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Women Fighting Against Stereotypes: Kate
Chopin's *The Awakening* and Kathryn Stockett's
The Help

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Resumen

A lo largo de la historia, se ha reprimido a las mujeres de diversas maneras, tanto en su entorno familiar como en la sociedad en general. Esta represión se ha llevado a cabo de diferentes maneras, no solo mediante violencia y leyes que no favorecían a las mujeres sino también a través de una fuerte arma psicológica: los estereotipos. Los estereotipos establecen una norma que puede garantizar la aprobación social cuando se siguen, pero también un rechazo social cuando se desafían. Dado que normalmente excluyen a quienes no se atienen a ellos, a menudo es necesario luchar en contra de estos estereotipos para luchar por la libertad, y la literatura tradicionalmente ha sido un elemento esencial en esta lucha. Este ensayo, que se centra en los estereotipos en torno a las mujeres y su lucha por la liberación, pretende analizar como el estereotipo de ‘La verdadera mujer’ es desafiado en dos novelas que pertenecen a distintas épocas, *The Awakening* (1899) de Kate Chopin y *The Help* (2009), escrita por Kathryn Stockett. Este análisis comparativo muestra que a pesar de que se habían logrado mejorías en los años que separan estos dos textos, la prevalencia del estereotipo de ‘La verdadera mujer’, con la represión que este implica, todavía es confrontado por esas mujeres que intentan vivir libremente y representar la imagen de la ‘Nueva Mujer’. En definitiva, muestra que a pesar de que los estereotipos pueden cambiar, siguen persistiendo y necesitan tenerse en cuenta, especialmente en sus manifestaciones literarias.

Abstract

Throughout history, women have been repressed in many ways, both by their familiar environments and society in general. This repression has been carried out in different ways, not only by violence and laws that did not play in their favor but also by a powerful psychological weapon: stereotypes. Stereotypes establish a norm that can provide social approval if it is followed, but social rejection if it is challenged. Because stereotypes normally exclude those people who do not respond to them, it has often been necessary to fight against these stereotypes to fight for liberation, and literature has traditionally been an essential element in this fight. Particularly concerned with stereotypes on women and the fight for female liberation, this essay aims to analyze how the stereotype of the ‘True Woman’ is challenged in two novels belonging to different historical times, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) and Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009). This comparative analysis proves that even though some improvements have been achieved in the years that separate the two texts, the prevalence of the stereotype of the “True Woman,” with all the repression it entails, is still currently confronted by those women who try to be free and embody the “New Woman” image. All in all, this proves that although they may be transformed, stereotypes are persistent and still need to be accounted for, especially in their literary manifestations.

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Introduction

Has social equality been achieved? Are women equal to men? Do black people enjoy the same privileges as white people? Although some people want to believe and try to convince the rest that these issues have already been overcome, the answer to each of these questions is no. Nowadays, economic and technological progress is at the center of life, but a complete social progress still remains to be achieved. Some examples of this are gender discrimination at the workplace, with women having lower salaries than men and fewer job possibilities, for example; or gender violence, more commonly suffered by women. However, there are also some positive achievements that cannot be ignored: the idea of a woman being the President of Germany and a black man being the President of the United States, two of the main global powers, was absolutely inconceivable not that long ago, and shows that relevant advances towards gender and racial equality have been made. Thus, another important question arises: how has this progress been achieved? Obviously, it has been achieved through struggle, not necessarily a violent one, but which did require many years of protest and vindication. It is in this respect that we must acknowledge one of the most powerful and successful weapons used in this fight for equality: literature. This essay aims to show how literature has taken part in white women's liberation. In particular, I will analyse the way in which female stereotypes are denounced and challenged in two novels, both authored by female writers but written and published at very different historical times: *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, published in 1899, and *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, published in 2009 and set in the 1960s.

Kate Chopin was born in 1850 and died in 1904. She was bilingual—speaking both English and French—and grew up in a bicultural environment, since she descended from French Creole aristocrats and Irish immigrants. She lived in St. Louis (Missouri) until 1870, when she married Oscar Chopin, a Creole cotton trader, and they both moved to

New Orleans, then to Cloutierville (Louisiana) in 1879. She was the mother of six children and went back to St. Louis with them when Oscar died in 1883. Chopin was best known for her short stories, including “The Storm,” “The Story of an Hour,” or “Desiree’s Baby,” and in many of them gender issues and women’s liberation are dealt with. In “The Story of an Hour,” for example, a woman realizes the positive implication of her husband’s death: she will be free. “A forbidden passion for self-fulfilment” was a major theme for Kate Chopin (Gilbert 8), and this became even clearer after the publication of *The Awakening*, which caused Chopin’s rejection at that time. As critics nowadays contend, Chopin was “a woman far ahead of her time” (Howard), and she became a representative woman of the nineties, a writer of the *fin de siècle* (Gilbert 12), which meant the representation of “the comparatively new idea of ‘free love’ as well as the even newer persona of the ‘New Woman’” (14). However, many critics have argued that she did not fight for all women’s liberation but only for the liberation of white women, which was partly sustained on the repression of black women. On the other hand, some critics such as Lundie argue that there are some “tales devoted solely to the condition of the African American Woman” (126) and that “[t]he negation of African American women—their rights, their sanity, even their lives—is the subject she explores” in some stories such as “Dèsiree’s Baby” and “La Belle Zoraide” (127). Even *The Awakening*, which apparently does not seem to be concerned with racial issues, is considered by some critics to actually do so. Joyce Dyer for example claims that “[i]n *The Awakening* there is an enormous black presence, often menacing, and sometimes capable of sabotaging not only the white characters in Chopin’s novel, but also the very text itself” (140).

Kathryn Stockett was born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi. She graduated from the University of Alabama with a degree in English and Creative Writing. She lived in New

York City for sixteen years, where she worked in a magazine and where she wrote her first novel, *The Help*, the only one she has published so far. Stockett lived in Mississippi at a time when most white families, including hers, had a black maid. When she was living in New York, she felt nostalgic about her home town, Jackson. She realized how important her maid, Demetrie, had been for her, wishing she had asked her what it was like to be a black in Mississippi, and that was the origin of her novel. She has been criticised for having appropriated the black maids' voices, for "misrepresent[ing] African American speech and culture" (ABWH 1), even though she clarified that she does not "presume to think that [she knows] what it really felt like to be a black woman in Mississippi, especially in the 1960s" (Stockett 460).¹

Apart from their author's background, one key issue to keep in mind when analyzing these two novels is the setting of each of them. *The Awakening* is set in Louisiana in the second half of the 19th century, at a time when Louisiana was made up by three different cultures, American, Southern and Creole, the latter being the most influential for gender issues, since Creole culture was Catholic and very conservative. Louisiana was the only state that operated under a different legal system which did not work for the benefit of women: for example, some articles of the Louisiana Code established that a woman was the property of her husband, and that married women, like children or mentally ill people, "were incompetent to make a contract" (Wyatt). Therefore "[t]he feminist movement of the late nineteenth century did not have much hope in the state" (Wyatt). This started to change at the turn of the century, but Louisiana would have to wait until changes were appreciated. On the other hand, *The Help* is set in Mississippi in the 1960s. Things were starting to change in this place that had been the heart of racial

¹ Although I am aware of the relevance of the racial issue in both *The Awakening* and *The Help*, it falls outside the scope of this essay, in which I focus on the stereotypes of white women.

discrimination and segregation, and the black fight for freedom became a relevant concern. This was also the time of the second wave of the feminist fight, women were adopting a stronger position regarding politics and public life, and not only did more white women start to fight for themselves in this state but also, “second wave feminism passe[d] as radical antiracism” (Russell 78).

Although these two novels belong to different historical times and places, and a progress in gender issues is supposed to have been achieved in the century that separates them, I will draw a comparison of the two texts to analyse how women fought against the stereotype imposed to them and show that even though women had some more freedom in the 1960s than at the turn of the previous century, they were still at least partly repressed by the stereotype of the “True Woman.”

The Power of Stereotypes

Throughout history, men have more often than not been the ones to control every aspect of the world: political power, economy, social relationships, art, knowledge. Accordingly, for a long time, the world of literature was also a male-dominated world, and often only men were able to write, and in many contexts, to read. As a consequence, without proper access to knowledge, women were frequently condemned to remain silent and accept what was taught to them by their fathers and husbands. Literature was to a large extent controlled by male writers, which implies that female characters were mostly created and developed by the external viewpoint of men, and in many cases they were silenced, they were inaudible and invisible. Consider, for example, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which no name nor voice is given to the eight female characters that are just mentioned in the novel. Only when it was for the benefit of men would female characters have a more important role in men's writings: roles such as a muse to inspire men, or the means for men to create life. Although the best-known feminist movements are those which started in the 19th century, literature had much earlier become a powerful weapon used to claim women's rights and to protest against those roles imposed to women. An early example would be that of Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), asking for male acknowledgement to female writing and explicitly showing her disconformity with the role imposed to Puritan women in her poem "The Prologue". The implication of this was not only that a woman was writing, but also that she was a woman writing in favor of women. Thus, it was largely through literature that women started their fight: writing would become a relevant way to rebel and fight for an equal world for men and women.

There are many ways in which literature can be used as a fighting tool. It can explicitly ask for recognition or show disconformity with inequality, like in the aforementioned example, but there are also more implicit ways of fighting which are

equally powerful: defying stereotypes. As it is explained in *Psychology of Women: A Handbook of Issues and Theories*, “stereotypes are assumptions about traits and behaviors that people in labeled categories are thought to possess” (Kite, Deaux, and Haines 2006). Thus, stereotypes establish a generalization, a norm that warrants social approval if it is followed, and at the same time, it threatens with rejection and disapproval when it is challenged, because defying stereotypes is a way of challenging social expectations. Women had been imposed a role in society, a role that was represented in and disseminated by literature, among other instruments, through stereotypes. As Anne Cranny-Francis explains in her book *The Body in the Text*, “the reflection began to construct the real, people construct their ‘real’ bodies in the image of those images of bodies they see at the movies and in the media” (13). This can be applied both to the present and to the past, in the latter case referring to literature, in the form of stereotyping: stereotyping is extremely powerful, and it does not usually play in favour of equality. As Susan T. Fiske claims:

Issues of power and stereotyping haunt our history and our present as human beings. Without stereotypes there would be less need to hate, exclude, exterminate. For good reasons, people object to being stereotyped, categorized and attributed certain characteristics in common. People do not want to be stereotyped because it limits their freedom and constrains their outcomes, even their lives. (621)

Therefore, defying stereotypes in writing is a way to fight for freedom, a way to fight against the chains that repress women, those imposed by a male-dominated society.

Women Stereotypes in 19th and 20th Centuries

At the beginning of the 19th century, middle-class children were taught the new values that started to characterize America: liberty, independence and ambition. However, these values were not applicable to women and although society seemed to advance, women's role and duty remained static: "girls were told to limit their aspirations to marriage and motherhood and to cultivate the modesty and malleability appropriate to a dependent role. They were advised to quell whatever ambitions they might have" (Epstein 74). The only future that a woman could expect was a life devoted to the comfort of her family. However, this situation started to change during the last years of that century, when the feminist struggle became powerful and succeeded to get some social improvements for women. As Vasurová claims, "[t]he stream of feminism represents the belief in the social, educational, economic, and political equality of the two sexes" (2). Thus, many protests organized by women aimed to achieve this equality, with many successful achievements such as The Married Woman's Property Acts, by which rights of ownership were given to married woman (Gray 68). Many artists and writers share the beliefs of this feminist ideology and show their nonconformity through their works, as we can see in Kate Chopin and Kathryn Stockett. The mother-woman role is both reinforced and challenged by several characters in their novels: some of them emphasize social expectations, whereas others, mainly the protagonists, resist them by following their inner need for individuality and independence.

Before analysing the novels, it is necessary to explain the features of the main repressive female stereotype that was present in the 19th and 20th centuries, the "True Woman," and the main challenging one, the "New Woman." As Welter points out in her analysis of the True Womanhood in the 19th century, "the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbours and

society could be divided into four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity [...]. With them she was promised happiness and power” (152). However, as Gilbert explains in her prologue to *The Awakening*, “a New Woman [is a] woman who chose to be politically, professionally, and emotionally autonomous” (14) and who “characteristically dreamed of a transfigured society where all ‘sex distinction’ had dissolved away” (17). We can thus assume from these definitions that while the True Woman had to give up her identity as an individual and submit to a husband, the New Woman dreamed of being free and develop her individuality. The True Woman development was reduced to motherhood and marriage, while the New Woman looked to develop herself through intellectual knowledge and education. It is important to acknowledge that even physicians and their medical research reinforced the responsibility that lied on women regarding motherhood, which was used as an impediment for women to receive an education:

During puberty, orthodox medical doctrine insisted, a girl’s vital energies must be devoted to development of the reproductive organs. Physicians saw the body as a closed system possessing only a limited amount of vital force [...]. The girl who curtailed brain work during puberty could devote her body’s full energy to the optimum development of its reproductive capacities. A young woman, however, who consumed her vital force in intellectual activities, was necessarily diverting these energies from the achievement of true womanhood. (Smith-Rosenberg, and Rosenberg 340)

Therefore, it was not only a moral issue to devote their lives to motherhood but also a physical one, since intellectual activities would impede the proper reproduction and thus, the whole humanity would be endangered (338). However, this did not mean that a woman

could not read or get involved in some intellectual activities such as music, but “she was to work only for pure affection, without thought of money or ambition” (Welter 160). That is, women could dedicate some time to work, but it had to remain invisible for the rest of the world, and by no means could it become her source of income since being “weaker in body, confined by menstruation and pregnancy, she was both physically and economically dependent upon the stronger, more forceful male, to whom she necessarily looked up to with admiration and devotion” (Smith-Rosenberg, and Rosenberg 338). The most intellectual and economically powerful were men, and the True Women had to willingly accept it.

Another element that was expected from a True Woman was purity: although it was considered understandable that men tried to assault women’s purity because of their nature, “purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order” (Welter 154). Women’s purity could only be altered by her husband, who was the one to have the sexual power, and of course, it could only happen after marriage.

As I argue in this essay the novels by both Chopin and Stockett challenge the True Woman stereotype by being articulated around a non-stereotypical white protagonist. Regarding the gender issues which this essay is concerned with, for it deals mainly women roles and stereotypes, these two novels, separated by nearly a century, should show an evolution from the image of the True Woman to the New Woman, both in the female characters actions and in social expectations. However, although *The Help* is closer to the New Woman than to the True Woman, not all the features of the latter have been socially erased yet, so both writers faced the similar necessity to fight for women’s liberation as a New Woman. As aforesaid, it is by addressing stereotypes that they did so.

Fighting against Stereotypes in *The Awakening* and *The Help*

My account of the fight against stereotypes in these two novels, will be focused on the analysis of three different kinds of characters: those who embody the True Woman stereotype, those who embody society expectations and those who challenge the True Woman stereotype.

As aforementioned, the stereotype of women during the 19th century was that of the mother-woman. A mother-woman is defined in *The Awakening* as one of those women who were “fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 16). In conclusion, marriage and maternity defined their lives. Throughout *The Awakening* this stereotype is reinforced not only by female but also by male characters: Adele Ratignolle represents the perfect role expected from a woman, and Mr. Pontellier, Edna’s father, and Robert represent the request of this role by society. In *The Help*, on the other hand, this idea of real womanhood is reinforced by female characters, mainly: it is the protagonist’s friend, Hilly Holbrook, and the protagonist’s mother, Charlotte Phelan, who embody these expectations.

As Gray claims about *The Awakening*, “everything about [Adele] satisfies the hegemonic ideal of women in her society, from her behavior to her physical attributes” (57). Regarding marriage, she is the kind of wife that could not receive any complaint and “[i]f her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of death by slow torture” (Chopin 17). Of course, her husband was completely pleased by her and their marriage is described by Chopin as “idyllic and precious” (Vasurová 23), a perfect combination, like the left and the right hand, the heart and the soul (Chopin 21). The role played by Adele made of this marriage a perfect one, and “if ever the fusion of two human beings into one

has been accomplished in this sphere it was surely in their union” (93). Thus, this is the definition of a marriage in which both are absolutely happy: a husband who is pleased by his wife and a wife who is pleased to live for him. Regarding maternity, the several children that Adele has and the fact that she endangers her life to bear another baby reflect the importance that children have in her life. Children are constantly on her mind, as proved when she is trying to convince her friend Edna to reconsider her priorities and tells her to “[t]hink of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (182).

Similarly, in *The Help*, there are definitions of what women should expect from life too: all they should wish for is “fine, strong kids, a husband to take care of, shiny new appliances to cook tasty yet healthful meals in” (Stockett 167). Hilly Holbrook is the character that most clearly embodies this motherly role. She is devoted to and absolutely involved in her husband’s political career, even in her speech on the Benefit night, which is “Hilly’s night” (310); she dedicates some words to her husband in order to help him succeed in his career, reminding the public: “don’t forget voters. Holbrook for State Senate” (312). She is also the reinforcement of social conventions regarding image and body, which were essential to please and show respect for their husbands: on that night, “the only genuine parts of Hilly you [could] see [were] her fingers and her face” (307). Even though Hilly is the character who best represents the negative side of issues such as the racial one, she is also the character who reinforces maternal love, for Hilly is the only white character that is said to really love and take proper care of her children. Even one of the maids, Aibileen, points it out:

One thing I got to say about Miss Hilly, she love her children. About every five minutes, she kiss little Will on the head. Or she ask Heather, is she having fun? Or come here and give Mama a hug. [...] And Heather love her mama too. She look at Miss Hilly like she looking up at the Statue a Liberty. (181)

On the other hand, the male characters that reinforce the authoritative role in *The Awakening* are those in charge of making sure that women act as any women should act. Edna's husband, Mr. Pontellier, is the first character to represent the condition of property and subordination under which women lived: "‘You are burnt beyond recognition,’ he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 7). Mr. Pontellier tries to impose this authority several times throughout the novel in order to make Edna play the role she is supposed to play as a wife and mother. An example of this is the moment when he comes back home late and wakes up his wife because he feels like talking to her: "She was over-come with sleep, and answered him with little half utterances." Her husband, "thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (12). In this scene the female subordination to their husbands can be clearly seen: while he does not value his wife's sleep, she is supposed to appreciate his anecdotes. Moreover, since children's care was considered a task for women, "Mr. Pontellier [...] reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" although he was comfortably smoking a cigar (13).

The second male character that reinforces the male role and the subsequent submissive female role in *The Awakening* is Edna's father. As Gray suggests in her article, "[h]er subjection begins as the daughter of a dominating father and continues in her later role as wife and mother" (59). Edna is born in a family in which the 19th century social roles are very strong, and consequently her father embodies the authority over his wife and daughters, until Edna gets married and he passes the authority on to her husband. However, her father still tries to make her act as she was taught under his subordination: "The Colonel reproached his daughter for her lack of filial kindness and respect, her want of sisterly affection and womanly consideration" (Chopin 119). Realizing that he is no longer

in charge of controlling her actions, he tries to make sure that her daughter is under the authority of a man by imposing it through Mr. Pontellier: ““You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce’ asserted the Colonel. ‘Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it’” (119).

In *The Help*, on the other hand, what society demands from women is represented mainly by female characters. The most explicit one is Skeeter’s mother, Charlotte. She is the character who constantly reinforces the need for finding a husband as if it were the only way to be a real woman. Charlotte is the perfect woman and mother figure. The contrast between her and Skeeter is pointed out several times, not only regarding each of their aspirations but also their physical appearance: Charlotte was proclaimed Miss South Carolina when she was younger and then brought up two children. She keeps bringing to the surface the fact that her daughter’s main interest should be finding a man to marry and have a family: ““Did I tell you?’ Mother says, ‘Fanny Peatrow got engaged [...] [n]ot even a month after she got that teller job at the Farmer’s Bank? [...] Why don’t you go down to the bank and apply for a teller job?’” (Stockett 60). However, the protagonist’s main interest and aspiration is her passion, writing. Every action that Charlotte encourages her daughter to take leads towards marriage, to the point that she even considers that education is less valuable than marriage. A degree that might allow her daughter to make a living and to do what she loves in life is insignificant for her in comparison to the “satisfaction” and the “plenitude” that marriage might provide in life: “Four years my daughter goes off to college and what does she come home with?” she asks. “A diploma?” “A pretty piece of paper,” Mother says. “I told you, I didn’t meet anybody I wanted to marry” I say (60). Moreover, Charlotte is always worried about her daughter’s aspect, about what a man would like to see or not. Women were supposed to put up an image that their husbands could be proud of, and of course, to provide sexual appeal and satisfaction to them: a

feminine, elegant, formal image. Charlotte is constantly reminding her daughter of these social rules for women, aimed at making her adequate for finally being liked by a man: “And don’t forget to smile. Men don’t want a girl who’s moping around all night, and don’t sit like some squaw Indian, cross your [ankles]” (166).

Apart from challenging women stereotypes, we find a denouncing of the misconceptions that society had of non-stereotypical women: people tended to assume that there was something wrong with them. In both *The Awakening* and *The Help*, women who resist the stereotype are believed to have some kind of health problem. In the former text, Edna is believed to be physically sick, and she is taken by her husband to the doctor, while in *The Help*, Skeeter is believed to be a lesbian, and her mother, who considers it a disease, gives her some kind of medicine to try to cure her. As we can see, both women are considered to be sick by the characters that represent social expectations: society cannot understand that they are just individuals whose happiness in life does not depend on having a husband and children.

Another important character regarding social expectations in *The Help* is Celia Foote: she does not only reinforce but she also defies social conventions. This character is the image of what a woman must do to be a good wife for her husband, but at the same time she defies some other social conventions such as appearance or the idea of sex before marriage. Celia proves how women internalized those values that they were taught: if a woman is told throughout her entire life that she must be able to cook, to have a perfect house, have great children and make them and her husband the main purpose of her life in order to have a complete existence, there is a high probability that she will believe it and try to act accordingly. Celia is desperately trying to learn how to cook and have their house clean and tidy for her husband to be proud of her. She has so deeply internalized the idea

that she must be a good housewife to be loved by her husband that even though Johnny knows she is not the one to cook for him and “[he doesn’t] care if Celia never lifts another finger for the rest of her life” (138), Celia thinks that “he thought [she] was the smartest girl he’d ever met [only when she] gave him those [pralines that Minny did]” (125). Moreover, the fact that she does not seem to be able to have babies terrifies her, since she thinks this will be a good reason for him to abandon her, which is why she has suffered several abortions in silence.

Interestingly, in spite of trying hard to belong in a conventional society, which she does not succeed at, Celia is at the same time the embodiment of female sexual and body freedom. She is the one that most clearly owns her body, which is shown in two main moments in the novel: first, when she decides to have sex with Johnny before getting married, and second, when she chooses what to wear to attend the Benefit night. The issue of having sex before marriage is brought up by Skeeter at another point in the novel. Stuart invites her to go to the hotel room with him, and she considers what their friends would say about it: Hilly would definitely disapprove if she did. However, Celia and Johnny got married because she was pregnant. Regarding image conventions that women were expected to follow, it is important to mention that on the Benefit night, an original founder of the League states that “bosoms [...] are for bedrooms and breastfeeding. Not for occasions with dignity” (Stockett 309). This sentence establishes the boundaries between private and public life, between what women should do at home, which clearly includes sexually pleasing their husbands, and what they should do in public, which includes not dressing “sinfully.” Celia, however, shows a different point of view: “The invitation said formal, but these girls here all look like they’re dressed for church” (309).

Apart from all these characters, the ones most directly connected to the stereotypes in these two novels are their protagonists. The main challenge of the 19th century female

stereotyping *The Awakening* is the main character, Edna Pontellier. She differs from every single value supposedly embodied by women in that social environment: she is so different from Adele, the perfect mother-woman, that “the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language” (Chopin 79). Most of Edna’s actions imply a rejection to that subordination expected from women. Since the summer in Grand Isle, she starts to act according to her individual desires, for “Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relation as an individual to the world within and about her” (25). She starts resisting both her husband’s and her father’s authority, acting on her individual desires, ignoring the rules that would stop her from achieving them. If, as we have seen before, Adele is the perfect wife, Edna clearly is not. The problem in Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier’s marriage is not the characterization of her husband, since “the ladies declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world” (15). The conflict of this marriage starts with the fact that Edna’s aspiration is not marrying the perfect husband, since “she says a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (110): Edna does not want to be a subordinated wife, which makes her start to reject everything that has been connected to her marriage, for example, her wedding ring, which becomes a symbol of constraint for her. At the beginning of the novel she asks her husband to give her back the ring that she had taken off to go for a bath. However, when she acts according to her individuality she rejects it as the symbol of her oppression in marriage: “and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it” (87). Another example of the nonconformity with her marriage is shown when Edna refuses to stay at home on Tuesday, that is, on reception day, giving the only excuse that “[she] simply felt like going out, and [she] went out” (85). Reception day is mainly a matter of pleasing her husband, something that consequently should make her happy: she is supposed to meet

wives of men who do business with Mr. Pontellier. She used to stay at home to receive them, but now she has decided to stop staying in: it does not please her and thus, there is no point in doing it. Regarding motherhood, Edna does not embody the inner love and attachment that a mother, unconsciously and inevitably, had to show for her children: “She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them” (33); for Edna, maternity seems to be “a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (33). Thus, Edna’s maternal role represents the rejection of the innate duty to become mothers that women had, and, whereas some children grow up feeling their mothers’ love and protection, “[she] failed in her duty toward their children [and] if one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother’s arms for comfort” (16).

Skeeter is different to every other white woman in *The Help*. Unlike Edna, she does not have a husband and children to let down, and that is what mainly makes her different, the fact that she has other priorities than having a family in life and she acts according to them. However, like Edna, Skeeter is the opposite of the perfect mother: she stops understanding their friends, mainly Hilly, the main representative of social expectations: “Our places of comfort are expectedly different, my friends and I,” says Skeeter (Stockett 170). She is also the opposite of the physical feminine stereotype. The challenging of this stereotype begins with her nickname, Skeeter, which people use instead of her real name, Eugenia: it was given by her brother, who claimed “It’s not a baby, it’s a skeeter!” (61), when he first saw her. Skeeter is uncommonly tall, her hair is “more pubic than cranial [...], like hay” (61). As aforementioned, it is her mother who constantly reminds her to pay attention to her appearance and also demands everyone to call Eugenia by her real name.

As Gray claims, “the achievement of women’s sexual power is a central goal of oppositional nineteenth-century feminist ideology” (69). Men had always been the ones to control sexual power: they were the ones to be satisfied and the ones to have the right to demand sexual relationships to their wives, but women started to claim the right to own their own bodies too. A woman who is aware and satisfied with her role as a mother-woman would probably not consider loving or having sexual intercourse with a man other than her husband. However, both Edna and Skeeter do not play that fixed role: they act freely looking for their own happiness and satisfaction. Edna crosses the boundaries of friendship not only with one man but with two: she loves Robert and has a sexual relationship with Alcée Robin. None of them saves her from the oppression of marriage, but they are symbols of her own sexual power: she decides when and who she has relationships with. Therefore, it is not only that she is adulterous, but she also loses the virtue of purity that women were supposed to defend and value.

Skeeter, on the other hand, does not explicitly show sexual power and agency. In *The Help* the main sexual issue that is covered is the possibility of sexual intercourse before marriage. Skeeter does consider the possibility of having sex with Stuart when he suggests going to his hotel room, but she decides to refuse thinking about what their friends might say if they found out. This is one of the True Woman’s duty: the duty to remain pure until marriage. However, it can also be interpreted that she refuses to please Stuart and thus shows that she can take her own decisions regarding sex. Moreover, Skeeter shows a different kind of body power with the clothes she wears. When she decides to go shopping and her mother cannot go with her, she tells her, “Make sure Miss LaVole helps you. She knows how young girls should dress” (Stockett 360). That is, her mother wants to make sure that she is told what clothes to wear. However, Skeeter ends up

in a shop in which there is a room for “MODERN WOMEN’S WEAR” where “Flowers! Big bright stripes! And hemlines that showed several inches of thigh” are sold (360). Regarding clothes, her mother is not the only symbol of repression; Stuart and his mother are quite repressive in this sense too. When Stuart and Skeeter meet, Stuart claims that he does not want his mother “to see [her] in that short dress” (361). After all, Skeeter has become the kind of woman that parents would not wish their sons to marry.

As aforementioned, the right of ownership was not typical of women in the 19th century. Before they possessed this right, their property depended on their husbands. Moreover, art, literature, or the sciences were fields that women were excluded from, and if they got involved in any of them it should be “without thought of money or ambition” (Welter 160). However, both protagonists have a passion and both end up making it their sources of income. They earn their own money instead of depending economically on men, who were the ones supposed to work out of home to maintain their families. At first, Edna is glad to accept the money that her husband gives her: “Mr. Pontellier gave his wife half of the money which he had brought away from Klein’s hotel the evening before. She liked money as well as most women, and accepted it with no little satisfaction” (Chopin 15). However, then she decides to get her own money through her art, and thus she is able to get her own property, ‘the pigeon-house,’ which shows that she does not want to be financially dependent on her husband. Moreover, her husband does not hesitate to tell her that her house should be more important than her art: when she is painting because “[she] feels like painting [and] perhaps [she] shan’t always feel like it,” her husband tells her that “it seems to [him] the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family” (57).

Similarly, in *The Help*, Skeeter is not allowed to use the money that is on her name freely, since when she talks about moving to an apartment in town her mother claims that “that is not what money’s for” (Stockett 60). However, when she gets a more important job she decides to move. Skeeter, as Edna, is told several times that marriage is more important than writing, but she also decides to do what she feels like, and even though she cares about finding someone, this does not prevent her from following her dreams. As she ponders, “Sure, I dreamed of having football dates, but my real dream was that one day I would write something that people would actually read” (63), and she fights to achieve that even though her mother tells her that “[she] will never meet anybody sitting at that typewriter” (78).

Conclusion

Both protagonists have a kind of non-conformist ending. In this case, it can be clearly seen that opportunities for women have increased with the passing of time. Edna is not satisfied with her life and does not see any chance to improve it, but she probably decides to stop living that life she has been imposed anyway. Skeeter, in turn, decides to look for a new, better life so as not to end up in a place that she no longer belongs to. In her words, “[a]ll my life I’d been told what to believe about politics, coloreds, being a girl. But [...] I realized I actually had a choice in what I could believe” (Stockett 67). Skeeter has the possibility to dream of becoming the complete image of the New Woman, although the ashes of the True Woman still burn on her feet. Both Chopin and Stockett bring to the surface the stereotype of the True Woman and defy it with actions more typical of the New Woman: a rejection of marriage, motherhood, and an affirmation of sexual power, intellectual activities and financial independence. It can be said as a conclusion that in both novels the same elements of the True Woman stereotype are challenged by using a similar technique: reinforcing expectations by some characters and defying them, mainly by the non-stereotypical protagonists. However, in *The Help* a certain progress can be appreciated, and more outstandingly, in racial issues, whereas in *The Awakening* Edna does not achieve her total freedom, she does not achieve a full life for herself, but she does serve as an inspiration for other women. Whereas in *The Awakening* social expectations remain static, Charlotte, the main representation of social expectations in *The Help* ends up telling Skeeter that she should not let Stuart despise her, and supporting her with the idea of moving to the city and taking her new job. Skeeter ends up embodying the closest image to the New Woman persona that can be suggested: she does not fight for the marriage she could have had, and she does not only work in her passion for pure affection but she finds

a good reward both regarding money and her ambition. We must keep in mind that *The Awakening* is set, as aforementioned, in a very conservative environment, within Creole culture, and thus Edna's revolutionary actions are more shocking. On the other hand, in *The Help*, set at the time of the Civil Rights Movement, Skeeter fights against racial injustices even though her family and friends do not approve it, making of her the most revolutionary character possible.

Stereotypes have been considered an issue to fight against, both by writers of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. It is now time to contemplate whether women in the 21st century, so often told that equality has been achieved and that the role as the True Woman is no longer present, can actually embody the persona of the New Woman, or whether we still have to do some revisioning on stereotypes of women. If this is so, as I believe it is, then literature will be one way of revision which we will have to be very attentive to.

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