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AGENCY, GENDER, AND CONSTRAINT:

EXAMINING SHAME IN *THE AWAKENING*

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and examines how shame constrains the performance of gender through the lens of Butler's theory of gender performativity. Judith Butler claims that gender is the "practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint," and I argue that shame organizes the scene of constraint by commanding specific responses to shame. In other words, I argue that shame is a social situation, not a personal emotion. *The Awakening* was written and is set at a unique moment in history that allowed for such a conversation about gender and gender performance to occur because of the social shift to a class system. The shift made leisure time more available, which allowed for this conversation of gender to develop. Within the novel, Edna Pontellier is shamed in various scenes for her gender performance, and she responds to this shaming by resisting, acquiescing, or improvising. In order to counter shame, Edna exercises agency through resistance or improvisation. The novel proves through Edna's navigation of the complex oppressive social structure that it is possible to combat constraints without compromising agency or succumbing to oppression.

Many social and cultural shifts and reforms occurred in the final decades of the nineteenth century in America, resulting in significant social progression in terms of class structure, economic power, and social formations, including conceptualization of gender and how one performs gender. During this time, the first-wave of feminism, in particular, raised significant questions regarding the rights of women and, perhaps more importantly, the agency of women. Although this certainly was not an intersectional conversation, the debate was naturally taken up by artists who created work that represented the problem of female agency in the changing world. Many female authors in the last decade of the century produced literature that interrogated and played with the ways in which female characters were represented. Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* explores the performance of gender through her female characters, particularly Edna Pontellier, and criticizes the traditional notions of gender and the limitations of prescribed and enforced gender roles. At a time when the social and cultural climate of the country was undergoing overwhelming change, many women examined, resisted, and improvised gender roles, social expectations, and the organized social structure altogether. Chopin depicts Edna navigating the complexities of the oppressive social structure and learning to exercise agency. Such agency arises in relation to various responses to these social constraints: submission, resistance, or improvisation of gender performance. These constraints of oppression can take many forms, but in the novel it oftentimes takes the form of shame.

The particular time period in which the novel was written and is set reflects a unique moment in history that allowed for the examination and criticism of gender roles and norms that I argue reveal themselves in Chopin's novel. Lawrence Birken claims that, during the 1870s to early 1900s, there was a social shift from "a holistic (or caste) to an individualistic (or class) conception of the social order" in relation to sexuality (4). Such a shift, Birken argues, was at the

heart of the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, but the transformation of the "caste" system of gender and gender roles only took place more than a century after the eighteenth-century bourgeois revolution, in the booming second industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century. Ronald Schleifer argues that the second industrial revolution more extensively offered a change of middle-class consciousness regarding "the possibility of class movement" (238). The difference in these ideologies of "class" and "caste" lies in the ability or lack thereof to transcend social barriers. The holistic ideology of caste indicates that there was no room for mobility, meaning "the barriers between the castes or orders appear[ed] to be relatively impermeable" (Birken 4). This ideology was traditionally extended to encompass notions of gender; the roles and norms for each gender were unmovable and inflexible just as the roles and norms of economic "class" position—aristocracy, agricultural workers, servant—were unmovable and inflexible. In contrast, the individualist ideology of class implies that social barriers were much more permeable, which allowed the possibility for social mobility. However, this new bourgeois system of class, as it arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, did not include flexibility for gender performance. During the time of the second industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century, however, there was also a dissolution of the phenomenon of need at the base of the holistic concept of the organization of human life into castes. Under such a caste system based on need, as Birken argues, "nothing appeared more natural and universal than heterogenital coitus and nothing more unnatural and idiosyncratic than nonprocreative sexuality" (50). However, the creation of a consumer society in the second industrial revolution led to "the consequent emergence of the radical individualistic concept of desire" and the concomitant organization of human life into permeable gender classes (Birken 50). That is, this transformation of caste into class extended to sexuality itself, so that with this shift to an

individualistic, consumerist society, sex and the ability to examine sex and sexuality becomes possible in radically new ways. Sexuality, Birken argues, became a leisure activity (rather than the necessity of procreation) so that the possibility, and even the "naturalness," of different kinds of sexuality and sexual pleasure—the "naturalness" of extramarital sexuality (for women), of homosexuality as well as heterosexuality for both sexes, of Freudian notions of "polymorphous" sexuality, and many other aspects of non-heteronormative sexuality—all became thinkable leisure activities and not simply "unnatural," immoral, and absolutely aberrational (Birken 98-100).

In *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Evolution,* Livingston also notes that this time of cultural change in the United States brought about an abundance of leisure time (117). He quotes Walter Lippmann who claims that, during this time of abundance, the labor movement and "women's awakening" began to take hold, indicating a connection between this time of leisure and the progression of democratic ideas (qtd. in Livingston 70). Lippmann refers to these movements as the "'two greatest forces for human emancipation'… because they were 'pointed away from submissive want, balked impulse, and unquestioned obedience'" (qtd. in Livingston 70). This progression extends beyond necessity and allows leisure time in which the examination of gender and sexuality becomes more pronounced because, when consumption/desire rather than dearth/need governs human relations, individuals have the time to consider and criticize the performance of gender. The breakdown of the caste system and the institution of a class system also allows this examination of gender to occur because one cannot examine the barriers while they are living in it; only after the system collapses can one examine the oppression within it.

During this time, for women, in particular, the prospect of social movement and the

availability of leisure time was met with various responses that ultimately attempted to oppress the women's freedom to consider and even shape their roles in society. Charles Rosenberg claims that the American middle-class sought to repress sexuality until the 1870s when this emphasis shifted from the individual "to that of organized efforts to enforce chastity upon the unwilling" (134). In order to oppress the potential improvisation or rejection of gender roles, the American middle class defined the roles in a manner that set up the shaming of those who rejected or did not adhere to the roles. Rosenberg continues, "Control was the basic building block of personality. To allow the passions—among which sexuality was only one—to act themselves out, was to destroy any hope of creating a truly Christian personality" (137). The influence of religious standards permeated the social sphere, resulting in the enforcement of sexual repression. Specifically, women were told that sexual expressiveness would cause illness, which constrained gender roles in a manner that repressed female sexuality. Feminist advocates during this time criticized these gender roles and many female writers asserted that repression was unduly placed on the female (Rosenberg 143-145). It is evident that the performance of gender, specifically female gender, was socially controlled as a means to oppress a particular class of people. Still, the shift in culture in the late nineteenth century I described earlier brought about by the increase of leisure time that allowed individuals the freedom to question the social construct, including constraints through the use of mechanisms like shame that sought to negate and weaken the individual's agency. Chopin is writing in a unique historical moment where the examination of the nature of shame is possible. Shame became visible and was able to be examined for the first time because possibilities of belief and behavior came to be perceived outside the self-evident "truths" of unchangeable caste characteristics. Without the breakdown of the caste-like patriarchal structures and the rise of leisure time that allowed for such examination

and criticisms to exist, the examination of shame as an isolatable social mechanism of constraint might not have been possible.

In this essay, I examine shame at this particular moment in history to determine the effects of shame on the performance of gender through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler claims that gender is the "practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (*Undoing Gender* 1). This essay argues that shame, as it differentiates itself from guilt and humiliation, organizes the scene of constraint and, as an organizing force, influences the improvisation and enactment of gender by forcing individuals to negotiate their gender identity and performance in relation to shame. Shame, as sociologists have argued for more than a century, is quintessentially based upon the judgment of the community in which all individuals, including the shamed person, participate. However, this does not imply that the shamed individual accepts the judgments from the community as true or right. Rather, shame forces the individual to perform the limited role, reject the role, or improvise their gender in order to avoid rejection from the community. In this way, unlike guilt or humiliation, shame is not an individual feeling or response, but rather part of the social situation altogether. That is, shame attempts to repress agency and negates the freedom of experience by forcing individuals to perform gender in a manner compliant with the socially accepted norms and roles. On the other hand, guilt and humiliation are not "shameful" insofar as they are outside the social order, so that rejection or acceptance by the social order are not apposite in relation to guilt or humiliation. In this, they are feelings/responses that are not related to shame at all.

In this essay, then, I first assess what shame actually is and how it acts as a constraint, and I also argue that shame and guilt or humiliation are not the same. Next, I examine agency and argue that the shame can impede and even negate agency. Then, I examine how Chopin

depicts shame and the effects of shame on gender performance. I examine the novel as a whole to determine how shame commands three responses:

1) the acquisition into the social order – into pre-existing unchanging, patriarchal caste-like categories of sex;

2) the rejection of the social order by refusing to succumb to oppressive social roles; and

3) the female improvisation of gender within that specific context that allows for the expansion of both gender and human (social) agency.

Through this examination, I demonstrate how Chopin shows that shame impacts the means by which female characters improvise and demonstrate their expressions of gender within and against existing societal constraints.

The Nature of Shame

Shame has been defined differently by a multitude of theorists and philosophers, but most seem to agree that shame is a powerful and central human emotion. I find it necessary to first acknowledge some of these definitions before developing a more detailed working understanding of shame for the purposes of my argument. Silvan Tomkins argues that "shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation" and asserts that shame and guilt are identical affects, and even claims shyness is indistinguishable from the aforementioned affects (118). However, I and many theorists argue that it is inaccurate to equate shame to other personal emotions like guilt or humiliation. Upon initial examination of shame and guilt, it is evident that each arises in separate but specific contexts. Drawing on Helen B. Lewis, Michael Morgan argues that guilt is focused on specific behaviors, whereas shame is directed at the self (45). While Morgan claims that both shame and guilt must be catalyzed by an action, he defines guilt

as a negative feeling that individuals experience when they judge their actions or lack thereof as wrong and conclude that they are "responsible and liable as an agent" (46). In contrast, he claims "shame is a feeling of unworthiness" that targets the self as a whole (46). In this it is important to notice that shame does not entail agency as a separate sphere of action and belief. In his argument, then, Morgan concludes, an individual feels guilt about what they have done and feels ashamed about who they are.

Shame is not a primary emotion, as defined by Paul Ekman, meaning that it is not innate or universal (*Paul Ekman Group*). In contrast, guilt is innate because one feels it without coercion or influence; guilt does not require an external force in order for an individual to experience it.[1] Morgan affirms, "The feeling of guilt lacks the social dimension that shame requires," and he claims that "guilt begins within ourselves and stays there" (46; 47). Social dimension refers to an audience or outside gaze that has the potential to impact the social position of a member of a community. Such a "gaze" might occasion emotional responses, but its work is essentially social rather than emotional. This audience can either be real or imaginary; the latter case suggests that the individual can simply acknowledge the social context and imagine others judging them, which results in being shamed. (Note: I say "being" rather than "feeling" shame because, as Morgan suggests, shame is essentially social.) Unlike shame, individuals feel guilt without the external influence of an audience. If guilt is experienced without the influence of an external force, then it is necessary to examine how guilt is produced. Morgan says that an individual feels guilt when they fail to meet a standard that can "originate

[1] While Ekman's six primary emotions—fear, anger, sorrow, joy, disgust, and surprise—does not include "guilt," guilt could be perceived as a combination of primary emotions (e.g. sorrow, fear, and maybe disgust). In contrast, shame does not allow itself to be seen as a composite of primary emotions. That is, shame as a social situation cannot resolve itself into individual emotions.

anywhere" as long as they accept the authority of the force and the standard it produces (46). One experiences guilt when one violates certain ethical or moral standards that are part of the social construct in which one was raised. Therefore, guilt can only be felt if one accepts the social standards and makes an effort to abide by those standards.

On the other hand, Morgan says that when we experience shame, "we experience the pain of inadequacy both in the eyes of others or before others… and in our own estimate" (46). In this, shame, unlike guilt, exists outside the possibilities of agency; the social sphere impedes agency by negatively impacting the way in which one views oneself. Shame is concerned with the rejection or acceptance of the individual by the community, and this element of external judgment causes and influences an individual's internal judgment. The individual's agency is negated, and shame is imposed on her. This suggests that shame is implicitly temporal. The temporality of shame is evident based on the means by which shame is inflicted on the individual: only after the temporal moment the individual is divested of agency— only after the social sphere adversely impacts the way in which the individual views the self—can shame act as a constraint. Morgan explores how external judgments become internalized:

> First there is a causal connection of some kind. That is, shame arises when we have feelings of inadequacy and distress about ourselves *because* others see us as flawed or unworthy. Shame is self-directed; it is shame about ourselves. But it is, in a sense, reflected distress; we feel discomfort because others judge us as inadequate. But this is not sufficient. The connection is more than causal. We also adopt the standards that the others use… Moreover, we acquire the standard for judging ourselves from the others who do so or whom we take to do so. In addition, because we take their standards and agree that they apply, we feel repulsive *in their eyes*, so to speak… It is about being an

> exposed failed self, one that appears to others who think poorly of it and from whom it wants to hide or flee. (49)

In going beyond a "causal" relationship, Morgan describes the manner in which any member of a community is immersed in sociality.

Moreover, it is evident in following Morgan's analysis that shame gives rise to a profound sense of social discomfort; and this suggests that an antonym of shame is social comfort. When an individual experiences shame, she is made uncomfortable by the judgments of others and, in effect, that individual adopts, or internalizes, those standards and judgments. If the community negatively judges the individual, regardless of whether or not the individual accepts the standards by which they are judged, the individual will begin to internalize the negative judgments, beyond the agency of acceptance or rejection, and such internalization leads to feelings of failure or inadequacy. The difference between accepting the standards and internalizing them lies in agency, which I define in more detail when I examine scenes of shame from Chopin's novel. Accepting standards implies that an individual has the freedom to choose whether or not they will regard the standards as true or adequate. In contrast, internalizing suggests that the standards are imposed on the individual, regardless of whether they accept them as accurate. So, if the community deems an individual's actions as wrong, then the individual feels that her personhood—who she is— is wrong. In such a situation, one will either submit to the social construct, reject it, or improvise.

Within the novel, it is evident that Edna experiences shame frequently simply because she is a woman, and this claim is supported by Rosenberg's argument that women and female sexuality were shamed and oppressed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that shame is experienced differently among genders because of the

differing social standards assigned to each gender. Focusing on the experiences of men and women, Donald Nathanson contends that women are more prone than men to "experience and describe shame in the language of shame," and Nathanson describes the language of shame in terms of worthlessness, ostracism, and indignity (158). As previously stated, Morgan also defined shame as experiencing unworthiness, and later in this essay I argue that an individual improvises in order to avoid social rejection, which leads to ostracism: as social animals, humans do not like to be alone, and in this improvisation, rather than outright rejection or total submission, one can find both community and agency. Nathanson also says that men are conditioned to experience shame as a catalyst for anger and use the language of insult and threat to describe the emotion (158). Women experience shame as judgment and rejection, while men experience shame as aggression and confrontation. The difference implies that, for women, shame demands and influences the individual to alter their behavior in order to gain acceptance from the social sphere. In other words, women are forced to either submit or improvise their performance of gender to avoid rejection from the community. (They can also reject socially imposed performances of gender, but in doing so they abandon the community altogether.)

In contrast, men are, arguably, forced to reaffirm their expressions of masculinity by upholding their limiting patriarchal roles as men. Sandra Lee Bartky agrees that shame is experienced differently among genders but also adds that the varying experiences of an emotion do not imply different emotional capacities:

> To say that some pattern of feeling in women, say shame, is gender-related is not to claim that it is gender-specific, i.e., that men are never shamed; it is only to claim that women are more prone to experience the emotion in question and that the feeling itself has a different meaning in relation to their total psychic situation and general social location

that has a similar emotion when experienced by men. (84)

Due to the differing experiences growing out of constraining gender roles, women are more likely to improvise their roles as a means of maintaining a sense of agency because women are more prone to experience shame as a mechanism that threatens to constrain and control. Improvisation offers a means by which women can alleviate the oppressiveness of the constraints, like shame, by operating within the social construct without abjectly succumbing to it.

Based on this examination of the nature of shame, I offer three working axioms of shame for the purposes of this essay:

1) shame does not require the shamed individual to accept the standards by which the community judges them;
2) even without "acceptance" shame can become internalized insofar as one might believe oneself to be inadequate based on the community's judgments, which could lead to either compliance, rejection, or improvisation; and
3) the influence of the social dimension in the mechanism of shame diminishes or weakens agency by attempting to limit the freedom of the individual to perform gender in the manner they choose; in fact, the limits of possible gender performance precludes agency in significant ways.

The Examination of Agency

To further clarify how shame organizes the scene of constraint, I want to expand the notion of agency in axiom three and explore how shame can reduce or negate it. I argue that shame constrains gender performance by attempting to diminish agency and negate the

experiences of the individual. However, agency, when enacted, can also act as the antidote to shame because the individual can choose to respond to shame in a manner that does not succumb to it. First, it is necessary to understand this idea of agency and how it works. In *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency*, Diana T. Meyers argues that the institution of gender and the norms surrounding the fulfillment of gender roles constitute a form of oppression, essentially limiting how gender is performed, which compromises individual autonomy (7-8). Meyers claims that autonomy "rests on the dignity of the distinctive individual and the wondrous diversity of the lives individuals may fashion for themselves" (12). In "Personal Autonomy and the Paradox of Feminine Socialization," she says, "A person is episodically autonomous when, in a particular situation, that person asks 'What do I really want to do now?' and acts on the answer" (625). Autonomy, then, refers to the freedom of the individual to shape and determine their personhood, which includes how they perform their gender. Meyers also argues, "Comprehensive programmatic autonomy requires that people be ready to resist the warranted demands of other individuals along with the conformist societal pressures, and that they be resolved to carry out their plans" ("Personal Autonomy" 627). Meyers clearly acknowledges social constraints that hinder the enactment of agency and negatively impact an individual's ability to exercise this freedom of self. Meyers goes on to argue, "Individuals experience lack of autonomy as a sense of being out of control or being under the control of others, whether other identifiable individuals or anonymous societal powers" (13). This means that autonomy is constrained to a certain extent when an individual's freedom is infringed by an external force.

While I agree with Meyers on her general accounts, she fails to acknowledge that this theory of autonomy is not universal, but rather a historical phenomenon. Throughout large portions of history—particularly in the context of caste systems of social organization--

autonomy was not always available to everyone, particularly women. That is, Meyers seems not to recognize that the "wondrous diversity of the lives individuals may for themselves" is not possible within economies of need, but only within an economy of leisure/desire that became available to large numbers of people in the late nineteenth century. That is clear in Birken's sociological analysis of sexuality in that period. Birken draws on Locke's assertion that only men were granted agency in the holistic (caste) system in the pre-Enlightenment; and men maintained and increased that agency in the individualist (class) system that arose in the eighteenth century. Of the "bourgeois individualism" of the new eighteenth-century class system, he writes:

> Bourgeois individualism rigorously excluded family from its domain. In the political economy, there could be only one will representing each household, and that will was the father's. For between men and women, an eternal difference appeared to block the inclusion of the latter in the political economy world of the former. A male/female caste system founded on the perceived natural difference between the sexes thus replaced the older three-function caste system of the aristocratic epoch. (6)

In the same vein of subordination, Schleifer also acknowledges that household labor, "the nonwage work by women," was excluded from commodification in Marxism economics in the same way because the women were exploited by the patriarchal household and placed in a lesser position to the husband (74). Thus, in particular historical circumstances women were not recognized as possessing agency, and this historical awareness complicates Meyers' theory because she does not take into account that agency is not trans-historic. It is only after the breakdown of the patriarchal, caste-like system that Chopin is even in a position to describe female autonomy. This further supports the significance of the moment in history in which Chopin confronted social/gender constraints.

However, this does not negate Meyers' delineation of the nature of agency. In fact, her acknowledgement of the constraints of the social sphere on the individual attempts to address how agency can be negatively impacted by social formations/assumptions. While we like to believe we are fully autonomous agents, the body or the self and the social dimension cannot be completely separated. Butler claims that "the body has its invariably public dimension" (*Undoing Gender* 21), which implies that the body is inescapably part of and belonging to the social dimension I mention in axiom three. This means that the individual is not fully autonomous, and that the individual cannot entirely reject the constraints of the social sphere because the body cannot exist outside of the social construct. Agency is weakened by shame because shame alters the way in which the individual views the self outside of any considerations of volition; shame judges the individual as bad, insufficient, and wrong, thus leading to the individual internalizing those judgments. Due to the fact that the individual cannot be removed from the social context, shame is unavoidable because, as Butler says, the body is "given over from the start to the world of others" (*Undoing Gender* 21). This means that one cannot remove one's body from the "world of others"; bodies—and even the "selves" associated with bodies—are subject to the judgment of the social dimension. The only means by which to alleviate the constraint of shame and retain agency is through the exercise of freedom, which the rise of leisure of time allows. Since the individual cannot escape the constraints of the social context, then they are left to work from within the context to expand or alter how that gender performance is understood by exercising agency as a way to perform within necessary contexts of social constraints. According to Butler, gender is something one "does," and she claims that "one is always 'doing' gender with or for another, even if the other is imaginary" (*Undoing Gender* 1). Agency allows one the freedom to choose how they "do" gender by exerting control

of their gender performance either within or in rejection of social constraints. In the novel, Edna's autonomy is infringed by the social constraints imposed through the act of shaming in an effort to repress her freedom to perform gender. But the novel allows both Edna and its readers to see the imposition of shame as a social mechanism rather than simply as the "nature" of the world. One great strength of *The Awakening,* then, is to make legible for readers the mechanisms and alternatives to social constraint and its concomitant "shame" by situating its characters within the dramatization—within scenes—of social interaction that can be understood as social rather than as the way things are. In the following examples, shaming inhibits Edna's agency by compelling her to conform through the implementation of social pressure. However, there are times that Edna implements her agency and either resists the social constraints or improvises her gender performance within the social construct of her time.

Scenes of Shame, Resistance, and Improvisation

In *The Awakening*, Edna is habitually shamed for her unwillingness to submit to gendered norms that forcibly regulate her behavior. Her husband, Léonce, is constantly the external force that shames and seeks to constrain her, and by means of that shame, he attempts to force her to adhere to what he takes to be self-evident and natural gender norms. For example, when Léonce comes home late one night, he finds that one of their sons has a fever, and he wakes Edna from her sleep. He tells her that their son "need[s] looking after" (Chopin 12). When Edna claims she is sure that their son is well since she was with him all day, Léonce admonishes her for her inattentiveness and tells her "in a monotonous, insistent way" that it is the "mother's place to look after children" (13). Léonce shames Edna for what he refers to as inattention, though she was aware that the child was fine all day while Léonce was at the club with the other men. He

demands that Edna respond in the way he thinks a mother should and questions her worth as a mother. He does not claim that Edna as a person is bad, meaning that he does not insult her character, but he insinuates that she is not a good mother for not immediately tending to the children. Léonce views Edna as inadequate and shames her for not acting in a manner he believes a mother should simply because she does not immediately forego sleep to attend to a child whom she believes is well.

After Léonce goes to sleep, Edna feels "an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (14). She does not lament the choices that led her to become a wife and mother, but she still cries. She feels this oppression because she is shamed by the notion that someone views her as an inadequate mother, though she does not view herself as inadequate. In a sense, Edna's agency is diminished or more fully compromised. She believes her son is well, but she still goes to check on him because Léonce shames her. Then, she cries because his comments make her feel insufficient; shaming represses and weakens her agency to come to her own conclusions about her mothering abilities and the efficacy of her actions. Edna does not question her capability as a mother; but Léonce's insinuation that she is incapable or does not have the ability to be a good mother influences Edna's self-perception and alters how she views herself. She is not free to determine whether or not she is a good mother because the social oppression, which personifies in her husband and his assumptions of the "truth" of social roles he unthinkingly inherits from his social world, diminishes her freedom of self-perception. This example demonstrates how shame influences Edna by affecting her comprehension of herself as a social being (rather than simply a "feeling" being). Still, throughout the novel, her reactions to shame shifts; while she succumbs to shame at times, she also resists it and also improvises. And these

possibilities of agency—resistance or improvisation—seem fully unavailable to Léonce.

In another scene from the novel—a scene of resistance to shame rather than her submission to shame— Edna utilizes her agency despite oppressive external forces by rejecting an expected role of a wife within the patriarchal social order when the Pontelliers return to New Orleans. Edna is expected to stay in the home and entertain callers on Tuesdays, which she has done—more or less unwillingly, certainly unthinkingly— for six years. Upon their return, however, Edna decides to reject this role and the conventions associated with it, and she goes out on a Tuesday without leaving an explanation for the callers. Léonce finds this unacceptable and claims that "people don't do such things" and they have to "observe *les convenances*," or the conventions, if they should "ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession" (Chopin 85). Léonce shames Edna for her lack of respect for the social conventions that attempts to constrain her actions and behaviors because it could negatively impact the family's reputation in society; Léonce implies that people might shame her. He is attempting to control Edna because he does not view her as an individual possessing agency, but rather his wife who should sacrifice herself for the good of their family. Léonce then flips through the cards left by the missed callers and chastises Edna for not taking "such trifles" seriously (86). Even he acknowledges how ridiculous and unimportant the conventions are but still he shames Edna for refusing to adhere to them and grows more irritated as Edna remains unbothered.

This scene is an instance in which Edna asserts her agency by making a decision for herself, regardless of how those around her perceive it; she exercises agency by rejecting a social convention that limits her actions, but she does not denounce the conventions altogether. Léonce then leaves the table and their home in an irritated huff, which would have previously left Edna distraught. However, she instead forces herself to finish dinner as "her eyes flamed with some

inward fire" (86). Edna rejects traditional roles of the wife by refusing to cater to her husband as the role requires. She consciously alters her behavior and chooses to continue with her evening instead of catering to her husband because she interprets, and he even admits, the conventions as trivial. In this scene, Edna exercises autonomy, specifically regarding how she behaves and reacts to external forces that attempt to control her behavior. By rejecting a gender norm dictated by what she takes to be insignificant social conventions, Edna exerts control over herself, which reflects Meyers' definition of autonomy. Then, Edna refuses to allow her husband's shaming to influence or alter her actions. Through the implementation of autonomy, Edna rejects a part of the social construct because the actions expected of her infringe upon her ability to be a free agent with the freedom to make decisions regarding her actions and behaviors. Moreover, this is a notable resistance of social constraints because it rejects the social altogether: Edna renounces sociability by simply not being "at home" for social interaction, and it is important to understand that the renunciation of sociability also encompasses the renunciation of gender roles as well.

While Edna exercises agency in response to shame, which can result in a rejection of gender role and norms, her improvisation of gender demonstrates how she is able to play with gender while remaining within the social construct. Thus, in scenes of improvisation, she does not reject the roles and norms so much as she alters how gender is performed. An example of Edna improvising gender performance is during her affair with Alcée Arobin. Alcée is described as a seducer of women, and he is infatuated with Edna. Edna, however, seems confused by her feelings toward Alcée and refuses many of his advances. During their first interaction alone, Alcée and Edna attend the horse races and spend the evening together. During this time, they grow "intimate" with ease (Chopin 127). Alcée tells Edna how differently life might have been if he had known her before, and impulsively shows her an injury on his wrist that he received from

a duel in Paris. Edna grabs his hand, but then quickly releases it and walks away, claiming that she finds such an injury repulsive (127). While she is initially curious and initiates physical contact, Edna quickly pulls herself away from Alcée's alluring attempt to present himself as brave and masculine. When Alcée apologizes, "He [stands] close to [Edna], and the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness" (127). Then, Alcée kisses her hand. In response, Edna repeatedly sends him away and claims that she does not like him, though she knows her words lack "dignity and sincerity" (128). Still, she refuses his subsequent advances and tells him to leave. Edna is attracted to Alcée but refuses to cross the line into adultery; therefore, she does not reject the social construct. But by "playing" with adultery, she does not fully accept (or has not fully "internalized") the social construct either.

After Alcée leaves, Edna looks at her hand and thinks, "'What would he think?'" (129). However, Edna is not referring to her husband, but to Robert, a man whom she loves. In thinking about Robert rather than Léonce, Edna improvises on gender roles. Gender roles take place among people, and perhaps the most conventional is the interrelationship between wife and husband. Thus, when Edna "maintains" the gender role embodied in "husband and wife" but substitutes the man she loves for the one she married, Chopin is offering a clear scene of the improvisation of gender roles. This improvisation does not reject the social construct, but rather subverts it, to use Butler's term from *Gender Trouble*, by changing notions of the "husband." The husband, to Edna, is not the man the social structure identifies as husband, meaning the man with whom she signed a marriage license. Instead, Edna inserts Robert into the role of husband because she loves and respects him, which is an aspect of the husband/wife relationship beyond the formality of social convention. But more importantly, she does so because sees "husband" as

a role and not simply as a self-evident natural fact. Edna is not operating outside of the social construct so much as she plays with its form.

Another scene of improvisation takes place after Edna throws a dinner party in celebration of her moving out of the larger family home and invites all of her friends, including Alcée. After the party, Adele visits Edna at her new home and chastises her closeness with Alcée but does not condemn her actions: "In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life. That is the reason I want to say you mustn't mind if I advise you to be a little careful while you are living here alone" (Chopin 160). Adele suggests that Edna ask someone to stay with her and reveals the reason behind her suggestion and word of caution: "Well, the reason—you know how evil-minded the world is—someone was talking of Alcée Arobin visiting you" (160). Adele is acknowledging the social sphere and warning Edna against the possibility of shame, but Adele does not outright shame her. She simply tells Edna to be careful with her actions. While Adele is not aware of the exchange between Edna and Alcée, it is clear that there is some sexual and/or romantic tension between Edna and Alcée, which Adele observes at the dinner party. Instead of shaming Edna and admonishing her for her potentially adulterous behavior, Adele just tells Edna to be cautious. This is an act of improvisation because Adele recognizes the social context and encourages Edna to act within it by not outright rejecting the norms and customs by pursuing a relationship with Alcée while she is married, but at the same time she does not condemn Edna's actions nor attempt to shame her into submitting to the social construct. This acting within the social context while not outright submitting to it is an act of improvisation.

In a way, the improvisation of gender and its performance can be likened to Martha Nussbaum's discussion of theatrical improvisation: "An improvising actress, if she is

improvising well, does not feel that she can say just anything at all. She must suit her choice to the evolving story, which has its own form and continuity. Above all, she must preserve the commitments of her character to the other characters" (94). She claims this example of the actress indicates "that perceiver who improvises morally is doubly responsible: responsible to the history of commitment and to the ongoing structures that go to constitute her contexts," and these commitments and structures refer to "a host of past obligations and affiliations" (Nussbaum 94). The limitations of a specific context act as the catalyst for improvisation in which an individual does not fully yield to or fully disregard the context. The actor recognizes that improvisation does not allow her total freedom to act beyond the context of the performance, so she improvises within the context.

The improvisation of gender is similar to Nussbaum's example of insofar that improvisation is dependent on the social sphere. Butler argues that our bodies are never truly our own in a passage I quoted in part earlier: "The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, baring their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own" (*Undoing Gender* 21). The individual cannot escape the social context; she is invariably part of the social as much as it is part of her. Among other things, this suggests that the social context has imprinted the norms and roles on her in a manner that limits her gender performance. Since the individual cannot remove herself from the social sphere, in order to obtain this balance between avoiding social rejection and retaining agency, she must improvise her gender performance.

Conclusion

Chopin is situated within a particular moment in history that enables her to explore and recognize shame as a constraining mechanism and to explore and recognize, as well, alternatives to shame. Only through this recognition is she able to determine how one might combat such an oppressive force. Shame organizes the scene of constraint by impacting Edna's performance of gender, forcing her to comply, resist, or improvise. While she sometimes succumbs to shame and accepts the limiting patriarchal norms and roles, she most often exercises agency as a means to counter shame. Improvisation, then, is the antidote to shame; it relieves shame of its oppressive control while avoiding rejection from the social altogether. Moreover, in improvisation, Edna discovers (or rediscovers) agency without rejecting the social, which is after all "part" of herself. Such improvised agency alleviates the fear of shame and enables Edna to reject the oppression entirely. The risk with agency, while necessary to improvisation, is that when agency is used to reject the social construct, the individual risks ostracization from the social construct and abandonment of the invariable public dimension of selfhood and, indeed, of agency itself. Improvisation differs from outright reject and abandonment of the social in that it allows the individual to operate within the social construct, seemingly playing by the rules of that construct, but still maintaining agency by altering the performance of gender by subtly undermining it. Chopin offers repeated scenes of how shame is successfully circumvented by the employment of agency as a means by which an individual can choose how they perform gender. When shame is recognized as such—when it is deployed outside a caste system in which it seems simply "natural" and self-evident— alternatives arise that allow the individual to alleviate the oppression of constraints and discover possibilities of "wondrous diversity of the lives individuals may fashion for themselves" (Meyers 21). Without this recognition of shame, it is

impossible to know or learn how to alleviate it. Kate Chopin's late nineteenth-century novel, *The Awakening*, proves that there is a way to combat constraints without losing agency and submitting to oppression.

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