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Paper #3

Women And the Pain They Bring

In this essay I would like to inquire into the role of women in some of our readings and focus on the pain that they bring.

In “The Knight’s Tale” we can see the fierce battle between Arcite and Palamon over the love of Emily. Their changes are most obvious when Palamon says to Arcite “You, my blood brother, my sworn confidant ... One of us must die!” (Chaucer 31). We can see how Emily turns them from sworn knights into mortal enemies. At first, it seems as if Emily cannot be blamed. Through no fault of her own both knights fall in love with her, and she never even encourages their behaviors. However, we can blame Emily that she never discourages their actions either. We learn that Emily wishes “to live as a virgin, never, never a wife or mistress” (42). Yet, she completely fails to stand up for her wishes or desires and accepts her fate at any cost. When Arcite dies in his fight for Emily, sorrow befalls everyone. “Throughout the town the tears and lamentations of young and old ... were unending. Man and boy wept for him. The women cried, ‘Why did he have to die?’” (51). Also Emily, Theseus, and Palamon were heart-broken too. While death is always part of life, their hate and Arcite’s young death might have been avoided if only Emily had spoken up just once.

In Kate Chopin's "The Awakening", we encounter another form of horror caused by a woman. Throughout the book, we get to know Edna Pontellier's struggle with her life. She had assumed responsibilities she wasn't ready for and she was suppressed by the culture of her time. Unlike Emily, Edna stands up for herself and tries to break her chains of fate. Unfortunately, at great cost to her family. Her husband has always been devoted and caring, but through Edna's mood change he now faces a horrible situation. He confesses to his doctor that "I don't want to quarrel or be rude to a woman, especially to my wife; yet I'm driven to it, and feel like ten thousand devils ... She's making it devilishly uncomfortable for me" (Chopin 109). Not only does the oncoming divorce threaten to ruin his reputation, but his personal life is at stake too. His wife cheats on him and leaves him lonely and abandoned. Yet, even worse, when Edna decides to take her life, she brings pain and terror on her husband and children. Though the book doesn't describe the family's suffering after her death, it will leave tremendous scars on everyone. "Still, [Edna] remembered Adele's voice whispering, "Think of the children, think of them" (185). If only she had, I wouldn't need to criticize her that much. I can almost grant her to leave her husband for another love, but to desert her children like that is simply inexcusable.

Euripides' "Medea" takes the concept of women-induced pain one step further. Jason, Medea's husband, leaves her for another woman and Medea has to leave the country. She is determined to take revenge and we are warned that "the fiercest anger of all, the most incurable, is that which rages in the place of dearest love" (Medea 32). In a rage of revenge and "out of mere sexual jealousy" (58) Medea kills Jason's new family

and both of their own sons. She scoffs at him “You were mistaken if you thought you could dishonor my bed ... my pain is a fair price to take away your smile” (59).

Of course such revenge could lash out from both sexes, but in “Medea” it is clearly blamed on the female. After the murder, Jason cannot understand that she killed out of jealousy only and asks her again: “you thought that reason enough to murder them, that I no longer slept with you?” She replies: “and is that injury a slight one, do you imagine, to a woman?” (59) Needless to say that Medea’s violent conduct cannot be generalized on all women, but even Nietzsche pointed out: “The sick woman especially: no one can excel her in the wiles to dominate, oppress, and tyrannize. The sick woman spares nothing, living or dead; she will dig up the most deeply buried things” (Burgard 239). Unfortunately, this very much sounds like the pain Medea inflicts on Jason.

So, the question arises what to make of all this? Was my teenage angst justified after all? Are we supposed to live in fear of women for the rest of our days? Let Nietzsche lead me to the answer to this question.

“Someone took a youth to a sage and said: “Look he is being corrupted by women.” The sage shook his head and smiled. “It is men,” he said, “that corrupt women; and all the failings of women should be atoned by and improved in men. For it is man who creates for himself the image of woman, and woman forms herself according to this image.”

“You are too kindhearted about women,” said one of the present; “you do not know them.” The sage replied: “Will is the manner of men; willingness that of women. That is the law of sexes – truly, a hard law for women. All of humanity is innocent of its existence; but women are

doubly innocent” ... someone else shouted out of the crowd: “women need to be educated better!” – “Men need to be educated better,” said the sage...” (Burgard 168).

I believe this passage holds some truth to it. If we, as men, are more observant and understanding to the needs of women, then we can help to ensure that our relationships will be filled with more love and less pain.

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