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Passive Victims: Analyzing Drowned Women in Literature

A good writer must be a good reader – this is the simplest rule in literature. “Memory of the literary tradition is vital” for every exceptional writer, as it provides a foundation on which to build their work (Boeninger 47). Observing the great works of those who came before us – “their poems and paintings, their novels and symphonies” – serves every artist with the opportunity to hone their skills and expand their knowledge, for “the dead walk among us and an artist who ignores them is no artist at all” (Boeninger 47). This dependency on literary history explains the development of various literary movements, which either diverged from the patterns of style and theme which came before them (e.g., Romanticism), or attempted to rekindle the traditions of their ancestors (e.g., neo-Classicism). This influence of past writers allows for certain patterns to develop in literature as a subject or theme is expanded upon throughout generations.

Considering Western literature, the nineteenth century saw such patterns arise concerning the deaths of young and beautiful women. Within the artistic depictions of these women grew an especially beautiful form of death – drowning. There are a number of reasons this form of death took on such popularity, including water’s association with femininity. “Water is a feminine element,” stated Dr Cristina Miedico in her speech at the Milan conference, *Nymphs, Women Alchemists and Washerwomen: Stories of Water and Popular Culture*. “Water belongs to women, starting from the amniotic liquid that generates life in the womb, and the water sources springing in caverns, the bowels of the Earth, where the gods are born.”

This essay aims to explore the history of literary drownings in relationship to the development of the nineteenth century “death culture,” and assert that works by women writers at the turn of the century, such as Kate Chopin (*The Awakening*), mark a shift in the representation of drowning women in literature.

The tradition of literary drowning arose with various writers expanding on the poetical distinction between drowning and other forms of death. From the late-fifteenth to early-eighteenth century, in England specifically, “drowning was one of the most frequent causes of accidental death” (Boeninger 29). Since it was often difficult to determine if their deaths were truly accidental or intentional, drowning was also placed as the second most common form of suicide during the time. And for women specifically, drowning was the single most common form of suicide. This era was also marked by an increase in sea travel, as the beginning of the fifteenth century saw massive amounts of sea exploration which only expanded with Europe’s later discovery of the Americas.

The increase of sea travel of course led to the increase in drowning, so it is no surprise that drowning became such a widespread topic of literary interest during the time. The traditional depictions of drowning hold a variety of common characteristics. Despite the terrifying reality expressed by living drowning victims, in literature, death by drowning was often pictured as “a gentle submission to the elements, even a way of uniting oneself with the natural environment” (Boeninger 23). However, while drowning was depicted as a “peaceful death,” it simultaneously served an ambivalent function in literature by uniting this human desire with “the equally powerful terror of being forgotten” (Boeninger 24). One common theme found in literary drownings is the anxiety over the corpse, since a drowned victim cannot receive “certain consolatory rituals—anointing the dead, burying the body, laying flowers on the gravesite” (Boeninger 34).

Writers often mourned over the lack of respect the ocean held for “Christian traditions of funerary rites and memorialization” which aimed to peacefully lay a soul to rest and lead it to Heaven, whereas “a scattered body” on the seafloor “suggests a disturbed and wandering soul” (Boeninger 28, 27). Their depictions of drowned heroes reveal a certain “anxiety about bodily dissolution and its connection between a sinful life and a speedily decaying corpse” (Boeninger 28). John Milton, T.S. Eliot and William Shakespeare touched on these issues of memorialization that arise from the state of drowned corpses, depicting them as either disintegrating or solidifying on the ocean floor.

In his pastoral elegy “Lycidas,” Milton mourns the death of a friend, Edward King, who drowned. Milton shows concern in his poem over the connection between “the sea’s battering of that body” and “the processes of memory and grief” (Boeninger 34). Eliot describes a similar watery grave in his description of Phlebas’ corpse in *The Waste Land*. However, the decomposition of Phlebas’ corpse is seen as almost a “careful and deliberate unmaking, reversing the aging process” (Boeninger 45-6). Unlike Milton, Eliot finds this disintegration of the body preferable to traditional Christian burials, which “attempt to hold on to things that should be released” (Boeninger 42). For Eliot, the forgetfulness which accompanies a watery grave is a “merciful escape” from the modern world, allowing “the individual person to disappear, a possibility that may seem frightening at first but… is ultimately freeing” (Boeninger 47).

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* reveals an entirely different version of drowning. The imaginary description of Alonso’s drowned corpse “transforming into a coral reef” has been viewed as “an image of immortality,” providing “one of the richest intertexts for later literary drownings” (Boeninger 31). The state of Alonso’s drowned corpse reveals a paradoxical nature of funerary rites as his body becomes "more permanent and durable even as it lies inaccessible on the sea floor” (Boeninger 32).

Contrary to these traditional depictions of drowning, Kate Chopin uses the sea as a comforting force in her novella, *The Awakening*, where her protagonist, Edna Pontellier, experiences “a kind of re-birth” (Emmitt 324). Chopin does not focus on the corpse of her drowned victim, but on the life leading up to her drowning. For Edna, the sea is “the perfect lover – speaking to the soul while caressing the body” (Emmitt 321). Throughout the story, Edna feels alone in the world, trapped between “that outward existence which conforms,” and “the inward life which questions” (Chopin 18). She feels trapped in a life she no longer wants – trapped by her husband and by her children, the “antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (Chopin 120). Edna ultimately chooses to die because it is the only “act of free will open to her through which she can elude those who would drag her down” (Emmitt 324).

While Edna wishes to escape this life of solitude – this life where she must play the role of “the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone” – she seeks comfort in the sea, which offers a different form of solitude (Chopin 94). As Edna walks toward the sea, towards her eventual death, she hears that “the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” (Chopin 120). However, as “the foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles,” the sea embraces her as though she were a child seeking comfort, and “Edna is not alone,” for “the shape-shifting sea provides company” (Chopin 120, Emmitt 324). And so, Chopin depicts drowning as a means of escape “out of a world which no longer has a place” for women like Edna (Emmitt 324).

However, some argue that Edna’s drowning was an act of fate, not conscious choice, accusing *The Awakening* of “ending badly and lacking a hero” (Emmitt 320). This interpretation stems back to the traditional depictions of women as passive victims, such as Shakespeare’s most famous victim of the water – Ophelia.

Ophelia was quite possibly “the single most often represented female figure” of the nineteenth century (Boeninger 30). Ophelia’s death takes place off-stage and is recounted to the audience by Gertrude, the Queen. Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s “wet and helpless body, surrounded by the lush natural world” became “an erotic subject for countless painters” of the nineteenth century, most notably in the paintings of John Everett Millais and John William Waterhouse (Boeninger 30). While Gertrude’s detailed account describes Ophelia’s death as accidental, observers after the fact – such as the doctor and the gravediggers - make assumptions that “her death was doubtful,” and that “instead of flowers or prayers, ‘shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her,’” indicating a desire to hasten the decomposition of her body and revealing a level of disrespect for victims of suicide, especially women (Boeninger 29). Because the audience does not witness Ophelia’s death with their own eyes, Shakespeare leaves the true nature of her death ambiguous. Either way, Ophelia’s death is depicted as a form of submission, “giving one’s body to the water’s deadly embrace,” and she is caste in the light of “victim,” whose inability to save herself reveals a certain passivity characteristic of literary women of the time. (Boeninger 30).

Many writers throughout Western history have depicted women in similar fashions, shuffling back and forth between the powerful dualistic representations of women as pure and impure, as whore and goddess (Hayman 27). In tragedies specifically, “women commonly play an important, often primary, role in the tragic plot” paradoxically through their “passivity and stasis” (Brown 430, 432). Many playwrights have adopted a Shakespearean style of action within their plays, which is “typically shaped to produce and sustain a high level of physical or psychological violence” (Brown 434). These writers often resorted to “scenes of madness, suicide, or sexual violation,” relying consistently upon the female victim to drive the plot forward (Brown 434). These women were caste in the role of passive and “pathetic,” and were “consistently depicted as victims – of their husbands, of fate, of circumstance, of unintentional error, or of love” (Brown 430).

While these traditional depictions of “defenseless women,” such as mad Shakespearean lovers, are dramatic, Edna’s suicide was quiet and personal. Chopin’s Edna is not portrayed as a victim of violence. While Chopin may portray Edna as a “victim” of her society, she does this through revealing the intricacies of systematic, patriarchal oppression, rather than through instances of physical and psychological violence. Instead of relying on violence to drive the plot, Chopin focuses on Edna’s development as an individual, relying on intimate revelations of her female protagonist.

The “rise of the defenseless female” in drama occurred for a number of reasons, including its aestheticism (Brown 441). The aesthetically pleasing nature of victimized women in literature extended well into the nineteenth century, where it mixed with the newfound “Victorian death culture,” and thus began the fetishization of dead women (Meessen 6). History often portrayed the beauty in feminine lamentation – in women’s ability to “mourn properly” – and this new death culture expanded those sentimental portrayals to sensationalize “women’s ability to die beautifully” (Clair 261). This culture is best exemplified by the words of the nineteenth century’s most renown writer of the macabre, Edgar Allen Poe, in his essay *The Philosophy of Composition* – “The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”

While death has always been widely depicted in art, “the display of the deceased, both in real life as in the realm of art,” gained new importance in the nineteenth century (Meessen 6). This rising death culture can be traced back to patriarchal roots, in which dead women were placed in the ideal feminine role – victims, completely subservient and inferior to men. Such literature that displays the corpses of victimized women “triggers feelings of masculine superiority and immortality” (Meessen 7). Through their glorified representations of “female passivity, especially in illness and death,” male writers of the nineteenth century developed a new “patriarchal cult of invalidism,” which allowed for the “ultimate objectification” of women (Meessen 6, 7).

The notions of agency which Chopin evokes in her work contradict these patriarchal “elements of control and objectification that have been used to explain the popularity of the theme of female death in nineteenth century art” (Meessen 7). While in Western culture suicide is often seen as a mortal sin and an act of “destructive narcissism,” (Higonnet 104) Chopin saw it as a reasonable option for women seeking liberation – from their husbands, from their families, from the societies that systematically oppressed them.

When Edna first swims out into the ocean on her own, “a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul” (Chopin 32). This was Edna’s first taste of liberation. More importantly, this was when Edna first became truly self-aware, and realized her lack of freedom. Because of the revelation, Edna “grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin 32). Here, Chopin reveals the self-destructive nature of Edna’s self-awareness and alludes to her ultimate decision to kill herself.

While Chopin’s treatment of Edna’s character differs greatly from previous works, her representation of the sea evokes traditional images of femininity. One reason drowning women became an object of fascination for writers of the nineteenth century was because of the innate femininity of water. Women have often been closely associated with water, from the goddesses and nymphs of ancient Greek mythology to the Judeo-Christian images found in the Bible. While women are depicted as “one with the sea,” men are depicted above it. For men, the water serves as a “narcissistic mirror” which reflects their own pleasing image on the surface, while underneath lies “a devouring female” which threatens to destroy them if they plunge in (Emmitt 318). While “reflection is integral to the male sense of self,” women have not been allowed to view themselves this way within society; instead, “women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Emmitt 315, 316).

Chopin uses similar imagery when referencing the water, but instead of personifying it as “a devouring female,” she describes it almost as a mother and caregiver. As Edna stood “naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun,” she hears the waves inviting her into a world where she may finally find fulfillment (Chopin 120). Standing vulnerable under the heat of the masculine sun – under the heat of a world ruled by men – Edna felt like “some new-born creature” in a world she knew, but to which she never belonged (Chopin 120). She looks out at the water and sees a mother, waiting to enfold her in its “soft, close embrace” (Chopin 120). She swims out, even as “exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her,” refusing to look back at the world she left behind (Chopin 121). The sea beckons her, and there Edna finds “the sole means of egress from a world in which she cannot see herself” (Emmitt 324).

Because women cannot see their own image on the surface of the water, they are forced to plunge into the depths in order to find themselves – their femininity – and “the embrace of the water provides self-fulfillment” (Emmitt 318). This notion of self-fulfillment expanded with the works of women writers such as Chopin. Unlike past depictions of women committing suicide, Chopin’s Edna is not caste in the role of victim. Instead, Edna’s drowning may be seen as “a parable of female development and liberation” (Emmitt 321). Edna discovers that “the men in her society do not offer her what she needs,” and therefore she must find her own identity (Emmitt 324). She is no longer willing to play the part of “an old maid with her fake violets and fear of water like Mademoiselle Reisz,” or a “sensuous Madonna” who finds meaning “only in relation to her children like Adele” (Emmitt 324). Edna has awakened from a deep sleep of “appalling and hopeless ennui,” from a life of “blind contentment,” to find within herself a passionate woman who can no longer conform to society’s version of womanhood (Chopin 61). But with her awakening, Edna realizes there is no place for an independent woman in the world around her – so she chooses the sea.

Ultimately, Edna drowns herself, but unlike the preceding nineteenth century’s fetishization of drowned women, Chopin depicts Edna’s death as a means of liberation. Edna is not a passive victim. Instead, she chooses her own fate by taking her life. Chopin’s work thus marks a shift away from the traditional depictions of female passivity and victimization, showing how a woman can take her life into her own hands, escape the pressures of the patriarchal world, and write her own ending.

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