



The Object of the Phallus

A Psychoanalytic Feminist Analysis of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*.

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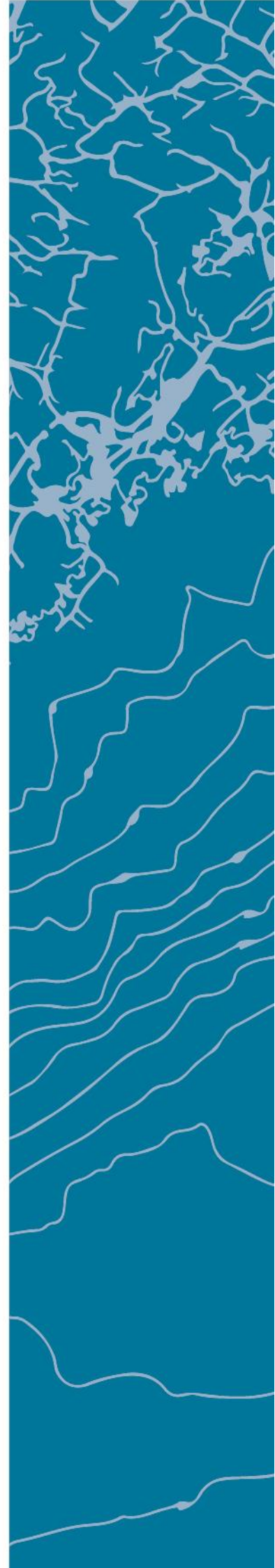
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Abstract

Much scholarly attention has been paid to the patriarchal constraints governing the lives of women. In this context, the role of discourse in the formation of representations of women is seminal to the feminist cause. The psychoanalytic feminists Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva claim, within their distinct theories on sexual difference, that prevailing phallogentric sets of representation and knowledge directly influence discursive constructions of sexual identity. Enlightened by the above, this thesis aims to perform a psychoanalytic feminist analysis of the role of Western phallogentric discourse in woman's repression. To that end, this thesis proposes a comparison of the way the nineteenth century 'feminine ideal' is depicted in two novels: namely *The Awakening*, by the American Kate Chopin, and *Ruth*, by the British Elizabeth Gaskell. Centred around female protagonists, these canonical books offer an intimate view of how the protagonists relate to the feminine societal identities they are assigned. As 'the object of the phallus', these women are invited to embody men's own repressed desires overflowed onto the free reigns of the patriarchal discourse of the time. However, it will be demonstrated that their positionings in relation to the Western phallogentric discourse are opposite. If Edna works to defy the confining discourses around the 'feminine', Ruth succumbs to the representations offered to her in the hope to find a place back into patriarchy. Regardless of the direction in relation to patriarchy, both protagonists demonstrate how Western phallogentric discourses indeed restricted the nineteenth-century woman's ability to access her subjectivity.

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1 Introduction

The psychoanalytic theory played a crucial role in validating prevalent patriarchal discourses around the feminine and the masculine. Despite its unbalanced weight on the sexual scales, psychoanalysis has offered the world a whole new discursive field, by shedding light on many areas of the human psyche and unveiling patriarchy's discursive formations that offered the feminine a place of silence and lack. Still, the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and women is ambivalent: while psychoanalysis poses a threat for those who "want to challenge the social functions and values attributed to women and femininity in our culture (actively affirmed in psychoanalytic theory)"¹, it still exerts on women a certain fascination and intrigue. Although psychoanalysis brought to women the hope of self-knowledge, as "an effect of women's narcissistic identifications"², it invited them to go beyond passive assimilation to use it to understand their assigned place in the phallogocentric symbolic order, that is, in the social and physical patriarchal organization.

While weaving his words on sexuality, Sigmund Freud brought to light an idea that had been somewhat hidden but still operative till then: that sexual difference is the truth that underlies the logic of any discourse. However, it is only with the theories devised by Jacques Lacan³, in which 'the subject of speech' became the focus of psychoanalyst investigations, that discourses on female sexuality in the Western world were truly unveiled. As a result, anatomy left its post of proof-alibi in sexual difference and the idea of sex became attached to and determined by discourse. Taking Lacan's idea that "there is no prediscursive reality" as "every reality is based upon and defined by discourse"⁴, the French psychoanalytic feminist theorists, such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, investigated the forms of reality that these discourses create in relation to women. As Lacan points out: "there is no woman who is not excluded by nature of things, which is the nature of words"⁵. In a position of exclusion, which is "internal to an order from which nothing escapes: the order of man's discourse"⁶, the 'feminine' is

¹ Grosz, Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction (1990), p. 6

² Grosz, Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction (1990), p. 7

³ French psychoanalyst who worked to decipher Freud's more radical positions regarding the human psyche

⁴ Lacan, Seminar XX (1975), p. 110

⁵ Lacan, Seminar XX (1975), p. 110

⁶ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p.88

inscribed in a discourse that projects the sublimated male drives onto the idea of 'femininity'.

Such affirmation makes one wonder what Western discourse – its language and embedded cultural meaning – has historically offered to women. As per the French feminists mentioned above, women, as opposed to men, lack the autonomous language designed to describe their body and their pleasure. The reasons for such a 'hole' in representation are hidden between the lines of the phallogentric Western discourse, which presumably causes women to part from themselves, not only concretely, in sexual intercourse, but symbolically, when they are forced into assigning to 'sameness' in sexual difference.

In this perspective, we might suspect the phallus (Phallus) of being the contemporary figure of a god jealous of his prerogatives; we might suspect it of claiming, on this basis, to be the ultimate meaning of all discourse, the standard of truth and propriety, in particular as regards sex, the signifier and/or the ultimate signified of all desire, in addition to continuing, as emblem and agent of the patriarchal system, to shore up the name of the father (Father).⁷

The phallogentric order, however, cannot be simply defined as "the primacy of the phallus"⁸, or, in simpler terms, a central focus on the male organ. In fact, it was Lacan who later offered another meaning to the Freudian more literal use of the term 'phallus'. For the psychoanalyst, the 'phallus' is a threshold signifier to the symbolic order as it stands for the paternal authority, or yet, 'the law of the father'. Under this broader scope, 'phallogentricism' can be said to be "a cultural and representational assimilation"⁹ which counts on the idea of one model of subjectivity – that of the phallic father – against which others are laid, positively or negatively. Considered a subtle sociocultural network, the phallogentric order proposes a representational system that sets a dichotomous opposition between the sexes. Such an approach to sexual difference explains the place historically offered to women in nineteenth-century patriarchy.

It is with this in mind that this thesis chooses to focus, more specifically, on nineteenth-century literary production. It is also in the words of the most famous authors of this time that it is possible to observe, in practical terms, the idiosyncrasies of the sexual discourses that formulated the rigid idea of 'femininity'. Thus, the thesis

⁷ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p. 67

⁸ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 104

⁹ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 104

will focus on two seminal texts from this period; namely *The Awakening*, written by Kate Chopin in 1899, and *Ruth*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, published in Victorian England, in 1885. In terms of historical temporality, these two canonical texts were written while immersed in the suffrage debate and the scientific and religious arguments that worked to evidence woman's 'natural' subjugation. When it comes to characterization, both novels depict female protagonists who embody the authors' controversial positioning in relation to the growing impasse regarding the place of the 'feminine' in patriarchy. The idea to compare and contrast these two novels, more specifically, roots in the heroines' opposing psychological reactions to their assigned 'place': if Edna, in *The Awakening*, seeks, in repudiation, a way 'out' of the role of 'object of the phallus' (to the point of drowning herself as the ultimate attempt to escape), Ruth accepts her way 'into' the religious symbolic construction, succumbing to the place of 'holder' of the male repressed drives. Although in different directions, both heroines' trajectories show how Western phallogentric discourses restricted the nineteenth-century woman's ability to access her subjectivity.

Consequently, this thesis seeks to answer the question: 'in what ways do Western phallogentric discourses act as a medium in the psychological repression of the female protagonists in *The Awakening* and *Ruth*?' To aid in the investigation, this thesis proposes an approximation of these canonical books and the psychoanalytic feminists Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, whose psychoanalytic feminist theories are of inestimable importance to the woman issue. Although their works share fundamental differences in method, goals, and analysed discourses, they both recognise the influence of prevailing phallogentric sets of representation and knowledge on discursive constructions of sexual identity. It is their reputation as "feminists of difference"¹⁰ (as they address women's autonomy from a male perspective) that inspired the choice of using their theories to enlighten the analysis of the two selected texts.

Soon after a chapter devoted to understanding the relationship between psychoanalysis and the woman cause, two chapters will be devoted to analysing, separately, the prevalent phallogentric discourses depicted in each novel. *The Awakening* will be the focus of the first analysis, which will take into consideration the

¹⁰ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. ix

impact of the Western phallogocentric discourse, as proposed by Luce Irigaray, on the female protagonist's trajectory. The novel introduces to the world a woman called Edna Pontellier and her story of resistance and awkwardness in relation to her role as 'the container of the phallus' in nineteenth-century America. A wife and mother of two children, Edna lives a life of placid conformity until the day she conquers the ocean waters and feels the touch of its enveloping embrace. The touch of the waters invites an 'awakening' to her subjectivity, in a time in which women were 'narcissistic objects' in a male symbolic order. The journey from silence to independence takes Edna to the painful conclusion that there is no conciliation between maternity, sexuality, and freedom for women in a patriarchal society.

Chapter two will be dedicated entirely to the second novel, *Ruth*. Still young and naïve, the protagonist, whose name inspires the novel's title, embarks on an affair with a seductive young man only to understand, quite dramatically, the implications of her choices. Enlightened by the analysis of the Western phallogocentric discourse performed by Julia Kristeva, this chapter will argue that the protagonist moves from the archetype of Eve, the sinner, to becoming the male's Oedipal ideal of the virgin mother Mary. Although Ruth silently accepts her fate while she remains a white canvas for the projection of the male sublimated drives, her subjectivity shows glimpses of itself through her hysteric rebellion through silence. The silence that also surrounds Ruth's sexuality offers her pregnancy airs of immaculate conception, crowning Gaskell's bold representation of a 'fallen' virgin Mary. Through the medium of a male (saviour) child, the holy protagonist is rescued from the 'evil' representation of Eve only to embody the maternal virginal martyr, a product of the male paranoia that excludes the sublimated male desires from the religious phallogocentric symbolic.

2 Theoretical Background

To enlighten the analysis of the chosen literary works and their female characters, this project first embarks on the historical journey of the evolution of discourses on sex. Foucault's theory on discursive formations and his account of the history of discourse on sex inform this theoretical analysis in the hopes of understanding how the control and repression of verbal representations on the 'feminine' influenced women's relationship with their subjectivity. After that, a more detailed look is taken into the main theories that give shape to psychoanalysis and its relationship with feminist studies. Luce Irigaray and Julie Kristeva are the main French theorist whose ideas are discussed in this chapter.

The French philosopher Michael Foucault dedicated much of his oeuvre to understanding the place attributed to ideology and language in the constructions of power relations. For the theorist, 'discourses' are "practices that systematically form the objects they speak of"¹¹. As the historical social system that produces knowledge and meaning, discursive formations organise the very knowledge that gives shape to social relations. For Foucault, knowledge in discourse is a tool used in the maintenance of power relations: "every point in the exercise of power is a site where knowledge is formed. Conversely, every established piece of knowledge permits and assures the exercise of power"¹². Thus, the acceptance of concrete true knowledge is necessarily a direct result of power relations. In that sense, according to Foucault, discourses should be questioned in light of the historical condition in which they were created and the interests they serve to understand which power relations they sustain.

For discourse to be disseminated and incorporated into society as 'common knowledge', there seems to be a need to make sure that other statements, i.e other sets of claims or beliefs, are promptly repressed. Repression, consequently, can be considered the pin that holds power and knowledge together¹³. Discourses on sex, for instance, have been historically repressed in the attempt to control emerging codes of knowledge. Contrary to the common understanding, sexual repression does not necessarily mean silence, as the history of sexual repression did not entail an attempt

¹¹ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1969), p. 135-140

¹² Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1969), p. 135-140

¹³ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1969), p. 135-140

to total annihilation of language about sex. The mystic aura that surrounded sexual pleasure in the seventeenth century, with its moral discursive prescriptions and sinful approach to desire, arguably enticed the scientific community to invite sex into their field of study. As Foucault puts it, it was time “to pronounce a discourse on sex that would not derive from morality alone but from rationality as well¹⁴”. This effort hoped to set aside condemnation and to give the idea of sex a more utilitarian purpose.

When historians seek to map discourses on sex, it is to the nineteenth century that they turn their gaze. It was in the eighteen-hundreds that sexuality became heavily administrated, instead of simply judged. The potential of the role of sex in power relations was suddenly noticed by the biggest empire in the world, Victorian Britain, and such realization demanded management, discursive analysis, and control. Formed by uptight people who valued honour, sexual propriety, and morality above all, the Victorian age marked the richest and most powerful period for Britain, and its prevalent discourses spread to all its satellite colonies, including America. The gradual industrialization of the production modes meant that a large part of the population experienced an increase in income, creating a whole new class that was neither rich nor poor¹⁵.

The advent of the ‘middle-class’ brought about parliament representation and shifted the old system of aristocracy and paternalism into a renewed spirit of entrepreneurship. Such a scenario explains why there was a sudden need to take control over the discourses on sex. The newfound idea of ‘population’ brought about economic and political problems, and at the heart of it all was sex. Birth rate, age of marriage and sexual relations, fertility, legitimate and illegitimate births, unmarried life and sex, contraception, these were all important issues which involved sex and had a drastic impact on population control¹⁶. Sex, therefore, became a matter of the state and an idea that needed to leave its secrecy in order to be controlled intelligently.

There emerged the analysis of the modes of sexual conduct, their determinations, and their effects, at the boundary line of the biological and the economic domains. There also appeared those systematic campaigns which, going beyond the traditional means-moral and religious exhortations, fiscal measures- tried to transform the sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behavior¹⁷.

¹⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1976), p. 24

¹⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1976)

¹⁶ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (1980)

¹⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1976), p. 26

If talking about sex was once considered too direct and crude, now what was being said about sex was hierarchized and articulated, favouring power relations. Nineteenth-century discourses on sex, therefore, were rescued from the confinements of censorship and began to take the shape of the 'Age of Reason'¹⁸.

2.1 The Riddle of Femininity

It is pivotal, at this stage, to first discuss Sigmund Freud's contribution to the understanding of female sexuality, as his contentions directly inform Luce Irigaray's and Julia Kristeva's feminist theories. Freud was a member of the European intellectual sphere of the late nineteenth century, a sphere that was similar to the Victorian culture: it was dominated by men, consciousness, and reason, as well as by "knowledge that was rarely questioned within the university and for the most part not in other areas of public discourse"¹⁹. It was on this set of ideologies that Sigmund Freud, one of the most important names of this intellectual movement, wove his famous words on female sexuality. In his essay "Female Sexuality" (1931), Freud sets the tone of his theories on sexuality right at the start by stating that the male psychosexual development is "simple" compared to that of the female, whose development is deemed "complicated"²⁰. By clearly contrasting the man's and woman's psychosexual development in such a fashion, Freud hints at the difficulty he was to encounter when attempting to understand female sexuality.

Freud proceeds to explain that the woman renounces her genital area, the clitoris more precisely, which in infancy is responsible for her masturbatory pleasure, in favour of a new zone, the vagina. Considered the 'true' female sexual organ, the vagina is said to only manifest itself later in the female sexual development, followed by a repression of the clitoris (the organ which is analogous to the male one) at the realization that it will never become a full-grown penis. However, Freud acknowledges later that the clitoris, "with its masculine character"²¹, continues to function in the sexual

¹⁸ It was a European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and celebration of reason, the power by which humans understand the universe and improve their own condition. The goals of rational humanity were considered to be knowledge, freedom, and happiness.

¹⁹ Luft, 1990, p. 95

²⁰ Freud, Female Sexuality (1931), p. 2

²¹ Freud, Female Sexuality (1931), p. 2

life of most women, which he finds complicated to fully explain: “of course, we do not know what the biological roots of these specific characteristics of the woman are, and we are still less able to assign to them any teleological purpose”²².

The young girl is also said to go through yet another renouncement: the exchange of the original Oedipus object, the mother (who is responsible for the child’s first masturbatory sensations during hygiene), for the phallic father: “as she changes in sex, so must the sex of her love-object change”²³. For Freud, both boy and girl start their sexual development with the same love object: the mother. It is due to this commonality that Freud claims that the little girl is indeed a little boy at this stage and their sexual desires are organized by a single masculine libido until they go separate ways, through their different Oedipal complex paths. The Oedipus complex in women, as theorized by Freud, derives from the realization that she does not have a penis and that her clitoris will not grow to be one. This process is called, in women, ‘penis-envy’: “the wish with which the girl turns to her father is no doubt originally the wish for the penis which her mother has refused her and which she now expects from her father”²⁴.

When describing the girl’s sexual development, Freud suggests that she acknowledges her castration and “her own inferiority” but not without rebelling against “these unpleasant facts”²⁵. At this point in his theory, Freud explains the three lines of development that derive from the castration complex in women. One path leads to what Freud calls “the budding woman”, who becomes dissatisfied with the inferiority of her clitoris and gives up sexuality in general, as well as other masculine activities in other areas of her life. The second line of development is the clinging to her threatened masculinity: “the hope of getting a penis some time is cherished to an incredibly late age and becomes the aim of her life, whilst the phantasy of really being a man, despite everything, often dominates long periods of her life”. The third line of development consists of what Freud calls the “ultimate feminine attitude”, described as the one in which she finally takes her father as love-object and crowns the Oedipus complex in its feminine form: “thus, in women, that complex represents the final result of a lengthy process of development; castration does not destroy but rather creates it”²⁶.

²² Freud, *Female Sexuality* (1931), p. 2

²³ Freud, *Female Sexuality* (1931), p. 2

²⁴ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), 128

²⁵ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), 128

²⁶ Freud, *Female Sexuality* (1931), p. 3

In other words, what Freud suggests is that the process of 'becoming a woman' starts when she understands she is not a man and shall not become one. She, then, surrenders to this notion, abdicates her sexual pleasure (accessed till then solely through the clitoris) in favour of a penis-enveloping sexual member (vagina), and develops an adoration for her father, the closest to having a penis she will ever be.

Some time or other the little girl makes the discovery of her organic inferiority, of course earlier and more easily if she has brothers or other boy companions. We have already noted the three paths which diverge from this point: (a) that which leads to the suspension of the whole sexual life, (b) that which leads to the defiant over-emphasis of her own masculinity, and (c) the first steps towards definitive femininity.²⁷

Having been born and raised in the eighteen-hundreds, mid-way through arguably one of the most patriarchally repressed centuries in history, Freud honours the phallogocentric discourses of the time and signals the restricted verbal representations available to describe the female body and pleasure. How may something be described if no words and expressions in the lexicon can do exactly that? If the discourses around sex were controlled and dictated by the power structures of the time and this power control necessarily counts on the repression of other adjacent discourses, then it was the discourses on the female body, her pleasure, and desires that were opted out. If women had any place in this matter, then it was one within the male-dominant symbolic order.

Proposing a rapture from the phallogocentric verbal representations of female sexuality offered until that point in time solely by white male scientists, analysts from within Freud's circle verbalized important disagreements with his theories on femininity and the existence of the so-called 'penis-envy'. Melanie Klein, Ernest Jones, Helene Deutsch, and Karen Horney, to name a few, were among those who argued against penis-envy and women's feelings of inferiority in relation to men's genitalia. Horney, more specifically, was the first analyst to refute Freud's point of view on female sexuality by claiming that the 'penis-envy' is not responsible for making the little girl substitute her love-object of the mother for the father as Freud's theories on Oedipus complex suggested. Instead, Horney claimed that it is woman's frustrated sexual desire for incestuous relations with the father that makes her attention shift. In other words, it is not the envy of having a penis that drives the Oedipus complex in girls; instead, it is the desire for penetration by the father, which produces guilt as much as

²⁷ Freud, *Female Sexuality* (1931), p. 3

desire. Therefore, by assigning a different explanation to why the little girl's love-object changes from the mother to the father, Horney opposes Freud's idea of an undiscovered vagina and accounts for it as an active sexual organ, responsible for such impulses in relation to the father figure.

For Horney it would not be appropriate to speak of the relation of the girl child to her vagina in terms of ignorance, but rather in terms of "denegation." This would account for the fact that the girl may appear not to know, consciously, what she knows. This "denegation" of the vagina by the little girl would be justified by the fact that knowledge of that part other sex has not been sanctioned at this stage, and also by the fact that this knowledge is dreaded.²⁸

As Horney drifted apart from Freud's school of thought, she gradually turned her gaze upon the sociocultural factors to which traits of female sexuality could be attributed. Parting from the idea of 'natural femininity', Horney interpreted the 'penis-envy' as "woman's resentment and jealousy at being deprived of the advantages, especially the sexual advantages, reserved for men alone: 'autonomy,' 'freedom,' 'power,' and so on"²⁹. By claiming so, Horney pointed in the direction of the manipulated discourses introduced at the beginning of this section. The theorist singled out the effects of the use of terms such as 'envy' and 'inferiority' and focused on the fact that woman's relationship to her genitalia is repressed by the over-explored idea of 'biological destiny' and 'natural injustice' in regard to the constitution of her sexual organs. Consequently, Horney described a different indispensable component to what Freud called 'the normal development of a woman': "she resigns herself to the role which is among other things a sexual role that Western civilization assigns her"³⁰, the one of inferior sexuality. In conclusion, it can be said that Horney opened an important door into psychoanalysis through which feminist studies could walk. The next section aims at discussing how this approximation between psychoanalysis and feminism took place around forty years after Freud devised his theories on female sexuality.

²⁸ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p. 50

²⁹ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p. 51

³⁰ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p. 52

2.2 Psychoanalysis and Feminist Studies

Feminist studies have changed considerably in relation to psychoanalytic theory. If at first, feminists like Horney viewed Freud's work as an affront to the woman issue, it was with Juliet Mitchell's publication called *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), in which she re-signifies Freud, that the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis started to shift. Mitchell calls attention to the role that Freud's work played in unveiling the patriarchal ideology which is internalized and deemed as 'natural' by man and woman alike. For the theorist, psychoanalysis is "a crucial science for understanding ideological and psychological aspects of oppression"³¹. As such, Mitchell agreed that without psychoanalysis, discourses on sexual difference would not have been named. Furthermore, the theorist tries to assign a political and social role to psychoanalysis, for it offered an "interpretive model rather than simply as a therapeutic technique"³². Many other feminists of the time are said to have been inspired by Mitchell's idea and turned a more contemplative gaze to Freudian theories. Nancy Chodorow, for instance, in her book entitled *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), also understood that psychoanalysis could be a sociological explanation for social sexist discrimination. However, in contrast to the feminist studies developed in France, both Mitchell and Chodorow did not take into consideration, in Grosz' words, "the functioning of discursive and signifying systems" as "the domain of phallogentrism"³³.

French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, contrastingly, studied language in relation to woman. Focusing on the symbolic representations, the French psychoanalytic feminists criticise models of subjectivity formulated within sexual difference and the societal tendency to stay within the lines of male discourse. For these members of the third wave of feminism, the current systems of representations in language do not have the means to actively translate woman's desires, as limiting discourses around sexual difference become embedded in language. This produces an important difference in the way statements are applied in relation to each sex³⁴. In

³¹ Mitchell, 1974, p. 301-302, *apud* Grosz, Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction (1990), p. 20

³² Grosz, Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction (1990), p. 20

³³ Grosz, Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction (1990), p. 22

³⁴ Burke, 1981, p. 288

other words, women have fewer verbal representations at their disposal to successfully express their desires and sexual feelings.

2.2.1 Luce Irigaray: The Idea of 'Sameness' in Sexual Difference

Similar to Mitchell's contention, Luce Irigaray is known to make use of psychoanalysis as a critical tool when approaching Western discourse. In a sense, the theorist can be said to psychoanalyse the psychoanalytic theory, hoping to unveil its phallogocentric nature: "psychoanalysis is a particularly pertinent and revealing discourse insofar as it states explicitly the various presumptions and beliefs usually left unspoken by other texts"³⁵. Informed by this premise, Irigaray spent a considerable amount of time on Freud's theories on femininity, hoping to "disconcert the staging of representation according to exclusively 'masculine' parameters, that is, according to a phallogocentric order"³⁶. Irigaray argued that Freud's words on female sexuality unveiled 'sexual difference' as the underlying logic of all discourses:

Given the wishes, desires and needs of the Oedipalised male subject, Freud deduces (rather than observes) a femininity that complements male development, and satisfies men's needs. In other words, Freud develops a model of human subjectivity that represents all the variations of subjectivity only according to a singular (Western, capitalist, white, Eurocentric) male model. Femininity is always represented in some relation of dependence on this model, a lack or absence of the qualities characterising masculinity.³⁷

For Irigaray, consequently, Freud's position is phallogocentric. Psychoanalytic theory gives scientific airs to the idea of 'sameness', that is, the idea of 'one sex', the masculine. In other words, sexual difference is explored through the standpoint of the masculine: "Freud does not see two sexes whose differences are articulated in the act of intercourse, and, more generally speaking, in the imaginary and symbolic processes that regulate the workings of a society and a culture."³⁸ Instead, Irigaray argues, Freud sees the development of the female sexuality in comparison to the male's, a comparison in which the female loses miserably due to the assigned complication of this development imposed by the abdication of her clitoris and her mother as love-object: "a comparison with what happens with boys tells us that the development of a little girl into a normal woman is more difficult and more complicated since it includes

³⁵ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 104

³⁶ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p.68

³⁷ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 105

³⁸ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p.52

extra tasks, to which nothing is corresponding in the development of a man"³⁹. Therefore, the specific stages which, according to Freud, belong only to female development are responsible for clouding more precise understandings of the nature of the woman's development. Assigned peripheric sexuality, a negative phallic representation sort of say, her path to 'femininity' is conducted by abdication and 'envy', instead of choice and 'desire'.

In other words, Freud is a prisoner of the phallogocentric logos and follows suit by defining sexual difference through the idea of 'sameness'. His theories rely on symmetry and dichotomous oppositions to propagate the set of ideologies he is clearly heir to: "Freud asserts that the "masculine" is the sexual model, that no representation of desire can fail to take it as the standard, can fail to submit to it".⁴⁰ This is how Irigaray approaches Freud's theories on femininity, as well as other philosophical logos which also help propagate the idea of 'sameness' when it comes to sexual difference: seeking to find what the coherent discursive utterances conceal about the context in which they were produced. In her own words, Irigaray proposes a deconstruction of "the grammar of each figure of discourse, its syntactic laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also, of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: its silence"⁴¹.

Although Irigaray is quite vocal about her reservations regarding the privileged place the phallus has in the psychoanalytic theory, the French theorist does not discard Freud's understanding of the unconscious as "that other scene"⁴² as an inner layer of the mind that goes beyond conscious control. Instead, Irigaray invites this understanding into her theory and suggests an interesting metaphor between the unconscious versus the conscious and woman versus patriarchal social relations. More specifically, if the 'feminine' is repressed in a similar fashion as the unconscious, then "it is possible to regard women, not as having an unconscious, but as being it (for men, for the phallic, for patriarchy)"⁴³. Irigaray, therefore, uses the most problematic elements of Freud's theory, i.e. the Oedipal structure, the female sublimation, and the penis-envy, to explain the male sex, not the human sexuality. By unveiling the

³⁹ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), p. 117

⁴⁰ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p. 72

⁴¹ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p. 75

⁴² Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 106

⁴³ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 107

phallogocentric discourse contained in Freud's theory, Irigaray seeks to unveil the repressed elements which drive his theories as well as its blind spots that disavow its existence.

Penis-envy, for instance, is central to Freud's understanding of female sexuality, as this envy is said to govern the path to womanhood: it is through a newfound understanding of her castrated nature that she finally realizes she had always wanted to be a boy. For Irigaray, this rationale speaks about man's castration complex rather than – in Irigaray's language - woman's "fantasy of loss"⁴⁴. By applying Freud's theories of projection, Irigaray argues that when Freud talks about women's penis-envy, in fact, he speaks about men's fear of losing their sexual organs. In simpler words, seeing that women do not have an external sexual organ on the show (and still survive in the world), the male supposes that the female must feel exactly like he would in such an instance, at a terrible loss, and then goes on to diminish her anatomy.

Also, if women had desires other than that of having a penis, then what would that mirror back in terms of men's image? When reading Freud's words in a lecture he published under the title "Femininity" (1932), it is possible to locate sentences in which the psychoanalyst clearly demonstrates what Irigaray views as a projection in the penis-envy theory: "original inferiority" and "genital deficiency"⁴⁵, "inferior clitoris"⁴⁶, "put at a disadvantage"⁴⁷, "more fortunate man"⁴⁸, to name a few. Thus, it is possible to speculate that men defend themselves from their anxieties in relation to the castration complex, or yet, the imminent loss of the phallus. Irigaray contends that men do so by attributing to women the incumbency of despising their pleasure "to procure a – doubtless ambiguous – remedy for man's castration anxiety"⁴⁹.

Conclusively, for Irigaray, it is due to the male's narcissistic defences that the woman's desire lacks representation, as the only gaze female sexuality receives is one that narrowly derives from a phallogocentric understanding. It is at this point in Irigaray's theory that women's repression surfaces. Women are unwillingly locked into the place of amputated and it is this place that secures patriarchy's very own sense of reality.

⁴⁴ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977), p. 75

⁴⁵ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), p. 132

⁴⁶ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), p. 127

⁴⁷ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), p. 124

⁴⁸ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), p. 118

⁴⁹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), p. 51

More precisely, women are robbed of valuable images and verbal representations of their own identity so as to hold together the narcissism that drives patriarchal gender roles. In order to explain this bridge between the castration complex in men (with its repressed 'imagined negative') and what Irigaray calls "ideal productions"⁵⁰, Irigaray suggests that as a product of sublimation of castration anxieties, the laws currently in place reinforce "the permanence and circularity of this system"⁵¹.

Such a claim naturally invites Foucault back to this theoretical discussion, as he offers great contributions regarding power relations and their role in the formation and reinforcement of discourses. It is through the repression of the castration complex and the fear of the 'non-sex' (the aberration of women's 'non-existent' genitalia) that sexual discourses travel down to the concrete fabrics of society. As Irigaray explains, "the legislation re-establishes, then, the castration complex, notably of woman, which will serve, along with other edicts, to transform into a historical program that fables relating to men's sexual practices"⁵².

Another importantly relevant concept is 'sublimation'. A central part of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, sublimation is an unconscious psychological repressive mechanism that protects us from the primal drives deemed as unacceptable by the superego⁵³. By sublimating (repressing) the negative and unacceptable urges of the id, the ego channels the behaviours that are deemed positive and acceptable in society. In psychoanalytic theory, sublimation is considered a sense of 'maturity' that turns people into civilized creatures. Once that is understood, we can turn our gaze to what Irigaray lists as an implication of Freud's account of the sublimation of the alleged penis-envy in women.

For Freud, the castration complex has a different working in women, as we have already seen. It does not serve to protect women's narcissistic views of their sexual

⁵⁰ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 52

⁵¹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 52

⁵² Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 52-53

⁵³ According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, there are three components of personality: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id is the first to form and serves as the source of the libido or the energy that drives behaviour. Primitive and basic, it contains all the urges and desires that are often socially unacceptable. The ego emerges later during childhood and is the part of the personality that reigns in the id and makes it conform to the demands of reality. Rather than simply acting out on urges, the ego forces us to deal with these desires in ways that are more realistic. Finally, the superego is the component of personality that is made up of all the morals, rules, standards, and values that we have internalized from our parents and culture. The ego is the mediator between the primal urges of the id, the moralistic standards of the superego, and the realistic demands of reality.

organs as it happens with men. Instead, the fathoming of an imagined mutilation subjects women to what can only be described as, in Irigarayan words, a “total denarcissization”⁵⁴. As Freud puts it, the little girl is expected to resign to the true disadvantageous nature of her sexuality and as a natural result, enter the Oedipus complex. Stuck in this aura of humiliation, it can be inferred that the little girl is left with very little to sublimate (to repress), due to the already frustrated primal desires – with no penis, all dreams of pleasure are consequently diminished and not many urges are left to be sublimated. Seeking to establish her narcissism, she turns to the father “by a phallic proxy”⁵⁵, hoping to institute personal value. The love received from the father, therefore, becomes her last token of hope for her superego, which, for Irigaray, is the “heir to the Oedipus complex”⁵⁶.

In more feminist words, sublimation in women seems to be hijacked by the male sex, as her superego functions through the ‘conscience’ of the men-fathers. What Freud explains as a natural course in the becoming of a truly feminine woman is deemed by Irigaray as mutilation and imposed repression of women’s natural development as a human being in a world that is governed by phallogentric representations. As the already mutilated woman turns to the male superego (which despises the female ‘negative’ sex), she is condemned to self-loathing. Consequently, it might well be argued that the female never attains what she sets out to do in the first place when she kick-starts the Oedipus complex: the male figure of the father will understandably refuse to give her what she comes for, impeded by his castration complex, his paranoid fear, and repugnancy.

For why is the woman's, the hysteric's, super-ego so "critical," so cruel? Several reasons might be adduced: its primitive character, the prohibition laid upon aggression in woman, whence the mortifying sadism of her super-ego; the relationship of women to the "mirror," to narcissism; or again their relationship to language, discourse, laws, etc. Let us examine one reason that overlaps several others: whatever works as a super-ego for women apparently has no love of women, and particularly of women's sex/organ(s).⁵⁷

When it comes to language more specifically, Irigaray contends that “woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the

⁵⁴ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 87

⁵⁵ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 87

⁵⁶ Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), p. 36, *apud* Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 87

⁵⁷ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 89

time of the Greeks"⁵⁸. In other words, for Irigaray, Western language has spoken little about woman's subjectivity, to the point of leaving them in darkness in relation to their desires. The erotic language at play in Western sexuality, for instance, is dictated by male rivalry surrounding the imaginary of the phallus: the bigger and the stiffer the better; Violent penetration, appropriation of oneself, of the womb in an attempt to return to the origin (complete union with the mother). Unfortunately, in this sexual imaginary, women are only left with the enactment of man's phantasies. Not knowing exactly what they want and need, woman finds pleasure in the "masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man"⁵⁹.

This subjugation clearly transcribed in language can be said to be embedded in Irigaray's understanding of the place reserved for 'the feminine' in phallogocentric sexual difference. Irigaray borrows Aristotle's understanding of 'place', as the "first unchanging limit of that which surrounds [the thing]"⁶⁰, to discuss the role assigned to women by the Western discourse. If, for Aristotle, each 'thing' has its own designated vessel-like 'place', then woman, for Irigaray, is designated the role of 'vessel', of 'container', for all that is man's:

If traditionally, and as a mother, woman represents place for man, such a limit means that she becomes a thing, with some possibility of change from one historical period to another. She finds herself delineated as a thing. Moreover, the maternal feminine also serves as an envelope, a container, the starting point from which man limits his things. The relationship between envelope and things constitutes one of the aporias, or the aporia, of Aristotelianism and of the philosophical systems derived from it.⁶¹

While literally taking Aristotle's postulation that every place has its own designated final envelope, the French feminist argues that as a 'vessel to the phallus', woman, too, ought to have her own unique place, her own envelope. However, within the boundaries of the patriarchal discourse, she is to be restricted to only the containment of man and his product (children), leaving her alienated from any relationship to her own specially dedicated envelope.

⁵⁸ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), p. 25

⁵⁹ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), p. 25

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Physics* (212), p. 20-21 *apud* Alfonso, 2011, p. 102

⁶¹ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984), p. 10

In summary, the mystery of the woman's genitals, the absence, the hole, its lack of form, or perhaps its ability to envelop adjusting precisely to the form of the phallus, is key to understanding Irigaray's claims about the masculine paranoia, the privileges of 'phallogormorphism', and the woman's place as male 'vessel'. In a male-dominant civilization in which everything is precise and accounted for, having not only one but two sexual organs protected by two lips that touch each other continuously makes woman's sexuality a mystery, as Freud denounced. As Irigaray puts it, the phallogentric discourses in the Western civilization are quick to violently part the woman from herself, concretely, with the penetration of the penis which forcedly ceases the embrace of the lips, and figuratively, when her sexual pleasure and desire are described in total relation to the phallus⁶². With a denied subjectivity, women are said to experience themselves "only fragmentally, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) 'subject' to reflect himself, to copy himself"⁶³.

2.2.2 Julia Kristeva: The Overflow of Repressed Male Drives

Julia Kristeva is yet another French feminist whose attention is devoted to the relationship between language and subjectivity. Highly influenced by Lacan's views on discursive formations as key elements in the formation of subjectivity, Kristeva explores more purposely, when contrasted to Irigaray, the structure of language and its interface with the formation of the 'I'. Although Kristeva shares important similarities to Irigaray's theory, due to their similar psychoanalytic background, one may argue that such similarities are mainly superficial⁶⁴. The pair differs greatly on what sexual difference truly entails. While, as exposed above, Irigaray seeks to establish women's autonomy and subjectivity outside the phallogentric set of representations on sexual difference, Kristeva understands that sexual difference means the dissolution of postulated accounts of feminine and masculine. The scholar aspires to uncover women's repressed masculinity and men's disavowed femininity through her theories

⁶² This is a reflection on what Irigaray explores in chapter 2 of her book *The Sex Which Is Not One*.

⁶³ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), p. 30

⁶⁴ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989).

on 'repressed Semiotic' and the formation of the Symbolic, in which subjectivity takes more definite contours⁶⁵.

Kristeva names 'Semiotic' the contributions that the sexual drives offer to signification, while the 'Symbolic' represents the organization and the structure for such significations, which, in turn, enable the social subject to come into being: "at the same time instinctual and maternal, semiotic processes prepare the future speaker for entrance into meaning and signification (the Symbolic)"⁶⁶. Thus, Kristeva contends that the 'Semiotic' and the 'Symbolic' are the two main movements that allow the subject to signify discourses and, as a result, take part in social practices. The 'Semiotic' dates to the pre-signifying stage in the child's development, in which the sexual drives are unstable and circulate throughout the child's body in an unrestricted way. As Grosz confirms: "Kristeva ascribes the Semiotic to a space, a locus rather than to a subject because the Semiotic precedes the acquisition of a stable subjectivity and identity"⁶⁷.

The transposition of the 'Semiotic' phase into the 'Symbolic', Kristeva contends, takes place in what Lacan calls 'the mirror stage': a stage in which the child first recognizes itself in the mirror. Such aptitude comes about only when the infant has already subtly understood that there is a distinction between itself and the mother. When ready, the child glances at its own reflection and recognizes the reflection as a depiction of its own being. Consequently, Lacan's mirror stage crowns the first step towards the formation of an identity that is independent of the mother: "the genesis of a sense of self or personal unity, the origin of the child's sexual drives and the first process of social acculturation"⁶⁸. Only then, Kristeva argues, that the child is ready to step into the field of signifiers, marked by binary oppositions generated by the castration complex:

Language learning can therefore be thought of as acute and dramatic confrontation between positing-separating-identifying and the motility of the semiotic chora. Separation from the other's body, the fort-da game, anality, orality... all act as a permanent negativity that destroys the image and the isolated object even as it facilitates the articulation of the semiotic network, which will afterwards be necessary in the system of language where it will be more or less integrated as a signifier. Castration puts the finishing touches on the process of separation that posits the subject as signifiable, which is to say, separate, always confronted by an other: *imago in the mirror (signified) and semiotic process (signifier)*.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 100

⁶⁶ Kristeva, *Desire in Language, A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), p. 136

⁶⁷ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 44

⁶⁸ Grosz, *Jacques Lacan - A feminist introduction* (1990), p. 32

⁶⁹ Kristeva, 1984, p. 47 *apud* Grosz, *Jacques Lacan - A feminist introduction* (1990), p. 46

Basing her conclusions on Freudian theories of sexual development, Kristeva asserts that the castration complex and the resolution of the Oedipus complex solidify the early identity structured in the mirror stage, as well as shape the vocalic systems which were formed in the imaginary. It is only here, upon the entry into the symbolic order, that language coherence and sociality start to be structured around, what Kristeva argues to be, the crucial signifier: the 'phallus'. Such contention regarding the 'phallus' is borrowed from Lacan's paternal metaphor, which tackles the prohibition of incestuous relations and the establishment of paternal authority. For Lacan, as well as Kristeva, this marks the subject's accession to the status of 'I' through the renunciation of the mother and the submissive posture towards the "phallic law-giver"⁷⁰. In more Freudian words, it is then that the child sublimates its Oedipal drives, and the 'lack' it constitutes. Such 'lack of being' becomes the ego's object of denial and it is in this protective attempt that language, sociality, and identity surface.

The analytic situation indeed shows that the penis which, becoming the major referent in this operation of separation, gives full meaning to the *lack* or to the desire which constitutes the subject during his or her insertion into the order of language.⁷¹

When it comes to feminist studies, it was in 1974, marked by her essay entitled 'About Chinese Women', that Kristeva intellectual interest shifted from a purely linguistic standpoint to a more psychoanalytic examination of the woman issue within Western representations. Kristeva proposes an enticing question: "What can be our [women's] place in the Symbolic contract?"⁷². If women are not willing to be restricted to more plural functions within the socio-symbolic contract they have historically been requested to perpetuate, Kristeva wonders how women can create a clear role that they wish to have. For the French theorist, there are two ways to approach this pledge: women can either aim to take control of this socio-symbolic contract in order to subvert it; or, they can focus on exploring the very inner fabric of the contract, not necessarily from the standpoint of theoretical knowledge, but from a more intimist point of view as a female subject who experiences it. This would mean, as Kristeva puts it, "to break the code, to shatter the language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by social contract"⁷³. In other words, if the

⁷⁰ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 46

⁷¹ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p.198

⁷² Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p.199

⁷³ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p.200

'feminine' exists, then Kristeva claims that it is only in the 'significant' and 'signifying' order, or, better yet, it is only positioned in relation to meaning and signification. For Kristeva, 'femininity' is labelled as an 'excessive other' within the signification that gives contours to sexual difference: women 'speak', 'think', and 'write' from a place of otherness within language and meaning produced by the phallic Symbolic language.

Taking a step back, Kristeva contends that the Symbolic gives the Semiotic possibilities of expression. In turn, the Semiotic retributes by offering raw materials to the Symbolic. This means that a certain social order can only be achieved if the Semiotic is promptly subordinated to the Symbolic. However, the Semiotic occasionally overflows the Symbolic boundaries in mainly three moments: madness (a rupture), poetry (a revolution), and holiness (a renovation)⁷⁴. Madness marks a psychic rupture, while poetry creates a revolution in the signifying practices. Religious ecstasy, which is mainly the focus of this project, in turn, represents the expression of man's repressed drives from the Semiotic through the transcendental freedom that religious discourses enjoy.

Hence, Kristeva spent a considerable amount of time on the relationship between woman's subjugation and the Western religious discourse propagated primarily by the Monotheist tradition. As mentioned above, the Semiotic overflow which inundates the Symbolic through the idea of 'holiness' in religion made sure to secure the paternal function. Patrilineality transmits the name of the father and, by centralizing erotic desire around the single goal of procreation, makes sure to remove the female body altogether from the reigning symbolic order. Consequently, Kristeva asserts that the 'maternal body' is the unspoken basis of all Western discourse. Its primal blissfulness gives shape to the Semiotic overflow that finds a welcoming place within the free reigns of religious discourse. In other words, the violent abdication of the most powerful love object (the mother) gives shape to Western religious representations. Through the 'myth of the Virgin' and its archetypes, Eve and the virgin Mary, Christianity promptly submits and sacrifices women in the name of the law and order of the phallus:

Articulating and representing this abyss in representation and indicating textual fragments in which this body is able even minimally or indirectly to be spoken.

⁷⁴ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 97

Kristeva's subversion involves breaching the limits of intelligibility, transgressing the borders between desire and language.⁷⁵

In precis, the French psychoanalytic feminists challenge, each in their own way, the universally established phallogocentric principles which impose a debt in knowledge production for women and maternity. Irigaray and Kristeva explicitly discuss the submersion, silencing, containment, and deletion of the female body in the process of knowledge production within the Western phallogocentric culture. Such recognition does not necessarily incite lament but hopes to both deconstruct the 'perceived' unity in Western texts and create new language significations that also accommodate the female body, its multiple desires, and perspectives.

Informed by this, the following chapters propose to analyse how these feminist interpretations of the Western phallogocentric discourse interact with the female protagonists of the chosen literary texts. It will be argued that Edna, in *The Awakening*, struggles to challenge the phallogocentric representations of woman - which, as Irigaray contends, assign to the female the role of a vessel. Whereas, in *Ruth*, the protagonist dutifully submits to what Kristeva calls the Semiotic overflow of repressed desires for the maternal body symbolized in the Western religious discourse. Although the two protagonists similarly struggle to find an avenue away from the patriarchal shackles, aside from death, they differ in the way they relate to it. If Edna manages to attain some agency, Ruth completely surrenders to what seems to be the only role there is for her.

⁷⁵ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 231

3 The *Awakening*: Repudiating the Role of a Vessel

*[...] so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole.*⁷⁶

The Awakening, by the American Kate Chopin, is the first book of this analysis. The way the protagonist, Edna, is depicted offers a fertile illustration of the confined place offered to the nineteenth-century woman by the Western phallogocentric discourse. Informed by Luce Irigaray's theories on the phallic sets of representations that gave shape to what was deemed 'feminine', this chapter aims to analyse Edna's repudiation of the patriarchal dictates represented by her repressed subjectivity. Prescribed 'silence' as a medicinal treatment against her indignant rebellion, Edna ultimately understands that there is no running from the confined role of a 'vessel'. This conclusion motivates her to cease her existence as 'object of the phallus' by drowning in the enveloping waters of the ocean.

Edna Pontellier is a respectable twenty-six-year-old woman who is married to a New Orleans Creole⁷⁷ businessman, twelve years her senior. The story opens in summer in the cottages of Madame Lebrun in Grand Isle, where Edna is vacationing with her husband and children. Depicted as of reserved nature, Edna lives "a small life all within herself"⁷⁸. Her passionate desires in youth were repressed but still move her inside "without causing any outward show or manifestation on her part"⁷⁹. Edna is to be portrayed as a woman who has had latent sexuality since her youth. Such choice in representation contradicts the idea of 'true womanhood' highly propagated at the time. The true woman was expected to control her manners, desires, and thoughts in a way that portrayed her as an 'angel in the house'⁸⁰: "quiet beauty, purity, devotion, and selflessness were some of the essential features of the domestic wife and mother [...]"⁸¹. In this perspective, it is possible to infer that there was no place for desire for the 'angel in the house'. Seen as the paragon of selflessness, not even in the secrecy

⁷⁶ Chopin, 1993, p. 106

⁷⁷ Creole people are ethnic groups that originated during the colonial era from racial mixing mainly involving West Africans as well as French, Spanish, and Indigenous American peoples. Creole peoples vary widely in ethnic background and mixture, and many have since developed distinct ethnic identities.

⁷⁸ Chopin, 1993, p. 13

⁷⁹ Chopin, 1993, p. 17

⁸⁰ The phrase "Angel in the House" derives from the title of a popular poem by Coventry Patmore (originally published in 1854, revised through 1862), in which he described his wife Emily as the perfect Victorian wife.

⁸¹ Black, J et al, *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature* (2006), p. lix

of the married chambers – where sex was destined to hide – was she expected to explore her pleasure. Right opposite to the angel, separated by a very thin line, was the ‘fallen woman’, societal label that “encompassed any form of female sexual experience deemed improper or immoral. Prostitutes, rape victims, unmarried mothers, adulteresses, homeless women, the insane, and any woman who displayed rebellious passions could be labelled ‘fallen’”⁸². Therefore, one small inclination toward sexual interest could be detrimental to the change of identity from the ‘angel in the house’ to a ‘fallen woman’.

During the summer in Grand Isle, Edna is surrounded by these ‘angels’, who are described by the narrator as those who “esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels”⁸³. Not Edna. The narrator makes it clear that the protagonist is not to be considered an angel in the house. Such failure is reinforced by Edna’s contrasting friendship with Adele Ratignolle, a lady who exudes sensual beauty and physical charm, which characteristically accompanied the Creole women’s innate “lofty chastity”⁸⁴. In fact, although Léonce is a Creole, it is in that summer in Grand Isle that Edna is exposed more intensively to the Creole society – a circumstance that contributes to the intrigue experienced by the protagonist when faced with the paradox that permeated the behaviour of Creole women. If on one hand, they lived up to their reputation of faithfulness and chastity; on another, they engaged in direct and plain speech, which, for the Anglo-Saxons, came across as absent of prudery. The fact that, for Edna, “their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible”⁸⁵ informs the assumption that the exposure to more open verbal representations of the feminine – which were acceptable in the Creole culture – ‘awakens’ in the protagonist the repressed anguish caused by the abnegation of her own.

Adele’s instigative ways open in Edna an unexpected door inward, inviting verbalizations that Edna might have never been enticed to make before. When the two friends are sitting on the beach contemplating the ocean, Edna is invited to share a childhood memory, which is quite informative when trying to understand Edna’s relationship to the prescriptive tone characteristic of phallogocentric discourse: “I was

⁸² Black, J et al, *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature* (2006), p. LIX

⁸³ Chopin, 1993, p. 8

⁸⁴ Chopin, 1993, p. 9

⁸⁵ Chopin, 1993, p. 9

running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of.”⁸⁶. The child's impulse to run from the service and ‘swim’ surrounded by high grass seems to symbolize the repulse of the dictatorial patriarchy which locked women within confined walls of feminine representation, disguised as the Word of God. Such verbal representations offer little room for a woman to be a ‘subject’.

As Irigaray explains, the symbolic order of the phallus requests that a woman does not “disrupt through her speech, her desire, her pleasure”⁸⁷. Women are left with no possible law, no possible discourse for their subjectivity, their existence. Hence, the scene Edna remembers is perhaps one of her first few attempts to run from annihilation: “and if women – according to him – can say nothing, can know nothing, of their own pleasure, it is because they cannot in any way order themselves within and through a language that would be on some basis their own”⁸⁸. It is man’s symbolic order that she runs from, but to no avail. Edna still grows up to inhabit the confined place of wife and mother, a path prescribed by the self-pleasing phallogocentric order.

3.1 Women as a Vessel

Luce Irigaray introduces her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993) by arguing that “in order to make it possible to think through, and live this [sexual] difference, we must consider the whole problematic of space and time”⁸⁹. Hoping to demonstrate how sexual difference serves as a basis for the categories that govern Western metaphysics (such as space and time), Irigaray dives into the history of Western philosophy to soften the pragmatic assumptions that ground it. More specifically, Irigaray takes Aristotle’s ‘Zeno’s Paradox’ to inform her contention that “as for woman, she is place”⁹⁰. Aristotle postulated that if a ‘place’ exists, and everything that exists has a ‘place’, then there must be ‘place’ for the ‘place’, and a ‘place’ for this ‘place’ of ‘place’, on and on till infinity. This idea of a series of infinite nested places needed a solution, as in Aristotle’s estimation, ‘being is one’ (limited). As a

⁸⁶ Chopin, 1993, p. 16

⁸⁷ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is not One* (1977), p. 95

⁸⁸ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is not One* (1977), p. 95

⁸⁹ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), p. 7

⁹⁰ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), p. 35

consequence, 'place' and 'thing' cannot be limitless and infinite⁹¹. This quest for a solution brought the philosopher to the idea of the 'first envelope', which he distinguishes from the other 'shared' places. This 'first container' is special in what it contains: no other 'thing' can be contained by the thing's own 'place'. Similar to a vessel that contains (and gives shape) to water, this 'first' container coincides perfectly with what it contains: "no other thing can take that thing's own, proper place. Each thing has its own place or topos that must be distinguished from common and shared spaces"⁹².

This paradox informs Irigaray's contention that women represent 'place' as she is the container of masculine 'immorality', through reproduction and sexual pleasure. It is exactly the reduction of the feminine to a 'place' for men that serves as a fundamental basis for the objectification of the feminine within the phallogocentric discourse. Similarly, other contemporary feminists also concern themselves with the idea of women as the 'first container' to the phallus. Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, writes that "men place women in the position of being 'guardians' of their bodies and their spaces, [...] without body or space of their own: they become the living representatives of corporeality, of domesticity, of the natural order"⁹³. Cynthia Freeland also validates Irigaray's understanding: "[t]his 'container' view of women [...] helps to legitimize pictures of woman as property or as rapeable bodies rather than as subjects, or as baby-producers who have no basic right to autonomy, to abortion, and in general to choices about sexuality and pregnancy"⁹⁴.

Man assigns to woman the incumbency of forming his identity, from the starting point of his birth (the woman-mother) till the fabricated sense of being that he dutifully prescribes to his woman so that she can relay his identity to the world (the projected narcissism). However, if her subjectivity manages to survive such intrusive endeavours, she involuntarily works to undo his efforts: "distinguishing herself from both the envelope and the thing, ceaselessly creating there some interval, play, something in motion and un-limited which disturbs his perspective, his world, and his/its limits"⁹⁵. Edna can be said to meddle exactly with this interval. She tries to stretch

⁹¹ Alfonso, *Thinking with Irigaray* (2011), p. 100-101

⁹² Alfonso, *Thinking with Irigaray* (2011), p. 101

⁹³ Grosz, 1995, 122 *apud* Alfonso, *Thinking with Irigaray* (2011), p. 104

⁹⁴ Freeland, 1998, 81, *apud* Alfonso, *Thinking with Irigaray* (2011), p. 104

⁹⁵ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), p. 10

it, disturb it, so she can find the limits of her own subjectivity, her own dedicated container. Such endeavour can be observed in her relationship with art. As her story progresses, the protagonist turns more intensively to her drawings, in search of herself. As the artist, Mademoiselle Reisz, tells Edna: “to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul”⁹⁶. Indeed, an unmarried female artist in Victorian England needed the courage to break the phallogocentric conventions, not exist in relation to a man, and, consequently, envelope herself freely.

Within this context, it is possible to say that, for Léonce, Edna failed to be ‘a place’. Edna suffers from the competition among the different kinds of ‘vessel’, of ‘container’, or yet, of ‘place’ she is expected to be: “she is supposed only to be a container for the child, according to one moral position. She may be a container for the man. But not for herself”⁹⁷. Such abdication of oneself is referred to by Freud in his theory around the ‘natural’ development of woman. Within the fallacy of dominant male discourse, woman can only offer a ‘place’ to the man when she abdicates her pleasure; or, as Freud puts it, when she abdicates clitoral masturbation in favour of a passive vagina that takes on the role of the vessel for the phallus. In broader terms, women’s abdication of her multiple active sexual organs gives practical contours to the ‘place’ she must become: one who passively envelopes.

Therefore, Chopin’s story of Edna’s awakening is the depiction of ‘the rupture’ between what phallogocentric discourse shapes woman to be and the self-enveloping of her own subjectivity. Such fracture disturbs the protagonist’s role as ‘a place’ for her husband and children and propels her towards coming into being. The start of this ‘rupture’ is firstly depicted when Léonce arrives home and takes offense to Edna’s little interest in him. Frustrated, “he reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children.”⁹⁸ By attacking her maternity skills, Léonce picks apart the very sense of ‘femininity’ (the ‘feminine’ as a ‘container’ of the male identity), which calls for servitude and attention towards the phallus and its product (children).

As she experiences the wave of sadness that takes over after this interaction, Edna seems to not be able to articulate her feelings. This lack of verbal representation, or yet, induced silence, can be said to be an important symptom of the role of container

⁹⁶ Chopin, 1993, p. 63

⁹⁷ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), p. 41

⁹⁸ Chopin, 1993, p. 5

to the symbolic phallus assigned to women. It is the narrator that explains to the reader what motivates the protagonist's sorrow: "she did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken"⁹⁹. The narrator's words characterize the 'fate to contain', as proposed by Irigaray. Women's grievance, as Irigaray puts it, derives from "being excluded as a subject from a phallogocentric scene upon which she can appear only if she accepts derision, guilt, and the loss of what they call, or he calls, her 'femininity'"¹⁰⁰. In other words, women were prescribed a sense of 'femininity' that worked as a standard to which they must adhere. It is exactly this "Fate", this 'femininity', that delimited nineteenth-century women, like Edna, to an 'envelope-like' existence, and also destroyed their chances of becoming something other than a vessel for the phallus.

Through her guilty tears, Edna demonstrates, for the first time in the book, what Irigaray calls an "acute, painful, paralysing conflicts, in which the question of the role of the super-ego is unavoidable"¹⁰¹. In fact, it is to the female sublimation process that Irigaray attributes the guilt and shame that women feel in relation to their tendency to conform to their fate as feminine beings. If we refer back to Freud's theory on sublimation, women's super-egos are formed by their resignation to the inferior nature of their sexual organs. This 'coming to terms' helps them enter the Oedipus complex: with little to sublimate, they turn to the father figure in the hopes to establish their narcissism and form a super-ego. What Freud calls 'natural' is, for Irigaray, women's "infantile submission"¹⁰² to phallogocentric order. It is a certain egoic revolt against the father-figure (and the imposition of being a container) that ensures that the ideal function of the female ego never really becomes interiorized in the psyche¹⁰³.

In simpler terms, most nineteenth-century women were locked into a submissive silent role of a 'vessel' for the masculine phallus, in a haze of humiliation and revolt. Those women were objectified in ways that were outside the organization of their ego, leaving them with a borrowed super-ego to count on – one which has cruel and judgemental tendencies toward her femaleness. Edna's tears, consequently, can be

⁹⁹ Chopin, 1993, p. 6

¹⁰⁰ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 57

¹⁰¹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 88

¹⁰² Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 88

¹⁰³ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 88

considered a result of the hyper-critical borrowed male super-ego: she cries out of guilt and shame for having been born a woman.

Although visible, Edna's tears are mute, like the way Irigaray describes the female guilt: "active, of course, but unutterable, ineffable, to be expressed only by the body"¹⁰⁴. Edna is not able to hide the tears, or yet, her guilt, from herself, but she is successful at repressing what causes such outbursts. In fact, Edna has little at her disposal in terms of verbal representations, within the discourses of her time, to explain how her husband's words make her feel. She sits at the edge of the bed and says nothing. In contrast, Léonce is able to rely upon a full range of representations to explain his thoughts. His "monotonous, insistent way,"¹⁰⁵ opposed to her silence, reflects how different the assortment of representations is for men and women in Western discourse: man is a discursive 'thing' contained by a silenced female 'envelope'.

This feminine guilt and shame inherited from the phallic super-ego can be said to lead women to subscribe to the subjugating limitation of being only a 'container'. For instance, Edna meets Léonce when she finds herself sexually enticed by the picture of a tragedian that sits on her desk. The guilt and shame involved in such primitive and raw sexual emotions seem to induce Edna to finally decide to marry Léonce, out of fear of the strength of the sexual desires she experiences. With no language apparatus available to freely explore the stirring sexual desires that she feels, and no freedom to act on them, Edna, just like most women of her time, chooses to get married instead. Thus, her marriage to Léonce can be deemed as the embodiment of the repression of her latent passions and the beginning of its replacement with a life committed to 'containing'. She gives up herself to be punished, as Irigaray puts it, "by the accomplished fact of castration"¹⁰⁶.

The acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world. As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 88

¹⁰⁵ Chopin, 1993, p. 5

¹⁰⁶ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 88

¹⁰⁷ Chopin, 1993, p. 18

The fact that Edna feels the pressing need to close “the portals”¹⁰⁸ of desire seems informed by Irigaray’s supposition that women surrender to a punitive relationship with men without knowing what they did wrong, what they are suffering from, or even what they endured¹⁰⁹. Fragilely subjected to the ‘conscience’ of men-fathers, the ruling super-ego, women quietly surrender to a phallogocentric order and its monopoly of consciousness. Edna understands that in order to fill the role assigned to women, she needs to abdicate any “trace of passion or excessive fictitious warmth”¹¹⁰. The protagonist does not seem to have a choice but to settle for a passion-free life, which she considers less threatening. Threatening to whom? - one may wonder. For Irigaray, the answer lies in the fact that “whatever works as a super-ego for women has no love of women, and particularly of women’s sex/organ. It would, in fact, have been built up out of anxiety, horror, disdain of women’s castration”¹¹¹. Therefore, it is out of fear of threatening the male identity and the sense of worth of the phallus that women feel compelled to repress their pleasure and succumb to a life as a container for the phallus.

3.2 The Hysteric Speech

Nothing asserts Edna’s place as a ‘container for the phallus’ like the ‘silence’ that surrounds her. As Edna’s awakening process progresses, Leonce seems completely unaware of the stirring forces that move his wife, as he is compliant to the silence socially imposed on Edna’s confusion. There is not a single interaction in which Leonce truly reaches out to his wife, seeking to understand what emotions drive her actions. Instead, the husband is quick to utter judgemental reminders, which criticise Edna for not acting according to conventions and end up unconsciously imposing more silence on her. In fact, such imposed silence goes beyond Leonce’s actions towards Edna and reaches the very fingers of the narrator, who can poetically explain *how* Edna feels but seems to fail to clearly explain *what* causes it. More specifically, this can be observed in the Tuesday night dinner passage, when Leonce is frustrated at Edna for

¹⁰⁸ Chopin, 1993, p. 18

¹⁰⁹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 88

¹¹⁰ Chopin, 1993, p. 18

¹¹¹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 89

not hosting the social meetings of the day. While he vents his indignation, Edna is described as:

seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet, half-darkness which met her moods. But the voices were not soothing that came to her from the darkness and the sky above and the stars. They jeered and sounded mournful notes without promise, devoid even of hope.¹¹²

Edna seems hopeless and frustrated, but the description above lacks an explanation of what motivates such emotions. In an attempt to overcome limitations in verbal representations to familiarise the reader with Edna's emotions, Chopin goes on to describe Edna's actions in the hopes to illustrate, rather than narrate, the unanswered cause (what) to the emotion (how). Edna is described as removing her wedding ring from her finger, throwing it on the floor, and angrily stepping on it. Not satisfied, she is also depicted flinging a vase upon the floor destructively. Such passionate reaction is accompanied by no inner dialogue or outburst of speech. Once interrupted by a worried maid, the chapter ends with Edna sliding her wedding ring back upon her finger, in silence. The fact that Edna removes her wedding ring and steps on it nonverbally proves that it is her place as a wife that causes such feelings of frustration and loss. Also, the fact that Edna silently slides the ring back onto her finger shows how unprepared she is, in the beginning of her awakening, to overcome the boundaries of her role as a 'male vessel'. It is possible to contend, therefore, that although unable to give direct words to what makes Edna feel the way she does, the narrator is still successful at depicting it despite the suffocating influence of phallogocentric silence imposed on Edna.

The relationship between Edna and Leonce since then grows less courteous. After the vase incident, Edna promises herself she will do what she pleases and feel what she will, while Leonce feels appalled by her subsequent disregard for her duties as a wife. This switch of dynamics makes the husband wonder if his wife is not, indeed, becoming mentally unbalanced. Leonce's intrigue illustrates what has been widely discussed regarding women's spontaneous speech and its relation to mental illness diagnosis. Within a phallogocentric order, a woman who does not comply with the role reserved for the feminine is deemed crazy. According to Phyllis Chesler, in her book *Women and Madness* (1972), "it is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioural norms for her sex though these kinds of

¹¹² Chopin, 1991, p. 52

behaviour are generally regarded as less socially desirable. The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture”¹¹³. The central aspect of the feminine identity in the phallogocentric order circles around the violation of the incest taboo, that is, the natural ‘preference’ for the father – as Freud keenly explains – followed by the substitute father figures assigned through marriage and love. Consequently, as Chesler elaborates in a similar fashion to Irigaray’s idea of ‘vessel’, starting from childhood throughout puberty, women are assigned the role of serving an image: as daughter, mother, and wife. In case a woman rejects this default role, as Edna does, she is considered mentally ill: “what we consider 'madness', whether it appears in women or men, is either the acting out a devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype”¹¹⁴.

It is exactly this defying of sex-role stereotype communicated between the lines of Edna’s progressively more vocal attitude that sends Leonce to the doctor’s office. When Mr. Pontellier walks into Dr. Mandelet’s office, he hopes to understand what illness has taken over his adorable wife: “she’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women”¹¹⁵. The doctor never tries to unpack what might be motivating such ideas in Edna; nor does he consider inviting Edna into his office in order to listen to what she might have to say. Instead, Mandelet only suggests that Leonce leave his wife alone: “don’t bother her, and don’t let her bother you”¹¹⁶. Not offered a place of speech as a subject, Edna is condemned to inflexible silence or else, the label of mentally unbalanced. This hardened mute space offered to the feminine can be said to intentionally freeze women within the walls of fixed representation. In fact, Mandelet offers the reader a concise description of the contours of such a fixed representation of womanhood:

Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism—a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them. And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. Most women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn’t try to fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if you let her alone.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Chesler, 1972, p. 68-69

¹¹⁴ Chesler, 1972, p. 56

¹¹⁵ Chopin, 1991, p. 65

¹¹⁶ Chopin, 1991, p. 66

¹¹⁷ Chopin, 1991, p. 66

For the doctor, women are temperamental and impulsive, and if not promptly ignored by men through retaliating silence, the results can be ‘bunglingly’ clumsy. The silence imposed on women prevents them from exploring freely who and what they are. In other words, the muted and rigidly controlled sense of femininity blocks a more plural development of women that would help them break free from the representations designed by the phallus. As a place other than a ‘mute container’ to the husband and children, women could explore their relationship with their own sexuality, their relationship with other women, their contribution to the sciences, as well as their use of language. It is possible to argue, therefore, that Leonce’s concern about Edna’s mental state as well as the doctor’s prescribed ‘silence’ as a treatment for her ‘symptoms’ is a perfect example of Freud’s diagnosis and treatment of ‘hysteria’.

Considered a ‘psychoneurosis’, hysteria was explained as the symptom of a ‘malfunction’ in the development of female sexuality. Instead of accepting castration and turning the Oedipal gaze to the phallic father, the hysteric woman renounces her ‘inferior’ clitoral pleasure at the same time that she refuses to convert her vagina into a passive (paternal) heterosexual organ. The resulting repression of the sexual drive, as Freud explains in his ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’ (1905), is what causes the symptoms of hysterical patients:

The removal of the symptoms of hysterical patients by psycho-analysis proceeds on the supposition that those symptoms are substitutes—transcriptions as it were—for a number of emotionally cathected mental processes, wishes and desires, which, by the operation of a special psychical procedure (repression), have been prevented from obtaining discharge in psychical activity that is admissible to consciousness.¹¹⁸

What Freud supposed to be a result of the sexual repression of ‘natural feminine drives’ is, for the psychoanalytic feminists, a product of the weaponization of silence in the phallogocentric order. For Irigaray, hysteria is nothing but a woman’s rebellion against the prescribed silence, basic requirements of femininity. Such rebellion can be said to be an active choice, a ‘mode of defiance’ through what Grosz calls “overcompliance” to the imposed feminine role: “The hysteric thus attempts to ‘cope’ with the demands and expectations of a male-dominated culture which relies on women’s renunciation of their relations to other women, and of their unmediated relations to their own bodies

¹¹⁸ Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), p. 164

and pleasures"¹¹⁹. Placed in a position of muteness and passive dependence on man, the hysteric seeks to cope by excessively mimicking the 'normal femininity' which restricts her. She might articulate an excessive corporeal discourse (through psychosomatic organic disorders), as well as an unrestricted verbal discourse: whichever it is, "the symptoms 'speak' on her behalf"¹²⁰.

In this light, it is possible to argue that Edna's progressive response to the prescription of silence is hysterical, insofar as she chooses to rebel by speaking, unrestrictedly, in a way that threatens – and unveils – the very repressive contours of 'feminine (non) speech'. An example of Edna's hysteric verbalizations is the 'moody and whimsical' (as the doctor defines it) remark about attending her sister's wedding: "she says a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth. Nice thing for a woman to say to her husband!"¹²¹. This attempt of an unmediated articulation of her subjectivity startles Leonce exactly because she, like the hysteric, fights for a place as a subject of speech.

However, women, if asked to speak, will never be able to express anything other than what the 'subject', the male, prescribes them to. They either comply to femininity or are labelled 'psychoneurotic'. Subjugated by the laws of language, women's intent, meaning, and thought are hijacked by a logical system of representations that places them as a 'signifier' to the male 'subject'. The prescribed 'silence' to Edna's supposed 'change of mood', as well as her hysteric reaction to it, represent the power of the phallus and emphasise the 'hole' in language intentionally designed to distance women from their chance to become their own container:

Or even that man, as representer of the power (of the) phallus, corresponds for her to any meaning, except perhaps that of her exclusion from herself. For man is placed in such a way as to re-mark the distance, the separation, in which she finds herself, but the "subject's" imprisonment in the autarchy of his metaphorical system implies that, even when such "re-marking" occurs, it does so only in the context of that contiguousness in which she is contained, retained, in her jouissance, and which steers her away from her own course in order to articulate a phallic whole: her function henceforward will be as hole.¹²²

A good thirty years after the writing of *The Awakening*, Sigmund Freud devised words about the sexuality of women of Edna's age. In such an attempt, Freud

¹¹⁹ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 134

¹²⁰ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 135

¹²¹ Chopin, 1991, p. 66

¹²² Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 231

describes an impression that he constantly received during his analytic practice: that women around their thirties presented “psychical rigidity and unchangeability”¹²³. While men of the same age were observed being more youthful, and, therefore, more open to sexual experimentation, women showed signs of stagnation in sexual desire: “her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development”¹²⁴. As Irigaray goes on to suggest, Freud’s observations of female patients in his clinic seem to describe what happens to women when they are assimilated by the silence prescribed to ‘femininity’. The non-hysteric is frozen in intimidation, in what Freud calls ‘frigidity’. Not Edna. Against all these odds, Edna is depicted as having enough energy to hysterically shake the rigidity observed by Freud. Although being prescribed silence, dutifully delivered by Leonce, Edna goes on to hysterically defy Freud’s findings by showing signs of a libido that refuses to take “final positions”¹²⁵.

This can be observed from Edna’s growing disregard for labels and gradual efforts to break the phallogocentric pervasive ‘silence’ prescribed to her. At the beginning of the story, Edna’s instinctive reactions to the constraints offered by marriage meet, in the language of Irigaray, “no signs, no symbols or emblems, or methods of writing”¹²⁶. She feels intensely but is openly described as not being able to verbally explain the roots of such emotions. As the story progresses, however, Edna seems more apt to do as Irigaray proposes: “work out or transpose specific representatives of her instinctual object-goals”¹²⁷. In the final pages of the book, in a conversation with Robert, Edna makes a direct reference to her new-acquired habit of expressing herself:

You are the embodiment of selfishness,” she said. “You save yourself something—I don’t know what—but there is some selfish motive, and in sparing yourself you never consider for a moment what I think, or how I feel your neglect and indifference. I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself. It doesn’t matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like.”¹²⁸

While Edna takes on the task to voice her opinions in the passage above, she also acknowledges the conventions she actively breaks by doing so. The silence

¹²³ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), p. 134

¹²⁴ Freud, *Femininity* (1932), p. 135

¹²⁵ Freud, 1932, p. 134-35 *apud* Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 127

¹²⁶ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 63

¹²⁷ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 63

¹²⁸ Chopin, 1991, p. 106

imposed on the protagonist as a treatment for her non-cooperative behaviour confirms Irigaray's pledge that "woman has not yet taken (a) place"¹²⁹. Or perhaps they did: either the silently compliant feminine place or the hysterically unbalanced feminine place. Regardless, both are considered inherent to the role as a container for the male sublimated desire to return to the initial state of unity with the maternal body. Consequently, Edna's sudden desire to 'become a 'unique container for herself' and differentiate herself from the place of wife and mother become a threat to the phallogocentric order and can only be met with retaliating silence.

3.3 The Enveloping Ocean

The ocean in *The Awakening* plays an important role in Edna's journey into becoming more than a 'vessel' within the logic of the phallogocentric order. It is in chapter ten that the reader is introduced to the fact that Edna tries to learn to swim. Her attempts seem in vain until the night the artist plays the piano at her request. Suddenly, perhaps guided by the emotions which have gradually resurfaced during her stay in Grand Isle, Edna takes the water and swims for the first time "as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul"¹³⁰.

Edna is able to be freely 'enveloped' by the ocean and desires to swim far out, "where no woman had swum before"¹³¹. The protagonist finds in the ocean the limits of a 'place for herself' and it is in her interaction with it that she parts from the place into which she is hammered as a woman. As Irigaray explains: "if she is to be able to contain, to develop, she must have her own envelope. Not only her clothing and ornaments of seduction"¹³². In Edna's case, her own envelope is embodied by the ocean waters.

As she takes in the experience of being able to swim, she turns her face to the great body of water "to gather in an impression of space and solitude", "reaching out

¹²⁹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), p. 227

¹³⁰ Chopin, 1993, p. 27

¹³¹ Chopin, 1993, p. 27

¹³² Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), p. 35

for the unlimited in which to lose herself"¹³³. Such a moment can be deemed as Edna's first awakening, and it comes as no surprise that the language that the narrator uses to describe this passage could be considered one used to describe the 'masculine'. Only a nineteenth-century man, not woman, would see flourishing "powers of significant import", would "control the working of [his] body", would grow "daring and reckless", would be caught "overestimating [his] strength", or would be "reaching out for the unlimited"¹³⁴. Such a choice of language can be argued to demonstrate the narrator's difficulty in finding verbal representations that do not depict women as the ideal men. The only way it becomes possible to describe a woman's becoming more than a vessel for the phallus is by assigning her 'masculine-like' attributes.

Clearly overtaken by the emotion contained in touching upon one's long-lost subjectivity, Edna turns and looks at the shore and suddenly feels afraid that she might not be able to swim back to land. The concrete shift of gaze described in this passage can be interpreted as a woman's relationship to her 'truth'. On one side, she can see the vast waters of her subjectivity. Wavy, dense, and unknown, they are submerged in the silence imposed by phallogocentric discourses which, as the French psychoanalyst feminists suppose, have not historically allowed a female-dedicated set of verbal representations to come into existence. On the other side, she can see the shore, the concrete, and the restricting land which has given her body a confining place, a fixed function.

What better symbol but 'ocean waters' to represent the mute and turbulent relationship women establish with their desires and body in a phallogocentric world. When Edna turns to the shore, she perceives the stretch of water that separates her from land as a "barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome"¹³⁵. Understandably, such emotion brings about "a quick vision of death" which "smote her soul"¹³⁶. Her encounter with the possibility of ceasing to be a 'vessel' for her husband and children and becoming a 'container' for herself has airs of impossibility, of imminent death. Although shocked by the experience, she still can't find words to express how she feels: "she made no mention of her encounter with death and her flash of terror, except to say to her husband, 'I thought I should have perished

¹³³ Chopin, 1993, p. 28

¹³⁴ Chopin, 1993, p. 27-28

¹³⁵ Chopin, 1993, p. 28

¹³⁶ Chopin, 1993, p. 28

out there alone.”¹³⁷ As a response, Leonce minimizes his wife’s experience by saying “you were not so very far”¹³⁸ and quickly reinforces his authoritative position in relation to her: “I was watching you”¹³⁹. Such dismissive and controlling utterances send Edna back to a state of silence and reserve.

With the sudden need to hold on to the self-enveloping sensations experienced in the ocean, Edna walks alone back to the house and ignores the people’s shouts that try to get her attention. However, fast enough, she is overtaken by Robert. It is with him that she shyly elaborates on her emotions:

I never was so exhausted in my life. But it isn’t unpleasant. A thousand emotions have swept through me to-night. I don’t comprehend half of them. Don’t mind what I’m saying; I am just thinking aloud. I wonder if I shall ever be stirred again as Mademoiselle Reisz’s playing moved me to-night. I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one. It is like a night in a dream. The people about me are like some uncanny, half-human beings. There must be spirits abroad to-night.”¹⁴⁰

Quite opposite to Leonce, Robert embarks on Edna’s reflections and explains to the married woman that it was indeed a special night. As Robert narrates, according to the creole, the twenty-eighth of August is when a spirit that habitually haunts the shores of Grand Isle seeks a mortal who is worth being exalted into the realms of “semi-celestials”. That night in special, Robert reassures Edna that the spirit found her and that “perhaps she will never again suffer a poor, unworthy earthling to walk in the shadow of her divine presence.”¹⁴¹ Robert undoubtedly seems to understand what Edna feels, once again, and dutifully offers her a mirror so that she can meet her own reflection. Once seated comfortably on the hammock, the pair stay in silence and it is here, for the first time, that the narrator mentions the awakening of sexual feelings in Edna: “no multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire”¹⁴². It is in a place of her own, embodied by the ocean’s touch that Edna starts to show signs of reconnection with her body, her desire, and sexual needs. As the narrator later says: “the touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace”¹⁴³.

¹³⁷ Chopin, 1993, p. 28

¹³⁸ Chopin, 1993, p. 28

¹³⁹ Chopin, 1993, p. 28

¹⁴⁰ Chopin, 1993, p. 28-29

¹⁴¹ Chopin, 1993, p. 29

¹⁴² Chopin, 1993, p. 30

¹⁴³ Chopin, 1993, p. 115

The role that the ocean plays in *The Awakening* converses well with the ideas around sexuality and nature presented by Camille Paglia, the famous contemporary American feminist whose theories are also influenced by Freud. In her book entitled *Sexual Personae* (1991), Paglia understands that it is a hard task to fully understand sex and gender without clarifying humanity's relationship with nature, as "sex is a subset to nature. Sex is the natural to man"¹⁴⁴. The author goes on to postulate that society is an artificial organization created by men as a defence mechanism against the "barbarous sea that is nature"¹⁴⁵. Nature is a strong force that can wipe up civilizations instantly if it wishes to do so: "let nature shrug, and all is in ruin"¹⁴⁶. Civilized life, therefore, is an illusory veil that tries to propagate the idea that nature is benevolent, appeasing humanity's fear of nature's strength and unpredictability. Although locked under the thumb of morality, humans, for Paglia, are part of nature's web of existence and, as a result, experience its force through sex's primitive force. Consequently, sexuality can be deemed where man and nature meet: "where morality and good intentions fall to primitive urges"¹⁴⁷. In this light, it can be said that it is in the thrill of 'conquering' the fear of the ocean that Edna reconnects with the primitive aspects of her sexuality. It is then that the protagonist starts to strip down the limits imposed by phallogocentric social conventions

However, Robert, the object of Edna's desires, cannot be said to reciprocate her tendency to act on her need for sexual freedom. Robert's understanding that Edna needs to be his wife, instead of Leonce's, before their love and desire for each other can be consummated raises a red flag in Edna's mind:

You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both.¹⁴⁸

Robert learns first-hand that Edna is not in the search of substitution for her husband, a recreation of the conventional marital life with another man. She explains to the confused young man that he was the one "who awoke [her] last summer out of

¹⁴⁴ Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (1991), p. 3

¹⁴⁵ Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (1991), p. 3

¹⁴⁶ Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (1991), p. 3

¹⁴⁷ Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (1991), p. 3

¹⁴⁸ Chopin, 1993, p. 108

a life-long, stupid dream”¹⁴⁹ and then proposes that they be “everything to each other” as “nothing else in the world is of any consequence”¹⁵⁰. Her words do not seem to convince Robert, as he highly steams society’s moral code and his well-established reputation. It is exactly Edna’s proposal of breaking it and ‘living in sin’ that drives Robert away one last time.

Robert’s choice seems to inform Edna of the confining nature of her existence as a woman in America of the late nineteen-hundreds. Edna seems to finally understand that Robert’s choice to leave is due to her unavailability to be, again, ‘the possessed object’ of the ‘male subject’. The female protagonist, therefore, breaks what Irigaray calls “the silent allegiance” which “guarantees the auto-sufficiency, the autonomy of the other”¹⁵¹. By questioning “the mutism as a symptom – of historical oppression”¹⁵², Edna decides to speak, or yet, as Irigaray puts it, she starts to ‘see’. Such strong positioning, and its domino effect in the story, answers one of the questions initially posed by Irigaray: “what disaggregation of the subject would that [the ‘object’ being able to speak] entail?”¹⁵³. In Robert, it causes an overwhelming break in the mirror, enough to make him flee. He sees in Edna a twisted reflection of himself, of a man who explores sexuality with a woman who contains herself, an image which he clearly does not wish to propagate to the world. Edna, however, sees his reaction as a mirror to her chances of existing without, in Irigaray words, “being determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her”¹⁵⁴. In a more macro vision, Edna concludes that “to-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me”¹⁵⁵.

Distraught, the protagonist goes back to the beginning of her awakening, when the ocean waters showed her that there can be, indeed, a place for a place. Hopeless, Edna finally understands the meaning behind the words she uttered to Adele in the summer in Grand Isle: “that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children”¹⁵⁶. It is important to highlight the noncoincidental fact

¹⁴⁹ Chopin, 1993, p. 109

¹⁵⁰ Chopin, 1993, p. 109

¹⁵¹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 135

¹⁵² Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 135

¹⁵³ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Another Woman* (1974), p. 135

¹⁵⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), p. 29

¹⁵⁵ Chopin, 1993, p. 115

¹⁵⁶ Chopin, 1993, p. 115

that Edna has two sons. These two small men are the ones who can ultimately, as Irigaray says, “drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days”¹⁵⁷. With the ocean waters touching her toes, Edna weighs the alternatives. If on one side she has the seductive voice of the ocean waters inviting her soul to wander in solitude, on the other, she has at her disposal the perpetual place of ‘lacking object’ to a male subject. She fatally understands that, despite all her attempts, in phallogentric order, all she can be is the giver of servile love to the father-husband, who, in her case, gave her two children-penis, reinforcing her role as guardian of the masculine narcissism in her position as envious of the phallus.

Symbolically speaking, it can be argued that Edna walks into the sea disrupted by the violent break-in of the phallus, or, in more concrete words, by the forceful and restricting nature of the phallogentric order in relation to women. In a fertile analogy, she seeks the touch of the ocean water in her bare body as the source of, in Irigaray’s own words, “the self-caressing she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations”¹⁵⁸. Abandoned exactly at the account of her seek for freedom, Edna drowns herself in the touch of her own envelope and ceases her existence in a phallogentric world, whose symbolic order offers her nothing but a place of lack and servitude to the male (the one and only sex).

To sum up, enlightened by Irigaray’s reflections on Aristotle’s theories on ‘matter and space’, as well as Freud’s words on female sexuality, this chapter dealt with the place offered to women within the Western phallogentric discourse. It was argued that Edna is designated a ‘feminine role’ which resembled the Aristotelian idea of infinite containment and the existence of a first ‘unique and dedicated envelope’. Edna’s rebellion against the patriarchal expectations regarding her role as ‘angel in the house’ illustrates woman’s struggle to abdicate her subjectivity in favour of the male necessity to be enveloped. Such need, taking into consideration Freud’s understanding of the Oedipal complex, roots in the repressed incestuous desire to remain in unity with the maternal body. This anxious longing for a compliant feminine threw women like Edna into a mute state of apathy and distorted any attempt for female verbalization.

¹⁵⁷ Chopin, 1993, p. 115

¹⁵⁸ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is not One* (1977), p. 24

Edna's growing need to 'speak up' is met with suspicions of mental illness, in the molds of the Freudian theories around hysteria. The protagonist tries to articulate corporeal and verbal discourses that characterize her resistance to the confinement imposed on her as a middle-class wife and mother. Informed by Irigaray's contention that the hysteric rebels against the subordinated place of 'object of phallus', it was explained that women mimic in exaggeration the very paranoia that forms the role they are forced into. Although Edna goes controversially far with her quest to shake this role as vessel, she stumbles against the truth that any place she wishes to inhabit within the phallogocentric order will inevitably be delimited by the male discourses that permeate it. Although she sees in Robert the chance to experiment being more than a wife and mother, she fatally understands that Robert, as everyone and everything, has no other place to offer her but the one of a 'vessel' that contains the phallus. Her final dive into the ocean waters marks her ultimate renouncement of the prescribed feminine and crowns the only place possible for an independent female subject: the annihilated one.

4 *Ruth*: Succumbing to the Phallogentric Discourse

[...] people have such different ways of showing feeling: some by silence, some by words.¹⁵⁹

Ruth, by the British author Elizabeth Gaskell, is also an important literary text that depicts a female protagonist whose repression stems from the Western phallogentric discourse. This chapter will mainly focus on Julia Kristeva's theories of the Western phallogentric discourse, hoping to shed a psychoanalytic feminist light on Ruth Hilton's trajectory in patriarchal Britain. In general lines, the book tackles the exhausted theme of the 'fallen woman', a social label that encompassed any form of female improper sexual experience¹⁶⁰. Although Ruth technically becomes a fallen woman after the consummation of her affair with Mr. Bellingham, in a broader sense, her moral descent can be said to have taken place way earlier. As an orphaned seamstress, the young girl carries on her shoulders the heavyweight of being the embodiment of what was deemed 'immorally evil' due to her social circumstance. Becoming a consummated fallen woman, for a girl like Ruth, is just a natural step towards the fulfilment of a fate prescribed to working women like her.

It can be said, therefore, that the narration of *Ruth* revolves mainly around the well-known path of the fallen woman and the nineteenth-century stories of prostitution: 'fall', 'descent', and 'death'¹⁶¹. Although Ruth is socially proclaimed 'fallen', the young girl's nature is controversially depicted as that of a perfect specimen of the Victorian 'feminine morality'. Such characterization proposes a dramatic clash between social and transcendental perceptions while remaining submerged in two opposing religious moral codes that bring the central conflict forward: "the old and ever-renewing struggle between Truth and Truth-seeming, virtue and convention, good deeds and bad names"¹⁶². The Basons, for instance, represent the 'good' religious discourse, as an approximation to the tolerant Unitarianism¹⁶³, a belief which was postulated by Gaskell's husband, a Unitarian minister of Cross Street Chapel in Manchester. The Bradshaws, antithetically, represent the 'evil' religiosity, with the hardened Calvinistic

¹⁵⁹ Gaskell, 2011, p. 104

¹⁶⁰ Black, J et al, *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature* (2006), p. LIX

¹⁶¹ Dolin, Introduction to Oxford World's Classics edition of *Ruth* (2011), p. vii

¹⁶² Lewes, 1853, p. 215 *apud* Dolin, Introduction to Oxford World's Classics edition of *Ruth* (2011), p. xvi

¹⁶³ Unitarian Christians believe that Jesus was inspired by God in his moral teachings, and he is a saviour, but he was not a deity or God incarnate.

belief that the commitment to Christ meant a rigid, severely censured life with no leniency to weaknesses. While the Basons are 'the true virtue', the Bradshaws illustrate the deceiving 'truth-seeming'.

Enlightened by the above, it can be argued that Gaskell contradicts herself by assigning 'good' and 'evil' to contrasting religious discourses while depicting a heroine who keenly blurs the moral line that separates 'pure and 'immoral' female sexual conduct. Nevertheless, the author successfully depicts the Manicheism that permeated the society of the time by unveiling not only the repression that fixed cultural identities meant for Victorian women, but also, less obviously, how these identities were in sync with the monotheist survival need to connect 'desire' to the female body.

As Julia Kristeva writes in her book entitled *The Chinese Women* (1974), the advent of a monotheist ideology represented a shift in the perception of 'desire' and the role of femininity in the Western world. It is in the founding of Judaism that the patriarchal monotheist discourse won force. Long before Judaism was founded, 'maternal divinities' were worshipped by the Northern Semites¹⁶⁴. However, even while this worshipping perdured, the shift towards the isolation of the male as a paternity divinity started and inevitably informed Judaism. Primarily formed by Egyptian refugees and nomads who banded together without any unified ethnic origin, the Judaic community desperately needed a central point of union which would guarantee their survival. The foundation of Jewish monotheism, therefore, can be said to have been rooted in the need to create a unified community despite its unfavourable circumstances: "an abstract, nominal, symbolic community beyond individuals and their beliefs, but beyond their political organization as well"¹⁶⁵.

Thus, the then proclaimed 'Jews' were gathered under one unified God whose Word ensured the safety of the community: "the word of the community will consequently oscillate between prophecy and legislation, but it will always be a word that aims to gather together this society which history is bent on dispersing"¹⁶⁶. Hoping to obtain control over any stirring forces that could disperse the community, 'the Word of God' made sure to target the very thing that could stir and threaten a unified community: 'desire', which found in the female body its perfect representation in the

¹⁶⁴ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 140

¹⁶⁵ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 140

¹⁶⁶ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 142

symbolic order. Understandably so, as, according to Lacan, 'desire' is a fundamental 'lack' that requires mediation due to its intrinsic inter-subjectivity: "desire desires the desire of an other. Desire is thus a movement, an energy that is always transpersonal, directed to others"¹⁶⁷. In a patrilinear society, this role of 'an other' in 'desire' was naturally assigned to women:

Monotheistic unity is sustained by a radical separation of the sexes: indeed, it is this very separation which is its prerequisite. For without this gap between the sexes, without this localization of the polymorphic, orgasmic body, desiring and laughing, in the other sex, it would have been impossible, in the symbolic realm, to isolate the principle of One Law - the One, Sublimating, Transcendent Guarantor of the ideal interests of the community.¹⁶⁸

As the embodiment of 'pleasure', women became excluded from the only true legislating principle, 'The Word', and, as a natural consequence, were kept subjugated by the paternal social fabric that controlled knowledge and power. Shaped by the religious symbolic order as the 'other', whose desires are to be banished, the feminine left the post of worshipped and was assigned the reduced role of silence¹⁶⁹. It was in this newfound discourse of sexual difference that the patrilinear, class-structured, and capitalist society formed its roots. Kristeva, therefore, stresses the negative impact of patriarchal monotheism on women, as it reduced them to the embodiment of desire, to the confining role of the silent Other in the symbolic order.

This evolution to monotheism experienced by the Judaic community directly influenced the formulation of the Christian ideology. Such juxtaposition can be observed in the way Christianity tackles desire and sin in the biblical story of 'Adam and Eve'. Kristeva contends that Eve's relationship to the serpent symbolically represents the inherited need to exclude women (desire) in order to establish control. The serpent symbolizes Adam's repressed desire to transgress God's word, or, more specifically, the male desire to defy the incest taboo imposed by the phallic order. Although Adam is strong enough to repress his desire for unity with the maternal body, Eve succumbs to the temptation offered by the serpent and not only eats the fruit from the forbidden tree but also encourages Adam to do the same. Eve becomes the one that 'connects' with what remains outside the religious sublimation, embodied in the symbol of the serpent. Assigned the role of the 'other', Eve represents Christianity's

¹⁶⁷ Grosz, Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction (1990), p. 65

¹⁶⁸ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 141

¹⁶⁹ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 138

choice to place women on the outskirts of their religious symbolism as the one 'acquainted' with what is 'evil' in mankind.

Informed by Kristeva's analysis of biblical representations of women, it can be said that the religious symbolic role of 'Eve' is openly projected onto Ruth when the protagonist becomes a 'fallen woman'. Although the way the character is depicted might try to prove otherwise, Ruth is socially seen as the woman who succumbs to temptation and contaminates Mr. Bellingham (Adam) with her evil desire for carnal pleasure. The reaction that his mother, Mrs. Bellingham, has to the affair illustrates this argument. The mother does not allow her son to acknowledge his responsibility for the affair: "don't be too severe in your self-reproaches [...] I have no doubt in my own mind she led you wrong with her artifices"¹⁷⁰. Being described as possessing intrusive manners, no shame or modesty, the mother vocally banishes Ruth to the embodiment of the symbolic representation of Eve, helped by the distorted perception of other women who were in direct contact with the young woman. The protagonist is not only pleaded guilty for being seduced by the temptation of her own carnal desires but also for enticing Mr. Bellingham to do the same.

In the Western religious discourse, as proposed by Kristeva, carnal desire is embodied by the female and deemed as the very opposite of the Word of God. Such a close connection between women and desire left the female pleasure no alternative but self-punishment and self-annihilation. This radiant 'maso-sadistic' tendency can be observed not only in Mrs. Bellingham suggestion that Ruth retire to a 'penitentiary'¹⁷¹ but also in Ruth's suicide attempt. Both forms of punishment can be seen as woman's assimilation into the Symbolic of the phallus and its proposed female guilt for experiencing desire, or in better words, for feeling enticed to 'dialogue' with the evil serpent.

In Kristeva's contention, such a close connection between the female body and desire, part of the Western phallogocentric religious discourse, leads women to believe that they are the phallus themselves, although they do not have a penis. If, for Lacan, the 'phallus' symbolizes the 'law of the father', then it is understandable that women

¹⁷⁰ Gaskell, 2011, p. 73

¹⁷¹ "Penitentiary" was a type of Victorian charitable institution created specifically for 'fallen women'. Similar to the male-only penitentiary 'workhouses', the penitentiaries trained women in a number of different professions in an attempt to 'rehabilitate' them.

perceive their role in relation to the phallus as one of major centrality. As the pin that holds together what is understood as 'phallogocentric discourse', the 'phallus' (the paternal word) lies on the female body the captive, silent, and expelled embodiment of man's repressed Semiotic desire. Her female body is the repressed blissful primal maternal body, the holder of social harmony and the future of the community:

In a symbolic economy of production and reproduction centred on the paternal Word (the phallus, if you like), one can make a woman believe that she is (the phallus) even if she doesn't have it (the serpent, the penis): doesn't she have the child? In this way, social harmony is preserved: the structure functions, produces and reproduces. Without it, the very foundation of this society is endangered.¹⁷²

In other words, women take on the role of 'serpent whisperer', as male condemned lustful actions are blamed on them, helping secure the very structure that represses and condemns their sexual drive. Assimilated by the phallus, women, therefore, submit themselves to the guilt and, inadvertently, help to absolve those (male) who are the organizers and central characters of the religious phallogocentric symbolic order.

Again, as the embodiment of the phallus' desire, Ruth suffers punishment (from herself and other women) for threatening social harmony with her forbidden carnal desire. However, in practical terms, this is not how her affair is depicted in the story. Ruth is never openly described as a sexual young girl. Instead, the protagonist is considered naive, young, and socially vulnerable, attributes that place her as a victim in relation to her intimate involvement with Mr. Bellingham. In fact, the reader is never made fully aware of the consummation of the affair until the doctor announces Ruth's pregnancy. Only then, it is abruptly confirmed that the couple has, in fact, had sexual intercourse. Such deafening (fearful) silence, that excludes Ruth's sexual desires from the story altogether, seems in line with Gaskell's religious background and her consequent expected faithfulness towards a symbolic order that sees pleasure (obtained through the desired maternal body) as a threat to the social fabric that maintained it erect.

Despite the blackout in representation of the sexual nature of the affair, it can hardly be said that Ruth shows no trace of sexual drive. To successfully establish this argument, it is important to explore Lacan's contention that sexuality is much more

¹⁷² Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 144

than the desire for sexual intercourse, but the vast field in which 'desire' plays out. Although sexual drive mimics biological processes (such as heterosexual intercourse), they are not exactly a biological instinct, but a direct consequence (and dependent) of a feeling of 'lack'. As the result of the socially constructed discourses of body and pleasure, sexuality, for Lacan, is the search for a particular 'meaning' that is 'lacking' within signification. In this sense, what is loved is basically the desire for what is important (but lacking) within the subject's social context: "the drive thus strives for an (impossible) object to satisfy its bivalent aims by filling the lack or gap. It is because of its essential lack of an essence, its capacity to substitute one object for another to gain satisfaction, that the drive is the field in which desire is manifested"¹⁷³.

In other words, 'loss' creates a 'lack' through which 'desire' can be formed. If I lose, I lack, so I desire. Therefore, for Lacan, what forms the sexual drives (which only mimic, but are not exactly copulation) is nothing but a symptom of this desire to fulfill a lack. If desire's existence is fully dependable on lack, then it is possible to say that a desire always desires another desire, infinitely, as being unfulfilled is its very nature. If sexual drive is the desire produced by a lack, then, it can be argued that Ruth externalizes the sexual drive that motivates her affair in the form of 'longing'.

The protagonist experiences the sudden loss of her mother, the consequent death of her father, the loss of her estate, and everything she considered familiar and safe. Although apparently resigned to her circumstance, the young girl is still described melancholically sitting with her head pressed against the window, or dreaming of the days that once were, with her head tucked in her pillow:

She watched and waited till, one by one, they dropped off to sleep, and then she buried her face in the pillow, and shook with sobbing grief; and then she paused to conjure up, with fond luxuriance, every recollection of the happy days, so little valued in their uneventful peace while they lasted, so passionately regretted when once gone for ever; to remember every look and word of the dear mother, and to moan afresh over the change caused by her death--the first clouding in of Ruth's day of life.¹⁷⁴

The passage above clearly narrates the loss of the mother as the first trauma Ruth experiences. The death of the protagonist's mother, right when the young girl should be progressing to the resolution of the Oedipal complex, can be said to decisively give shape to the young girl's drives. Ruth can be said to lose her mother

¹⁷³ Grosz, Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction (1990), p. 76

¹⁷⁴ Gaskell, 2011, p. 33

twice before she becomes sexually mature. First, there is the natural break of the unity with the maternal body in the mirror phase, in which the subject experiences the first big loss. In a second moment, this symbolic loss of the mother materializes for Ruth, as her mother dies precociously. The materialization of this fundamental loss can be said to drive Ruth's movement toward Mr. Bellingham.

Such argument is illustrated by the passage at the shire-hall ball when Ruth meets Mr. Bellingham for the first time. The young seamstress becomes contemplative while watching the attendees enjoying themselves: "it was enough to gaze, and dream of the happy smoothness of the lives in which such music and such profusion [...] were every-day things"¹⁷⁵. Ruth clearly lacks and longs to somehow find the object that will satisfy her need for completion, until she shares a shy smile with Mr. Bellingham at the ball. Shortly after, the protagonist is depicted projecting onto the young stranger the ability "to understand the feelings of those removed from him by circumstance and station"¹⁷⁶, the very thing that she seems to lack. The whole affair that unfolds after this encounter only confirms the assumption that Ruth materializes in Mr. Bellingham the object that can satisfy what is important, but missing, in the protagonist's life. Although the young girl experiences a faint sensation of the phallogentric-imposed guilt and shame for acting on her desires, she still pursues them with the sexual energy that permeates these Semiotic drives. The consequent condemnation she is submitted to, by other women and herself, crowns Gaskell's faithful depiction of the sexual-religious discourses of the time.

4.1 From Eve to the Virgin Mother

Bason plays a vital part in Ruth's saga. It comes as no surprise that the narrator assigns to a minister the role of Ruth's saviour and propagator of the Unitarian sense of 'morality', deemed as 'good'. By placing this responsibility on a 'man' of 'God', Gaskell strengthens her claim with the aid of a double stamp of credibility: the phallic and the spiritual. Moreover, Bason is physically deformed, or, yet, symbolically 'crippled' in the eye of the phallogentric order, as his low stature and arched back do not represent the strength that stereotypical 'masculine activity' demands. Such a bold

¹⁷⁵ Gaskell, 2011, p. 14

¹⁷⁶ Gaskell, 2011, p. 16

choice of characterization helps the narrator form a concrete contrast between the perceived idea of 'morally good' within patriarchy and the spiritual essence of what is 'good' in the author's own religious faith. Only a man who has probably spent a life of humiliation due to his condition can postulate that it is better to "look to God, rather than to man's opinion"¹⁷⁷.

As the representation of this 'good religious morality', Bason offers redemption to the young girl when faced with the news that the protagonist is abandoned and pregnant. In total contrast to his sister's idea that Ruth has no moral right to have an illegitimate child, the minister argues that:

If her life has hitherto been self-seeking and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin, -will be purification.¹⁷⁸

As he considers the bearing of a child a transcendental opportunity for sin purification, it is possible to infer, consequently, that Bason sees in Ruth's child a token that can secure her a rupture from the role of a (sinful) woman and the transcendence into the role of a (holy) mother. Bason goes on to postulate that the hatred and judgment deposited on pregnant fallen women tend to "harden the mother's natural love" and "defile her holiest instincts"¹⁷⁹. Once again, he assigns to motherhood a holy-like instinct, which seems to imply the washing of the sinful identity of the mother-to-be and the continuous purification of her soul through maternal martyrdom.

Although Kristeva explains that the exclusion of desire (and the female body) from the symbolic order is the bone that keeps the monotheist tradition erect, the need for the continuation of the species through reproduction prevented woman's total annihilation from the Symbolic. It was her central role in the perpetuity of the patrilineal economy that secured women a restricted set of representations within the religious symbolic: she could be the virgin, or, in failing that, she was to become the martyr. But she could never be an object of 'desire'. These representations of the feminine suit the male narcissistic paranoia to perfection, as they are symbolic reproductions of men's incest taboo - the desires sublimated during the Oedipal complex and overflowed into

¹⁷⁷ Gaskell, 2011, p. 99

¹⁷⁸ Gaskell, 2011, p. 97

¹⁷⁹ Gaskell, 2011, p. 98

the free reigns of the religious symbolic. Again, in the desperate quest for unity, the 'desire' for an other – the female body – was keenly expelled from monotheism. Such fear-induced attempt to obtain control over the man's sexual drive limited 'feminine' representations within the religious logos. Women became represented as either the perfect Oedipal 'virgin holy mother', which is the dream of the Oedipal son, the repentant 'maternal martyr', whose sexual pleasure is absolved by the duty of motherhood or the sinning, 'serpent charmer Eve', whose surrender to desire gave women the place of 'phallus charmer' and absolved men's incestuous drive.

All the above-mentioned representations of women within the religious symbolic boil down to one male need: that of the return to the Semiotic maternal body. Thus, this plight, which Kristeva calls 'The Myth of the Virgin', finds perfect embodiment in the biblical character of the virgin Mary. The allegory of a 'holy mother' does much more than altruistically offer a place for woman within religious symbolism. More importantly, it marks the return of the renounced pleasure of the male Semiotic drives back into the Symbolic, pleasures which are lost in sublimation after the castration complex. Such contention can be explained by the psychoanalytic understanding of the role of the mother. For Kristeva, motherhood starts to become contradictory, especially for the son, and as early as the mirror phase, when the mother is named 'mamma' and becomes 'the other'. Later, the male subject understands that not only is the mother the other, but she is castrated and bears children. This paradoxically unsettling understanding takes place on a pre-conscious level, just so that the repression of the nature of his own conception (with its underlying pleasurable coitus) is safely guaranteed: "once more, the vagina and the *jouissance* (gratification) of the mother are disregarded, and immediately replaced by that which puts the mother on the side of the socio-symbolic community: childbearing and procreation in the name of the father"¹⁸⁰.

In short, the son's wish for a sexless and unpenetrated mother motivates Christianity's 'Myth of the Virgin', which finds in the archetype of the Holy Mary its perfect symbolic embodiment. The creation of a 'holy mother' who remains a virgin even after conception represents the consummation of the son's fantasy resolution to the Oedipal complex - for the mother is a virgin and remains untouched by another

¹⁸⁰ Kristeva, *A Semiotic Approach. to Language and Literature* (1980), p. 146

male. In more detailed words, the cult of the virgin, which offers what is understood as the most prominent verbal representation of maternity within the Christian tradition, is, as Kristeva points out below, a hopeful attempt to explain the contradictions that permeate maternity in the phallogentric Symbolic.

A skilful balance of concessions and constraints involving feminine paranoia, the representation of virgin motherhood appears to crown the efforts of a society to reconcile the social remnants of matrilinealism and the unconscious needs of primary narcissism on the one hand, and on the other the requirements of a new society based on exchange and before long on an increased production, which require the contribution of the superego and rely on the symbolic paternal agency.¹⁸¹

Such a fixed set of representations within the Western phallogentric discourse allows the contention that Ruth is to be the embodiment of the symbolic archetype of Eve who, after succumbing to the enticing calls of the serpent, transcends into the role of the holy mother through the (almost) immaculate conception of a baby boy. The young protagonist can be seen as a 'virgin' mother insofar as the sexual consummation of her affair with Mr. Bellingham is never depicted in the story. This narration silence makes Leonard's conception resemble the immaculate conception of the baby Jesus Christ, an idea that is quickly consolidated by Bason's (holy) postulations.

The representational blackout of Ruth's sexuality resembles Kristeva's words on Christianity's virginal cult, in which the theorist introduces the idea of 'impregnation without sexuality': "According to this notion, a woman, preserved from masculine intervention, conceives alone with a 'third party', a non-person, the Spirit"¹⁸². As far as the reader can see, Ruth, indeed, seems to have magically conceived a son without any sexual act, any masculine intervention. Followed by this immaculate conception, Ruth is to give birth to a boy. Equally, the virgin Mary is represented in direct relation to a (male) son, to whom she is "the mother, progenitor of the son" while "the son, himself, is the model on which the mother is based"¹⁸³. These undeniable similarities between the two depictions, that of the almost 'immaculate' conception of Ruth's son and the immaculate conception of baby Jesus, strengthen the argument that the protagonist is 'invited' to move from the place of Eve onto the most prominent

¹⁸¹ Kristeva, 1986, p. 183, *apud* Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1989), p. 83-84

¹⁸² Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 164

¹⁸³ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1989), p. 83

representation of maternity within the phallogentric religious discourse, that of the virgin Mary.

Consequently, it can be said that Ruth is never 'removed' from the religious cult of the phallus. Instead, she is allocated different spots as a hopeful symptom of the narcissistic paranoia of men. Again, Ruth's illegitimate pregnancy allows a new reality to be assigned to the young girl. The child is depicted just like Jesus Christ is within the Christian tradition: as the very token that can raise "all that is good in her [in Ruth, in all Christians] ... to a height unmeasured but by God; while all the evil and dark may, by His blessing, fade and disappear in the pure light of her child's presence"¹⁸⁴. This hope, cathartically described by the narrator with Bason's eyes full of tears and trembling hands, arguably drives the minister's choice to bring Ruth to their house and offer her a new beginning as the pregnant widow Mrs. Denbigh.

As discussed above, the son's (male) existence is what ascends Ruth into the representational role of the virgin Mary, a role which she dutifully embodies. Not only is the sexual nature of Ruth's relationship with Mr. Bellingham not openly discussed, but the protagonist also becomes celibate from the moment she becomes a mother until the day of her death. Moreover, the young mother is prescribed some other (equally) important virgin-Mary-like qualities. Humility, self-abnegation, and modesty are words that can be easily used to describe both Ruth and the Holy Mother. Such angelic attributes, which Bason sees in Ruth from the first moment he lays his eyes on the young girl, are important traits of compliance: they ensure "acceptance of the status quo amongst the oppressed and downtrodden"¹⁸⁵.

The passage which perfectly illustrates these qualities at play in the protagonist is the one in which Sally severely cuts Ruth's long hair so that she can wear a widow's cap. Ruth shows no opposition; instead, she sits still and quiet. Once facing Ruth, Sally expects quiet anger, but, instead, she finds Ruth's gentle eyes, "dignified in submission"¹⁸⁶. Ruth submits dutifully, with dignity and gentleness, to the consequences of her sins, in what can be called an almost inhuman, transcendental, way. This dramatic encounter happens at the very end of part I, crowning Ruth's transition into almost sainthood and preparing the reader for the other Holy-Mother

¹⁸⁴ Gaskell, 2011, p. 98-99

¹⁸⁵ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1989), p. 83

¹⁸⁶ Gaskell, 2011, p. 118

traits the protagonist will demonstrate once she becomes an “archaic, primal shelter” of “the protective maternal harbour”¹⁸⁷ for her son, the saviour.

Although the narration’s effort to attribute to Ruth such representation is undeniable, it becomes rather difficult to argue that Ruth is indeed ‘saved’ by her ‘son’, as Bason hopes to infer. Taking into consideration the role that the archetypes Eve and virgin Mary play in the sublimation of the boy’s Oedipal complex, Ruth can be said to have never caught a glimpse of freedom, like any other woman of her time. Firstly, she is handcuffed to the ideal of feminine virginal purity, although such commending attribute, in her case as a working woman, worked more like a magnet to ill-intentioned sex predators rather than a token of her value as a lady. From this identity, it has been argued that Ruth is quickly, and inadvertently, thrown into the representational archetype of Eve, as a result of her impulse to act on her sexual drive established by the preconscious loss of her mother. As such, Ruth is imprisoned by the religious symbolic representations of male desire and punished by her fellow women who feel identified as ‘the phallus’ themselves. Outcast as the ‘other’ who succumbed to the luring serpent, Ruth is about to be abolished from society when Bason learns that she is expecting a child. In a moment that resembles a step towards freedom, Ruth falls back into yet another caged role as the embodiment of the Holy Mother, whose cell walls seem even tighter to keep safe the male dream of the perfect Oedipal, unpenetrated, mother.

4.2 The Oedipal Resolution

As shown at the beginning of the section above, Bason postulates that motherhood might somehow wash over the identity of a woman, as the expected child might “teach her [...] to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin, - will be purification”¹⁸⁸. Such hope for purification seems in sync with Kristeva’s physiological claim that pregnancy is “a process without a subject”¹⁸⁹, as it precedes the formation of the ‘I’. If pregnancy ‘happens’ but the mother ‘is not there’, then, for

¹⁸⁷ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1989), p. 83

¹⁸⁸ Gaskell, 2011, p. 97

¹⁸⁹ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1989), p. 79

Kristeva, the woman abandons her sense of identity in the process of 'mother-becoming'.

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism.¹⁹⁰

This idea of passivity in relation to the woman's role in mother-becoming denotes a lack of agency. In fact, Kristeva claims that pregnancy has little to do with what is culturally proclaimed: 'the confirmation of her (phallogentric) femininity', or yet, 'the crowning of her identity as a woman'. Quite the opposite, it is the connection between pregnancy and the primal corporeality of the Semiotic drives that crowns the understanding that becoming a woman-mother entails nothing but a rapture of her subjectivity. If anything, it dramatically splits the interconnected relationship between 'nature' (Semiotic) and 'culture' (Symbolic). As Kristeva explains, the maternal instinct has a pre-discursive biological trait; hence, it is a process that precedes the 'I'. Exactly like the pre-discursive baby's uncontrolled bodily reflexes, the woman's body during gestation also experiences a process of fusion, merging, and fragmented bodily spasms that remain completely outside the control of the mother-to-be. Such a naturalistic approach to maternity proposed by Kristeva, therefore, claims that instead of the identity of the woman-mother, pregnancy unveils woman's "corporeality, her animality, her position on the threshold between nature and culture"¹⁹¹.

Ruth's evolution as a nineteenth-century female character heavily depends on the contention above, as her pregnancy is a turning point in her saga. Once confronted with the guilt and abandonment resulting from her 'intercourse with the evil serpent', Ruth can be said to jump out of a catatonic state motivated by her pregnancy's promise of a return to the spasmodic Semiotic, pre-discursive, 'pre-I' realm. Even before Bason gives volume and shape to Ruth's instinctive hopes, the young girl already embraces the Semiotic identity void contained in pregnancy, the nothingness of what Kristeva describes as the "radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject"¹⁹².

¹⁹⁰ Kristeva, 1980, p. 237

¹⁹¹ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1989), p. 79

¹⁹² Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 206

Pregnancy's challenge imposed on subjectivity comes as a breath of fresh air for the fallen Ruth, who unconsciously welcomes the fantasy of blissful totality experienced through the uncontrolled spasmodic gestation of 'an other'. Such contention explains why Ruth happily adheres to the proposed embodiment of 'the virgin martyr mother Mary', argued in the previous section. The protagonist's happiness towards the idea of motherhood can be connected not only to the deletion of her sinful embodiment of Eve but also to the fulfillment of her Oedipal desire to bear her own mother as a child. Such a controversial claim finds grounds, once again, in the Oedipal complex formulated by Freud. In this universal human process, the boy is said to experience a more 'hopeful' voyage into the symbolic order (and its repressed incestuous drives) as he counts on his normative heterosexuality to eventually reconnect to the maternal body through love. The heterosexual girl, however, is faced with no other way to return to the *jouissance* of the Semiotic unity with the mother but through her own motherhood. As Kristeva contends, not only does the mother-to-be 'become' the 'abdicated' Oedipal mother herself, but she also finds a way into a Symbolic which had no proper representational role for her till then:

A girl will never be able to re-establish this contact with her mother - a contact which the boy may possibly rediscover through his relationship with the opposite sex - except by becoming a mother herself, through a child or through a homosexuality which is in itself extremely difficult and judged as suspect by society; and, what is more, why and in the name of what dubious Symbolic benefit would she want to make this detachment so as to conform to a symbolic system which remains foreign to her?¹⁹³

From the virginal daughter to the bride, the nineteenth-century woman, like Ruth, can be said to have been made to walk a social procession towards the fulfillment of man's desire for the maternal body. In this parade, Kristeva argues that it was in motherhood that she finally found a safe place within the phallogentric Symbolic; a place in which she could also experience the pleasure she was made to abdicate in order to abide by 'the law of the father'. The boy finds union with the maternal body through sexual intercourse with the female body. The girl, however, finally reconnects with the blissful experience of union with the mother when she finally concretely becomes, herself, the embodiment of the maternal body.

In this sense, it is understandable that the news about Ruth's pregnancy is received so positively by both the protagonist and Bason. For the young girl, it marks

¹⁹³ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 204

the chance to solve the desire for unity that drives her (silenced) longing for the past – desire which found no meaningful fulfillment in her sexual relationship with Mr. Bellingham. For one, Ruth misses her mother terribly. When she understands she is pregnant, the young woman says “oh, my God, I thank thee”¹⁹⁴. Her words narrate her joyful reconnection with her lost mother and the bliss resulting from the successful resolution to her Oedipal complex. As for Bason, the minister can be said to recognize the hopeful breach that opens for Ruth in the phallogentric Symbolic. Now as a mother herself, the protagonist can safely leave behind the role of sinning object of carnal desire to be reintroduced as the only representation offered to women in the Symbolic: that of the mother. As the years pass, Ruth proudly appropriates herself of this representation and makes motherhood the sole driver of her existence. As an obedient impersonator of the very repressive role that saved her from social annihilation, the protagonist takes full advantage of the status that Kristeva considers to be of ‘part-object’ offered by maternity.

4.3 The Hysteric Silence

In such a gloomy interpretation of Ruth’s trajectory as a repressed character within the phallogentric order, one may wonder if it is possible to spot, between Gaskell’s lines, any glimpses of Ruth’s subjectivity. It can be said that the character is a concealed protagonist, in the sense that her subjective contours are meticulously hidden within her passive subjection to male representational projections. However, her relationship with ‘silence’ can work as a shy door into her inner world. Despite Ruth’s passive adaptation to her evolving biblical characterizations, from the phallogentric depiction of Eve to that of the virgin Mary, ‘silence’ remains a constant for the character throughout the story. In fact, silence seems not only to permeate the characterization of the protagonist’s sexuality, but it is also present in the decisive interactions she experiences.

Such characterization seems to induce the reader to perceive Ruth as a passive agent in her own story, understandably, as ‘silence’ is commonly connected to an idea of female ‘passivity’ and ‘powerlessness’. As mentioned at the beginning of this

¹⁹⁴ Gaskell, (2011), p. 97

chapter, Kristeva contends that woman was assigned the reduced role of silence in the Western religious symbolic order. As the 'other', her desires were expelled and silenced in the hope of a monotheist communal unity. Within the mute and rigid walls of this banished sense of 'femininity', she was expected to abide by the blackout in verbal representations regarding her subjectivity. If the 'feminine' left the post of 'worshipped' to inhabit a place of 'silence' within the monotheist tradition, then it is exactly on this assigned 'corner' that Ruth's subjectivity overflows. Even when the young woman is rushed to speak up and defend herself in a confrontation, the moral judgment impregnated in the social context of the interaction unveils the unsaid expectation of her 'silence', or yet, the meaninglessness attribution to her words. An example of this is when the young girl is pressed to decide to either stay or go with Mr. Bellingham to London. When faced with her silence, Mr. Bellingham makes the decision that best suits his needs and even says "you make me too happy by your silence, Ruth"¹⁹⁵.

However, the words that follow hope to establish the idea of 'activity' in Ruth's relationship to silence, although she is passively prescribed it. As it will be argued, the protagonist's choice for silence seems to be an attempt to defy, in a hysterical fashion, man's yearning to annihilate her subjectivity, by mirroring exactly what is forced onto her. If she is to be a mute 'object of the phallus', tossed around different male-pleasing roles symbolized by the Western religious discourse, then it is excessive muteness she always offers them, even when words are expected. In order to explore such an argument, it is important to revisit Irigaray's understanding of the Freudian theory of 'hysteria'.

The psychoanalytic feminist theories converge on the premise that woman's 'place' in the phallic Symbolic is directly defined by man's interests in a passive maternal body. As a consequence, her psychical development happens in conformity with the 'phallus', that is, 'the law of the father'. As continuously demonstrated throughout this thesis, within a patriarchal societal structure – with its concrete sexual discourses and symbolic representations - there is very little space and few resources for women to be, what Lacan calls, 'subject of speech'. For this reason, women are left with the incumbency to adhere to the very patriarchal discourses, knowledge, and

¹⁹⁵ Gaskell, 2011, p. 48

social practices that constrain them. It is understandable, therefore, that it can only be through patriarchy's own specificity that woman is able to actively challenge it.

This understanding leads back to Irigaray's contention that hysteria is an act of rebellion against female subjugation to the phallus, in which she keenly over-adheres to the patriarchal specificity. As previously discussed, for the theorist, the hysteric relies on mimicry to contest the very repression she is submitted to. Hysteria, therefore, is "the symptomatic acting out of a proposition the hysteric cannot articulate"¹⁹⁶. Such supposition connects the Freudian idea of the term to defiance through feminine silence. For Freud, the hysteric does not exactly believe she is phallic, but she, as Grosz explains, "displaces her 'phallic' attribute onto another part of her body, which becomes the hysterogenic zone"¹⁹⁷. What Freud calls the 'hysterogenic zone' is, for Irigaray, the part of the body that is frozen, muted, in subjugation. This psychosomatic expression of 'overcompliance', therefore, can take place in many different forms: through psychosomatic body language, excessive subjective speech, or, even, through silence itself, in which the 'hysterogenic zone' is the paralyzed throat.

If for Irigaray, mutism and mimicry are all that is left to hysteria, then one may well speak of 'hysteric silence'. Such contention proposes an interesting bridge over to what Kristeva understands as the only place offered to woman in the monotheist Symbolic, that of the expelled silent other:

Hysteria is silent and at the same time it mimes. And - how could it be otherwise - miming/reproducing a language that is not its own, masculine language, it caricatures and deforms that language: it "lies," it "deceives," as women have always been reputed to do.¹⁹⁸

'Hysteric silence', consequently, can be said to attribute to the imposed 'prescribed feminine silence' an 'active' nature, idea that logically threatens the very idea of 'silence' as a 'passive' symptom of female subjugation. If the hysteric also rebels through mutism, then there can be a difference between 'passive silence' (its phallic imposition) and 'active silence' (the hysteric choice to rebel). In a fertile analogy, 'feminine silence' can be thought of as a two-sided coin. On one side lies silence's *passive* nature, its imposition contained within the phallogocentric ideal of 'femininity'. On

¹⁹⁶ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 134

¹⁹⁷ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (1989), p. 134

¹⁹⁸ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is not One* (1977), p. 137

the other is woman's hysteric reaction against the imposition of silence, which has a more *active* contour and indirectly challenges the one-dimensional quality normally attributed to female silence in feminist studies.

Before connecting the idea of 'hysteric silence' to *Ruth*, it is possible to borrow the existentialist dissenting view of 'passivity and choice' to further establish the argument that 'hysteric silence' is indeed an active choice. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his book, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), argues that we are passive when we suffer a change which we did not originate: "that is, [in such instances, we are] neither the source nor the creator"¹⁹⁹. Sartre goes on to argue that for us to 'suffer', or, yet, for us to 'support' a change, we must 'exist', and existence, alone, entails activity: "existence is always situated on the other side of passivity"²⁰⁰. In other words, for existence to persist, it is necessary to 'seize' it through choices. As we position ourselves in the world, we automatically take power through choice and cease "to be passive in relation to it"²⁰¹. Even if we attempt to support a change passively, we are still making an active choice to either enjoy our freedom to choose a reaction or "to reject [it] resolutely"²⁰² by simply refraining from choosing. Consequently, rejecting a choice is still an active choice:

The paradox is not that there are "self-activated" existences but that there is no other kind. What is truly unthinkable is passive existence; that is, existence which perpetuates itself without having the force either to produce itself or to preserve itself. From this point of view there is nothing more incomprehensible than the principle of inertia. Indeed where would consciousness "come" from if it did "come" from something?²⁰³

Thus, it can be said that the *active* side of the 'coin' analogy contains the woman's hysteric choices 'of not being heard', and, also, 'of being silent'. In both instances, the hystericogenic zone is the throat. In the first, the woman chooses to over-comply by speaking exactly because she knows 'the feminine' is not to be heard. In the latter, she chooses the defiant silence that, similarly, unveils her limited access to verbal representations. Either way, she is taking an active instance towards 'silence', or yet, she is relying on the side of the coin reserved for her active reaction to the imposition of 'silence'.

¹⁹⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), p. lviii

²⁰⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), p. lviii

²⁰¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), p. lviii

²⁰² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), p. lviii

²⁰³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), p. lvi

Contrastively, woman remains on the passive side of the coin when the activity of silencing, or 'not being heard', is exercised on her by the other agent. It converges, thus, to the idea of spontaneity, or, in more psychoanalytic words, a hysterical outburst of subjectivity: silence is passive only when spontaneity is contained when the desire to speak and be heard is present, but the subject has no other choice but to refrain. In any other instance (for example, when there is no desire to speak), 'silence' can be seen as a hysterical choice. As an active means to an end, 'hysterical silence' can be deemed as the very protection of one's very existence.

In short, if choice, for Sartre, is an act of self-preservation and hysteria, and for the French feminists a fight against woman's annihilation, then Ruth's choice for silence can be considered active and hysterical insofar as she refrains to speak in the hope for self-preservation. Ruth can be said to hysterically rebel against subordination by excessively mimicking what represses her. She actively chooses silence, mimicking exactly what Kristeva contends as the place offered to the female body within the Western religious discourse: "silence weighs heavily nonetheless on [...] the self-sacrifice involved in becoming anonymous in order to pass on the social norm"²⁰⁴.²⁰⁵ By refraining from speaking in pivotal moments in which her words are somehow expected, Ruth actively resorts to the forceful imposition of her anonymity within the phallogocentric order. The protagonist's 'hysterical silence', therefore, can be interpreted as a (conscious or unconscious) artifice for self-preservation: an "active protest against intrusion rather than a passive, submissive position"²⁰⁶.

Take, for instance, the day Ruth is called a "naughty girl"²⁰⁷ by a child due to the nature of her relationship with Mr. Bellingham. The young girl returns to the room apathetic and monosyllabic. Although insistently questioned by Mr. Bellingham, Ruth still resorts to silence, as she "could not put into words the sense she was just beginning to entertain of the estimation in which she was henceforward to be held"²⁰⁸. It is the narrator who once again informs the reader what lies behind Ruth's lack of words. Ruth's choice to refrain from speaking is motivated by fear of abandonment,

²⁰⁴ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 183.

²⁰⁵ Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), p. 183.

²⁰⁶ Mahoney, *The Problem of Silence in Feminist Psychology* (1996), p. 613

²⁰⁷ Gaskell, 2011, p. 59

²⁰⁸ Gaskell, 2011, p. 59

fear of annihilation: “she fancied she should sink in his opinion if she told him how others regarded her”²⁰⁹.

If, for Sartre, “each person is an absolute choice of self from the standpoint of a world of knowledge and of techniques which this choice both assumes and illumines”²¹⁰, then, from this moment on, Ruth seems to establish a pattern of mimicking silence when confronted with shame and guilt. This can be observed in the protagonist’s reaction to Mr. Bellingham’s departure from the inn. Ruth lies catatonic, as the shameful ‘phallic whisperer’, until the news of her pregnancy offers her a breach within the phallogentric Symbolic. The shutdown of her body, in total silence to the point of mimicking death, can be considered a hysteric rebellion against the role she is being forced into. Equally, much later in her trajectory when she is confronted by Mr. Bradshaw about her past, Ruth remains quiet and erect, hysterically defying the man’s ranging expectation for humiliating self-defence words.

Such a pattern can also be observed in the contrastive relationship that Ruth has with Mr. Bason. The minister asks Ruth questions that do not imply opinion or judgment, leaving her in a comfortable place to naturally voice her ideas and feelings, without the need for hysterical rebellion. This can be observed when Mr. Bradshaw sends Ruth a muslin as a gift, and she feels she should not keep it. Although Faith expresses her opinion promptly and combatively tries to convince Ruth to accept the gift, Mr. Bason opens a dialogue with the protagonist, in an honest attempt to understand her reasoning. He first asks her “you would rather send this present back, Ruth?” and “why do you want to return it?”, and, subsequently, mirrors her answer by reaffirming, “you think that it is a right which must be earned?”²¹¹. Resultant of Mr. Bason’s direct wording, his mirroring capacity, his empathic listening skills, and his openness to her spontaneity, Ruth manages to find a place for her subjectivity without the need for rebellion. Ultimately, she confidently breaks the pattern of silence: “I never reasoned why I felt as I did”²¹².

In fact, Ruth herself, much later in the story, names the active nature of her silence in two distinct decisive moments in her saga. First, when she is alone in her

²⁰⁹ Gaskell, 2011, p. 60

²¹⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), p. 555

²¹¹ Gaskell, 2011, p. 129

²¹² Gaskell, 2011, p. 129

bedroom, desolate and confused after realising that Mr. Bellingham is at Mr. Bradshaw's house, she has an intense inner monolog. Speaking to herself, Ruth, for the first time, takes accountability for her rebellious silence: "I can never again lift my face in innocence. They think I have forgotten all because I do not speak"²¹³. Ruth chooses not to speak about her past as an act of rebellion against the forceful assigning of symbolic archetypes onto her. In a second instance, the narrator, in a confused tone that leaves no clear idea if it is her or Ruth that are uttering the words, signals the role of (inner and outer) 'silence' in the 'drowning' of her sinful past. When faced with Mr. Bradshaw's anger and astonishment at finding out about her past, Ruth stands erect and realises that "it was of no use; no quiet, innocent life--no profound silence, even to her own heart, as to the Past; the old offense could never be drowned in the Deep"²¹⁴. Here, the protagonist seems to succumb to the understanding that no 'hysterical silence' is rebellious enough to break the crushing effect of the phallogentric discourse over woman's subjectivity. Ultimately, Ruth dies realizing that even her hysterical mimicry of the imposed 'feminine' silence does not guarantee freedom from the shackles of patriarchy.

In conclusion, *Ruth*, at first glimpse, comes across as a plain story of a naïve young woman whose apparent passivity becomes her demise. However, as it has been argued in this chapter, the novel relies heavily on the phallogentricism embedded in the Western religious discourse to allocate the protagonist societal roles that resemble biblical archetypes. After the protagonist succumbs to the immoral desires of the serpent, the narrator silences Ruth's sexual drive and the sexual nature of the affair. Such blackout in representation furthers the argument that the protagonist is to embody the representational role of the virgin Mary, as such representational silence gives to her son's conception airs of immaculate. Her saviour son (not daughter) was argued to dutifully transform the young girl from the sinful Mrs. Hilton into the virginal mother Mrs. Denbigh with the help of no other than a minister. The choice to assign such incumbency to Bason was pointed out as the crowning of the array of phallogentric projections to which the protagonist is submitted.

The analysis, however, contested the passivity attributed to the female character. It is both her hysterical use of silence and the concrete loss of her mother

²¹³ Gaskell, 2011, p. 221

²¹⁴ Gaskell, 2011, p. 273

that work as a door into her subjectivity, highlighting the consecutive existence of a repressed rebellion and latent sexual drive. Used for self-preservation, it was argued that Ruth's hysterogenic zone is localized in her throat and her hysteric silence is a shy reaction to subjugation through the mimicry of the repressive muteness inherent to the feminine ideal. Although full of needs like any other human being, the protagonist is portrayed as the immaculate representation of the religious symbolic order: a dramatic 'repentant and sinful virginal maternal martyr'. In short, *Ruth* is a story that tries to raise a fallen woman to holy grounds, with the aid of the freedom enjoyed by the Western phallogentric religious discourse.

5 Edna and Ruth: An Approximation

[...] assigned to be place without occupying place. Through her, place would be set up for man's use, but not for hers.²¹⁵

It has been argued throughout this thesis that both books keenly reproduce sets of phallogentric representations in the characterization of their protagonists. The ideal of 'femininity', which is the basis for the patriarchal discourses on sexual difference, indeed acts as a medium in the psychological subjugation of these two nineteenth-century women. As shown, the journey of Edna's awakening unveils the oppressive roles assigned to women by the Western male-oriented discourse of the time. Similarly in *Ruth*, the young orphan's trajectory illustrates the subjugating phallic symbolic views of the feminine that are nothing but an overflow of the repressed drives of the Semiotic onto the Western religious discourse. Convergingly, the two women can be said to have no choice but to deal, in their own ways, with the repressed place offered to them within a patriarchal society, which swung the female body on a male-favouring moral seesaw.

In a polarized opposition, each protagonist inhabits a different moral pole and, proportionally, takes contrasting positionings in relation to patriarchy. Edna, for instance, already has a secured 'virtuous' place, and, as a response to it, works hard to deconstruct the confining discourses that keep her in this role. Thus, she can be said to attempt to find a way *out* of patriarchy by forging a place for herself, a place in which she can hopefully become a subject of speech and desire. Ruth, opposingly, sits from the start on the outskirts of the Victorian ideal of femininity, reserved for those women who represent 'evil'. With her head melancholically rested against the windowpane of the dressmaking shop, the young protagonist longs for a place back *within* patriarchy while stuck behind the glass barrier that parts her from the safety of the good 'feminine fate'. Heading in opposite directions, both protagonists long to embody roles that are utopic for women at their time, as these roles lack representation within the Western phallogentric discourse. If Edna wants to become the (non-existent) free desiring woman, Ruth gladly embraces the (improbable) hope to be a forgiven fallen woman contained in dutiful, almost virginal, maternal martyrdom.

²¹⁵ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1993), p. 52

That said, the following discussion hopes to round off by comparing and contrasting how the repressive Western phallogentric representations of the 'feminine' affect the protagonists' relationships with their subjectivity. To this end, the next few pages will place Edna and Ruth side by side in relation to four main phallic discursive formations discussed previously in this thesis: 'the vessel', 'the maternal body', 'the non-desiring object', and 'the hysteric'. The aim is to show that despite the protagonists' significantly oppositional 'movements' concerning patriarchy - a fact that inevitably affects the way they react to these four discourses, they still share interesting similarities.

5.1 The Vessel

The reason for the lack of a more plural set of representations of the 'feminine' has been argued to lie in man's need for containment. Based on Irigaray's theory mentioned above, it may well be argued that within the Western phallogentric discourse, the nineteenth-century woman represented a 'place', a 'vessel', in three main senses. She was a mere physical envelope (a passive vagina) for man's penis, a metaphysical container for his narcissism, and a container for the overflow of his sublimated drives. Such argument offered an intriguing intimate explanation of why these women were reduced to a confining ideal of 'feminine', an ideal that shaped their sexual and political objectification. As discussed, both Ruth and Edna follow the social procession of the time by stepping into the type of 'container' specially designed for women like them. Each protagonist, however, inhabits a specifically contoured 'vessel' and reacts in a different way to being an 'object of the phallus': Edna repudiates while Ruth succumbs, but not as passively as imagined.

In *The Awakening*, it has been argued that Edna refuses to be an 'object of the phallus' ever since a little girl when she finds herself listening to her father preaching the Word of God. Edna runs out of the church to swim free in an imaginary ocean. As a spontaneous child, the protagonist instinctually seeks to contain herself, to find the boundaries of her own envelope. She demonstrates, early in life, her tendency to refuse the prescriptive tone of the Western phallogentric discourse. It can be argued, consequently, that Edna does not willingly hand over her subjectivity to the mediating hands of the male lawmaker. Such a memory elucidates to the reader Edna's potential

as a subject of desire who will not succumb to the position of guardian of the male body, to the delimiting space in which they reign freely, to the embodiment of the rigid walls of the family house, and to the prescribed feminine silence. Much later, by suddenly being able to independently control her body while swimming in (enveloped by) the ocean waters, the protagonist seems to understand that for the sexual difference to see a new era, women must have a place of their own. Sadly, as a nineteenth-century heroine, Edna is unable to freely contain herself in the patriarchal society of the time. It is only in the swaying envelop of the ocean waters that Edna ultimately succumbs to death as her only chance of an unmediated existence.

Ruth, on the other hand, is to represent the sphinx of the 'fallen woman'. It is on the feet of these women who dared to pursue the banished 'desire' that man placed the shame and guilt caused by their own sublimated incestuous drives. As a female who finds *jouissance* with something, including penetration, the 'fallen woman' seemed to frustrate the patrilinear society's need to exclude 'desire' (which is feminine) from the symbolic order. Therefore, the social identity of the 'fallen woman' can be seen as the concretized 'container' for man's 'shame' about his own primal sexual desire: the Semiotic incestual unity with the maternal body which is promptly repressed by the 'law of the father'. As explained, this male sublimated sexual drive, from which the phallic shame (projected onto the female body) might steam, overflows through the cracks of the symbolic order and finds haven in the free reigns of the religious discourse. Thus, it can be argued that the 'myth of the virgin', prevalent in Christianity through the symbolic archetype of the Virgin Mary and its oppositional Eve, is a very pragmatic example of the 'vessel' role to which women are assigned. Consequently, in *Ruth*, the idea of women being a 'vessel' is depicted through the protagonist's representational evolution from the biblical Eve to virgin Mary, whose sins (of carnal desire) are forgiven through maternal martyrdom. In more direct words, the protagonist is not only the 'vessel' to Mr. Bellingham's primal sexual drive, which is depicted in a more obvious way, but also to Bason's need for the perfect resolution of his Oedipal complex: having the sexual maternal body being absolved for the 'sins of the flesh' through martyrdom.

Regardless of the different contours of their assigned places, neither protagonist manages to break free from the role of a 'vessel for the phallus', no matter how much energy is put into depicting them as 'controversial' heroines of their time. Although the shape of the containment they offer to man is almost oppositional to each other, they

both see their subjectivity be meddled with by the phallic Symbolic inundated by the male Semiotic drive. This contention proposes a juxtaposition of Irigaray's understanding that woman is a vessel and Kristeva's 'myth of the virgin', symbolically impregnated in the Word of God. If women were the container for the enactment of man's fantasies, then these fantasies were the repressed need for a virginal mother who does not experience primal pleasure.

5.2 The Maternal Body

As has been discussed, both Edna and Ruth illustrate, in their own particular ways, the role of 'object of the phallus' imposed on a nineteenth-century woman. As a 'vessel', all she was allowed to be within the phallic Symbolic was the virginal wife-to-be, the angelic wife, and the mother-martyr. However, as demonstrated, all these representations boil down to one main 'vessel': that of the maternal body. Both protagonists find in maternity a strong representational role within phallogentrism; however, their relationships to this central 'feminine' role are opposed in such a way that mirrors their unique movements out of and into patriarchy: Edna repudiates the contours of motherhood while Ruth dutifully embraces them.

It was argued that Ruth's happiness in relation to the news of her pregnancy is connected to the resolution of her Oedipal complex. While both the boy and girl are made to renounce their incestuous desire for unity with the maternal body, the boy can reenact this primal blissful experience through heterosexual intercourse. The girl, however, is left with no route back to the mother other than motherhood itself. Therefore, Ruth finds in maternity not only a breach into the phallic Symbolic, which has a captive spot saved for the mother (immaculate or martyr) but also the blissful return to her Oedipal mother. Taking into consideration the argument that Ruth's sexual drive is shaped by the double loss of her mother, it is understandable that her unexpected pregnancy is so blissful that it is capable of raising her from a catatonic state.

In contrast, Edna's awakening unfolds very much in contrary motion when compared to Ruth's trajectory. The middle-class woman slowly understands that the central role played by the motherhood ideal in the phallogentric order is detrimental to the deletion of her female body. In a heated conversation with Adele, illustratively,

Edna utters some of her most provocative words about ‘maternity’ of this narrative, in which she confirms that she is not prepared to sacrifice her subjectivity for her children: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; I wouldn’t give myself”²¹⁶. In her fight for a non-phallogocentric existence, she seems to awaken to the fact that the only place she can ever be offered in patriarchy is the one of a ‘vessel’ for her husband and her children. In more psychoanalytical words, Edna is not seduced by the motherhood promise for a blissful return to the Semiotic unity with the mother. Different from Ruth, Edna furiously seeks to establish her subjectivity to the point of preferring death over giving up on her quest. In short, what differentiates the two protagonists as mothers is not necessarily their aptitudes to embody the ‘feminine’ maternal traits. Instead, it is their opposed willingness to succumb to the erasing of their bodies, their subjectivity through motherhood, as well as their different movements concerning the symbolic order. Ruth gladly welcomes the deletion of her identity and hopes to find her way in through the breach proposed by motherhood. Edna, opposingly, walks out in total refusal of the only ‘feminine’ phallogocentric representation possible; that of the perfect Oedipal mother.

5.3 The Non-desiring Object

In recapitulation, this funnel-like ‘place’ offered to the ‘feminine’ in the nineteenth century relied on the energetic exclusion of ‘desire’ from the Symbolic. If woman is the maternal body, then she is the embodiment of man’s sublimated incestuous desire to return to the origin. Women were offered a ‘place’ within patriarchy if they accepted the imposed deletion of their own bodies, as the pure, virginal, bodiless Oedipal mother. If she were to be allowed into the phallic Symbolic, then it was at the cost of her ‘desire’: just like the crucifixion of Christ that saved sinful humanity, woman’s desire was to be banished from patriarchy to absolve man’s desire to defy the incest taboo through pleasurable coitus with the female body.

In both *The Awakening* and *Ruth*, the protagonists’ forbidden desires propel their narratives forward and unveil the place nineteenth-century women had within the Western sexual-religious phallogocentric discourse. Based on Lacan’s conceptualization

²¹⁶ Chopin, 1993, p. 47

of desire discussed earlier, the thesis presented sexuality as a medium through which desire can manifest. In this broader sense, it is the protagonists' 'desires' that move the plots, finding in their sexual choices an avenue for manifestation. The narration of Edna's saga is more vocal about her drives. The protagonist openly longs for the lost freedom of her childhood when she was able to imaginarily contain herself while "she traversed the ocean of waving grass"²¹⁷ back in summery Kentucky. The woman is depicted as having sexual desire ever since she is a young girl and multiple times after that. Overwhelmed by such 'subversive inclinations for pleasure', it was demonstrated that Edna rushes to marry a man who offers her a safe place away from her burning desires and in conformity with the feminine fate. Robert, however, comes as a reminder of the spontaneity lost with the repressions of her drives: "for the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child"²¹⁸.

Contrastingly, in *Ruth*, there is a narrative hole in relation to the protagonist's sexual drive. As an orphan seamstress, the young woman is depicted shily longing for a past in which she had the safety of her mother and her house. Depicted as unaware of sexuality in inter-sex relations, Ruth comes across as only being in the passive receiving end of Mr. Bellingham's attention as if she is not herself driven towards him by her own desire. In other words, the protagonist has 'desire', like any other subject, but the narration attempts to rip her of it. Such an intentional hole in representation, which hopes to portray a non-desiring female protagonist, mirrors both the monotheist efforts to exclude the female body and desire from discourse and Gaskell's faithful commitment to the Word. However, regardless of the yearning to comply with the Symbolic representation of a bodiless feminine, it was demonstrated that the narrator's efforts are betrayed by the inevitable fact that woman is also a subject of desire. It is between Gaskell's lines that Ruth's primal sexual drive shows its colours. By borrowing Lacan's understanding of the sexual drive mentioned above, it was possible to demonstrate that the death of Ruth's mother creates a 'loss', a 'lack' that propels the young woman's desire. She finds in Mr. Bellingham the first embodiment of what she lacks and acts on her desire for this lack's fulfillment, with the energy contained in the Semiotic sexual drive.

²¹⁷ Chopin, 1993, p. 17

²¹⁸ Chopin, 1993, p. 45

It is possible to argue, therefore, that both Edna and Ruth desire the impossibility of returning to the past. The impatient latency of their sexual choices demonstrates that they both desire to fulfill the loss experienced throughout time. They can both be described as having lost access to their pleasurable, primal, pre-discursive, Semiotic subjectivity. Edna lost poignant sexual attraction towards the other and the guilt-free expression of her subjective desire. Similarly, Ruth lost her Oedipal love object, her mother, and the blissful safety it conveys. Edna longs for pleasure, the pleasure from being free to explore her subjectivity, her artistry. In the same vein, Ruth longs for a safe past when she shared 'the feminine fate' as a 'morally good' feminine being. Both women hope to fulfill these urgent (unresolvable by nature) desires through sexual consummation with a person of the opposite sex.

5.4 The Hysteric

As Kristeva argues, it is exactly the need to sublimate the idea of a sexual maternal body that aided in the deletion of the female body from the Symbolic, placing woman outside phallogentrism as 'the other', in a reduced role of silence. Prescribed 'silence' and locked within the mute and rigid walls of the imposed sense of 'femininity', woman was expected to familiarize herself with the phallogentric discourse which directly locked her into the restricting role of a 'vessel'. It is within this phallic 'assimilation' that she found the hysteric artifice for rebellion. In this light, Freud's understanding of 'hysteria' takes the shape of 'overcompliance' in Irigaray's theory. For the feminist, the hysteric mimics exactly what forces her to abide by the 'law of the father'.

As demonstrated separately in each chapter, both Edna and Ruth react against the phallogentric imposed silence in a way that resembles the Irigarayan understanding of hysteria. However, what they choose to mimic stands in complete opposition. While Edna subverts the prescribed silence by mimicking masculine speech, Ruth finds in the adherence to the prescribed silence a perfect way to secure a place for herself back into phallogentrism. These two distinct hysteric choices mirror their movement in relation to patriarchy. While Edna repudiates it, she hysterically speaks. While Ruth succumbs, she hysterically omits. Regardless of the opposed modus, they equally

show spontaneous (hence, subjective) reactions to the subjugating role as mute 'object of the phallus'.

For one, Edna is prescribed mutilating silence to which she actively resists abiding. Not only does the protagonist lack meaningful interactions with her husband but the narrator also 'silences' what motivates her emotions. Such 'loss for words' of the narrator was interpreted as the materialization of the societal struggle to overcome the lack of verbal representations of the feminine. As a symptom of her resistance to the mute place offered to her, Edna gradually turns up the knob of speech in a hysterical rebellion: she tells her husband that marriage is a pitiful scene; she speaks loudly about the races, just like her father used to do, making curious and judgemental (male) heads turn in her direction. She excessively speaks as retaliation for not being allowed to speak as herself. She chooses to break the silence, even if she is still not properly heard.

In *Ruth*, 'silence' also permeates most corners of the narrative, as a backdrop against which the very role imposed on the protagonist is placed. Just like in *The Awakening*, silence here is prescribed not only to the main character but also to the narrator. The sexual nature of Ruth's affair is never depicted till the day it is understood she is pregnant. This blackout in representation was argued to contribute to the characterization of the protagonist as the virgin Mary, capable of conception without sexuality. Although Ruth seems to passively succumb to the representational roles offered to her within the phallic Symbolic, it was demonstrated that the young woman still finds shy energy to rebel, if anything, as an instinctive fight for existence: Ruth hysterically mimics the very repressive silence imposed on her. In pivotal moments in which she is expected to speak up in her own defence, the protagonist attempts to retaliate with silence. She actively chooses to refrain from speaking so as to avoid annihilation. Equally important, she also projects back the very repressive silence imposed on the feminine, making the repressive agents suffer the consequences of their own shackles.

Overall, while Ruth's evolution is more prominently characterized than Edna's – as the young orphan goes on a rapid progression from sinful woman to angelical mother – her experience with 'silence' is more linear. Edna seems to change quite dramatically where she stands in relation to it: she goes from the appeasing silent wife

to the hysterically excessive vocal woman whose new attitude makes men speculate about her mental health. Ruth, on the other hand, sees 'silence' intermesh with every construction of her character, to the point of confusing the reader about its passive nature. However, as discussed above, Ruth's silence cannot be considered passive exactly because of its hysteric nature.

In precis, both Edna and Ruth are 'object of the phallus' insofar as they are confronted with the inevitable assimilation of their subjectivity to feed the paranoid 'law of the father'. However, they have different reactions in relation to the imposed role of 'vessel' for the male drives. Edna refuses to be the bodiless mother and wife. She longs for an outlet for her subjectivity, for the embrace of her own sensuous envelope. Contrastingly, Ruth succumbs to whatever role is imposed on her as long as it means she has a chance to fulfill her desire to return to the maternal body. Her surrender still has, nevertheless, this shily active contour unveiled by her choice for hysterical silence. Although in opposite poles and directions, it can be said that both women fail in their quests. On one side there is Edna, who sees no chance of running free from the annihilating forces of the phallogocentric discourse regardless of how much she defies it. She refuses to be Leonce's bodiless wife and, while she finds hope in another man's attentions, she fatally understands that also for Robert, she cannot be anything else other than a pleasure-less container for man. On the other side sits Ruth, who succumbs to the role of sinful phallus charmer and the immaculate mother-martyr only to witness the frustration of her desire when her secret is unveiled and demonized.

6 Conclusion

What Freud describes as the only natural course towards ‘true femininity’ serves as an accurate description of the long-present source of repression of women. Driven by discourses that favour men in power relations, nineteenth-century women were unconsciously taught to perceive their subjectivity, body, and sexual feelings in an unfortunate relation to men. Western discourses assigned woman a confining place that mirrors the fears and anxieties of man about the perceived fragility of his sexual organs and the unresolved state of his sublimated Oedipal complex. As an ‘object of the phallus’, woman was invited to abdicate her place as a subject of speech so that the law-making fathers could keep the monopoly of consciousness, driven by their “horror, disdain of woman’s castration”²¹⁹. If woman is a mere mirror of man’s masculinity, then she has only two choices. She can either remain silent, in both speaking and writing, as whatever she says, in a spontaneous feminine way, will come across as meaningless and incomprehensible within the logic of the patriarchy; or she can imitate what patriarchy expects sexual difference to be: they can hysterically, and actively, impersonate the inferior and passive ‘feminine’ imposed on them.

This thesis aimed to investigate how the Western phallogocentric discourse, as summarised above, acts as a medium in the psychological repression of the female protagonists in *The Awakening* and *Ruth*. Starting from the psychoanalytic theories on female sexuality proposed by Freud, this investigation went down two concomitant psychoanalytic feminist theoretical avenues, allowing a more funnelled analysis of the two novels. The chapter on *The Awakening* heavily counted on Luce Irigaray’s interpretation of the Western phallogocentric discourse and its relationship to the woman cause. The understanding that woman is a ‘vessel for the phallus’, concretely and subjectively, aided in the navigation of Edna’s fight to be a free subject of desire. By understanding what ‘container’ she is expected to be in nineteenth-century America, it was possible to discuss the impacts of the Western fixed sets of representations of the ‘feminine’ on the protagonist’s repressed psyche. It was argued that Edna feels locked into the representational box of the angelic wife and mother. As she gradually understands that she is at ‘loss’, that she ‘lacks’ a container for herself, the protagonist

²¹⁹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), p. 89-90

reconnects with her long-lost desires embodied by the charming and young Robert. Propelled by the energy of the Semiotic sexual drives, Edna hysterically rebels against the prescribed phallogentric silence and pursues the 'fabrication' of a non-phallogentric container for herself. However, when ready to consummate her repressed desires, she is confronted with the fact that, no matter how much energy she puts into fostering the freedom of her subjectivity, there is no 'feminine' existence, in the arguably most patriarchal century in history, that is unmediated by the phallogentric discourse.

The analysis of *Ruth* counted on Julia Kristeva's interpretation of Western discursive formations and their relationship to the perception of the 'feminine'. Kristeva contends that, in order to guarantee societal unity, monotheism relied on the exclusion of 'desire' from the moral fabric that formed their community. As an overflow of the Semiotic drives sublimated by the incest taboo, 'desire' was directly connected to the female body. Its deletion, through the 'virgin myth', gave shape to woman's restricted place within the religious symbolic order: that of the virginal or martyr mother. Such understanding found grounds in the analysis of the myth of Eve and the centrality that the archetype of the virgin Mary has within the Catholic tradition.

In this regard, it has been argued that Ruth acts as a white canvas onto which this symbolic discourse can be played out. Although Ruth tries to act on her sexual drives by trying to fulfil the 'loss' caused by the death of her mother, she ends up being the object of man's sublimated drives. Ruth evolves from the role of the guilty Eve-like serpent charmer only to become the paranoid embodiment of the dream Oedipal mother, the virginal mother-martyr. Her longing, therefore, sets the plot in motion and her choice of silence gives contours to her benignly hysterical rebellion against the oppressive phallogentric discourses. Although Ruth dutifully complies with the roles assigned to her, she still hysterically reacts to annihilation, just like the uncontrollable flinching of the eyes when faced with an imminent punch. Comparatively, both protagonists have been demonstrated to be 'the object of the phallus'. As a 'container' to the projection of man's sublimated Oedipal desire for the maternal body, both Edna and Ruth experience psychological repression that blocks them from the free expression of their desires. The result of their frustrated endeavours is their early but elegant, quiet, and sober deaths. Their fatal destiny fulfils the Lacanian prophecy that permeates every desire: they are to be eternally desired. The protagonists, therefore, are psychologically repressed by this masquerade of femininity - "a role, an image, a

value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation”²²⁰. In the end, all they can be, in the phallogentric society at the time, is the ‘object of the phallus’, the vaginal shapeshifter that envelopes the phallic quest to return to the blissful motherly origin.

²²⁰ Irigaray, *The Sex Which is not One* (1977), p. 84

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