

Naturalism and the New Woman

by Maria Luisa S. Saministrado

There is a reductionist treatment of naturalism within literary criticism (Brennan 12). Critics link naturalism with sensationalism (Cowley 426), promotion of skepticism (Jalavich 348), pessimism, unhappy endings, depressing environments, and the depiction of men as laboratory specimens controlled like puppets through environmental and hereditary forces (Loomis 181-191 and Cowley 427-429). Naturalism advocates are appalled by its initial censure in literary criticism. Zola, founder of naturalism, is aware of these criticisms. He laments naturalism's annihilation (296) in literature through these criticisms when he writes about the "massacre of the naturalistic novelists" (290). He hints that these criticisms are misinterpretations of his genre and suggests that critics "seriously study the question in the original documents" (296) in order to understand this genre much better. However, detractors argue that real life can be depressing, and the magnification of harsher realities as portrayed in the naturalistic novels is beyond reader reception. These critics, nonetheless, have basis for their arguments directly linked with naturalism's choice of subject matter.

The main reason naturalist writers are partial to social realities as fiction's subject matter relates to their aim for social awareness among readers by portraying these realities as they are, a unique narrative mode of expression that values verisimilitude. Their creative productions are attempts to show that everyday realities are appropriate subjects in fiction, implying that literature is not only about the beautiful and loaded aristocracy featured in the genre earlier on. Obviously, the naturalists have veered a little further from the romanticism that was highlighted in the century that precedes naturalism. Poverty, prostitution, violence, gambling, marital concerns, and the like are serious subjects that pertain to everyday realities and may offend human sensibilities or upset the already disturbed imagination because these realities are felt and observed in society.

Up to this day, critics have witnessed the proliferation of naturalistic literature in the modern times as evidenced in the continued focus on social realities in genres like the novel. Its presence therefore is not just felt during the nineteenth century spearheaded by first generation naturalist practitioners like Stephen Crane, Jack London, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, et al. A number of modern day novelists have written novels with tendencies towards the naturalistic approach. This is supported by Geismer who, referring to American writers, claims that since these novels dwell on "the sordid, the criminal, the brutal" (1), and the incongruous as subject matter, "it is likely that the present younger generation of novelists in the United States are quite unaware that they are naturalists at all" (3).

This paper examines two nineteenth century novels, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Both novels are perceived as examples of naturalistic literature that highlights social realities as subject matter, objectivity as a narrative mode of expression, and the role of determinism on human beings. This paper's focus is on the representation of the married

woman where I incorporate a space for spiritual discourse within the Christian framework as reflected in *Gaudium et Spes: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, a Vatican document. I will cover three areas: the representation of the nineteenth century married woman as portrayed by the female protagonist in the novels, her status and role in society, and the role of spirituality in her relations with the world. The female protagonist's privileged status in society and the novels' imbedded message of the non-importance of self-preservation, and the reductionist treatment of the non-physical in naturalism are fraught with controversies. I should like to explore the tension between naturalism and spirituality through a discussion of the physical and non-physical as represented by the spiritual values framed within the Vatican document. Both traditions seem to clash, but they point to a similar conclusion – the betterment of the human experience and humanity as a whole. This paper therefore is an attempt to provide a venue for a better understanding of the representation of the woman in naturalistic literature, her need for a sense of meaning and direction in her connections with the world, and thus bring out a truly human cord in the reading of naturalism beyond the borders of presumptions and color.

The female protagonists in Chopin's and Flaubert's novels represent the nineteenth century women and wives of men with patriarchal consciousness. They are construed as controversial modern women when they challenge feminine roles and societal expectations on gender relations and sexuality. They are portrayed by Chopin and Flaubert as women with unique qualities because they exhibit individualism and non-conformism or freedom from the patriarchal orientation. These distinctive qualities are different from the expected qualities of nineteenth century women who possess similar attributes from the century that precedes it. The protagonists' individualistic nature clashes with the values of the era where a woman is subject to male dominance and control in marriage and family, social roles and gender relations. For example, one of the expected roles of a mother is to sacrifice self for the children's welfare. This is also one of the values reflected in the Vatican document. Chopin and Flaubert's representation of women, however, reverses the prevailing perception of self-sacrifice of the time in favor of individuality by defying outdated tradition and expectations of female roles within a repressive patriarchal structure.

Chopin presents a woman with a radical understanding of her role as a wife and mother in *The Awakening*. This radicalism is shown with the declaration of the heroine, Edna: "I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Chopin 21). Her statement suggests that a woman refuse to sacrifice herself for anything unessential (48) because she has personal integrity and individuality as a woman. The traditional society of Edna is peopled with women who have no other interests apart from their families, e.g. overprotecting their children, pleasing their husbands ad infinitum and taking good care of the house.

Chopin's novel is an attempt to show that women with imagination cultivate other interests as expressions of their individuality or personal integrity. This implies that women play an active role in rising above mediocrity by fulfilling individual interests for self-fulfillment. Nineteenth century women are expected to submit to domesticity, but the novel shows that women are individuals with choice and creative expressions. The heroine is represented as "an independent artist" (Clark 338) who must have "the soul that dares and defies" (Chopin 63). Very few women in Chopin's time dabble in painting, and she presents a woman-painter protagonist to suggest that not only men but

also women are capable of creative expressions. Chopin's implied message is that individual gifts and talents can be developed no matter what a person's gender is and interests are cultivated through passion, e.g. active involvement in one's art to suggest that a life without passion is not life at all.

Chopin's protagonist questions the inflexible nature of society's expectations about gender roles and relations where female creativity is constrained by domestic demands. Moreover, Chopin depicts her differently from the mother-women in society by describing what the traditional mother-women are: "They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (10). She projects the concept of a radical woman-mother who questions the status quo in order to effect change to her subordinate position in society. Her message is that domesticity is not the only place for women because they can lead creative or productive lives like men. The heroine's childrearing approach is likewise drastic for the traditional mother. She is portrayed as a woman-mother who does not have to adore her children, or believe in full-time mothering or care for the young. The heroine employs a quadron who attends to the children most of the time while her husband provides for the family. Her high economic status in society is linked to her husband's income and family sustenance that allows her to employ a sitter. The heroine is not depicted as a negligent mother because she is able to demonstrate her love and concern for her children. When her son feels heavy-eyed, for example, she attends to him until he goes to sleep: "Edna took him in her arms, and seating herself in the rocker, began to coddle and caress him, calling him all manner of tender names, soothing him to sleep" (Chopin 40). She also tells her children bedtime stories after she sent the quadron away for supper and instructed "her she need not return" (44).

Then she sat and told the children a story. Instead of soothing it excited them, and added to their wakefulness. She left them in heated argument, speculating about the conclusion of the tale which their mother promised to finish the following night. (44)

Because of her creative interests, the heroine insinuates that she cannot give full time to her children which means she cannot be a full-time mother. Children are one of the leading oppressors of women, according to Dix (132). She explains that mothers sacrifice exceptionally for the well-being of their children who get "unreasonable" at times because they require extra time and attention from them. Dix hints that children can be a source of irritation in the household because even if sitters are available, they still need their mothers' physical presence so that they fall asleep or feel comforted. Mothers are sometimes constrained to leave their house-guests in the living area just so they can attend to their children who crave attention (132). Dix elaborates on the role of mothers who are willing victims of their children's demand for constant attention:

In her desire to be a good mother, and to do everything possible for her child's welfare, the average mother permits herself to be made martyr before she realizes it. It doesn't take a baby but three days to develop all the amiable traits and the despotic power of Nero and a Caligula, and there are plenty of women who never saw a single breath of freedom after their first child is born. They may have the best nurses, but angel Freddy howls like a Commanche unless his mother sits by his side and holds his hand until he goes to sleep, or darling Mary won't let the nurse undress her, and so no matter how interesting the

conversation downstairs, or how important the guests, the poor mother has to leave it all, and spend her evening in solitary confinement in a dark room to gratify the whims of a selfish and unreasonable creature.

Chopin's heroine thus challenges the prevailing idea of "woman" being defined by the role of "mother." Her depiction of the woman-mother is one who understands quite well that children can be a source of oppression for mothers, and she finds it unnecessary to cater to her children's every whim as reflected by her less frequent presence with her children or focus on supervision. Chopin indicates that her heroine refuse excessive childrearing tasks which means she has time for other things that call for creativity and self-fulfillment. In other words, Edna is a wife and mother, but she does not highlight these feminine traditional roles because she also desires the exploration of the creative side of her personality for expression of her individuality. Chopin, therefore, exposes one of the social realities of her time that affect women in relation to undue marital servitude, psychological oppression, and double male standards within the patriarchal tradition. She presents her readers with an alternative type of woman who caters more to her natural self through individual expression to effect change in society's expectations of gender roles and relations.

The Awakening presents an account of the "new woman" through the heroine, Edna, in pursuit of equal opportunities with men. In a society where women are relegated to the household, she stands out in her search for self-fulfillment and individual expression. Her story promotes equality for both sexes demonstrated in her pursuit of art and rejection of a domineering husband. Doing so emancipates her from the husband's psychological oppression, inhibited speech, and the right to property. Although she appreciates the material comforts that her husband provides for her, there are other matters of equal importance for her such as the need to challenge the outmoded patriarchal status quo so that she can be true to herself as a modern woman. Her marriage has become a sham because it is fraught with hypocrisy and unhappiness. She moves from a woman silenced by the male-controlled consciousness through her confinements in space and movement to someone who clamors for a sense of balance between life's physical and non-physical spiritual dimensions for meaning. She is no longer the woman who submits easily to society's constructs of female. She is now the woman who rethinks society's stereotyping of women and their expected roles, and resists the excessive adulation of women-mothers towards their husbands and children. Overall, she challenges society's dominant expectations of the female which are anathema to creative pursuits, gender equality and individual freedom with her assertion: "But I don't want anything but my own" (110). She defies the patriarchal ideology that represents an outdated tradition that encourages the low position of women in society. Her defiance against social stereotypes exemplifies the triumph of female will, individual expression, and spirituality defined by Waaijman as a human dimension marked by courage, energy, and detachment (59). However, the heroine's lack of resolve for continuity and permanence may have affected her spirit to live which suggests a yearning for spiritual nourishment. Her physical, material thirst is already satisfied with her husband's capability to provide well for the family.

Chopin's depiction of her heroine's dip into the deep part of the ocean specifies a total rejection of the physical dimensions of the self to record her need for something more that points to a spiritual value reflected in the Vatican document, *Gaudium et Spes*, and naturalism's recognition of the non-physical human element. Her free-spiritedness and non-conformism relegates the

importance of self-preservation and therefore projects the condemnation of the physical, material self, an inversion of the law of love that Christian spirituality promotes.

Emma's position in society as a woman in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is similar to Edna's in Chopin's *The Awakening*. Both heroines challenge the institution of marriage because of their impatience with domestic confinements and search for self-fulfillment. Both feel restraint within a defined space after marriage. Both of them feel immobilized to communicate their innermost feelings with their husbands who consider them their properties. Their husbands though live up to society's expectations of men as providers. The female protagonists are middle class wives who enjoy life's luxuries as they belong to the society's elite. They employ a non-traditional approach in the rearing of their children by hiring a nurse or sitter. Their child-rearing approach implies they require time for the pursuit of other interests for artistic or creative expressions. Both however profess that they love their children although they will not let them be a hindrance in their quests for self-fulfillment.

Their creative energies differ, however. Emma, for instance, plays the piano while Edna dabbles in painting. Both of them, however, read books (romances). Flaubert portrays Emma as a woman interested in the humanities and arts: "dancing, geography, drawing, embroidery and playing the piano" (13) and her interest in geography suggests that she loves to travel and see places. Within her is an adventurous woman with the goal to explore her world. Both Emma's and Edna's husbands are preoccupied with their professions who expect their wives to be happy in their submission to domesticity.

Flaubert portrays Emma's education in the convent as ineffective for her spiritual formation because instead of focusing on the Christian values, she is more drawn to romantic books. Flaubert suggests that his heroine is a person of the world – which represents the physical-material dimensions rather than the non-physical. But her attraction to romances indicates she values the beautiful in this physical world in her search for the ideal. The heroine's reading orientation therefore can be read as a vehicle for some higher aspirations. In fact, while drawn to romances, she also exhibits spiritual longing to fill the void within her as suggested in her attempt to seek spiritual enlightenment. She goes to church to see a priest concerning her problem. Vinken writes that "Emma regularly turns to religion for what she cannot find in earthly love" (766) suggesting a tension between divine and human love, the non-physical and physical human dimensions.

Emma's attraction to romances indicates that Flaubert wants to show that a woman in his society has quixotic tendencies despite her convent education. Flaubert further hints that female agency leaves some traces of romanticism in the modern woman of his time despite the call for rational thinking. The symbol of woman as the heart in Flaubert's society echoes the feminist view on the polar opposites in patriarchal discourse – the rational and irrational. This imagery represents her need not only for physical, worldly love, but also the non-physical love as represented by her longing for spiritual guidance.

Emma is a counterpart of Edna whose actions and sentiments point to a longing for self-fulfillment through economic freedom and an escape from domesticity. Both women call for freedom from marital domesticity because they feel that there are paths for a woman's imagination

and creativity other than the household. Both women experience limited social possibilities and they envy the roles reserved for men in society. Their attempts to address male authority are geared towards having the same privileges that society accords men. Of the two women, it is Emma who experiences the problem of money. She borrows funds from other people and loses track of her debts because she values money only for what it symbolizes in relation to her quest for the non-physical. Emma's and Edna's quests suggest an ideal of equal parenting, domestic freedom, and self-fulfillment through artistic endeavors. Edna's feminism is brought about by the psychological oppression she feels from her husband who considers her his property. Emma, on the other hand, feels the oppression of capitalistic practices in a dominant patriarchal society. Edna does not have financial worries although she bears the psychological oppression of her husband. Emma regrets her marriage to Charles due to intellectual incompatibility. Edna does not have financial obligations because her husband provides for her lavishly. Charles can support Emma and their daughter with his hard-earned income as a countryside doctor, but due to consumerism and excess, Emma becomes insolvent as a result of her family's properties being sequestered due to her mounting debts. In addition, both heroines have illicit relations with men who perceive them as their properties. These relations are manifestations of their search for life's meaning that is diverted to worldly enticements in their attempts to create similar opportunities that men enjoy in society.

Emma's radicalism as a woman is illustrated in her boldness in violating social expectations. And despite her radical display of free will, Flaubert's non-physical depiction is in the purity of Emma's motives in her relationships. She is not perceived to have shown ill will or grudges to the men who discard her like an object. She displays a generous heart as shown in the gifts she offers as symbols of her love. Also, she possesses an unusual intelligence. She explores literature and the arts through her readings and artistic endeavors. Her spirituality then is found not only in her pure intentions but also in her higher pursuits. Flaubert's representation of the nineteenth century woman is one whose quest for higher meaning relates to her need for worldly love which (although becomes misdirected in the course of events) eventually leads her to spiritual redemption as shown in her return to faith at her deathbed.

Naturalism in literature therefore suggests that spirituality fills the cracks in the female experience by providing balance to the physically slanted existence of the naturalistic woman. As hinted by Christian spirituality within the *Gaudium et Spes* framework, the awareness of a person's dual nature (body or material self and soul or spiritual self) is a reminder that a focus on the purely physical human aspect is futile unless it is tempered with the non-physical human dimension via the nourishment of the soul. This idea suggests that a woman is more than her physical self. So although naturalistic literature seems to block access to spirituality through its reductionist treatment of self-preservation, sexual transgression, and promotion of life as an impractical passion with its focus on loss of whatever form as humanity's fate, naturalism recognizes the dual nature of man -- his physical and spiritual nature. Therefore, while naturalism promotes social awareness for the betterment of the human condition, its end goal echoes similarly the content of *Gaudium et Spes*, the spiritual creed of love and furtherance of humanity.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Chopin, Kate. *Kate Chopin: Complete Novels and Stories*. Ed by Sandra Gilbert. New York, N.Y.: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2002.

Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Trans by Eleanor Marx-Aveling. United States: CreateSpace, 2011.

“*Gaudium et Spes* – Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World.” Promulgated by his Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965. Web.

Secondary Sources

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Emma Bovary*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers; 1994. Print.

Brennan, Stephen C. “Literary naturalism as a Humanism.” *Studies in American Naturalism*, Summer 2010, Vol. 5 Issue 1, p8-20, 13p.

Clark, Zoila. “The Bird That Came Out of The Cage: A Foucauldian Feminist Approach to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 12.4 (2008): 335-347. MLA International Bibliography. Web. 6 Mar. 2013.

Cowley, Malcolm. “Not Men”: A Natural History of American Naturalism. *The Kenyon Review* Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer, 1947), pp. 414-435. Kenyon College. Web. 20 August 2011.

Dix, Dorothy. “The American Wife.” *The Awakening*. Ed by Margaret Culley. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976.

Geismar, Maxwell. “Naturalism Yesterday and Today.” *The English Journal* Vol. 43, No. 1 (Jan., 1954), pp. 1-6. National Council of Teachers of English. Web. 22 August 2011.

Jelavich, Peter. *The Censorship of Literary Naturalism, 1890-1895: Bavaria*. Vol. 18, No. 3/4 (Sep. - Dec., 1985), pp. 344-359. Cambridge University Press on behalf of Conference Group for Central European History of the American Historical Association. www.jstor.org/stable/4546052

Loomis, Roger Sherman. “A Defense of Naturalism.” *International Journal of Ethics*. Vol. 29, No. 2 (Jan., 1919), pp. 188-201. The University of Chicago Press. Web. 15 Feb 2013.

Vinken, Barbara. *Loving, Reading, Eating: The Passion of Madame Bovary*. *MLN*. Vol. 122, No. 4. French Issue (Sep., 2007), pp. 759-778. John Hopkins University Press. <http://jstor.org/stable/30139246>. Accessed 23/06/2013 17:49.

Zola, Emile. *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*. USA: Nabu Press, 2010.

Waaijman, Kees. *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*. USA: Peeters Publishers, 2002.