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Women in Literature

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The Problem That Has No Name: The Awakening and Mad Men

In her landmark 1963 book “*The Feminine Mystique*”, Betty Friedan discusses a phenomenon she calls “the problem that has no name”. (Friedan, 20) This problem is an affliction that is caused by society keeping women from achieving their full potential. Women are restricted to the roles that are predetermined by society. These roles include being a mother/wife and running the household while the father is out working and bringing home the bacon. The aforementioned problem is what causes Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s “*The Awakening*”, to act out against the roles that she is supposed to be filling. The problem also afflicts the main female characters of AMC’s hit television program “*Mad Men*”. The most obvious character that Edna is comparable to is that of Betty Draper. In their own way, both of these ladies are trying their best to fight back against this problem in society, with varying success.

AMC’s “*Mad Men*” is one of the most important television dramas to come out in the latter half of the past decade. The brainchild of show runner Matthew Weiner, a former writer for “*The Sopranos*” and protégé of David Chase, “*Mad Men*” takes place in the 1960’s and centers on the world of advertising. The show follows main character Don Draper as he and the other members of the Sterling-Cooper ad agency react to the major changes that would come to define the decade. The changes also affect the home life of these characters, such as with Don’s wife Betty. One of the major changes that would occur in the 60’s was the emergence of modern feminism and the growth of the women’s rights movement. It was also during the 60’s that Kate Chopin’s “*The Awakening*” was rediscovered. At the time when it was published the Awakening was seen as obscene and amoral and was largely forgotten for over 50 years. It’s rediscovering in the 60’s shows that Chopin’s novel of a woman who fights back against the traditional roles must have seemed relevant to the women of the 60’s who were also fighting back against tradition.

Betty Friedan wrote her classic work of feminism in 1963, which would have been around the time in which “*Mad Men*” is set. “*The Feminine Mystique*” was a pioneering work of feminist literature and it helped usher in what has now become known as the Second Wave of Feminism in America. The major crux of her book is this idea that American housewives are feeling this sort of personal emptiness. This is something that shouldn’t be happening because they seemingly have everything: a nice house, a loving husband, and adorable children. The problem, Friedan says, is that a housewife hase a massive hole in her life This hole represents the emptiness left by things like education, a fulfilling job, and other activities that do not involve taking care of the house. It is this emptiness that Friedan refers to when she is writing about this “problem that has no name” (Friedan 15-32)

The character of Edna Pontellier in “*The Awakening*” has a lot in common with Don Draper’s wife, Betty. They have some physical resemblance with both being tall blonde women in their late 20s. They are both housewives who feel constrained by the traditional role in which society has placed them. Both of their husbands are never home due to work or, in the case of Don Draper, having extramarital affairs. They both have children, but don’t really do much with them and there is always a nanny/maid who is taking over the role of a doting mother.

There is, of course, one major difference between Edna and Betty, and that difference lies more in the character of the husband. Both Mr. Pontellier and Don Draper live a completely separate life from the domesticity of their wives’. They each live in two different worlds; that of the home and that of work. Mr. Pontellier has to leave his wife and children at the vacation house to go back to work in New Orleans, and even later he must go to New York on business, leaving his wife alone in their massive house. Things are a little different for Don and Betty Draper. As many who have at least heard of the show know, a major aspect of the character of Don Draper is that he cheats on Betty constantly. He is able to maintain this separate existence due to the fact that he works in New York and Betty is back in suburban Ossining. Though Mr. Pontellier remains faithful to his wife, it doesn’t make the emotional distance any more harmful to his wife psyche. By working far away from their wives both Don and Mr. Pontellier are leaving their wives feeling unfulfilled in their marriages. This does nothing but add to the trapped feelings that both women feel.

Edna and Betty occasionally take these trapped feelings out on their husbands. This is something that Betty does constantly. This becomes a major plotline in season two when, after finding out about one of his affairs, Betty kicks Don out of the house. In “*The Awakening*”, this is most telling in the scene with the hammock. Overcome with anger and other emotion stemming from the “problem”, Edna stubbornly refuses to leave the hammock, leaving her husband perplexed and resigned to go along with his wife’s bizarre behavior. When he feels annoyed at her behavior he demands that she comes inside. This only increases her stubbornness, or as Chopin writes, “she perceived that her will had blazed up stubborn and persistent. (Chopin 1277) The actions taken by Edna can be seen as a reaction against being subservient to her husband. This is Mrs. Pontellier acting out against these traditional roles that society gives women. By staying in the hammock, Edna is attempting to exercise her independence.

Both Edna and Betty try to escape the boredom and the stifling nature of their societal roles by taking on jobs and activities that would allow them to assert their independence. For Edna this is obviously her painting, a task that basically takes over her life. This isn’t a bad thing for her though because of how it allows her to express her creativity. Edna may be neglecting other duties, but it is those duties which have made her feel empty and unsatisfied. In a season one episode entitled “*Shoot*”, Betty has a chance to go back to the world of modeling, a career she left to settle down and raise a family. This job allows Betty to regain her sense of having a career and independence away from being a homemaker. Sadly this job was not meant to last, since it was a ploy by a rival ad agency in an attempt to court Don. In the show’s second season, Betty finally finds an activity that allows her to escape from the stifling world of 1960’s suburbia, horse riding. This is about the only time that she has any semblance of me-time away from her kids and the activities and demands of being a housewife. It is during her equestrian outings that she meets her own Robert.

This potential paramour is named Arthur and he is a fellow rider who is engaged to a young woman from a rich family. They start off a friendly flirtation, which Betty enjoys because it allows her to feel like a young girl again. There are two moments where the flirtation starts to sour. The first of these moments occurs in the third episode “*The Benefactor*” when Arthur tries to make a move but is rebuffed by Betty. What follows is the humorous exchange when Arthur calls her “deeply sad” and she replies that she is just of Nordic heritage. Later in the 6th episode “*Maidenform*”, Betty runs into Arthur at a veteran’s day event at a country club. During their talk, Betty’s children run up to her and one can’t help but notice the visible shock that appears on Arthur’s face. Eventually Betty decides to introduce her friend and riding partner to Arthur as a way to vicariously cheat on her husband through her friend. Betty is interesting in that she is interested in escaping the roles society put her in through using her sexuality. The problem is that either a force or her own insecurity keeps her from going through with the idea.

In the first season episode “*Ladies Room*”, we first really meet Betty, who seems to be suffering from temporary paralysis of her hands. These tremors are the physical manifestations of the “problem that has no name”. In order to help treat her, Don sends her to a psychiatrist. The episode ends with the revelation that Don calls the doctor at night to find out what Betty talked about. This breach of doctor-patient confidentiality is Don’s way of better understanding the troubles that are plaguing his wife. A similar thing is done by Mr. Pontellier in “*The Awakening*” when he goes to visit Doctor Mandelet. Mr. Pontellier is doing this because Edna has been acting out and ignoring the duties that come with following the role of a housewife. Mandalet tells him in a very condescending way that “women (are) a very peculiar and delicate organism,” (Chopin 1305) which is a commonly held belief amongst the medical professionals at the time.

One of the major things that caused Betty’s hand problem was the passing of her mother. Betty’s mother is an interesting presence on the show because although we never see her on screen except in a season three dream sequence, she play a major role in understanding Betty as a character. Like the Colonel in “*The Awakening*”, Betty’s mother instills in her daughter old fashioned ideas of women’s roles. Throughout the series, Betty is told by her mother how to not reveal one’s true emotions and that beauty is everything. These negative effects are unleashed by Betty onto her poor daughter Sally. Betty is not the best example of the “mother-woman” (Chopin 1259); there are many instances where she takes out her frustrations with her philandering husband on her children.

There are many instances where the two characters unleash their frustrations as a result of the pressure that the “problem” puts on their psyche. These outbursts are usually taken out on inanimate objects. The most notable of these outbursts in Chopin’s “*The Awakening*” is the scene where Edna destroys a vase. The outburst occurs after a day of doing what is expected of a late 19th century housewife, which is holding a reception day. A reception day is when one sits around the house all day taking in visitors and playing the dutiful hostess to friends and acquaintances. After a very bland and boring dinner, Edna goes up to her room and then proceeds to take of her wedding ring and tosses it on the ground. After which she “stamps her heel upon it, striving to crush it.” (Chopin 1294) After failing to destroy her wedding ring, she then seizes “a glass vase from the table and [flings] it upon the tiles of the hearth.” (Chopin 1294) Chopin’s explanation for Edna’s actions is just that “she wanted to destroy something” (1294), this impulse is a direct reaction by Edna against the boring routine of a housewife within which society has trapped her. Betty has a similar outburst on an inanimate object in a second season episode of “*Mad Men*” entitled “*A Night to Remember*”. The incident occurs when Betty is getting the table ready for a night of hosting a party. When she notices that one of the chairs as a wonky leg, instead to trying to fix it she proceeds to bash the chair against the ground until it is broken up into multiple pieces. Both of these scenes and character moments occur either before or after Edna and Betty have to perform traditional behaviors that are expected of housewives by society.

According to Friedan, the feminine mystique destroys these ideas of women’s identity; this leaves them to only be known as “Tom’s wife [or] Mary’s mother (Friedan 71). These hosting duties that both Edna and Betty have to perform are nothing but an extension of being the wives of these successful businessmen. Who is Edna but the wife of Leonce Pontellier? Is Betty known as anything other than Don’s wife? This is shown in Mad Men multiple times when Don uses Betty to help him with clients. In an episode entitled “*The Benefactor*”, Don brings Betty along on a business dinner with a client, in order to use her beauty to help woo the clients. In this episode, Betty is treated as nothing more than a prop to be used by Don to aid getting success in his job. She represents to him the ideal wife that is promised with the American Dream.

Another reason that both of these characters are not the best examples of “mother-women” is that they don’t seem very involved in their children’s lives. Both Edna Pontellier and Betty Draper have hired nannies/maids that seem to do the majority of the work. These nannies/maids are the hired help and are both African American. At least in the show “*Mad Men*”, the maid Carla is given a name and a personality. The same cannot be said of the unnamed “quadroon” who is only seen following Edna’s Children around. This in my view is mainly a result of the time period in which each of the works were made.

The show “*Mad Men*” deals with a time period where the roles of minorities and women were changing. That is why it is important that the audience is given a character through which we can see the changes that occur during the civil rights movement of the early 60s. This is also a reflection on the characters themselves; Betty is a woman who is living through a time period where there are changes that she will need to acknowledge. There is a very important moment in an episode from season three entitled “*The Grown Ups*”, which deals with the aftershocks of the JFK assassination on the show’s characters. There is a scene in which both Betty and Carla sit together on the couch and take in the tragic news, equal in grief. There is no such event or chapter in “*The Awakening*”, Edna is never once seen interacting with the woman who is taking care of her children.

Both Edna and Betty have a foil, a female character that represents the opposite of what they are as individuals. For Edna Pontellier, that character is Adele Ratignolle. Adele represents all the aspects of femininity that Edna wants no part of. Adele is the perfect example of a true “mother-woman.” She loves and dotes on her children, she is eternally faithful to her husband, and she performs all the duties that are asked of her when it comes to being a true housewife. Nowhere is Edna’s distaste for Adele’s lifestyle more evident than in the scene where Adele is giving birth to her new child. We are shown just how distasteful Edna finds the whole thing through Chopin’s choice of language and words. The entire birth is described as “a scene of torture” and her feelings are described as an “inward agony…a flaming outspoken revolt against the ways of nature.” (Chopin 1340) This chapter does the most to show just how unsuited Edna is for a life like Adele’s. The foil to Betty Draper, Helen Bishop, is a far cry from that of Adele Ratignolle. Helen Bishop is a divorcee living alone with her children who is new in the suburban neighborhood. This causes scorn from the other housewives in the neighborhood and leers and snide comments from their husbands. At first Helen seems to embody everything that is good about the new woman. She is politically active, full of confidence and a sense of self, this façade eventually drops as we see more of her life. She has a very rocky relationship with her ex-husband and her son has turned into a little creep with no sense of personal boundaries. In some ways, Helen is a major influence on Betty’s decision regarding her marriage to Don. She sees that if she divorces Don, her life would be a struggle not just to get by as a single working mother; she would also have to deal with that horrible aspect of being judged by the other housewives and society as a whole. Both the early 1960’s and the late 19th century were not good time periods in which to be a single mother. The characters of Helen Bishop and Adele Ratignolle could not be any more different, but the effects that they have on the characters of Edna and Betty share many similarities. They both help these two women reinforce their lifestyle choices and they do that job quite well.

Eventually their dissatisfaction with these traditional womanly roles lead Betty and Edna to commit adultery. For Edna it is with the salacious rake, Alcee Arobin, who seems to be nothing more than a rebound from the unconsummated love affair between her and Robert Lebrun. A similar thing happens to Betty in the second season finale after finding out she is pregnant again, and she decides to embark on a one night stand with a stranger she picks up in a bar. What both of these actions have in common is the feeling of general emptiness that accompanies them. After her affair with Arobin is consummated in what seems like the literary equivalent of a fade to black, the following chapter deals with the emotions that Edna goes through in the aftermath of the affair.

The short chapter starts with Edna crying, trying to reign in the “multitudinous emotions that assailed her”. Edna felt a wide variety of emotions including “an overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility” and “the shock of the unexpected and the unaccustomed.” (Chopin 1319) Edna feels guilty not just because she cheated on her husband, but that the affair was with a man who was not her beloved Robert. These feelings represent the emptiness that her actions failed to fill. She wanted to exert her freedom by opening herself up romantically and it does nothing for her. A similar thing happens in Betty’s one-off affair, she does this in part to get back at her philandering husband Don. She sees this as a way to put her on equal footing with her husband; getting her vengeance before taking him back. The emptiness of this affair is highlighted by the fact that all of Don’s affairs were much deeper than simple one night flings. Don has affairs with women who exhibit a strong independent spirit and are also usually brunettes. These affairs seem more like to lovers who complement each other intellectually. Don is not just having affairs for the sex; what he seeks in these women is just what is missing from Betty’s character, independence and self assertion. In some ways Don is having these affairs as a reaction against these classic examples of what was expected of housewives. Betty is typical of the housewife suffering from “the problem that has no name” and Don in some respects doesn’t find having this ideal wife that fulfilling and thus he starts affairs with women who can at best be described as the opposite of her. The actions of both Don and Betty can be seen as a sort of reaction against “the problem that has no name”.

These days in our modern American society there has been an increase in a political reaction to the rights of women. This so-called conservative War on Women has been all over the news lately. Cable news channel personalities have been arguing over what is okay for a woman to do with her body. It seems that many on the conservative side want to take women’s rights back to the 1950’s, a time when the role of women was to be in the kitchen barefoot and pregnant. It is during times like these where works like “*The Awakening*” and “*Mad Men*” are important because they help to show just how bad things were for women in those eras who strived for something more. Both Edna and Betty suffered from what Freidan describes as “the problem that has no name” and the stories that ensue during “*The Awakening*” and the first few seasons of “*Mad Men,*” chronicle their attempts to react against this problem and the female roles within which society has trapped them. Thankfully, we live in a modern society where it is possible for women to be both a wife and mother yet still have a fulfilling career. But this recent War on Women shows that misogyny lives on.

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