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# AGAINST THE PURSUIT OF 'LIFE'S DELIRIUM': MODERN QUEER READINGS OF KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING* AND FANNY FERN'S *RUTH HALL*

by

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## Introduction

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* are not often books placed together when one studies 19th century American literature. The former is a post-bellum text, published in 1899 and taking place in New Orleans and its surrounding areas, which uses techniques of realism and free indirect style to describe a woman's struggle with her femininity and selfhood. The latter, published in 1854, is an antebellum work in the sentimentalist style, a roman à clef detailing one woman's tragic life story and her eventual, self-earned success through writing. There is much critical conversation regarding both characters' rejection of gender norms and thus the progressive potentialities of the books, but the scholarship that exists provides a distinctly limited view of how Chopin, Fern, and their respective stories actively undertake this project. Most notably, there is an absence of modern queer theory to be found in analyses of *The Awakening* and *Ruth Hall*. Queer theory, which only began to gain an academic foothold in the early 1990s, has the possibility to take up the liminal, more ambiguous space that gay, lesbian, and women's studies often preclude; it questions the very structures and formations of homo- *and* heterosexuality, and works within that in-between place, the place that *The Awakening*'s Edna Pontellier and *Ruth Hall*'s title character very often inhabit.

With *The Awakening*, the scholarship that does take from women's studies is, unfortunately, most often aligned with the views of second-wave feminism. This approaches greatly essentializes the category of 'woman' and vastly excludes queer, trans, and intersectional narratives. Many readings of the book (for example, those by Ivy Schweitzer and Nicholas Gaskill) frame the protagonist Edna's coming into herself, her eponymous 'awakening,' as decidedly feminist, primarily through the lens of maternity, as she was pushing back against maternal norms of her time, and prioritizing her own interests and beliefs over her societal

obligations to her family. Further analysis by writers such as Elizabeth LeBlanc and Kathryn Lee Seidel give an explanation for the ways in which Edna could potentially be considered a lesbian and a progressive character in that regard, but support this depiction with those second-wave feminist ideas; for example, they primarily discuss her relationships with other women characters in the book, like Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle, and her eventual embrace of her own (hetero)sexuality.

There is less scholarship, in general, about Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*, and when the texts are imbued with ideas from women's studies, it is more to do with feminist individuality within the context of post-Jacksonian economic markets, rather than queer potentialities. This is an acceptable reading, as Ruth's questions of selfhood only really emerge when she is forced to materially provide for herself and her two daughters. After suffering through fate's misfortunes and cruelness at the hands of her male relatives, she bests a restrictive patriarchal society to achieve financial, critical, and popular success as a writer. Her queerness, however, is present to the modern reader – she is a single mother raising a family, with little interest in remarriage after her husband dies, and achieves the most personal fulfillment by engaging and focusing on her craft.

What ultimately bonds these two characters together, in spite of their very different personalities and genre-specific portrayals, is that they both possess a capacity to experience emotion and feeling on a very deep, very physically embodied level – Edna and Ruth are incredibly sensitive, affected by their environment, relationships, and (perhaps most crucially) art, to a degree that is for the most part unmatched by any of the other characters in each book. If we draw from writers and theorists such as Audre Lorde, José Muñoz, and Heather Love, who each place an emphasis on the queer significance of feeling in regard to construction on the self,

we can read Edna Pontellier and Ruth Hall as queer (as in: expressing non-normative modes of gender and sexuality) characters precisely *because* of their deep capacities for feeling. A reading like this opens up possibilities for new 19th century literary interpretations of queerness and femininity. Additionally, the two protagonists meet very different ends in their respective texts – Ruth quite literally rides off into the sunset with her daughters and her economic stability, and Edna walks into the sea to drown herself, rather than being forced to occupy a societal role she cannot feasibly inhabit. New understandings of queerness and, subsequently, character motivations could provide for new ways of looking at the endings and general projects of each book, and perhaps pave the way toward a new narrative of progressive women characters in 19th century American literature.

In the first section of this essay, I will situate my argument in two branches of critical context – the first being the historical literary context behind each work, with regard to time, geography, common literary styles, and sociocultural norms. How were women portrayed in books from mid-century to 1900? What was the perceived relationship between gender and art in each respective era? How were definitions of femininity and maternity commonly actualized through works of literature? The second part of the section will take up scholarly work that explicitly addresses the primary texts, a literature review in which I will begin to posit where and how my assertions differ from those of prior writers.

In the second section of the essay, I will analyze *The Awakening*. First, I will flesh out the connections between sensitivity, deep feeling, and the concept of the present as crucial to one's queer formation. Then I will explore the implications of Edna's friendship with Mademoiselle Reisz, and lastly touch on the role of maternity, femininity, and gender in Edna's transformation. In the third section of the essay, I will take up *Ruth Hall*, both as a foil to *The Awakening* and on

its own, capitalizing on the intersection of feeling and queerness described in the above section. The main points I will discuss here are the overlap between deep feeling and art, Ruth's innate sensitivity, the implications of Ruth's friendship with Mrs. Leon, and the relationship between maternity, gender, and Ruth's career.

In the last section of the essay, I intend to briefly compare and contrast the endings of *The Awakening* and *Ruth Hall*, and take up what implications queer readings might have on analyses of 19th century literature as well as a subsequent legacy of messy, unconventional literary women.

## Historical literary context

Throughout history, women have commonly been associated with the emotional realm, the feeling, the heart (ostensibly against the masculine knowing, the doing, the mind). In mid-1800s North America, this phenomenon was capitalized upon in a particularly noticeable way – the advent of sentimentalism. Primarily written by women, for women, sentimentalist literature was known for appealing to one's feelings; the author would often make plot decisions based on how an action or character would make one feel, rather than adhering to a specific logic or tradition of literary legitimacy. Often, sentimentalist books would deliver a moral at the story's end, a moral inevitably shaped by pervasive middle class, Christian ideologies. Different scholars have taken various perspectives on why sentimentalism as a women's genre was significant, with most people arguing that there is power to be found in the universality of the sentimental work and the women characters portrayed within it, and others putting forth the idea that the women writing the books themselves changed ideas of what it meant to be feminine in 19th century North America.

An addendum: the ‘universality’ I mention here refers to the demographic of women that were white, predominantly middle class, and Christian. Members of the women’s suffrage movement closely (and misguidedly) linked their struggle to that of slaves, and their generalizations about sentimentalism, femininity, and maternity made by previous scholars below (with the exception of Lauren Berlant) fail to take into account an intersectional understanding of gender. The exclusion of lower-class women, women of color, and non-Christian women within literary and social markets in the 19th century each deserve a respective essay, but for the sake of this one, we will focus on the type of women I allude to above, as they are the ones being represented and marketed to in *The Awakening* and *Ruth Hall*, in addition to being the authors of the texts.

The critical theory boys’ club that roots itself in modernist ideas of what gives a text merit besmirched the women of sentimentalism in what we can now understand as a flagrantly misogynistic fashion. As Jane Tompkins writes in her 1986 book, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*: “twentieth-century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness… domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority” (123). In a chapter on sentimentalism that focuses specifically on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s wildly popular opus, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Tompkins argues that the trend had an inherently political project that at once acknowledged pervasive sociocultural norms and sought to change them through appealing to the reader’s emotions.

Working with the blatant religious themes of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* Tompkins argues that through the eventual abolition of slavery that Stowe condones and projects in the book, she creates a future “utopian society,” where “...the whole [world] is guided by a Christian woman

who, through the influence of her ‘loving words,’ ‘gentle moralities,’ and ‘motherly loving kindness,’ rules the world from her rocking chair” (141-142). While, obviously, this imagined society never came to fruition, Stowe puts forth a picture of how the ideal antebellum woman should act and behave, placing an emphasis on a proud reclamation of domesticity and an essential maternity that should seep into everything she does.

Linda Grasso, in her 1995 article “Anger in the House: Fanny Fern’s ‘Ruth Hall’ and the Redrawing of Emotional Boundaries in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” deals with Fanny Fern specifically, and draws attention to the fact that the manner in which she wrote *Ruth Hall* allowed women new ways to express themselves outside of the domestic sphere. Once people found out that *Ruth Hall* took significant autobiographical elements from Fern’s (real name Sarah Payson Willis) life, particularly those in which she revealed her well-to-do male family members had treated her cruelly, the public had a hard time processing the book itself. How should women be allowed to assert their anger? As Grasso puts it, “...what was ultimately at stake in the debate over *Ruth Hall* was whether a woman had the right to publicly express anger at men and still be deemed ‘womanly,’ respectable, and capable of rational authorship” (253).

Did she? The short answer is no, even though times were changing. Grasso argues that the influx of “slave narratives, domestic novels, and woman’s [sic] rights literature made anger in and at the familial, marital, and national house much more imaginable than it had been earlier in the century” (257). Alas, ‘imaginable’ was not the same as ‘accepted,’ so women would have to wait a bit longer before expressing themselves as they pleased in addition to being validated as authors in the public sphere (a considerable while longer, as we modern readers know). Grasso also notes that as capitalism virtually replaced religion for men and masculine, capitalistic values began to be embedded within American society, religion “had become relegated to the realm of

the feminine," with its "...repository of culturally sanctioned, female-gendered values such as meekness, humility, and lack of greed" (259). Stay in and keep the house and family, the idea was, while the men go out and work. Ruth Hall, and Fanny Fern, would do no such thing.

Some forty-odd years later, realism and naturalism were the literary trends of the moment. While not distinctly a women's tradition like that of sentimentalism, realism provided new ways for women to voice their stories and provide an honest look at the minutia of daily life. *The Awakening* is probably the best known text to explicitly work within the constructions of realism to emphasize a woman's struggle; however, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" utilizes elements of the tradition, as well as an overarching Gothic motif, to detail a woman's descent into psychosis and draw attention to the violent, patriarchal practices of 19th century psychiatric treatment.

However, Peter Ramos, in his 2010 article "Unbearable Realism: Freedom, Ethics, and Identity in *The Awakening*," makes the claim that Kate Chopin played with the constructs of realism and naturalism to demonstrate that the connotations linked to the genres "can and must be overcome" for women who do not adhere to certain sociocultural norms to persevere (151). At the crux of his argument, Ramos eloquently states:

> "By illuminating the extent to which identities are mostly inhabitable social fictions, *The Awakening* complicates realism's insistence on the empirical; by presenting women who seem to have a modicum of agency and autonomy, as well as a protagonist who mistakenly comes to believe that she has no say over her own fate, it undermines naturalism's claims of determinism" (151).

Through realism, the reader learns what was expected of Edna and women like her; society women must be pleasant, be attentive to their husbands' whims, both publicly and privately, and

above all, value maternity (a struggle to feel maternal, after all, is the catalyst that sparks Edna's awakening). Additionally, the novella's geography is not something to disregard; the fact that *The Awakening* takes place in New Orleans and on an island resort off the coast of Louisiana demonstrates elements of the 'local color' genre, which "[zoned] in on the culture of a specific geographical region, [intensifying] the… focus on the things of life as they really are" (Killeen 416). With this in mind, the reader can understand better, for instance, the importance of public family life in the turn-of-the-century coastal South; think here of the highly visible "mother-women" of Grand Isle.

In addition to typical gender norms of the time, Ramos also gives a succinct portrait of what a woman artist looked like in New Orleans society, of the role she fit into, through the character of the aging pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, noting that she's not expected to marry or act typically feminine "or even polite," as she frequently speaks her mind (148). He then subsequently takes care to note that this "aging, un-married, impolite troublemaker" is "[so] different from other representations of meek, self-effacing spinsters of this period," again demonstrating the ways in which Chopin put her own spin on realism's conventions (149).

Another archetype pertaining to women that Chopin would have known about and have made use of in her portrayal of Edna was that of the New Woman, the concept of which started to gain traction at the very end of the 19th century and became fully embodied by women in the 20th century. The term emerged into general circulation around 1894 with the debate between British writers Sarah Grand and Ouida in the *North American Review*, and had varied meanings, depending on time, place, and region. As Martha H. Patterson writes in the introduction to the 2008 book *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930*: "the New Woman represents all of these contradictory positions and more: suffragist, prohibitionist, clubwoman,

college girl, American girl, socialist, capitalist, anarchist, pickpocket, bicyclist, barren spinster, mannish woman, outdoor girl, birth-control advocate, modern girl, eugenicist, flapper, blues woman, lesbian, and vamp" (1).

In her 1897 short story, "The Egyptian Cigarette," Kate Chopin alludes to the New Woman's ability to tap into her sexuality, if she so desired; the story focuses on a woman smoking alone while dreaming passionately of a now absent lover. In their article "*Fin De Siècle* Female Writers: Representing the New Femininity in the New Woman's Short Stories," Enes Kavak nicely sums up Chopin's representation of the unnamed woman: "[the] story exemplifies the New Woman's argument for free expression of female passion and [sexual] desire which were fully censored by the Victorian male writers" (1039). This phenomenon is found again in *The Awakening*, upon Edna's newfound quasi-independence when she returns to New Orleans and pines lustfully after the idea of an absent Robert Lebrun. Still, both stories highlight the fact that the liberal sexual expression of women was a new idea to American society and was met with a fair amount of pushback, particularly before the beginning of the 20th century.

## The present critical conversation

Most of the scholarship behind *The Awakening* as a progressive text for women ultimately gives the conclusion that Edna's newfound selfhood was fashioned primarily by her relationships (with her friends, and her two lovers) and her environment, augmented by her sensitivity to people and spaces around her. I would like to argue that the act of coming into her own queerness can be essentially synonymous with her continuous self-making. Elizabeth LeBlanc, writing in 1996, has a similar contention in her essay "The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in The Awakening," borrowing the term from writer Bonnie Zimmerman, describing it

as “a provocative controlling concept to describe a character who is not ‘really’ a lesbian but could be, who engages in a variety of woman-identified practices that suggest but stop short of sexual encounters” (290). This ‘not really’ places into Edna squarely into that liminal space between gay and straight with explicitly using the word ‘queer,’ and LeBlanc also takes care to highlight Edna’s capacity for feeling as germane to her metaphorical lesbian-ness in her work.

Kathryn Lee Seidel also alludes to Edna’s non-normative sensual behavior in her 1993 article “Art is an unnatural act: Mademoiselle Reisz in ‘The Awakening,’” but primarily focuses on the topic only in response to the character of Mademoiselle Reisz. This precludes the ability to notice Edna’s queerness in her relationships with other characters such as Adele Ratignolle (which Kathleen M. Streater touches upon in “Adele Ratignolle: Kate Chopin’s Feminist at Home in *The Awakening* and Jarlath Killeen takes up in “Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*”), as well as interactions with her male lovers, Robert Lebrun and Alcee Arobin, and her husband, Léonce Pontellier. Ivy Schweitzer focuses on the importance of physicality and physical sensation in Edna’s relationship to herself in “Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*”, but through the lens of maternity, rather than queerness.

There exists virtually no work that takes up Ruth Hall explicitly as a queer character; however, most texts that portray the book in a feminist light note that Ruth Hall was behaving in a non-normative fashion, albeit not particularly sexually (though perhaps sensually). In “Inscribing and Defining: The Many Voices of Fanny Fern’s ‘Ruth Hall,’” Susan Harris acknowledges how Ruth’s appropriation of masculine power allows her to triumph economically and socially as a writer; Linda Grasso even goes so far as to deem the book “a Franklinian story of success that is recast in gendered terms” (253). Lauren Berlant’s excellent essay “The Female

Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment" does not specifically discuss *Ruth Hall*, but speaks to the form of sentimentalism that Fern herself utilized in her writing, one that undid the myth of universality in women's fiction by a quasi-reclamation of it:

> "[Fern] offers the form for feminine legitimation in the fragment, the detail, the essay, journals—not by rendering women's experience generic, but by expressing the frustration of *being* generic… the expression of Fern's personality becomes the model for that kind of individuated expression she aims to enable the reader to imagine in herself" (278).

Perhaps, then, as *Ruth Hall* was a largely autobiographical piece of writing, readers could have seen expressions of Fern's personality in Ruth herself; it can be asserted that Ruth the writer, with her non-normative behavior and widespread public acclaim in the novel, could have enabled women to reexamine their roles in life, thus acting as, if not a queer figure, then at least a subversive one.

### Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899)

Edna Pontellier is exceedingly affected by her environment. This is not an indicator of queerness per se, but it demonstrates a certain connection between herself and the world that many of the other characters in the book do not have, save for Mademoiselle Reisz (who is ostensibly queer herself). For Edna, there exists a certain fluidity between the human and the natural world, particularly the sea. Near the beginning of the novel, Chopin writes,

> "...[Edna] was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations to the world within and about her… [the] voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander

> for a spell in abysses of solitude… the touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (33-34).

By putting the passage about Edna realizing her relationship to the universe a few paragraphs above the passage emphasizing the reflective significance of the sea, Chopin thus links the two, foreshadowing that the sea has something to do with these realizations. Additionally, the personification of the sea demonstrates the easily crossable boundaries between the human world and the natural world. Further, the sensuous and erotic qualities of the sea get at something that becomes a recurring theme throughout the book: Edna's ability to relate to herself through aesthetics, a primarily physical experience. The viscerality of aesthetics, with the sea and with the music of Mademoiselle Reisz, allow for Edna to become situated in the present moment.

The importance of the present for Edna is exhibited physically and mentally – Edna is not necessarily comfortable in her body; for most of the novel, she never quite feels like it belongs to her. At the very beginning of the book, Léonce looks at her like "a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage," which in turn causes Edna to "[hold] up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and [survey] them critically" (4-5). She reacts to her body as if it is a thing she is not quite attached to, but when she is rooted in the present, she is able to explore her body as her own, which she ultimately uses to tap into a newfound erotic energy that transcends sex and heterosexual desire in itself, similar to what Audre Lorde explores in her seminal 1978 paper "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."

For example, after Edna says goodbye to Robert when he goes to Mexico, she reflects on how she was perhaps infatuated with him, like she had previously been infatuated with other boys as a young girl, but ultimately, at the end of the chapter, she comes to this conclusion:

> "The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded" (116)."

Using such words as "torture," "biting," and "impassioned," Chopin here underscores the why the physicality of the present moment consumes Edna. As Nicholas Gaskill puts it in his 2006 article, "The Light Which, Showing the Way, Forbids It:" Reconstructing Aesthetics in *The Awakening*:" "Within an aesthetic experience, rhythmic adjustments of relations conduct the unified efforts (corporeal, intellectual, affective) of the entire 'live creature' towards the end of enlivening *the present moment*, which, in turn, assumes a consummatory whole permeated through with a distinctive quality" (emphasis mine, 169). The present is attractive to Edna because it is the only temporality in which she can achieve a fullness, a completeness, as opposed to feeling a loss, that vague and insurmountable bigness of emotion that she finds herself grappling with many times throughout the novel. This feeling is decidedly queer, and particularly expounded upon by Heather Love in her 2007 book, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, in which she posits that queer history is a painful one, rife with negative emotions, and the embrace of and willingness to interact with such is a way of reclaiming queerness and being able to access and learn from queer ancestors.

That unnameable feeling, positive, negative, or otherwise, is constantly referred to throughout *The Awakening*. We see it at the beginning of the book, that crucial scene in which Edna is crying alone, seemingly apropos of nothing: "An indescribable oppression, which to generate in some unfamiliar part of consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague

anguish… It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood" (14-15). That feeling envelops her as she becomes 'awakened' throughout the novella, and it is the pursuit of that feeling that ultimately guides to her eventual quasi-independence. José Muñoz, on the very first page of his 2009 book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, defines this feeling explicitly as queerness, even taking care to note the importance of the aesthetic realm in relation to it: "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic" (1). And what is missing for Edna are words to describe how she feels, because there really were no words to describe queerness in turn-of-the-century America, particularly not in the heteropatriarchal linguistic economy. Elizabeth LeBlanc articulates this phenomenon well in her essay: "always [Edna] feels more than she can say, and the flood of feeling seems constantly on the verge of bursting the dam of codified language" (295).

The present is not the only way in which Edna can experience this fullness, this erotic physicality. When she hears Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano, the effect is immediate and powerful:

> "The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth… the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her." (66)

First, there is the obvious allusion to the sea – Chopin takes care to note that the experiences she has swimming in Grand Isle and the experience she has with music are essentially two sides of

the same coin. But there is an important difference between the sea and the music; both make Edna feel intense things physically, but she submerges herself literally in the sea, whereas the music is intangible. How, then, does this happen? Art can certainly have a profound effect on the observer, for that is what it is meant to do, but there is significance in Mademoiselle Reisz providing this experience for Edna. She is a character that most of the other characters in the novel are repulsed by (both her physical self and her personality); most of them, especially Léonce and Alcee Arobin, do not understand what Edna sees in her.

Kathryn Lee Seidel makes the argument that Reisz "embodies the traits of the female artist as lesbian, at least as the late nineteenth century understood this concept," and she subsequently bears an attraction to Edna (1). While this reading is enticing in its binaristic cleanliness, I would go so far to as to say that their relationship is a queer one, once again residing in that liminal space between friendship and romantic love; Reisz never makes a move on Edna, but they do share a physical intimacy many times over. Seidel notes of the scene where Reisz plays the Chopin Impromptu: "the rapture Edna feels and Mademoiselle's willingness to engender it suggest a passionate connection, unfulfilled in a literal sense, but present and alive symbolically" (6).

There is another moment in the book that suggests Edna's explicit recognition of a kindred spirit in Mademoiselle Reisz. After Robert has gone and the two of them still remain on Grand Isle, Edna acknowledges that "when Mademoiselle Reisz came and touched her upon the shoulder and spoke to her, the woman seemed to echo the thought which was ever in Edna's mind; or, better, the feeling which constantly possessed her" (117). Audre Lorde echoes this profound connection in her work: "the erotic… [provides] the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing… whether physical, emotional, psychic, or

intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (90). Although Edna and Reisz are very different externally, they share this deep, formative feeling, the capacity for the erotic (in Lorde's sense of the word). It does not matter how Mademoiselle seems or acts towards other people; she is able to access Edna's queer self with her in the present moment, and for Edna, that takes precedent over petty appearances.

Both the feeling that Edna gets from Mademoiselle Reisz's music and the music itself sometimes seem to transcend gender, or the human realm altogether – while the book, stylistically, is written from a realist perspective, there is certain language used in the pair's interactions that moves them almost to a higher place. For example, in the midst of Edna trying to figure out what she wants out of her relationship with Arobin, she pays a visit to the pianist. Chopin writes: "There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (204).

Here, Chopin underscores once again the physical embodiment of Edna's emotions, choosing to use the word 'senses' rather than 'feelings' or 'moods.' Additionally, Chopin uses the phrase 'divine art,' and the use of the preposition 'by' as well as the commas between the clauses suggest a double meaning – the music is divine itself, but the manner in which Mademoiselle Reisz communicates that which touches Edna's spirit is also bigger than the human world. Lastly, by referring to Mademoiselle Reisz as 'that personality' and then, separately, 'the woman,' it sets up a framework in which her essence is not necessarily connected to her physical form. Ivy Schweitzer goes so far as to posit that Edna "rejects the masculine autonomy achieved by Mademoiselle Reisz because it is disconnected from the

body… [Reisz] is cold and sexless, even unnatural" (182). I would argue that while the ways in which Reisz expresses her autonomy are coded by the patriarchy as masculine, her 'sexless' spinster status is non-gendered, and as Schweitzer notes 'unnatural,' perhaps otherworldly; further, New Orleans society sees a woman using masculine tools to achieve a semblance of power when, in fact, she could be read as a queer figure, an explicitly sexless one at that, appropriating the patriarchy's mannerisms in a way that shirks the binaries of masculine and feminine as categories altogether. Edna, too, openly notices the ways in which she herself does not act as a woman, the example of which is most clear when she calls Robert selfish at the end of the novel; she says to him, "'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'" (277). Here, she uses a word that implies physicality, 'express,' rather than a phrase like 'speaking my mind,' to highlight the essential quality of her transformation. She is unwomanly, but she is not manly, as Robert most certainly knows; rather, she falls back into that middle, liminal space.

Finally, the question of maternity in *The Awakening* is the one that eventually spurs Edna to reconsider her motivations and purposes in life, as the primary role for women in the turn-of-the-century South was that of mother, and Edna does not neatly fit into it. This is made known to the reader early on in the novel: "It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or any one [sic] else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived, and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement" (18). The phrasing of 'felt rather than perceived' suggests there is something innately off about Edna; she is not technically bad at mothering per se, but rather, one can *feel* that it is not what she is meant to be doing. Even after

her various affairs and personal transformation, Edna still feels this way at the end of the novel (if not more so) when she witnesses Adele's birth scene and recalls her own: "[Edna's] own like experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go" (288). She cannot really remember the births of her own children; here, Chopin places an emphasis on the lack of physical sensation Edna felt at this seemingly crucial moment, as well as the chilly impersonality with which she treats her child upon awakening from her stupor.

As Peter Ramos suggests in his essay, Edna believes that the identities available to her are binary (mother or sexual being, wife or person) and thus, as she undergoes her process of self-making, she "...comes to believe that she cannot achieve individuality or personhood" (149). Readers know this is not true; Adele, for example, embodies effortlessly the qualities of a mother while also imbuing the role with a natural sexuality, as Chopin describes many times over. Edna, however, does not think of Adele as playing both roles; in her 2005 article "'Into realms of the semi-celestials:" From Mortal to Mythic in *The Awakening*," Angela Hailey-Gregory writes: "[Adele's] sensuousness awakens Edna to her own sensual capabilities, but she is unable to reconcile Adele's sensuousness or sexuality with its culturally mandated end as mother and wife" (300). Because Edna cannot perceive the role of 'woman' or 'mother' as dynamic and embodying several personality traits at once, she perceives herself as not falling into either; she is a woman who does not really feel like a woman, nor a man; this sentiment again queers her character.

### Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854)

Ruth Hall, too, is also a particularly sensitive character, and has been since she was a child. The reader is introduced to this phenomenon within the first few pages of the novel: "...Ruth was fonder of being alone by herself; and then, they called her 'odd,' and 'queer,' and wondered if she would 'ever make anything;' and Ruth used to wonder, too; and sometimes she asked herself why a sweet strain of music, or a fine passage in a poem, made her heart thrill, and her whole frame quiver with emotion?" (4) This passage points to a few compelling points: first, there is the use of the word 'queer' at which modern readers can cheekily smile; while 'queer' was not used to signify non-normative gender or sexual until well into the 20th century, it still evoked an aura of weirdness or abnormality of some kind in that time. Second, by placing a sentence stating that Ruth preferred to be alone next to a description of her reactive qualities, Fern implies that the two were linked, that she preferred to be alone because no one quite understood this crucial feeling. Third, it is telling that her visceral reactions are so linked with art and yet other people wanted to know if she would ever produce anything – a use of foreshadowing by Chopin to suggest that there is a link between Ruth's chosen solitude, the art she eventually does create, and the way she is affected by certain stimuli.

Like Edna, Ruth's sensitivity is depicted as innate, as essential to her being. This is also established early on in the text; on page 25, Fern writes: "Ruth had a strong, earnest nature; she could not look upon this wealth of sea, sky, leaf, bud, and blossom; she could not listen to the little birds, nor inhale the perfumed breath of morning, without a filling eye and brimming heart, to the bounteous Giver." Recall the language of the divine invoked when Mademoiselle Reisz plays to Edna, here used when Ruth merely looks upon and engages with her surroundings. This, also like Edna, suggests a special connection to the world that other characters in the book do not

possess. It is this quality, this queer mode of being, that allows Ruth to succeed exceedingly well in her writing career. Towards the end of the book, Ruth's nature gets explicitly characterized again, this time by a phrenologist that her mentor figure Mr. Walter takes her to see. He says of Ruth: "Your physiology indicates a predominance of the nervous temperament; this gives unusual activity of mind, and furnishes the capacity for a great amount of enjoyment or suffering. Few enjoy or suffer with such intensity as you do. Your happiness or misery depends very much on surrounding influences and circumstances" (215). It is clear that Fern deeply wants the reader to understand the inherent quality of this trait and thus, through repetition, stresses its importance. Ruth is sensitive, Ruth has suffered, but she also has the possibility to tap into an immense happiness.

When she marries Harry Hall, still early on in the course of the novel, the relationship truly seems to be a symbiotic one. He loves her immensely, and she him, but there is a meaningful moment when their first daughter, Daisy, is born, when she realizes Harry can never understand what she has been through as a woman. Fern writes, of Ruth: "She cannot even welcome the little stranger. Harry thought her dear to him before; but now, as she lies there, so like death's counterpart, a whole life of devotion would seem too little to prove his appreciation of all her sacrifices" (19). This is a fairly astute realization for a protagonist to have in a post-birth scene in a sentimental work. It suggests that she is aware of the fact that even *good* men (unlike her brother Hyacinth, for example, or her father) cannot conceptualize essential things that women have to endure, which suggests that she is aware of the gender-based discrepancies that a patriarchal society creates. And although maternity and her desire to take care of her daughters are ostensibly what motivates Ruth's writing career in the rest of the book, in what

could be perceived as the ultimate maternal moment, she refers to her daughter as a stranger and cannot acknowledge her.

Put in contrast with Adele Ratignolle's heady birth scene in *The Awakening*, it is intriguing that these two moments of motherly sacrifice, which would often be written about in both sentimental and realist literature in a positive or at least a respectful light, find both protagonists feeling conflicted about their life choices. For Edna, the birth scene comes near the end of the novella, and is the last piece of evidence she needs to come to the conclusion that her selfhood is tied to her maternity. For Ruth, this scene comes at the beginning of the story, and the sentiment is more or less disregarded throughout the rest of the book. Recall the importance of the present moment in relation to feeling comfortable in one's own from the previous section – scenes of birth are extremely physical, and yet in those moments, one's body is not their own. Edna strikingly says that she would give "[her] life for [her] children; but [she] wouldn't give [herself]," and this scene is potentially an example of Ruth feeling the same way (Chopin 122). Her life is devoted to her children, but her writing and her very livelihood are a celebration of herself.

Another parallel that can be drawn between *The Awakening* and *Ruth Hall* is that of the integral queer female friendship between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz, and Ruth and Mary Leon. When Ruth and her family spend time at Beach Cliff for a vacation, she does not wish to spend time with many people, but "[finds] herself drawn to Mrs. Leon by unaccountable magnetism" (55). While Fern goes on to attribute their eventual meeting to Ruth's daughter Katy, the 'unaccountable magnetism' between the two women mirrors the way in which Edna felt Mademoiselle Reisz was simply able to 'get' her on a spiritual level. While Fern notes that Ruth has not had many female friends over the course of her life, she takes care to mention that

the reason for that is because “[Ruth] had never found any woman who had not misunderstood and misinterpreted her” (56). Mrs. Leon and Ruth then bond over their mutual dislike of typical women’s pastimes, and the chapter in which they might ends with a passionate confession from Mrs. Leon to Ruth, in which she confesses her unhappiness in her marriage to Mr. Leon, saying, “God bless you, Ruth; ‘tis long since I have shed tears. You have touched the rock; forget that the waters have gushed forth” (57). Ruth awakens something in Mrs. Leon because of her passionate temperament; think again here of Audre Lorde’s thoughts on shared feelings from “The Uses of the Erotic.”

Reading same-sex friendship as queer is another topic explored in Heather Love’s book, in the chapter entitled “The End of Friendship: Willa Cather’s Sad Kindred.” “This model of ‘primary intensity’ between women,” she explains, “closely allied to Adrienne Rich’s concept of the lesbian continuum, de-emphasized the erotic aspect of relations between women and privileged instead affective intensity, mutual support, and the freedom of self-definition” (75). While there is no erotic or even physically sensual relationship between Ruth and Mrs. Leon, there is certainly a feeling of mutual support. Love also cites ideas from Michel Foucault’s 1981 interview “Friendship as a Way of Life,” summarizing his ideas that friendship can be understood as “an alternative form of intimacy, a utopian space beyond the constraints of marriage and the family” (76). Mrs. Leon is unhappy in her marriage, Ruth is a widowed single mother treated poorly by her living relatives and thus part of a disjointed, unorthodox family structure, but it is clear that the pair find something immensely redemptive and comforting in each other.

Ruth, unlike Edna in *The Awakening*, does not take issue with her maternal obligations. Rather, she loves her daughters dearly, and makes it known that everything she does is for them.

However, in the scenes in which maternity and art are placed together in dialogue, there is a noticeable lack of gendered language, which suggests a desire on Fern's part to remove Ruth's passion from a womanly lens. This is made all the more impactful by the fact that sentimental literature often relied on typical 'womanly' tropes – flowery language, appeals to pathos, and so on. Susan Harris touches on this her work, and puts forth a good hypothesis regarding Fern's concurrent use of cynicism and sentimentalism, especially with regard to the scene where Ruth is negotiating with two of her editors, some hours apart: "Rather than exhibiting Fern's confusion or carelessness, this temporal fold successfully accomplishes Fern's purpose of showing the inadequacy of feminine passivity and the necessity of business aggressiveness in the pursuit of a livelihood" (622). This 'business aggressiveness' would typically be gendered masculine, but yet the reason for this behavior is borne out of a distinctly feminine motive – thus, Ruth embodies both male and female characteristics innately, transcending gender.

This phenomenon is also exemplified when Ruth makes the decision to write for the papers and is subsequently rejected by Hyacinth when she contacts him looking for a job; she is suddenly filled by a renewed sense of passion and commitment:

> "'I *can* do it, I *feel* it, I *will* do it,' and she closed her lips firmly; 'but there will be a desperate struggle first,' and she clasped her hands over her heart as if it had already commenced; 'there will be scant meals, and sleepless nights, and weary days, and a throbbing brow, and an aching heart… *Pride* must sleep! but… it shall be *done*… 'What is it, my darling?' and Ruth caught up the child with convulsive energy… and as she kissed Katy's upturned brow a bright spot burned on her cheek, and her eye glowed like a star" (147).

The language here is again of immense physicality, in which her body is wholly affected by the feeling that takes her over — in this passage, she's closing her lips, clasping her hands, being overcome with energy, and quite literally glowing. Although she is clutching her child, the mannerisms that she is exhibiting are not obviously masculine or feminine; they barely appear human. She feels that she will accomplish her goals, and thus, she knows things will happen, in an almost godlike manner (also note the use of the language of the celestial, such as the invocation of a bright burning and stars). Her writing and the motivations behind it are bigger than her at this moment, and her body merely a vessel through which to harbor this intensity of feeling. Though the language of Christianity pervades *Ruth Hall*, the human transcendence referred to here does not seem directly correlated to a religion; rather, it is Fern's way of giving Ruth and her passions a special legitimacy.

## Conclusion

The endings to these two stories vary almost to point of complete contradiction. Ruth, having finally left her toxic family and unfortunate past behind, sets off with her daughters and Mr. Walter into the blissful unknown, with the money she has made from her writing. In *Ruth Hall*, our protagonist takes a risk and, though it takes a very long time to do so, the risk pays off. Her rebellion against the normative gender roles placed upon her is rewarded, and Fanny Fern demonstrates that women do not always have to act like women, or men, and can still succeed and find happiness. On the other hand, the end of *The Awakening* is not as clear-cut. Edna walks into the sea, and it is heavily implied that she drowns herself; scholars disagree upon her motivations at this juncture. I believe that Edna chose happiness in the only way that she could. While she may have died, the final scene is peaceful yet arresting, with Edna merely succumbing

to that which had played a major role in her awakening and process of self-making. The last passage highlights sensory experiences she has had in the past—she hears the spurs of her cavalry officer clanking as he walks and bees buzzing, and smells “the musky odor of pinks”—and then the book softly but abruptly ends (303). In this moment, this in-between space, Edna manages to unite her past (through her memories), present (through the physical embrace of the sea), and future (her probable suicide) in one moment. No, Edna was not able to survive as a queer person, but in her last and perhaps most formative moment, she carved out a place for herself that was all her own. For a brief moment, it seems, she was finally able to give herself that sense of fullness and contentment.

Analyzing these books through the lens of queer theory allows for a couple notable potentialities. First, as Heather Love and José Muñoz touched upon, it is important for modern queer readers to look back through history and find ancestral traces. There is comfort in knowing that people have come before you, felt and experienced the things that you have, and survived, or at least made their way in the world. Finding queerness in literature is, for the queer student, redemptive; an act of disrupting the heteropatriarchy of the canon and being able to complicate narratives which academia would rather generalize or gloss over. Second, if we are able to triangulate our modern perceptions of queerness with prior understandings of such in texts from a time period long past, we can learn more about specific temporal perceptions of gender and sexuality. It allows for a more dynamic, thorough interpretation of the characters and the books themselves, and also spurs us to ask more questions about the authors, and their lifestyles and motivations. How did they engage and challenge the world around them? Why did they choose to do so in the manner that they did?

Queerness is, first and foremost, about inhabiting a liminal space. Binaries exclude and limit expression, knowledge, and growth; part of what compels readers to return to *The Awakening* and *Ruth Hall* over and over again is the fact that these characters were exceptional in the ways they pushed back against what was expected of them. They refuse to fit into the narrow roles ascribed to them, albeit to different ends. But part of what makes art, and specifically literature, so captivating is that the works still have merit even if they are messy. The best pieces of literature allows readers to be transported somewhere else while simultaneously encouraging them to reflect on their own life. Within the realm of 19th century American literature, *The Awakening* and *Ruth Hall* set the tone for so many other unpredictable, necessary literary heroines that came after them, and continue to do so today.

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