bonner’s yellow mule, turn the social hierarchy upside down. The mule is a dumb animal given the power of speech and the ability to outwit those considered his superiors in order to achieve his desires. Janie, like the mules in the folktales, also finds the power of speech and uses her wits to rise above the lowly station assigned her by society. In this way, Janie’s actions also turn the social hierarchy upside down.

Hurston’s use of storytelling, and specifically her use of the mule tales, explores Janie’s evolution from silence to speech and from a dreamy girl to a mature, autonomous woman. As Janie evolves into an independent woman, the representation of the mule also changes, thus linking Janie directly with the folklore of the South and creating a new meaning for the mule tales: “Hurston uses the image of the mule to comment on the disparity between speech and silence...The image of the mule is frequently linked to these acts of silencing, while the absence of the mule indicates the potential for speech and communication in Janie’s life” (Haurykiewicz 45-46). In the first half of the novel, because of repeated silencing by Nanny, her first two husbands, and the community at large, Janie is like the dumb mule before it transforms into the talking trickster with the power of speech. After Janie learns to speak for herself and leaves Eatonville to marry her young lover, Tea Cake, the mule imagery no longer appears in the rest of the novel. However, there are key moments in the first half of the Their Eyes that illustrate the significance of this metaphor in relation to Janie’s circumstances.
For example, at the beginning of the novel, Nanny fears that Janie will end up as some man’s mule, worn out by heavy physical labor and treated with no more respect by her man than the way he treats his farm animals. She wants Janie to have a better life than she had. Nanny, who was born into slavery and was worked like a mule most of her life, prays that Janie will have a happier fate than both she and her wayward daughter:

Ah was born back in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of what a woman oughta be and to do. Dat’s one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can’t stop you from wishin’…I didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood sow and Ah didn’t want my daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn’t mah will for things to happen lak they did. I even hated the day you was born…somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in the world…Lawd knows where she is right now. (*Their Eyes* 18-19)

In this passage we are getting the perspective of three generations of women: two born in slavery and one born free. Janie’s grandmother hopes that Janie will be the first to break the cycle of sexual abuse from white masters as well as the cycle of forced manual labor and servitude to black men.

However, Nanny’s dream for Janie is almost Janie’s undoing. Janie wants to experience life, to experience community, to be with people, and have her true inner self be known. Her dreams are romantic, sensual, and unarticulated. Janie’s speech and self-expression are stifled and the fire of her spirit is nearly snuffed out by trying to live Nanny’s dream for her. In her first two marriages, she plays a subservient role, adjusting her own needs and desires to fulfill her husbands’ expectations. Janie is only sixteen
years old when she marries her first husband, Logan Killicks, and though she is not sexually attracted to him, she feels it is her duty to please him as a wife. Her second husband, Joe Starks, is overbearing and controlling. Janie avoids confrontation with him and allows herself to live in his shadow to keep the peace.

During her first marriage with Logan, Janie is disillusioned when she finds that, contrary to Nanny’s promise, marriage does not make her happy. The mule imagery is reintroduced by Janie complaining that Logan’s “toe-nails look lak mule foots” (*Their Eyes* 23). Logan does not satisfy Janie emotionally or sexually and expects her to work at whatever task he orders her to do. After a brief honey-moon period, one morning Logan tells Janie: “Mah fust wife never bothered me ‘bout choppin no wood nohow. She’d grab dat ax and slings chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten...Looka heah, help me out some. Cut up dese seed taters fuh me” (*Their Eyes* 25). Logan expects Janie to assume these outdoor chores as well keep house for him. Logan attempts to complete his domination of Janie by putting her in the field behind a second mule he is going to buy. This moment is significant because “Janie’s position in this scheme is literally behind a mule, reflecting her place in Logan’s social hierarchy where she will be ranked even lower than the mule” (Haurykiewicz 54). Janie does not openly defy Logan, but allows herself to be enticed away from him by Joe (Jody) Starks and his promise of love and adventure. At this point in Janie’s early feminist awareness, the dream of love, is closely tied to her need for freedom of expression. She cannot spend her days as a dumb animal.

Janie leaves Logan without a word and does not bother with the legalities of a divorce. But again, she is following a dream that is not wholly hers. She still harbors the illusion that she will find the happiness and security in marriage as Nanny promised. Her
bigamous marriage to Joe does manage to provide material comforts and some status when Joe opens a general store and becomes Eatonville’s first mayor, but the alliance does not fulfill Janie’s dream of love. To her consternation, Janie does not find the verbal and sexual expression she desires with Joe, but instead becomes his housemaid, store clerk, and verbal whipping post. Her primary source of entertainment comes from listening to the men tell stories on the front porch of Starks’ general store, while Janie silently waits on the customers. Janie particularly likes hearing the mule tales, especially the ongoing repartee about Matt Bonner’s yellow mule (*Their Eyes* 48-50).

It is significant that Janie not only enjoys the “mule talk” for the potential inclusion into community that it might afford her, but that she also has empathy for the plight of Bonner’s yellow mule. The mule is a sterile animal bred only to be used and discarded. Janie, a mulatto (her mother was raped by a white man), is also light skinned, like the mule, and though we do not know if she is sterile, she has no children. The mule is a hybrid like herself. Janie is depicted as brown skinned with long, curly, black hair that has the texture of Caucasian hair. Light skinned African-Americans were sometimes called the more derogatory term “yellow” that identifies the person as a descendant of slave women raped by their white masters (Walker 299). Janie, like the mule, also spends her days toiling without pleasure for her husband, who is essentially her master.

At the sight of “the men baiting the half-starved mule—she mutters and fumes about their cowardice in mistreating ‘helpless things’” (Davie 449). Janie identifies with the mistreatment of the mule and what she perceives to be her own helplessness. Janie’s frustration and sense of powerlessness is exacerbated by Joe overhearing her complaints
about the treatment of the mule and using the opportunity to strengthen his position of power over Janie while making himself appear benevolent in the eyes of the community. He buys the mule for five dollars and sets him free to roam the town. Janie compares Joe’s actions to that of Lincoln freeing the slaves:

Jody, dat wuz uh mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. ‘Tain’t everybody would have thought of it, ‘cause it ain’t no everyday thought. Freein’ dat mule makes a mighty big man outa you…Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something. *(Their Eyes 55)*

It is not clear whether Janie is being sarcastic in response to Joe’s appropriation of her words or whether, in her sympathy for the mule, she is relieved to see Joe make a humanitarian gesture. Perhaps Janie is unaware of Joe’s clever manipulations: “Not even Janie notices the switch; she ends up complimenting Joe on his masterful gesture, comparing him to Abraham Lincoln. This part of the mule story in a sense supports the hierarchical status quo” *(Davie 449)*. Joe does not respond to Janie, but simply “bit down hard on his cigar and beamed all around, but never said a word” *(Their Eyes 55)*.

However, given Janie’s awareness of Joe’s bluster and ego up to this point in the novel, it is difficult to accept that she is not aware, on some level, of Joe’s masterful control of the events for his own benefit. Janie feels that, once more, Joe has silenced her. Janie’s spontaneous oration in response to Joe’s actions gives her the momentary upper hand. To her surprise, Janie finds that she has spoken her mind in public. She is complimented by Hambo, “Yo’ wife is uh born orator, Starks. Us never knowed dat
befo’. She put jus’ de right words tuh our thoughts” (Their Eyes 55). Joe is overshadowed by his wife in a temporary reversal of the established order, putting Janie one rung up on the social ladder. This is Janie’s first outward expression of her inner thoughts which brings her a step closer to freeing herself. As Jacqueline Vaught Brogan states in “The Hurston/Walker/Vaughn Connection: Feminist Strategies in American Fiction,” in Their Eyes, Hurston exposes the psychological abuse of silencing that women suffer in a patriarchal society. Janie experiences “self-revelation, despite formidable obstacles to such growth” (186). Furthermore, Hurston “uses the narrative device of having Janie speak the ‘truth’—the ‘other side’ of her story” (Brogan 186).

Janie’s catalyst for expressing her side of the story and her burgeoning need to speak out publicly is personified in the treatment and antics of the yellow mule. Once Joe buys the yellow mule and sets him free, the mule talk takes a different turn. When the yellow mule belonged to Bonner, the mule-talk centered around the mule’s mistreatment and suffering. After Joe frees the mule to live his days in ease, the mule talk is centered on the mule’s supposed antics in the community. At this point the mule takes on the trickster role:

New lies sprung up about his free-mule doings. How he pushed open Lindsay’s kitchen door and slept in the place one night and fought until they made coffee for his breakfast; how he stuck his head in the Pearson’s window while the family was at the table and Mrs. Pearson mistook him for Rev. Pearson and handed him a plate; he got tired of listening to Redmond’s long-winded prayer, and went inside the Baptist church and
broke up the meeting. He did everything but let himself be bridled and
visit Matt Bonner. (Their Eyes 55)

The mule upsets the hierarchy of the town and the “freed mule is linked to social
displacement” similar to the social displacement and upset following the emancipation of
the slaves (Davie 448). The mule talk continues on after the death of the mule, reaching
its height with the celebration of the mule’s life at a mock funeral in its honor.

At this point, Joe regains his authority over Janie by forbidding her to attend the
“dragging out” of the mule and the mock funeral. Once again Joe claims the right of
speech for himself and denies it to Janie. When Janie asks Joe why he can go and she
cannot, he responds: “But Ah’m uh man even if Ah is de Mayor...Anyhow they’s liable
tuh need me tuh say uh few words over de carcass, dis bein’ uh special case” (Their Eyes
56). Janie desperately wants to be included in the funeral services for the mule, but
instead is totally excluded from the festivities while Joe enjoys himself immensely. The
whole town is shut down as if it was a holiday and Janie assumes that Joe will shut down
the store so that they can both attend the service. But Joe tells Janie she must stay behind
and mind the store to which she replies: “‘Tain’t nothin’ so important Ah got tuh do
tuhday, Jody. How come Ah can’t go along wid you tuh de draggin’-out?” (Their Eyes
56). Joe tells her that, as the wife of the Mayor, it wouldn’t be proper for her to go “off in
all that mess uh commonness” (Their Eyes 56). As Joe’s wife, Janie is bound by the
double standard of the old patriarchal order which requires the wife to obey the husband,
while giving the husband freedom to dictate his commands without censure. Joe leaves
Janie standing in the doorway of the store while the whole town goes to the ceremony.
Joe leads the service and gives the eulogy standing on the belly of the mule, and receives accolades from the town for his performance. By standing on the mule, it is as if Joe is standing on the defeated Janie. On a larger level, this action can be viewed as representing the black man raising himself up at the expense of the black woman. Taking this analogy further, Joe standing on the mule can be interpreted as the white race standing on the black race and the black woman being crushed by the weight of it all. The burden of that weight has reached all the way down the social ladder to nearly crush Janie at the bottom.

For the black woman, there is nowhere to go but up, either through her own hard work or a fortunate association with a man. But she might also go further down into despair if her circumstances become untenable. bell hooks describes the often unexpressed anguish of African-American women who grew up in the early to mid-20th century as “crying for our souls” (hooks “Feminism” 265). As hooks asserts in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*: “For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such, it represents a threat” (428). Janie does not want to stay at the bottom of the heap. She does not want to be invisible. She is becoming more and more aware of her desire to be part of the community, not isolated and silenced by her husband.

When Joe returns to the store he finds Janie “sullen and he resented that” because “she had no right to be, the way he thought things out” (*Their Eyes 58*). To Joe, Janie should be satisfied as the Mayor’s wife and that “many women would be glad to be in her place.” He momentarily thought that he should “box her jaws” but instead he gloats to her
about the good time had by all (*Their Eyes* 59). As a result, Janie can no longer tolerate subservience to Joe and the incident becomes the impetus for Janie’s later outburst of anger and frustration directed at her husband: “Janie’s position on the threshold is symbolic of her readiness to cross over into a way of life where she refuses to be silenced by her husband. The death of the mule signifies the death of woman-as-mule” (Haurykiewicz 57). Janie has come to the point where Joe’s weight on her back is too much to bear and she finds the strength to confront his hypocrisy. She will no longer be any man’s mule.

Janie verbally expresses her previously mute thoughts and feelings when she publicly stands up to Joe in the store with his male cronies watching. Like Bonner’s yellow mule, Janie has silently, but resentfully taken the abuse heaped on her by her “master.” And like an unpredictable trickster mule, Janie strikes back when it is least expected, lashing out at Joe after being insulted by him about her age: “Talkin’ ‘bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (*Their Eyes* 75). This verbal dressing down hits Joe like a kick in the gut from a mule. He is essentially emasculated and defeated by the power of her words. Janie learns what it is like to stand up for herself for the first time in her life. Joe’s attempt to humiliate Janie backfires and he is defeated. From that point on, Janie becomes aware of the power of her words and continues to break her silence when she chooses to do so. Her feminist consciousness has surfaced and it has found a voice. The voice is Janie’s and it grows stronger as she becomes more aware of her own self-worth.

When Janie confronts Joe again at his deathbed, she is one step closer to achieving her liberty, as she exposes Joe for his weaknesses, which leads to his
humiliation, demise, and eventual death. She has won the battle of wills and has the final word in her previously unequal relationship with Joe. At last she is able to speak her mind to Joe, expressing her dissatisfaction with “dis bowin’ down, all dis obedience under yo’ voice” and she is finally free of silence (Their Eyes 82). After Joe dies, Janie recognizes that “Dis sittin’ in de rulin’ chair is been hard on Jody” (Their Eyes 83). For a moment, she has sympathy for Joe and for the superficial life he created for himself in his need for self-aggrandizement. But after this moment of reflection, she “tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair” (Their Eyes 83). In this action, Janie is freeing herself from the restrictions placed upon her in her role as Joe’s wife. She no longer needs to hide her beauty, nor live merely as her husband’s shadow. Janie is now ready to start her life, a life that had been dominated and controlled by others for over thirty-five years. The mule is never again mentioned in the novel as the analogy has served its purpose.

After burying Joe, Janie essentially comes back to life, like a bud popping up through the cool spring soil. She wears her “mourning white” and has “hosts of admirers,” but she was too busy “basking in freedom for the most part without the need for thought” (Their Eyes 88). As she tells her best friend Pheoby, “Ah jus’ loves dis freedom...Let ‘em say whut dey wants tuh, Pheoby. To my thinkin mourning oughtn’t tuh to last no longer’n grief” (Their Eyes 89). She takes her time before giving in to the attentions from Tea Cake, a man fifteen years her junior, in order to savor this period of self-discovery brought on by the reclamation of her previously inaudible voice and her burgeoning sexuality. As she looks at herself through her own eyes for the first time and examines herself in the mirror: “[Janie] looks hard at her skin and features. The young
girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place” (*Their Eyes* 83). She “uses her own vision to find beauty and value in her visually inscribed racial identity” (Clarke “The Porch” 608). Janie is coming to terms with her mixed race heritage, finding beauty and sensuality in her own body. She is seeing herself as both a woman and an individual at the same time.

The journey to self-discovery begins anew as Janie is wooed and won by the young, charming, sensual, reckless, and impulsive Tea Cake. Following a brief courtship, Janie again flies in the face of convention and moves to the Everglades to marry Tea Cake. With Tea Cake, she continues to assert herself verbally and will not to be silenced again. Yet, at the same time she yields to Tea Cake’s raw sensuality, willingly and without inhibition. She is on her way to discovering her sexual prowess as well as her intellectual abilities and in the process is beginning to understand that the two are not mutually exclusive. As she ends her social isolation, she rediscovers her own sexuality.

Janie is no longer playing the role of “dumb mule” and has symbolically disrupted the social patriarchal hierarchy: “Hurston’s text not only inverts the terms of accepted hierarchies (black over white, male over female) but—more significantly—allows readers to question, if only for a moment, the hierarchical mode itself” (Davie 447). She defies the social norm by following her heart and marrying Tea Cake only for love and will no longer be controlled or tolerate the artificially created social laws imposed upon her by either black or white society. By the end of the novel, Janie will be able return to Eatonville as a woman of means, with her head held high, capable of creating her own destiny.
Hurston creates a world where the social hierarchy is exposed for the artificial contrivance it is: a system of oppression of white over black and men over women. Today, this struggle for self expression is still unfolding for the African-American woman as the social structures designed to keep her in her place have not been completely dismantled. As Jacqueline Jones asserts in “Writing Women’s History: What’s Feminism Got to Do with It?”:

In the early twenty-first century, we do not deny impoverished citizens the right to vote, and employers cannot advertise “whites only” or “no women need apply” when they seek out potential employees. Despite this seemingly “level playing field” for women, people of color, and the poor, the structure of the labor force reveals enduring patterns of discrimination and inequality...To state the matter more boldly: white men have often employed such ideologies as political strategies in order to enforce a certain social division of labor that relegates women, blacks, and the poor to the margins of the body politic. (141)

Jones’ review of the evolving status of women in America, especially women of color, in relation to civil and social rights, illustrates the ongoing struggle for women’s rights. Janie’s journey serves as an early example of the possibility of a woman’s life lived beyond these limitations, where the individual consciousness matters and the social hierarchy is rendered powerless. In this way, Their Eyes is very much a feminist novel, whether or not it was intended to be.
Nature as Metaphor and the Nature of Love

As previously discussed, in *Their Eyes*, Hurston weaves the elements of folklore and natural imagery into a feminine coming-of-age story that can also be interpreted as a consciousness-raising parable for African-American women. It has been established that Hurston uses symbolism associated with the “mule” heavily throughout the novel. In addition, Hurston uses other natural images throughout the book that are usually related to Janie’s experience of love and personal growth. A particular metaphor from nature that Hurston uses frequently is that life is like a tree.

While the mule imagery is used primarily in context with Janie gaining verbal and physical freedom, the tree images are used in relation to her emotions, sexuality, and inner life. One of the most powerful uses of this imagery is in Chapter 2 as Janie discovers her sexuality one spring day under a pear tree:

Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back­yard...ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called to her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why?...She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing 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 a marriage! She had been
summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet [sic] that left her limp and languid. (*Their Eyes* 10-11)

The language in this passage is explicitly sexual, using the euphemism of bees pollinating flowers to describe Janie's visceral comprehension of the joining of a man and a woman in intercourse that she equates with marriage. However, it is significant that Janie's sexual awakening (presumably her first orgasm) is achieved on her own, stimulated by the palpable beauty of nature and her own personal identification with it. Janie's experience can be interpreted as feminist on two levels.

According to Luce Irigaray, in "Women on the Market," one of the most powerful tools used against women by the male patriarchal system is the treatment of female sexuality as a commodity: "Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property" (Irigaray 808). African-American women, with the ghost of slavery haunting their heritage, have been especially susceptible to the reduction of a woman's body to something to be used and discarded. Janie's experience is in opposition to this system and can be considered as contributing to her feminist consciousness. It is significant that Janie's first sexual feelings are experienced without the coercion, persuasion, seduction, or indeed the presence of a man. Considering that Janie was born as a result of her mother's rape and that Nanny had been a slave and sexual object for her master, this incident represents a break in the cycle of male dominance over female sexuality in Janie's family. Janie's first sexual experience is an expression of her own femaleness: "She was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers...Oh to be a pear tree—any [sic] tree in bloom!...She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds...Where
were the singing bees for her?” (Their Eyes 11). In a sense, Janie gives birth to her fledgling womanhood through this private rite of passage.

Irigaray also states in “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,” that in the patriarchal system what is “strictly forbidden to women is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure... A playful crossing, and an unsettling one, would allow woman to rediscover the place of her ‘self-affection’” (796). Janie appears to feel no shame, only pleasure in her solitary sexual act, which, at least for the moment, contributes to her awareness of the sensuality lying dormant within her, waiting for the right time to awaken.

At this moment, Janie feels empowered. As Maria Tai Wolff asserts in “Listening and Living: Reading and Experience in Their Eyes Were Watching God”: “Janie’s ‘conscious life,’ and the real beginning of her efforts to know herself, begins when she first becomes aware of her sexuality” (219). She then chooses to find someone to share her newly aroused desires in the person of Johnny Taylor. Unfortunately, her desire overpowers her discretion. Janie lets Johnny kiss her over the fence post and the romantic moment is abruptly ended by Nanny. Nanny is afraid for Janie as she realizes that Janie is becoming sexually aware and decides that it is time for Janie to marry. Nanny has not been able to fulfill her own dreams of womanhood, which consisted of being married to a respectable man and raising her children in freedom. Nanny wants Janie, as a free woman, to become what she could not in her days as a slave: a respectable married woman who is not sexually used and abused the way Nanny and her daughter were.

Janie’s newly found emotional and sexual independence is suddenly squashed by her own grandmother who is adhering to the patriarchal rule that sexuality must be within
marriage and that a husband will protect his wife from her own desires as well as provide for her material needs. Janie does not want to marry, but Nanny insists, and for the first time, unburdens herself of some of the pain of her past as she explains to Janie why she must marry Logan Killicks:

Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection... Ah ast de Lawd when you was uh infant in mah arms to let me stay here till you got grown. My daily prayer now is tuh let dese golden moments rolls on a few days longer till Ah see you safe in life... Ah got tu try to do for you befo’ mah head is cold... And Janie, maybe it wasn’t much, but Ah done de best Ah kin by you. And Ah can’t die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah’m a cracked plate. (Their Eyes 14-19)

This passage demonstrates that Nanny is making the most pragmatic choice she can to secure Janie’s future. Even though Nanny is accepting the patriarchal system of marriage as the most legitimate choice to provide for Janie upon her death, she is also strongly voicing an early feminist sentiment in that never again will she allow herself or Janie to be any man’s emotional or sexual slave.

Unfortunately for Janie, marriage to Killicks is not what she longed for and imagined under the pear tree, in fact “the vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree” (Their Eyes 13). Janie complains to Nanny that the love she promised would come with marriage was not manifesting: “He don’t even never mention nothin’ pretty... Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and
think” (Their Eyes 23). Janie finds no sexual or emotional satisfaction in this arranged marriage and begins day dreaming again of love and adventure:

So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn’t know exactly. Her breath was gusty and short. She knew things nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to the falling seeds and said, ‘Ah hope you fall on soft ground,’ because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed...She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman. (Their Eyes 23-4)

Janie is coming to her first adult revelation that the dreams created for her by Nanny and even the dreams of her adolescent sexual awakening are not enough to sustain her. As Gates explains in “The Speakerly Text,” for Janie “love never quite finds its way to Logan Killick’s sixty acres. But even in this confined space, Janie comes, by negation, to a measure of knowledge, signified in the language of the trees” (Gates 172). The return to the tree imagery also reflects another level of awakening to the fertility and abundance of nature and Janie’s longing to join the earth in those deep and mysterious wonders. In her restlessness she waits and watches for the opportunity to follow her own dream of love. Janie identifies with the beauty and simple sensuality of the trees. The trees are caressed by the wind and with their softly rustling leaves express their pleasure. They seem to speak for her—to express her deepest, unarticulated, desire for love and sexual intimacy.
Janie’s marriage to Killicks is unbearable and Nanny’s advice is unsatisfactory: “Tain’t no use in you cryin’, Janie…Better leave things de way de is. Youse young yet. No tellin’ whut mout happen befo’ you die. Wait awhile, baby. Yo’ mind will change” (Their Eyes 23). To her dismay, Janie is discovering that the natural erotic feelings of sexuality she wishes to express and the love she yearns for cannot be found in her marriage. Janie will also soon experience the loss of maternal love, as Nanny’s health is failing: “Towards morning she muttered, ‘Lawd, you know mah heart. Ah done de best Ah could do. De rest is left to you.’ She scuffled up from her knees and fell heavily across the bed. A month later she was dead” (Their Eyes 23). There is now a void in Janie’s heart with the loss of her grandmother and the loss of her dream of love. Janie no longer feels obligated to fulfill Nanny’s wish for her to stay with Killicks. Janie’s willingness to leave with Joe Starks, without a word to her husband, seems to be what Janie considers becoming an independent woman. She is making a choice for herself for the first time by following her natural instincts and taking the risks and responsibilities that come with doing so. This is a chance she is willing to take to discover her own identity and fulfill her dream of finding love.

Janie finds Joe exciting at first and is sexually attracted to him, but unfortunately she does not find the intimacy and sharing in marriage for which she longs. Living in Joe’s shadow as the mayor’s wife in Eatonville and tending his store is just another form of subjugation for her. To Janie’s disappointment, “Joe imposes a role on Janie, considering his wife incapable of good judgment, Joe precludes the possibility of her choosing whether or not to speak…again Janie withdraws into herself’ (Wolff 222). Janie expresses her frustration to Joe that his political ambition and business dealings are
getting in the way of their intimacy: “...it jus’ looks lak it keeps us in some way we ain’t natural wid one ‘another. You’se always off talkin’ and fixin’ things and Ah feels lak Ah’m jus’ markin’ time” *(Their Eyes 43).* To which Joe responds: “Ah ain’t even started good. Ah told you in de very first beginnin’ dat Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, ‘cause dat makes uh big woman outa you” *(Their Eyes 43).* But Janie doesn’t want to be an extension of Joe. She wants to be a person in her own right and “a feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely” *(Their Eyes 44).* As Joe’s voice becomes louder and more dominant, Janie becomes more silent. Joe constantly belittles Janie and verbally abuses her into silence:

Times and scenes like that put Janie to thinking about the inside state of her marriage. Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn’t do her any good. It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it. So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush. The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor...the bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in...She wasn’t petal-open anymore with him...Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. *(Their Eyes 67-68)*

The mention of the bed as a daisy-field is the last allusion to nature and Janie’s sensuality regarding her marriage to Joe. Janie sublimates her desires and longings and again becomes ruled by someone outside herself. Even though she eventually finds the courage
to stand up verbally to Joe, Janie has packed away any sexual desires she once felt for
him.

However, the sexual fulfillment associated with the pear tree reappears after Joe’s
death when Janie meets the young and handsome Vergible Woods, known as Tea Cake. It
is also interesting that Tea Cake’s last name is Woods, which brings to mind the previous
tree imagery used in association with love and sexual gratification. To Janie, Tea Cake is
not just a single tree, he is a whole host of trees; he is a wood: “He looked like the love
thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring.
He seemed to be crushing the scent out of the world with his footsteps...He was a glance
from God” (Their Eyes 99-100). Janie recognizes in Tea Cake the sensuality and
earthiness that she feels in herself and is drawn to him, almost in a primitive way, by the
sheer sexual chemistry between them. It is as if they are both children of the earth and
nature. But more than that, Janie feels that Tea Cake sees her for who she is and
encourages her to speak and laugh and love. In Joe Starks’ store she was never able to
join in the festive gab sessions the men held on the front porch and she and Joe seldom
had company at home. The fact that the porch talk is considered an exclusively male
activity is representative of the repressive politics at play between the men and women of
Eatonville. As Susan Stanford Friedman states in Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural
Geographies of Encounter:

The store porch is a distinctly masculine space, the site of black manhood
denied by the white world and constructed through competitive
talk...Janie loves the porch talk and longs to participate, but is repeatedly
silenced and denied access to the porch by her domineering husband, who
makes clear that the porch is no place for ladies...Hurston suggests that women need space on a communal porch to fulfill their creative genius. The narrative frame for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* significantly takes place on Janie’s porch—not the store porch—but a porch where Janie tells her story to her friend Pheoby. (128-9)

Janie will not ultimately find her full voice until she creates her own narrative space on her own front porch when she finally returns to Eatonville. But for the present, with Tea Cake, Janie finds the personal validation she needs to begin her journey away from Eatonville and all that constricts her there. Janie longs for freedom, love, and adventure, and she finds all three with Tea Cake. She leaves Eatonville to enter into her second bigamous marriage (as she is never legally divorced from her first husband) and becomes Janie Woods. But more importantly, Janie is making a conscious choice to do what pleases her, regardless of the gossip and disapproval of the townspeople of Eatonville.

This choice is perhaps Janie’s first overtly feminist action in that she is defying all social norms in order to seek her own self-gratification. Janie’s need for self-gratification is in direct response to intense introspection and the examination of her past after Joe’s death: “She discovers, for example, that ‘she hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity.’ She recognizes, as well, her own desires to seek out experience. The only truths she will now accept are derived from her own experience” (Wolff 223). However, Janie’s need for self-gratification is only a first step toward self-awareness and the most rudimentary of feminist action. Before Janie can move to a higher level of feminist consciousness, she must first acknowledge that she possesses social, physical, and emotional needs that are as authentic as those of any man,
and just as important. Like a baby who has just become aware of her ability to explore her surroundings, Janie must crawl before she can walk.

When Tea Cake asks her if she is satisfied with their simple life together in the Everglades or if she misses her old life in Eatonville as a store owner and mayor’s wife, she replies: “Ah naw, honey. Ah laks it...Clerkin’ in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain’t got nothin’ tuh do but do our work and come home and love” (Their Eyes 127).

In the evenings, their front porch is full of people laughing, talking, telling stories, gambling, and playing music. Janie has found the narrative space denied her in Eatonville:

The house was full of people every night. That is, all around the doorstep was full...Sometimes Janie would think of the old days in the big white house and the store and laugh to herself. What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest. (Their Eyes 127-8)

With Tea Cake Janie has released the free spirit inside of her which has been searching for a means of expression since that afternoon under the pear tree.

Even though Janie’s actions could be read simply as those of a romantic dreamer letting her feelings for a man guide her life, Hurston does not seem to be making that statement. Hurston does not seem to equate a desire for sexual gratification and intimacy
with a man as a sign of weakness, or of a woman sublimating herself to a man. As Janie explains to her friend Pheoby why she is leaving with Tea Cake:

Cause Tea Cake ain’t no Jody Starks... Dis ain’t no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine... She was borned in slavery when folks, black folks, didn’t sit down anytime dey lak. So sittin’ on porches lak de white madam look lak u mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’s whut she wanted for me—don’t keer what it cost... Git up on uh high chair and sit dere... So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Pheoby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere... Tain’t so big a chance as it seem lak, Pheoby... If people thinks the same they can make it all right. So in the beginnin’ new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said. After Ah got used tuh dat, we gits along jus’ fine. He done taught me de maiden language all over. (Their Eyes 108-9)

Janie’s sexual awareness is a key component of her overall development as a woman who is capable of making her own choices, however unwise they may seem to others. For Janie, the need for sexual expression goes hand in hand with the need for verbal expression as well as the need to feel a true sense of belonging within her own skin and her surroundings.

By leaving with Tea Cake, Janie is taking one more step toward autonomy: “Her relationship with Tea Cake represents the burgeoning reconciliation of the inside and outside she had so scrupulously separated to live false emotions with Joe... the pear tree symbol drops away because her metaphorical figure of fulfillment has been collapsed into
Shultz 48

veritable fulfillment” (Bond 212). Tea Cake becomes an extension of Hurston’s use of nature as a metaphor for love, because Tea Cake represents natural, sensual, spontaneous, and joyous love: “She went to the hammock to shake him and he seized and pulled her in with him. After a while, she let him adjust her in his arms and laid there a while... They went inside and their laughter rang out first from the kitchen and then all over the house” (Their Eyes 102-3). To Janie, the love she finds with Tea Cake mirrors the love she found within herself as a young woman: “Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place” (Their Eyes 122). Metaphorically, Janie has returned to that summer afternoon under the pear tree and then moves beyond it.

For the first time in her life, Janie feels at one with her community and has learned the art of natural, playful self-expression with Tea Cake. The expression of love between Janie and Tea Cake is also metaphorically linked to nature since the two literally live at the mercy of nature in the “muck,” which is what the natives call the Everglades. This has a huge impact on their lives as they live and work very close to nature in the bean fields and the whims of Mother Nature can make or break their livelihood. During their time together in the Everglades, and essentially for the remainder of the novel, the elements frame the narrative of the story.

It is nature that rules in the Everglades and determines how people live and die. Janie, in her newfound sense of empowerment as a woman, willingly exchanges a comfortable material life, empty of meaning, for a life close to nature and the man she loves. As Judie Newman explains in “‘Dis Ain't Gimme, Florida’: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Janie “swaps status and prestige of an empty material
kind (running a store)” for “erotic happiness on the muck” (819). Janie willingly works alongside Tea Cake in the fields: “The differences between the image of the mule and its final reversal are obvious. On the muck, Janie is working only in name; she converts hard toil into play. Tea Cake has asked, not ordered” (Newman 819-20). The couple is able to work and play on a footing of equality and for a time they are happy. Their relationship parallels the give and take of nature in the muck. They work the earth, live close to the earth, and the earth provides their sustenance. They draw energy from the earth which manifests in their raw, sensuous, almost symbiotic love. But as the summer begins to turn hot and humid, the marriage of Janie and Tea Cake becomes equally steamy.

Jealousy sets in between the two over seemingly harmless flirtations and Tea Cake strikes Janie for the first and last time:

Some of the men made passes at Janie, and women she didn’t know took out after Tea Cake. Didn’t take them long to be put right, however. Still and all, jealousies arose now and then on both sides...Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured his possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss....It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her. (Their Eyes 140)

It is clear that Tea Cake feels remorse for his actions and attempts to make it up to Janie, but it is curious that there is no notice made of the event by Janie. She seems to have taken it in her stride. It is difficult for the modern reader to justify Janie’s passive
response and that Hurston seems to be more concerned with Tea Cake’s insecurities as a man than with his unnecessary brutality. Perhaps the point to be made is that Janie is more secure in her womanhood than Tea Cake is in his manhood. Or maybe it is simply a glimpse inside the mind of Tea Cake to illustrate his fear of losing Janie due to her attractiveness. Either way, Janie does not retaliate in kind and appears to accept his apology.

Yet, there is a more subtle subtext to this incident concerning Janie’s light-skinned, biracial status. Tea Cake explains his need to establish authority over Janie as best he can: “Ah didn’t whup Janie ‘cause she done nothin’. Ah beat her tuh show em Turners who is boss. Ah set in de kitchen one day and heard dat woman tell mah wife Ah’m too black fuh her. She don’t see how Janie can stand me” (Their Eyes 141). Janie seems to understand Tea Cake’s need to save face within their social circle. By acquiescing to the beating and allowing Tea Cake to fawn over her afterward, Janie willingly restores Tea Cake’s status as the man of the house. Janie seems to do this out of love for Tea Cake and sympathy for his need to feel empowered. However, this episode foreshadows the storm that is brewing around them and between them, which will not allow the status quo to remain for long.

Within a week, nature wreaks havoc with their lives and all the residents of the muck when a Hurricane devastates the area, breaching the levees and flooding the town: “The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time…They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God” (Their Eyes 151). There is a sense of foreboding concerning the fate of Janie and Tea Cake as they huddle together in the dark with their silent prayers to the forces of nature. In the mayhem of the
following days, their love, which had been so attuned to the beauty and sensuality of nature, is being destroyed by the uncontrollable forces of nature. Tea Cake becomes rabid after a dog bite and Janie is forced to kill him as he tries to attack her. This action can be interpreted as Janie’s ultimate break with the destructive forces in her life that can masquerade as love. Though Janie loved Tea Cake and was liberated sexually by his love for her, when the moment came, she was able to choose life over death. She did not allow Tea Cake to overwhelm her, but stood her ground against the madness that had overtaken him. The tragedy culminates in Janie telling her story before an all white jury at her murder trial. For the first time in her life, Janie uses the power of her voice to its full extent. She comes to her own defense and demonstrates that she has the composure and strength of character to stand before a jury and succeed in being understood. She is set free and buries Tea Cake.

By having Janie kill Tea Cake, Hurston may be implying that the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake was bound to erupt one day into a storm, but they ignore the early signs of destructiveness manifested in petty jealousies and Tea Cake’s physical violence. For the reader, the end of the romance is surprising and abrupt, yet ironically it creates true independence for Janie: “When Janie shoots the maddened Tea Cake, she not only saves her own life, she also steps outside of the male-defined circuit of exchange” (Willis 127). By the end of the novel, Janie has come full circle. She comes back to Eatonville to plant the seeds that Tea Cake bought for their garden in the Everglades before his tragic death. The seedlings that come up will be a tribute to their love and an acknowledgement of the natural cycle of death and rebirth.
At forty years of age, Janie is back home, and back to being a woman alone. But she has learned what she wanted to learn about love and life. The physical expression of love she found with Tea Cake may be viewed by society as unconventional and improper, but it is natural to her. As she tells Pheoby, “Love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore” (Their Eyes 182). Janie finds that she can bend and shape herself to love as the sea shapes the shore. She is a satisfied, self-sufficient woman with no regrets and is willing to live her life on her own terms. Janie can never again be any man’s “mule” or settle for love that doesn’t move her the way she was moved lying under the pear tree so many summers ago.

Janie’s awakening under the pear tree, can now be reinterpreted as Janie’s need for “that oldest human longing—self revelation” (Their Eyes 6). Carla Kaplan, in "The Erotics of Talk: 'That Oldest Human Longing' in Their Eyes Were Watching God" affirms that by telling her story to Pheoby, Janie finally fulfills “her quest for the satisfaction she beheld under the pear tree. The meaning of Janie’s pear tree ‘revelation,’ it turns out, is not marriage or a husband or sex, but talk itself, the experience of conversation, the act of storytelling and self-narration” (Kaplan 118). In her return to Eatonville as a mature woman, Janie tells her whole story to Pheoby, with self-assuredness and without censorship from any outside male authority. Janie has fully found her voice. Her newfound feminist voice can be heard rising from Janie’s lips: “Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh themselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves” (Their Eyes 183). Janie’s journey of self discovery has been filled with joy and sorrow, but she succeeds in finding out that what it
means to be a woman who can take care of herself and maintain her personal integrity. She now has the power speech or silence, and sexual expression, when and if she chooses. Janie has acquired the power of choice.

The power of choice is also central to Chopin’s heroine, Edna Pontellier, in *The Awakening*. In many ways, Edna’s journey toward selfhood mirrors Janie’s. Although she comes from a privileged, upper class white background, Edna desires to uncover her own authentic expression of sensuality, love, creativity, and self-expression as much as Janie does. The difference in their social classes serves to accentuate the similarities of their need to be seen and heard. For Edna, a life of privilege did not guarantee her fulfillment as a woman any more than Janie’s life of toil and servitude provided her with what she desired. What the two women have in common is the need for full equality with their male counterparts within their social systems. In this way Hurston and Chopin both express a feminist point of view that distinguishes them as early advocates of women’s rights.

**The Feminist Link between Hurston and Chopin**

Even though Hurston and Chopin did not actively participate in women’s rights movements, they did, however, advocate the most basic tenant of feminist doctrine: the right of a woman to choose how to live her own life, governed by their own intellect, talent, sensibilities, and voice. As writers, both women placed themselves at odds with the accepted social norms of their day regarding women’s roles, especially their unequal status in marriage, limited freedom of expression and movement, and suppressed female sexuality. During Hurston and Chopin’s lifetimes, the public discussion of female sexuality, especially outside of marriage, was considered offensive and immoral. The
outrage over the subject matter in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Awakening* overshadowed a rational response to the cultural and literary value of both novels. But, beneath the outcry concerning the illicit sex found in both novels, lingered a certain uneasiness concerning what is basically at stake: women's rights. It is sometimes difficult for the 21st century woman to understand how radical the writings of Hurston and Chopin were perceived. We must, for a moment, forget our legal rights and privileges, and the progress made in establishing parity between the sexes in both the public and private sphere over the past century. Writers such as Hurston and Chopin had within themselves the courage to speak, through Janie and Edna, of the discriminatory practices that women endured in the United States since its inception.

Historically, the feminist movement in the United States has been marked by three distinct waves. The first wave is an outgrowth of the abolitionist movement that found its voice by exposing the second class status of American women under the law while calling for the freedom of the slaves. After the emancipation of the slaves, the energy of the movement focused on a woman's right to vote and the suffrage movement, the first major women's movement in America, was born. The second wave of feminism has been identified with the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s: "If first-wave feminists were inspired by the abolition movement, their great-granddaughters were swept into feminism by the civil rights movement and the attendant discussion of principles such as equality and justice" (*britannica.com*).

Today's feminist literary criticism can be viewed as a direct product of the second wave women's movement of the '60s and '70's in that "the women's movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature" since "the representation of
women constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations” (Barry 116-7). It was second-wave feminism and literary criticism that brought the works of Hurston and Chopin back to light. In both authors’ works, the public/private dichotomy that was significant to the earlier second-wave feminists, was also evident in Hurston and Chopin’s representation of their female protagonists. Even though the feminist movement has gone in various directions since the second wave, “each of these different forms of feminism tended to develop its own ideas about how to break through the oppression of women in the public and private sphere” (Mack-Canty 155-6).

Reflecting on her own experience as a feminist and a woman working in the professional world, Hedda Bolgar, in “A Century of Essential Feminism,” identifies two lines of development in the feminist movement from the suffrage movement to current third wave feminist initiatives: “One is the increasing demand for women’s political and economic power. The other is the search for an autonomous self, one that is independent of the power of men in patriarchal societies” (195). Though neither Hurston nor Chopin were overtly political, it is clear that a feminist element is portrayed in their novels through Janie’s and Edna’s need to break free of patriarchal constraints and find personal autonomy.

As the second wave of feminism progressed into the third wave, women of color, lesbians and third-world women began asserting their voices, arguing that their social status and geographical location gave them a different perspective from the early white, middle-class feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan (Mack-Canty 157). Some women of color authors, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks, are examples of
“theorizing from embodiment” calling “attention to the intersectionality of racism, and heterosexism with sexism, further illustrating the unevenness in the movement of second-wave feminism into third-wave feminism” (Mack-Canty 158). This statement illustrates the need for women to not only identify with the oppression of women as a gender, but also recognize the additional layers of oppression that lesbian women, women of color, and lesbian women of color feel. The third-wave of feminists challenged the second-wave feminists to acknowledge the discrimination that many minority women felt their white sisters did not fully understand. In both Hurston and Chopin it is possible to find elements of each of these feminist waves, though neither author defined her writing as feminist.

An over-arching issue for scholars of the women’s movement is to understand how the feminist movement has changed over time, but at the core has remained the same by calling for women’s rights, equality, and justice. As women in one part of the world enjoy greater freedoms and opportunities, the emphasis is now on women in the less advanced countries who are still struggling for basic human rights. Many questions are left to be answered: “What has changed over the years about the experience of living a feminist life, about the relationship between the personal and the political? What does it mean to do feminist activism in this paradoxical world, where so many profound changes have occurred, and so many remain unchanged?” (Whittier 150). The writing of bold women, such as Hurston and Chopin, will continue to lead the way. The following examination of Chopin’s, *The Awakening*, provides insight into the psyche of the late 19th century woman, still bound by stifling laws and the prevailing social hierarchy.
Cultural Influences and the Literary Response to *The Awakening*

*The Awakening*, published in April, 1899 by Herbert S. Stone & Company, was Kate Chopin's final and most notorious novel that "scandalized its contemporary audiences" (Toth 336). Like Hurston's, Chopin's literary career suffered after publishing a novel which featured an unconventional female protagonist who defies the social conventions of her day. Hurston's Janie Woods and Chopin's Edna Pontellier both represent women who slowly become aware of their identity apart from men and as their female consciousness emerges, decide to live outside of society's stricture of moral conformity. *The Awakening* was bold both in its subject matter and in Chopin's treatment of her heroine, Mrs. Edna Pontellier. Chopin's representation of a woman who seeks independence and sexual satisfaction outside of marriage was unpalatable to many readers and critics of her day.

Chopin wrote *The Awakening* during the period known as "The Gilded Age" due to its blatant display of wealth, both real and artificial, in architecture, personal possessions, home furnishings, and fashion (Freeman Clark 21). In 1899, the same year *The Awakening* was published, American economist Thorstein Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption" with his book *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen 65). This period, between 1890 and the beginning of WWI, also called the "Fin de Siècle," was exemplified by "tacky splendor" which covered a certain "world-weariness" and a devotion to decadence and the erotic, including the homoerotic which could be found in the works of writers such as Oscar Wilde and Algernon Swinburne (Harad xii).

It is Swinburne's poem "A Cameo" that is quoted by a guest of Edna Pontellier at her final dinner party in her husband's home. Chopin uses the poem to capture the Fin de
Siècle mood of the evening in Chapter XXX: “There was a graven image of Desire /
Painted with red blood on a ground of gold” (138). By including Swinburne
in a scene that descends into drunkenness and threatens to end in debauchery, Chopin
places Edna in a situation where she is walking a dangerous line that may result
in her banishment from society before she is fully aware of the consequences. Edna ends
the dinner party abruptly and retreats to her solitary new home, not quite sure where she
is going, but at least becoming aware of where she no longer wants to be. She discovers
that she does not want a life of hedonistic pleasure, filled with evenings such as the one
she just experienced. Edna abruptly realizes that with freedom comes the responsibility
for structuring an environment that will advance her growth, not stifle it. However, like
Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Edna must discover her individuality in a setting
that is not sympathetic to a woman’s desire to live on her own terms. Edna realizes that
there is no clear path for her to follow in pursuit of her dreams and very few who will
support her.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin tells the story of a married society woman’s illicit love
affairs in a rather detached, sometimes ironic narrative tone that does not seem to either
condone or condemn Edna’s actions. Chopin was vilified for not making moral
judgments about her heroine’s behavior. In addition, the novel was “so viciously and
universally condemned for its ‘morbid, poisonous, and vulgar’ subject matter that
[Chopin] virtually gave up writing in the few remaining years of her life” and “suffered
social ostracism by friends and literary acquaintances in St. Louis” (Oates 129). Even
though Chopin’s narrative point of view was clearly neutral to her heroine’s deeds and
misdeeds, paradoxically she was also criticized for glamorizing and even promoting
lascivious behavior in married women as evidenced by reviews published in St. Louis newspapers. The critic for *The Mirror* wrote:

Like many of the novel’s contemporary readers, this reviewer expresses personal repugnance at Chopin’s exploration of female sexuality...one dislikes to acknowledge a wish that she had not written her novel...It absorbs and interests and makes one wonder, for the moment, with a little sick feeling, if all women are like the one, and that isn’t a pleasant reflection after you have thoroughly taken in this character study whose “awakening” gives title to Mrs. Chopin’s novel. (Frances Porcher, *The Mirror*, 9 May 1899, 6)

The *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* reviewer wrote:

At the very outset of the story one feels that the heroine should pray for deliverance from temptation, and in the very closing paragraph, when, having removed every vestige of clothes she “stands naked in the sun” and then walks out into the water until she can walk no farther, and then swims on into eternity, one thinks that her very suicide is in itself a prayer for deliverance from the evils that beset her, all of her own creating.

(Anonymous, “Notes from Bookland,” *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* 13 May 1899, 5)

The only contemporary woman writer to voice her opinion on Chopin’s novel was Willa Cather. Though mostly negative in tone, Cather does begrudgingly acknowledge Chopin’s skill at writing:
A Creole Bovary is this little novel of Miss Chopin’s… There was indeed, no need that a second Madame Bovary should be written, but an author’s choice of theme is frequently as inexplicable as his choice in wife. It is governed by some innate temperamental bias that cannot be diagrammed. This is particularly so in women who write, and I shall not attempt to say why Miss Chopin has devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme. (Willa Cather. “Books and Magazines,” Pittsburgh Leader, 8 July 1899, 6)

After the critics denounced her work, Chopin published an ironic, tongue-in-cheek “apology” to explain why she felt compelled to write about such a controversial and unsympathetic heroine:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together to see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (“Aims and Autographs of Authors,” Book News, 17 July 1899, 612)

In her personal life, Chopin exercised a degree of intellectual and physical freedom similar to the privileges she grants to her protagonist, Edna in her quest for independence. However, there is no evidence that Chopin indulged in any extra-marital affairs or actively advocated infidelity (Toth 168).
Before writing *The Awakening*, Chopin previously had modest literary success and acceptance as a Local Color writer of romances situated in the exotic Creole culture of the Louisiana Bayou. Born Kate O’Flaherty in St. Louis, to an Irish Catholic father and a French Creole mother, Chopin “grew up listening to her grandmother’s racy stories of Creole life and reading French literature” (Harad ix). She married at twenty to Oscar Chopin, a French Creole Catholic, moved to New Orleans and bore six children in nine years. However “unlike many nineteenth-century women, she seems to have avoided being buried alive in domestic chores…Oscar Chopin seemed to enjoy and encourage his wife’s independence” and the marriage was a happy one until his sudden death in 1882 from “swamp fever” (Toth 168).

Chopin moved back to St. Louis and was the sole provider for her family for the remainder of her life. Even though she never remarried she had a confidante in the person of Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, an obstetrician, who introduced her to authors such as Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley and encouraged her to write. Chopin differed from most married women of her day in that she was a self-supporting middle-aged widow who held a small literary salon at her home. Until *The Awakening* was published, she enjoyed considerable social status in St. Louis, “in spite of her eccentric French habits of smoking, drinking, and walking about alone, and this made the negative reception of *The Awakening* in her hometown all the more difficult” (Harad x). Sadly, Chopin never regained her previous status as an author and she died of a brain hemorrhage in 1904 (Toth 412).
Sex and “The Woman Question”

Although Chopin’s generation of women writers, including Edith Wharton and Sarah Orne Jewett, did not address slavery directly in their works, they can be seen as following in the footsteps of the women abolitionist authors who preceded them in that they continued to emphasize the plight of American women, especially in regard to male dominance in the home. Abolitionist authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, Julia Ward Howe, and Margaret Fuller often made the comparison between slavery and the lack of equality for women under the law. In her 1843 essay on 19th century relations between men and women, “The Great Lawsuit: MAN versus MEN. WOMAN versus WOMEN,” Margaret Fuller explains:

It is not surprising that it should be the Anti-Slavery party that pleads for woman, when we consider merely that she does not hold property on equal terms with men; so that, if a husband dies without a will, the wife, instead of stepping at once into his place as head of the family, inherits only a part of his fortune, as if she were a child, or ward only, not an equal partner.

(1627)

This earlier generation of female authors set the stage for advocating women’s rights by equating the plight of women, to some degree, with slavery. The precedent was thus established to put into question the role of women in society, especially concerning marriage, children, and property. Chopin also came into womanhood at a time when the middle class began to thrive. As more women were being educated and entered the workplace, the fight for emancipation and women’s suffrage intensified. The Awakening also addressed the issues of earlier women’s rights advocates by challenging the
Shultz 63

cipal role of women in regard to their sexual and legal relationships with men, particularly in marriage. Chopin explores the effects of the powerlessness that women of her generation felt in regards to domestic and legal issues. Through Edna, the reader sees how a woman could be drawn to take rash actions as her awakening consciousness disconnects her, bit by bit, from what seems to be arbitrary rules set by men to control women.

But unlike her heroine, it appears that Chopin was fortunate in her choice of husband and she did not have to negotiate with him for her personal liberty in order to write and come and go as she pleased and by all accounts was a marriage based on respect, love, and equality (Toth 167). In this way, Chopin’s marriage may be compared to what Margaret Fuller would call the highest level of marriage: an intellectual union of two independent, fully developed individuals, which leads to the empowerment of both genders (Lawsuit 1643). Fuller viewed the relationship between the genders as fluid: “Male and Female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (Lawsuit 1651). In this passage Fuller takes the argument for equality of the sexes a step further by asserting that masculinity and femininity are not absolutes, but that both sexes possess the same human qualities, in different degrees, and gender roles are socially defined. Men and woman possess the same basic needs, emotions, and intellectual capacity, but how this manifests, both publicly and privately, is largely due to the social constraints that limit both men and women, in different ways.
Whether or not Chopin was consciously putting Fuller's ideas into practice is not known. However, it is reasonable to hypothesize that she might have been familiar with Fuller's writing and may very well have discussed them in her salons in St. Louis as well as the writings of other Transcendentalists. There is evidence that Chopin probably read Emerson since Edna refers to reading Emerson as part of her self-education process in Chapter XXIV:

That night Edna dined alone... Then Edna sat in the library after dinner and read Emerson... She realized that she had neglected her reading, and determined to start anew upon a course of improving studies, now that her time was completely her own to do with as she liked... After a refreshing bath, Edna went to bed... a sense of restfulness invaded her, such as she had not known before. (111-12)

Unlike Hurston, whose feminist voice seems to derive from an individualistic point of view concerning her own personal need as a woman to create, move, and live freely in the world, Chopin seems to be more representative of the debate during the late 19th century of the "woman question" and creates in Edna a representation of many women of the age who were becoming increasingly dissatisfied and unfulfilled by the Victorian role for women typified by the Cult of True Womanhood (Welter 152).

The Cult of True Womanhood was essentially based on gender differences that came to identify women primarily with the body and men with the mind. It was reasoned that since the mind controlled the body, a woman's nature was considered inferior to a man's and their role to be subordinate to them (Crouse 260). Jamie S. Crouse writes in "If They Have a Moral Power: Margaret Fuller, Transcendentalism, and the
Question of Women's Moral Nature:"

The dominant understanding of gender roles in the nineteenth century found its clearest expression in the Cult of True Womanhood, but had its roots in a much longer tradition, one based on essential gender differences...In the nineteenth century, as industrialism increasingly divided men's and women's work, a woman's sphere of influence was increasingly tied to the home, while men were concerned with the larger, public sphere. The belief then became that a woman's nature fitted her precisely for this domestic role. A woman's bodily functions as wife and mother rendered her passive to the more powerful will of her husband; thus she became identified with the innate virtues of sympathy, altruism, selflessness and spirituality. (260-1)

In contrast to the views of the Cult of True Womanhood, Fuller believed that the qualities of femininity and masculinity existed in all people and that what needed to be sought was a balance between these two natures (Lawsuit 1651). It seems that Edna was actively seeking some balance in her own nature between femininity and masculinity, as Fuller describes. She wanted to have romance, love, and be loved as a woman, yet she needed to work and live independently as men of her age could do with impunity.

In the literary world, male uneasiness over women's emerging power and the exploration of female sexuality devolved into the creation of caricatures of women possessing varying degrees of virtue. A woman exhibiting her sexuality took the form of the “femme fatale,” a female creature fatally attractive to men and driven by her own desires to destroy herself and the men who succumb to her charms, such as Cleopatra,
Helen of Troy, and Aphrodite (Steele 316). A slightly more positive female role model was the New Woman typified by Henry James in *Daisy Miller*, “as forthright, innocent, and intelligent” (Harad xii). Chopin answers these stereotypes of women with “subtle portraits of the female psyche struggling to move beyond constraints” (Harad xiii). Chopin also examines the remnants of the 19th century Cult of True Womanhood as it transforms into the Angel in the House in the person of Madame Adele Ratignolle (Gilbert and Gubar 814). Yet, even Adele is not presented as one dimensional, but as a woman with many layers and variations in temperament. It is notable that James and Chopin both have their heroines, Daisy and Edna, die at the end of their novels. Perhaps, both authors recognized that society was not yet ready to accept a liberated woman and that their physical death was the only path to freedom left open to them. Their tragic ends serve to underscore the severity of the social stigma attached to defying the existing social class structure of male dominance. James and Chopin may have wanted to leave the reader feeling the depth of despair these women felt as they attempt to break free of their social constraints and face the prospect of social ostracism.

Another masculine reaction to the changing roles of women during the late 19th century was to label an unmarried woman as a spinster. If she were unmarried and unattractive, but intelligent and a professional person or artist, she may be given the unspoken title of the witch which represents “the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained ‘place’ and thus generates a story that ‘gets away’ from its [male] author” (Gilbert and Gubar 819). This incarnation of woman can be seen in New Orleans society’s treatment of the brilliant, unmarried pianist, Mademoiselle Reisz.
However, Edna seems to be struggling to overcome identification with any of these female roles. She tells the man she loves, Robert LeBrun, in response to him questioning her emerging outspokenness: “I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself. It doesn’t matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like” (Chopin 163). However, the men in Edna’s life categorize her in terms that complete their fantasy of who she is: To her husband, Leonce Pontellier, Edna is valuable and precious domestic property; to Robert she is a romantic heroine; to her companion Alcee Arobin, she is a budding femme fatale. Perhaps she best fits the description of Henry James’ New Woman. But Edna struggles against these attempts to label her in any way as she strives “to define her desires, and to understand herself as a separate and solitary being” apart from any limitations (Harad xiii-xiv). However, before delving into Edna’s journey from wife to woman, it may be enlightening to first concentrate on Chopin’s version of the ideal wife, the “mother-woman,” Adele Ratignolle. Adele is Edna’s confidante and to some degree a mother-figure for her. Without the presence of Adele against which Edna could measure her own life, Edna may not have been able to begin her awakening process.

Adele Ratignolle – The Consummate Mother-Woman or an Early Feminist?

The “mother-women” in The Awakening, as described by Chopin, can be equated to some extent with the idealized women of the Cult of True Womanhood also known as The Angel in the House (Gilbert and Gubar 818-20). According to Chopin, mother-women are: “...women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as
ministering angels... Many of them were delicious in the role; one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm... Her name was Adele Ratignolle. (12)

Through Adele, in contrast to Edna’s growing discomfort with her role as wife and mother, the reader sees a woman who is comfortable in her position and who wields power through skillful adaptation to the hierarchical social structure which does not wholly confine, nor define her. In fact, there is an ironic tone in Chopin’s grand description of Mrs. Ratignolle as “the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams” (12). Chopin seems to indicate that no woman could possibly live up to the romantic expectations set forth by the earlier tradition of the Cult of True Womanhood and even someone like Adele can only represent a near approximation of this idealized fantasy.

Adele has adapted to her circumstances, and unlike Edna who desires to break free of her fetters, Adele chooses to loosen her bonds so that she may live more comfortably within them. In this way, she can be viewed as taking an early feminist stance by judiciously using her power of speech and silence, much like Hurston’s Janie: “Chopin uses Adele’s character to show readers another form of resistance: Adele reveals her strength and feminist identity by working the patriarchal system to her advantage” (Streater 407-8). Adele uses her beauty and supposed frailty to become the center of male attention when she desires it and is not at all shy concerning her sexuality or her biological needs as a pregnant woman and mother.

For example, at Grand Isle, the young Robert LeBrun quickly attends to Adele after “She complained of faintness... The spell was soon over, and Mrs. Pontellier could not help wondering if there were not a little imagination responsible for its origin, for the
rose tint had never faded from her friend’s face” (18). Robert is exceedingly attentive to Adele’s needs and he follows her orders with care and affection. In fact, the previous summer at Grand Isle, Adele had been the center of Robert’s attentions after the death of Mademoiselle Duvigne: “...then Robert posed as an inconsolable, prostrating himself at the feet of Madame Ratignolle for whatever crumbs of sympathy and comfort she might be pleased to vouchsafe” (15). The relationship was merely a playful interlude satisfying to both Adele and Robert, even though he complained that, “she knew I adored her once, and she let me adore her. It was ‘Robert, come; go; stand up; sit down; do this; do that...Come and read Daudet to me while I sew’” (15). In Adele’s casual repartee with Robert, and her flirtation with him the previous summer, Chopin cleverly blends sexuality with the mother role. Adele has not let her skills with the opposite sex decline simply because she is a wife and mother:

By allowing Adele’s character to introduce and blend confident sexuality in the mother role, Chopin is distorting the role’s defined limits...Adele’s character projects the ideal mother-woman image, magnifies its stereotypical qualities, and then, by allowing Adele – a pregnant woman – to hint at sexual identity, Chopin contests the boundaries of Adele’s assigned gender roles...and reveals Adele’s ownership and authority of the mother-woman role beyond the male-prescribed definitions. It is a quiet revolution of sorts. (Streater 408-9)

One example of Adele’s conscious use of her feminine powers to gain control over a situation is when she again uses the ruse of feeling faint in order to have Robert accompany her back from the beach so that she can warn him not to toy with Edna’s
affections. Adele is using her knowledge of men, the limits of social acceptability, and her growing concerns about Edna's apparent naivete to attempt to influence Robert:

   Do me a favor, Robert...let Mrs. Pontellier alone...She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously...If your attentions to any married women here were ever offered with any intention of being convincing, you would not be the gentleman we all know you to be, and you would be unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust you. (29-30)

This passage clearly indicates Adele's understanding of the social customs between men and women in Creole society that allows the pleasures of flirtation, but does not condone the complications of entering into an affair.

   Edna is not sure what to make of the casual intimacy and flirtatiousness between Robert and Adele, for she does not feel the relaxation and assuredness in her feminine role as Adele does. Chopin suggests that much of the freedom of expression permitted women and men in New Orleans society was due to their Creole upbringing (14-16). They possessed a certain cosmopolitan air derived from the French and Spanish influence in New Orleans. The resulting mix of cultures set standards of behavior for women, in the presence of men who are not their husbands, which other more conservative communities might find offensive. This lack of jealousy can be seen as tempering the hold that men possessed over their wives, while at the same time placing the women in an honor system that the husbands believed their wives would uphold.

   According to Chopin, Creole men permitted their wives more freedom in the company of other men because they seemed to trust the women to make appropriate
choices because there was "a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be
inborn and unmistakable" (14). Adele further explains to Edna the Creole man's attitude
toward jealousy: "the Creole husband is never jealous; with him the gangrene passion is
one which has become dwarfed by disuse" (16). This degree of social freedom puts Adele
ahead of Edna in her ability to express herself in social situations. However, this
relaxation between men and women in Creole society did not nullify the double standard
concerning men's affairs with women outside of their circle. The double standard still
held that men could be forgiven an indiscretion, but for a woman, an illicit affair marked
the end of respectability, accompanied by the loss of social status and possibly her home
and children. Ironically, even though Edna is initially more socially conservative than
Adele, it is Edna who will ultimately push past all social boundaries and separate herself
completely from the patriarchal norms of domestic behavior.

However, to overlook Adele's fledging feminism and "to focus solely on Edna's
radical feminism is to limit Chopin's exploration of women's social roles since feminism
is about choice, and Chopin, through Adele, offers her readers more than one definition
of the feminist expression" (Streater 406). As a mother-woman, Chopin places Adele
Ratignolle in the double bind of "capitulating one's self to patriarchal systems" on some
level in order to survive (Streater 406). Yet, Adele does not display any particular
dissatisfaction with her role as wife and mother, and indeed seems to relish in it. Adele is
not presented as a passive wife and uninvolved mother. She is described as an equal
partner with her husband in the domestic sphere in which she rules, and is the primary
caretaker for her children since she does not employ a nanny, whereas Edna has a
"quadroon" to watch over her children (Chopin 3). This is not to say that Adele does not
Shultz 72

have domestic help, as most Creole women of means did, but that she chooses to take an active role as a homemaker. The relationship between Adele and her husband seems warm and congenial. Chopin paints a picture of domestic contentment in the Ratignolle home:

Mr. Ratignolle was one of those men who are called the salt of the earth. His cheerfulness was unbounded, and it was matched by his goodness of heart, his broad charity, and common sense...The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union. (85)

There does not seem to be any tone of condescension on Chopin’s part in describing the suitability of Mr. and Mrs. Ratignolle for each other. The reference to their “union” is reminiscent of Margaret Fuller’s descriptions of the ideal marriage. However, the Ratignolles do not seem to have reached Fuller’s highest order of marriage, described as the “spiritual and intellectual union of two independent, fully developed units” (Lawsuit 1642-3). The Ratignolles could never have an equal union as long as Adele did not have equal rights under the law.

Fuller held up her ideal union as something for women to strive for in the future. In “The Great Lawsuit” Fuller explains this distinction: “It is for that which is the birthright of every being capable to receive it,—the freedom, the religious, the intellectual freedom of the universe, to use it means to learn its secret as far as nature has enabled them, with God alone for their guide and judge” (1636). Fuller wanted nothing less than full equal rights and equal status for women with men in all aspects of society. For Fuller, the laws that prohibited women from owning property and having the right to work
outside the home, as well as to enjoy the personal freedoms granted to men were the social constraints that women needed to challenge in order to gain full citizenship and autonomy. Even though the Ratignolles have a very workable marriage that is satisfying to both, Adele is still dependent upon her husband in all material ways. For this reason, Edna does not envy Adele’s situation. In fact, Edna feels that the Ratignolles “domestic harmony” is a “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” (86). To Edna, Adele is living on the surface of life, unwilling to plunge into the depth of feeling and experience that would unleash her passions. For Edna, life without passion is only a superficial experience. She perceives Adele’s life as safe, comfortable, and predictable. This is not the life Edna wants for herself. But Adele seems quite content with her family life and does not understand why Edna is not satisfied with her marriage. If measured by the standards of the day, “Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world” and “Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better” (11).

Even though the Ratignolles may not fully represent Fuller’s concept of the ideal union, mainly because of Adele’s material dependence upon her husband, Chopin seems to be holding up this type of marriage as a place where feminism can grow and eventually thrive. Adele does not take a subordinate position to her husband in the home sphere and is free with her conversation and comments. Indeed, the two are frequently observed as thinking as one and finishing each other’s sentences. As Edna observed the couple conversing at a dinner party: “He spoke with an animation and earnestness that gave an exaggerated importance to every syllable he uttered. His wife was keenly interested in
everything he said, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth” (85-6). However, it is clear that the male role is dominant in Creole society and Adele only pushes her limits so far. For example, unlike Edna, Adele rarely leaves her house “except to take a languid walk around the block with her husband after nightfall” (116). Adele also does not appear in public in the later months of her pregnancy and when Edna invites the couple to her dinner party, “Monsieur Ratignolle brought himself and his wife’s excuses” (133).

However, there is one instance where Adele takes umbrage at a mandate given her by her husband when Mr. Ratignolle sends Adele to warn Edna of the possible scandal which might erupt from Edna living alone and being seen in the company of the known womanizer, Alcee Arobin. Adele dutifully delivers the message. However, upon leaving Edna’s “Pigeon House,” she dismisses the warning and tells Edna: “don’t mind what I said about Arobin, or having someone stay with you” (148). In this moment Adele is demonstrating a certain respect for Edna’s independence or at minimum, for her right to make her own choices. This demonstrates the female bond forming between the traditional woman and the untraditional woman against the social conventions of patriarchal law.

**Edna Pontellier: Awakening of a Feminist Consciousness**

In Edna Pontellier, Chopin creates the representation of a young, married woman at the turn-of-the-century who, very gradually as if waking from a deep sleep, discovers her feminine consciousness and strives for independence from her socially defined role as wife and mother. At the beginning of the novel, Edna appears to be content with her station in life as she vacations at Grand Isle, Louisiana with her Creole husband, Leonce,
and their two young sons. But unlike the other upper class vacationers from New Orleans, Edna is not Creole. She is a Protestant, raised by a strict, widowed father in Kentucky and transplanted to New Orleans through marriage. Edna is different. She is an outsider by circumstance and reticent by nature. Chopin describes Edna as introspective with eyes that reflect her inner dimensions:

She was an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution ...Mrs. Pontellier’s eyes were quick and bright... She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought. Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair...emphasizing the depth of her eyes. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features.

(5-6)

Despite being a married woman in her late twenties, Edna seems quite innocent and unaffected with her tendency toward gazing in contemplation and her mercurial facial expressions that involuntarily reflect what she is feeling. Unlike Adele, Edna is not socially self-assured and “though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles” (14). Edna is fascinated by Adele and drawn to her candor and warmth, and seeks her out as a confidante. Edna is also attracted to Adele’s freedom of expression and is impressed “most forcibly” by her “entire absence of prudery” (14). Though Adele is only a few years older, Edna finds herself opening up to Adele almost as a surrogate mother, supplying the nurturing and affection that Edna missed as a motherless child. This pseudo-maternal relationship reinforces the early impression of
Edna as rather dreamy and emotionally naïve in the early chapters of the novel, especially in dealing with the opposite sex.

Edna’s most deeply felt romantic attachments, prior to marriage, were to men who were unattainable and mainly built on fantasy. Her first infatuation as a young girl is with a Calvary officer who visited her father. Her second is for a young man engaged to a neighbor’s daughter, but “he, too, went the way of dreams” (26). Her final and most intense passion is with the photograph of a great tragic actor and “when alone she sometimes picked it up and kissed the cold glass passionately” (27). But as that fantasy died out, Edna found herself in the “world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (27). In a household dominated by her strict father and an unaffectionate older sister, Edna did not have the guidance in these tender matters that a mother might have provided. As a result, she was “not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection in herself or in others...she never realized that the reserve of her own character had much, perhaps everything, to do with this” (25). In her friendship with Adele, she finds herself opening up in ways she had never allowed herself before. Early in the novel, before her friendship with Adele, Edna’s is presented in a dreamlike way, as if she is on the verge of awakening.

In Chapter I, Edna appears to almost be an apparition as Leonce watches his wife come up the path from the Gulf shore to the Lebrun Hotel: “He fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at a snail’s pace from the beach...The Gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun” (3). This image of Edna has been likened by Sandra Gilbert to a “distinctly
feminist fantasy of the second coming of Aphrodite” (Gilbert “Second Coming” 45).

Gilbert suggests that Chopin is setting the stage for the exploration in The Awakening of what would “really happen to a mortal, turn-of-the-century woman who tried to claim for herself the erotic freedom and power owned by the classical queen of love” (Gilbert “Second Coming” 45). In this respect, Edna’s goddess-like entrance foreshadows the difficulties Edna will face as she attempts to claim her sexual, intellectual, and personal freedom in a society that is not yet ready to accept these changes.

As soon as Edna reaches the porch of their cottage, the spell is broken and she is immediately chastised by her husband who is “looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (3). He says to her: “What folly! To bathe at such an hour in such heat! You are burnt beyond recognition” (3). Edna does not respond but silently reaches out for him to return her wedding rings “and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm. She slipped them upon her fingers” (3). This pantomime between husband and wife mirrors the nature of their conventional marital relationship. Leonce takes Edna for granted as an extension of his material possessions and Edna responds to Leonce almost as impersonally, in tacit understanding of his dominion over her as well as the provider of her material needs. This incident is also more significant when viewed through the lens of 19th century laws governing the rights of women in marriage. Though a simple act, it reminds the reader that Edna is by law an extension of her husband’s property and privilege. Edna does not have the same civil rights as her husband, and this simple gesture metaphorically ties Edna to Leonce in the legal bond of marriage.
Chopin provides more insight into the subtleties of their relationship by describing Leonce’s frustration with Edna’s lack of enthusiasm for motherhood:

It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or anyone else’s, wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived...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...In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. (11)

Chopin establishes early that Edna is not a model of the Cult of True Womanhood. She is not devoted to her children in the way that Adele and the other mother-women are devoted to theirs. Edna’s feelings toward her husband and her children are ambiguous. She appears to have affection for her children and is a dutiful wife, but she does not seem to put Leonce and the children at the center of her consciousness. Edna ruminates on this in a moment of retrospection on Grand Isle: “She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them...their absence was a sort of relief...it seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (28). This ambiguity, along with Leonce’s vague dissatisfaction with Edna, leads to a scene that precipitates Edna’s first awakening.

It was Leonce’s habit to go out in the evening to meet with other summer husbands at the neighboring Klein’s Hotel for billiards and business. Upon his return, Edna is fast asleep but he rouses her to question her about the children. He checks on the sleeping children and then tells Edna that Raoul has a fever. Half asleep, Edna responds
that Raoul is fine and “had gone to bed perfectly well,” but Leonce berates her for her “habitual neglect of the children” (8). At that, “Mrs. Pontellier sprang out of bed and went into the next room” where she found the children sleeping contentedly (Chopin 8). When she returns to bed, “she said nothing, and refused to answer her husband when he questioned her...Mrs. Pontellier was by that time thoroughly awake. She began to cry a little” (8). At this point, Edna has been feeling a vague dissatisfaction with her life that she has not yet identified. She is becoming more sensitive to Leonce’s accusations and retreats from him for solace and self-consolation. It is significant that Chopin uses the phrase “thoroughly awake,” as it suggests the internal process which will eventually lead to Edna’s full feminist awakening.

Even though scenes like this one were not uncommon in her married life, in this instance Edna is particularly affected by her husband’s criticism. It is now past midnight and Edna cannot sleep. She goes out to the front porch and rocks in one of the wicker chairs. She is alone in the night and “there was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl...and the everlasting voice of the sea...it broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night” (9). Edna finds herself crying, though she cannot not pinpoint exactly why. She has never been so affected by her husband’s chastisements as “they seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband’s kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood” (10). However, Edna is now feeling 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” (9). In short, Edna is experiencing her first twinge of feminist consciousness. She is beginning to
feel uncomfortable with the status quo and the unspoken understanding between she and Leonce that Edna’s place is in the home and that her husband is the master of that home.

Edna still feels uneasy and disconnected from her surroundings when she wakes in the morning. She is becoming aware of her inner thoughts and over the summer will take “the first step of a dependent housewife towards liberation” which is to “be in possession of her body and mind” (Clark “The Bird” 335). In some ways Edna is very like the caged birds in the main house of the hotel: “A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door” spoke a “language which nobody understood, unless it was the mockingbird that hung on the other side of the door” (1). Like one of the caged birds, Edna lives in her own gilded cage, but does not speak the language of the bird in the other cage. The bird in the other cage seems to represent the women in Creole society who, unlike Edna, have contented themselves with domesticity and accepted their limitations. The two are near in proximity, living in similar circumstances, yet are not able to communicate with each other. The cage seems to represent the oppressive patriarchal society which confines Edna and other women of her era who lack the vocabulary necessary to express themselves (Clark “The Bird” 337).

In Edna’s journey toward self-expression, Chopin appears to be tapping into the energy of the New Woman movement of late 19th century. One of the primary factors motivating the typical New Woman was rebellion against the “old woman,” described by one member of an 1890s women’s club as “bounded on the north by servants, on the south by children, on the east by ailments, and on the west by clothes” (Finney 195). Like the pampered birds in their gilded cages, these women were confined by the elements of their lives that served to keep them carefully contained in domesticity. Their duties
included the supervision of the servants, the care of the children, and attending to the ailments of all members of their families, all the while being almost completely covered in layers of constrictive clothing. Unlike the conventional Victorian woman who is accustomed to this perpetual self-sacrifice, the New Woman pursues self-fulfillment and independence, often choosing to work for a living. She typically strives for equality in her relationships with men, seeking “to eliminate the double standard that shaped the sexual mores of the time” (Finney 195-6). This description of the New Woman is embodied to a great degree in Edna. However, Edna is not involved in any organized women’s groups, and Chopin does not refer to her directly as a New Woman. Edna comes to the realization of her desires, slowly, on her own without the benefit of communion with other women seeking the same thing. Nevertheless, Edna’s friendship with the Adele does help her bridge a gap in her relationship with women, as Edna is not close to her two sisters and their mother died when she was very young: “Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences…even as a child…she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (20). However, at Grand Isle, Edna begins to “loosen a little the mantle of her reserve” due to a combination of several influences, but “the most obvious was the influence of Adele Ratignolle” (20). This friendship also provides the foundation for Edna’s second awakening.

The scene of the second awakening is set by the sea with Edna, Adele, and Robert. Chopin uses the imagery of the sea liberally throughout the text as a force of nature which speaks to Edna’s soul, beckoning to her inner consciousness. As Robert invites Edna to join him bathing in the Gulf, “her glance wandered from his face away
toward the Gulf, whose sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty” (18-9). Chopin explains the inner workings of Edna’s mind at this stage in Chapter VI:

    A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her...at that early period it served but to bewilder her...Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her...The voice of the sea is seductive...The voice of the sea speaks to the soul...The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.

    (19-20)

The sea becomes a metaphor for Edna’s emerging sensuality and individuality. Robert and the sea are joined together in this metaphor as Robert will become the focal point for Edna’s desires. Adele is also pivotal in this scene. As the two women sit in the shade gazing at the sea, Adele urges Edna to tell her “of whom—of what are you thinking” (23). For the first time in her life, Edna opens up and tells of wandering in the fields of her childhood and her first romantic infatuations. She confides to Adele that “sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” and that her marriage to Leonce “was purely an accident” (26-7). He had pursued her passionately when she was secretly infatuated with “the face and figure of a great tragedian” and she felt that as Leonce’s wife she would live in the world of reality and let go of her romantic dreams.

    Edna found that she “grew fond of her husband” and was “fond of her children,” and missed them when they were away, but sometimes found herself forgetting them
Edna confesses that she does not feel excessive passion for her husband and believes that this adds to the stability of her marriage since she equates passion with her fleeting girlhood imaginary romances. As she completes her reverie to Adele, Edna “was flushed and intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled her like wine, or like the first breath of freedom” (28). By trusting in Adele, and allowing herself to reveal the intimate details of her life, Edna has achieved a second level of awakening of her feminist consciousness. Edna first had to become aware of her own inner stirrings of discontent before she could absorb this second awakening that held the promise of friendship and self-expression with another woman. The third level of Edna’s awakening would be instigated by a very different type of woman—Mademoiselle Reisz.

The Female Artist and Emerging Feminism

Over the next few weeks, after the heady experience of allowing herself to experience intimate friendship with Adele, Edna also finds herself more and more drawn to Robert’s company. But she is unaware that Adele has warned Robert not to draw Edna into a romantic flirtation that she may not fully understand. Edna is at a vulnerable stage where her emotions are lying just beneath the surface and she is not yet equipped to deal with her depth of feeling. Edna is also beginning to dabble in her sketch book, but does not yet see herself as an artist. However, she experiences a connection with the artistry of the concert pianist, Mademoiselle Reisz, whose friendship becomes essential to her relationship with Robert and more importantly to her relationship with herself as an artist. In this way, The Awakening, is also a Künstlerroman, meaning an artist’s novel that deals with “the youth and development of an individual who becomes—or is on the
threshold of becoming—a painter, musician, or poet—and usually ends on a note of rejection of the commonplace life” (Higgins Britannica.com). Edna will eventually discover this for herself in her exploration of her identity, but it begins with hearing Mademoiselle Reisz play a moody prelude by Frederic Chopin.

One Saturday night, when all the guests are gathered together in the main house of the LeBrun Hotel, Edna is seated on the porch, as the moon is rising “casting a million lights across the distant, restless water” (37). Robert asks Edna if she would like to hear Mademoiselle Reisz play, knowing that Mademoiselle Reisz rarely plays for the guests: “I’ll tell her that you want to hear her. She likes you. She will come” (37). Robert is sensing the connection between the two women as artists and is bringing Edna out of her inner world of restlessness into the outer world of experience and culture. Reisz’s music will have a profound and unexpected effect on Edna. Reisz grants Roberts request and comes to the main house. Reisz represents the artist Edna hopes to become.

Chopin describes Reisz as a “disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to her temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (37). Yet, when she plays the piano, the guests are captivated and Edna is moved to tears. Again Chopin combines images of the sea with Edna’s inexpressible feelings: “She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body...tears blinded her (39). As Reisz finishes, she asks Edna how she liked the music and Edna is unable to speak. She “pressed the hand of the pianist convulsively” to which Reisz responds: “You are the only one worth playing for” (39). The bond between the accomplished pianist and
the fledgling painter is formed at that moment. Edna has now established her second intimate female friendship with a woman, quite unlike Adele, who represents a world of opportunity and freedom that Edna has never known. Mademoiselle Reisz becomes Edna’s confidante for the expression of her artistic aspirations and romantic yearnings.

As mentioned earlier, Mademoiselle Reisz represents an incarnation of an independent, professional New Woman that “was treated with contempt or fear” because she embodies “some deeply held assumptions about what it meant to be a man or woman” (Powell 77). Reisz is suspect as a woman because she is unmarried, unattractive, and yet is able to support herself through her art. In the patriarchal order, she would be perceived as “a symbol of upheaval, threatening to dissolve the boundaries of gender and disrupt the maternal activities which nature was thought to have ordained for women” (Powell 77). According to Gilbert and Gubar in “The Madwoman in the Attic,” Reisz would be cast as the Witch/Fiend as she is marked by “her stubborn autonomy and unknowable subjectivity” and “the ineradicable selfishness” that underlies her motives to defy the traditional female role that she is unwilling to play (818).

Edna is now aligned with two women who appear to be on the opposite ends of the spectrum of women’s roles at the turn-of-the-century: Madame Ratignolle, the mother-woman and Mademoiselle Reisz, the spinster-artist. Edna herself is struggling to find her own middle ground and her own truth. However, she seems to need these alliances to enable her to find out not only who she is, but who she is not. When the summer is over and Edna visits Reisz in New Orleans, Reisz warns her of the dangerous path she has chosen as Edna declares: “I am becoming an artist. Think of it!” (97). Reisz tells Edna that “to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul…The soul that
dares and defies” (97). This definition could also be applied to the soul of an early feminist, as Edna appears to be. Edna is drawn to Reisz’s freedom as well as her art as she recognizes that the “profit from ‘selling’ her talent” brings her “what money of her own can buy: independence and freedom” (Dyer 51). Edna no longer wants to rely on her husband for her material needs, for as long as she is financially dependent upon him, she is also subject to his control. By selling her art, Edna will be able to live on her own. Even if she must live more simply and apart from the social benefits that marriage affords, she is willing to sacrifice social and financial security for freedom.

An Awakening in the Water

The music of Mademoiselle Reisz uncovers Edna’s deeply buried emotions and also has a stimulating effect on the rest of the guests. Those who are fond of sea bathing, including Edna, Robert, Leonce, the Ratignolles, and Madam LeBrun are all drawn to take a moonlight swim. Edna is the only one who cannot swim, even though the others have been trying to teach her throughout the summer. As the group approaches the beach, they notice that the “sea was quiet now...and did not break except upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents” (41). Even though Edna feels “a certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water,” she is determined to attempt to swim and “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” (41). She shouts with joy “as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water” (41). Like Janie’s epiphany under the pear tree, Edna has unleashed yet another portion of her sleeping soul as she, almost miraculously, begins to swim:
She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her own strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no man had swum before...intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone...she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself...A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses...She made no mention of her encounter with death and her flash of terror, except to say to her husband, “I thought I should have perished out there alone.” (41-2)

Leonce and the others have been watching Edna with great pleasure and each feels a measure of her success. Leonce reassures her that she was not in any real danger, telling her: “You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you” (42). Edna’s flash of fear and premonition of death can be seen as symbolic of her uncertainty as to where her passions will lead her and also as possibly the death of her old, recognizable self. This incident foreshadows the tumultuous changes she will experience as she goes out into the world on her own and the final tragic consequences. But for the moment, she is thrilled with her accomplishment, yet suddenly feels exhausted and starts up the path to the hotel alone. But as Robert joins her, Edna becomes defensive and irritable, even though he has become her daily companion:

Did you think I was afraid?...I’m very tired...You don’t know anything about it. Why should you know? ...A thousand emotions have swept through me to-night [sic]...I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one. It is like a night in a dream...There must be spirits abroad to-night. (43)
Edna feels bewitched and possessive of her new feeling of power. She does not want Robert to intrude and break the spell. This is also similar to Janie’s experience under the pear tree in that both women have realized for the first time their own internal worth. Robert seems to sense this and replies: “The spirit seeks some one [sic] mortal worthy to hold him company, worthy of being exalted for a few hours into the realms of the semi-celestials...But to-night he found Mrs. Pontellier. Perhaps he will never wholly release her from the spell” (44). But Edna’s “thoughts were elsewhere—somewhere in advance of her body, and she was striving to overtake them” (44). Robert and Edna have become kindred spirits in their longing, though they do not have words to express themselves when they settle on the porch of Edna’s cottage and she stretches into a “beneficent repose” in the hammock. Robert “seated himself again and rolled a cigarette, which he smoked in silence. No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbing of desire” (45-6).

Robert and Edna have begun at this moment, without words, the connection that will blossom into an ill-fated romance in the year to come. Yet, Edna does not seem to be completely aware of the romantic element, as she is also feeling the pull toward autonomy that will take hold of her after the summer ends. The sensuous stillness is broken by Leonce and the group’s return.

Leonce is perturbed to see Edna in the hammock and not preparing for bed. When he orders her to come inside, she refuses and tells him she is going to sleep in the hammock: “Another time she would have gone in at his request...with a writhing motion she settled herself more securely in the hammock. She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant” (46-7). For the first time in their married life, Edna tells
Leonce to “go to bed...don’t speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you” (47).

The gauntlet has been thrown down. Edna has taken a stand against Leonce and against her role as a dutiful wife. Chopin describes the transformation in Edna as “like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (48). Edna has been forever changed. She will never be able to play the role of Leonce’s wife again without realizing that the role no longer suits her. This situation echoes Janie’s final words to Joe on his deathbed as she comes to understand her role in their marriage: “You done lived wid me for twenty years and yo don’t half know me atall...Ah ain’t goin tuh hush. Naw, you goin tuh listen tuh me one time before you die...Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me” (Their Eyes 82). Like Janie, Edna is no longer going to keep silent or live her life through the dictates of her role as a wife.

The following morning Edna takes her new found feeling of independence further and summons Robert to go with her to mass at the neighboring island, Cheniere Caminada: “She had never sent for him before. She had never seemed to want him before. She did not appear conscious that she had done anything unusual in commanding his presence” (49). They spend the day together, away from the others who attend mass, in what seems to be idyllic romance. They are both caught up in the magic from the night before and their unspoken desire for each other. Edna is becoming more and more womanly and less like an adolescent through her new awareness of her senses. Chopin illustrates this transformation in a scene that seems almost like a fairy tale. After a long nap in a villager’s cottage, Edna wakes up feeling ravenous and “bit a piece from the brown bread, tearing it with her strong, white teeth. She poured some of the wine into a
glass and drank it down” (57). She finds Robert outside reading a book under an orange tree and asks him: “How many years have I slept? The whole island seems changed” (57). Robert replies that she has slept “precisely one hundred years” and he was “left here to guard” her slumbers (57). They cross back to Grand Isle in the twilight in a small, borrowed boat while “misty spirit forms were prowling in the shadows and among the reeds, and upon the water” (59). The next day, Edna’s fairy tale romance is thrust back into reality as Robert announces that he is leaving to try to make his fortune in Mexico.

With Robert’s abrupt departure, Edna recognizes that she has become infatuated with him and misses him desperately. She returns to New Orleans at the end of the summer a changed woman, in love with a man who is absent from her and pulling away from her ties with her husband and children. She no longer obeys her husband’s commands. She throws her wedding ring into the fireplace in a burst of anger one evening, only to recover it the next morning, feeling rather foolish for the vehemence of her outburst. But she ceases to adhere to the social niceties: “She began to do as she liked and to feel what she liked. She completely abandoned her Tuesdays at home, and did not return the visits of those who called upon her. She made no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household” (86). Each new act of independence leads to another which eventually leads Edna to leave her husband’s home and her children to live in her own little “Pigeon House” and actively pursue her art while she uncovers her appetites for life and love (112).
The Consequences of Freedom

Edna has become the New Woman. She even goes so far as to have a sexual relationship with the charming, handsome, but shallow Alcee Arobin. She finds only disappointment after Robert’s return in his inability to accept her and understand her need for independence. Robert breaks with her because he wants her for a wife and she does not want to divorce Leonce to become another man’s wife. He leaves her with a note: “I love you. Good-by – because I love you” (172). Edna wants what she finds is impossible to have: a life lived as a sexually liberated, financially independent, working artist. It is this realization, as well as her conflicting feelings toward her children, that takes her back to Grand Isle the following spring alone and leads her to swim to her death.

In attempting to understand Edna’s apparent suicide, Chopin provides some insight through Edna’s explanation of her feelings about her children to Adele: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (72). As Edna walks into the sea to swim until she can swim no more, she seems to be literally giving her life for her children, but is keeping her soul for herself. Edna cannot imagine how she can reconcile the kind of life she wants with the reality of the life she is able to have. These thoughts run through her mind as she enters the water:

She said over and over to herself: “Today it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one [sic] else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Leonce Pontellier – but Raoul and Etienne!” She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle
that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children. (176)

In these thoughts, Edna seems to value the freedom and awareness she has come to possess as more valuable than a life lived under the conditions that society would permit her. Life would have no meaning as a series of sexual affairs without love. Life would not have meaning without her art. Yet, she could not leave her children the legacy of an estranged mother, considered to be living a scandalous and immoral life. It would seem that the price of freedom from patriarchal law for Edna is death.

As she swims, she becomes increasingly exhausted as she “thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (177). Chopin offers no definitive explanation for Edna’s death, but she does allow the reader to hear Edna’s final thoughts as she swims on and on, with the sensuous touch of the sea “enfolding her body in its soft, close embrace” (177). Edna thinks of “the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little girl, believing that is had no beginning and no end” and how Mademoiselle Reisz, if she saw her now would laugh and say to her “and you call yourself an artist! What pretentions, Madame!” (177). The only person she wants to be with is Robert, but “he did not understand. He would never understand. Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him—but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone” (178). Edna dared to become as much of a New Woman as she could, but she could not find reconciliation between her dreams of selfhood and her limited reality. As Joyce Dyer explains in “Understanding Edna’s Suicide:”
The 19th century’s message of the supremacy of motherhood was so strong and so intense that it was absorbed into the systems of its women—even women like Edna who were not maternally inclined... Edna’s deep ambivalence, caused in large part by her natural inheritance of her century’s philosophy, prohibits her from solving her dilemma. Motherhood and selfhood were incompatible in Edna’s century and in Edna herself. The moral implications of her role are so deeply a part of Edna’s psyche that there is no way to remove them, except through death.

Perhaps the story of Edna’s awakening is about the beginning of selfhood as exemplified in one woman’s lifetime, and not the full completion of the process. It seems that Chopin is creating a parable for women that represents both the promise and the pain of rebelling against a suffocating social system for the hope of a life free from oppression and artificial limitations. Edna’s story seems to end prematurely, but in that ending we are left to ponder the choices she made in her life and, as readers, we must seek the answers for ourselves. In that process, we continue Edna’s journey as we look into our own struggles with our feminist consciousness and the actions that women, may or may not take to achieve autonomy in our own lives.

Conclusion

With *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston succeeds in writing an unconventional novel with an African-American female heroine who experiences significant growth from adolescent to womanhood and stands on her own, making her own choices, and living her life as she chooses. In this context, the feminist voice found
in *Their Eyes* still resonates today. Chopin, with *The Awakening*, also succeeds in creating a complex, character study of a woman from the dominant white culture, who becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her socially confining gender role and takes courageous steps to gain her independence from her prescribed station in life as a wife and mother. The feminist voice is heard throughout *The Awakening* as Chopin challenges all aspects of the limitations facing women in the late 19th century.

Even though they are from opposite sides of the social divide between blacks and whites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Hurston's Janie and Chopin's Edna share many common traits and aspirations. Both women are thoughtful and introspective, which leads them to question their circumstances and recognize that they yearn for a more fulfilling life. They both become increasingly restless and look to new horizons and new experiences to fill the voids in their lives. What they find missing in their lives is essentially their own individual sense of self. They are not comfortable with the defined social order which relegates them to wife, mother, lover, or spinster. They do not want to be labeled or possessed. They long to find themselves, as women, separate from men, in order to be able to live their lives in the full expression of their most deeply held desires. They also both need artistic expression: Janie as a story-teller and Edna as a painter. But what they want most of all is the freedom to choose to live their lives the way they want to live them, in social and legal equality with their male counterparts. The common traits that Janie and Edna share place them as forerunners to what became the feminist movement. Even though Janie and Edna are not perfect women or perfect human beings, they are excellent examples of women who take a chance and follow their deepest human
longings with the courage and conviction necessary to accept the consequences of their choices, come what may.

In the 21st century, it is easy to forget the severity of the obstacles facing women of previous generations in their quest for basic human rights and equality under the law. Women from diverse social and economic classes, as represented by Janie and Edna, had formidable choices to make if they chanced to stray outside the socially accepted gender roles ascribed to women of their day. For a woman to dare to live as she pleased, the consequences were often dire. If she did not have an independent means of financial support, she had to rely on male family members for her every need. If she chose to remain single and become a professional woman, she was demeaned for being masculine and sexually undesirable. If she was married, she could not own property since her husband was the legal head of the household, and a woman could lose her children if she were divorced (McDowell 16). Social ostracism was often the result for women who lived as divorcees or had a sexual partner outside of marriage. Both Janie and Edna faced many of these issues to different degrees with different responses, and this is what makes their stories still so compelling and poignant. These women could not live within the established social order and remain true to themselves. They could not live their lives confined to the duties of wife, mother, and homemaker.

The strictures of traditional womanhood established that “the American woman had her choice—she could define her rights in the way of the women’s magazines and insure them by the practice of the requisite virtues, or she could go outside the home, seeking other rewards than love…a decision on which everything in her world depended” (Welter 173). If a woman listened to her own inner voice or to “other voices than those of
her proper mentors, she lost both her happiness and her power in her proper sphere” (Welter 173). Her proper sphere was, of course, the home. Today, either by choice or economic necessity, many women work outside the home, but they are still expected to maintain the household and be the primary caretaker for their families. Within recent years, it has become more common and acceptable for a husband to share homemaking and child rearing duties with his wife, but in the workplace women are still paid less than men for doing equal work.

According to the 2008 United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, women who work full time still earn, on average, only 78 cents for every dollar men earn and the statistics are even worse for women of color (Vagins ACLU.org). This illustrates that even though American women have come a long way toward equal rights, there are still many hurdles to clear in the public sphere. For women in third world countries, the challenges to securing equal rights and protection under religious and civil law are even more intimidating. For this reason, the current third wave of feminist action has become increasingly more global as light is shown into the dark recesses of the abusive behavior of men toward women in many areas of the world.

In her study of the current state of discrimination toward women worldwide, Sylvia Walby, in Theorizing Patriarchy, moves from using the term “patriarchy” as the primary cause, to “gender regime” which takes into account the interconnected structures of geography, social divisions, age, ethnicity, and different sexual orientations (McDowell 17). It is important to note that the patriarchy which dominated and limited Hurston’s and Chopin’s female protagonists is still fully functioning in many parts of the
world. Walby breaks down the gender regime into two distinct areas: the domestic
regime and the public regime:

The domestic gender regime is based upon household production as the
main structure and site of women’s work activity and the exploitation of
her labour and sexuality and upon the exclusion of women from the
public. The public gender regime is based, not on excluding women from
the public, but on the segregation and subordination of women within the
structures of paid employment and the state, as well as within culture,
sexuality, and violence...In the domestic form, the beneficiaries are
primarily the individual husbands and fathers of the women in the
household, while in the public form there is more collective appropriation.
In the domestic form the principal patriarchal strategy is exclusionary,
excluding women from the public arena; in the public, it is segregationist
and subordinating. (McDowell 17)

The discrimination that Janie and Edna experienced is not so different from what million
of women are still experiencing today in both the private and the public spheres, or as
Walby puts it, the domestic and public gender regimes.

The primary accomplice that allows these systems to keep women chained to
archaic patterns of male dominance, whether at home or in the workplace, is silence. That
is why women authors, such as Hurston and Chopin, who give voice to those women who
are unable to speak for themselves, are so necessary for the advancement of women’s
rights in generations to come: “The survival of feminism—of feminism in an ongoing
history-in-process with a future—depends in part on our ability to reproduce ourselves in
subsequent generations and to pass on what we have learned so that the wheel does not need to be reinvented every generation” (Friedman 215). Women must continue to write about the condition of women and to provide a platform where deeply held prejudices and doctrines can be examined and exposed through the literary arts. The works of Hurston and Chopin are just as relevant today as they were at the time of their writings, because women still need to find their voice and to create their own narrative spaces. As Annette Kolodny tells us: “We must take responsibility for recovering our history, lest others write it for us” (Friedman 215).


Appendix

Excerpt from letter found in Carla Kaplan’s *Zora Neale Hurston, A Life in Letters*:

Dear Mr. Hoole,

I think I must be God’s left-hand mule, because I have to work so hard. That’s very funny too, because no lazier mortal ever cried for breath. But the press of new things, plus the press of old things yet unfinished keeps me on the treadmill all the time. That’s how come I haven’t answered your most kind and flattering letter before now.

My next book is to be a novel about a woman who was from childhood hungry for life and the earth, but because she had beautiful hair, was always being skotched upon a flag-pole by the men who loved her and forced to sit there. At forty she got her chance at mud. Mud, lush and fecund with a buck Negro called Teacake. He took her down into the Everglades where people worked and sweat and loved and died violently, where no such thing as flag-poles for women existed. Since I narrate mostly in dialogue. I can give you no feeling in these few lines of the life of the brown woman with her plentiful hair. But this is the barest statement of the story.

I am glad in a way to see my beloved southland coming into so much prominence in literature. I wish some of it was more considered. I observe that some writers are playing to the gallery. That is, certain notions have gotten in circulation about conditions in the south and so these writers take this formula and work out so-called true stories. For instance, one Russian lady got hot under the collar and walked out of a party because I wouldn’t say that I had suffered terribly down home. It seems that she helped arrange the party for me to expose my sufferings and the real conditions in the south and when I said I lived pretty much the same in New York and Florida, she used that back-house word and walked out. Being poor myself I am heartily in favor of poor people getting hold of money but I fail to see the difference between an under-paid cotton-picker and an under paid factory hand. So why stress Alabama? The under dog catches heck everywhere. Nobody would love to see ideal living conditions for everyone more than I, but I sense insincerity when only one section of the country is held up for example. (Kaplan 366-7)
Additional Sources


