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**SLEEPING BEAUTIES:
FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN THE SELECTED WORKS
OF TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS**

Though heroines in American literature created at the turn of the century constitute a significantly broad spectrum of female types, there is at least one feature that brings many of them together. These women frequently have a certain air of aloofness or detachment about them. They give the impression that they are only half awake and their inner selves are immersed in some vague dreaminess. Consequently, they seem only involuntarily involved in the external events which, without their active participation, inevitably send them to their doom.

The heroine of "The Awakening," while questing for a term that would accurately describe her state of mind, to her own astonishment comes upon the word "delirium."¹ The present essay will deal with different manifestations and consequences of this delirium which seems a recurrent feature in the female characters of American literature of that period. Moreover, it will be argued that this quality is crucial to the tragic developments of their lives. Though it is the lot of Lily Bart, the heroine of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, that will provide the structure of the argument, more often than not illustrative examples and parallels will be drawn from other literary works as well.

On the most apparent level this absent-mindedness manifests itself in the women's gaze. In *The House of Mirth* Lily Bart's eyes often seemed "inattentive"² thus betraying some inward preoccupation. In Mary Wilkins Freeman's story "Old Woman Magoun" we are told that the heroine's

¹ Kate Chopin, "The Awakening", in: Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, eds, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 1046. All references in the text will be to this edition.

² Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Scribner's, 1969), p. 10. All references in the text will be to this edition.

“retrospective” eyes “seemed to see past all that she looked upon.”³ Her grandmother, while talking to Lily’s father, looked “as if she saw through all externals” and “spoke with her eyes aloft as if addressing something outside of them both” (1112). Similarly, Kate Chopin’s heroine Edna Pontellier “had a way of turning her eyes upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought” (995).

The notorious inattentiveness to what is going on around is well exemplified even by the very mode of narration.⁴ For these women, whose perceptive capacities are so seriously questioned, more often than not become the centers of consciousness and the description of their fictive worlds hinges on their senses. Therefore in order to have some idea of the degree to which, say, Lily Bart is consciously present in her surroundings, it may be enough to assess the verisimilitude of *The House of Mirth* as a realistic novel.⁵ And there is no doubt that it is the sensory aspect of reality that is starkly missing in the novel. There are no descriptions of New York because Lily herself hardly knows what it looks like. As for other externals, they are limited to a few remarks in regard to the heroine’s attire and for the same reason – Lily’s own perception rarely extends beyond what she is wearing. To be sure, this charge is not raised against the book itself. The deficiency is simply necessary for the consistency of Lily’s character. Any keenness of observation on her part would inevitably imply certain meaningful relationship between Lily and her physical environment. And such capacity, in turn, would sooner or later translate into some kind of personal integrity – a premise she demonstrably lacks.

In order to understand fully the implications of the problem one should perhaps also look at one episode in Chopin’s “The Awakening” which is all the more illustrative of the present thesis as it affirms the positive consequences of a reverse situation. In Chapter XXIV Edna’s husband goes

³ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “Old Woman Magoun,” in: Gilbert, Gubar, *op. cit.*, p. 1106. All references in the text will be to this edition.

⁴ This idea is related to what is discussed by Julia Bader in her essay “The Dissolving Vision. Realism in Jewett, Freeman, and Gilman,” in: Eric J. Sundquist, ed., *American Realism. New Essays* (Baltimore: Hopkins University Press, 1982). Analyzing the fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, she writes: “Through the techniques of realism, its sober accountability, its common-sensical dailiness, Jewett and Freeman explore the possibilities for their female characters. They create worlds where women are neither rewarded for their obedience to traditional expectations and conventional roles nor offered romantic love as a mirror for seeing themselves. On the contrary, the female selves that emerge in these works are given strength and particularity by the realistic settings that reflect them. They acquire power and autonomy precisely by controlling some aspect of this setting.” (178)

⁵ Here the meaning of the word realism is limited to the function of mimetic representation alone.

to New York, thus leaving the house for the first time entirely under her command. Never before has she had a better chance to exercise her power or to have her sense of responsibility tested. It is then a rare moment in Edna's life in which the capacities and energies of her adulthood are at last summoned and provided with an adequate outlet. Significantly, at this point her inner and outer selves become meaningfully integrated. All of a sudden she becomes very sensitive and responsive to what is going on around her:

She walked all through the house, from one room to another, as if inspecting it for the first time. She tried the various chairs and lounges, as if she had never sat and reclined upon them before. And she perambulated around the outside of the house, investigating, looking to see if windows and shutters were secure and in order. (1061)

The text abounds with details signifying Edna's emerging sensitivity to material reality. She begins to discover things that previously would have stood no chance of catching her attention: "The garden walks were damp . . . it smelled so good and looked so pretty in the afternoon sunlight . . . the cook . . . served a delicious repast — a luscious tenderloin broiled à point. The wine tasted good; the marron glacé seemed to be just what she wanted. It was so pleasant, too, to dine in a comfortable *peignoir*" (1061). This fragment of Edna's life, however, is notable mainly for its singularity. Edna would soon fathom the superficiality of the freedom granted by her husband's physical absence and her subsequent alienation becomes even more intense.

Usually the women are absorbed in self-sustaining dreams that need little, if any, stimulus from the outside world. Ever since childhood they have been engrossed in illusions which, despite their maturation, have not lost their power. Normally, as it is in the case of men, this infant fantasy is gradually adapted for the growing demands of the society that invites their active participation in its affairs. Eventually, their inner vision begins to approximate outer reality. The heroines of Wharton and some other female writers, by contrast, often exist in a vacuum. There seems to be no connection between their beings and their surroundings; or, even if there is one, it certainly lacks immediacy and consequentialness. Women's emotional development, unchecked and haphazard, brings them to a critical point when their conception of the world and their own position in it does not reflect the actual conditions (physical, financial and political) in which they are enmeshed.

Such female infantilism is exemplified by Lily Bart, the protagonist of *The House of Mirth*.⁶ She lives permanently in a world of fantasy where

⁶ See Joan Lidoff essay "Another Sleeping Beauty. Narcissism in *The House of Mirth*," in: Sundquist, *op. cit.*

she has absolute power, inexhaustible wealth, eternal youth and beauty. Her reality, "the house of mirth," is the territory of Eden, entirely free from work and mortality. Since her childhood she has not ceased to believe that all her desires are naturally congruous with the laws of her surroundings. She sees little difference between her wish and its automatic satisfaction. For Lily the effects do not necessitate the causes. As she has never exerted any influence upon her environment, she considers herself absolutely sovereign.

Lily does not shrink from applying her childish fantasies to financial dealings. The language she employs with regard to money makes it evident that she unconsciously expects the tricks of magic to be effectual in the material world as well. At some point, for instance, she is disturbed that "she cannot *conjure* back the *vanished* three hundred dollars" [italics added] (27). When she asks Trenor to help her get away from a financial impasse, her thoughts once again betray the total inadequacy of her understanding as to the harsh mechanisms of the financial world:

Through a general blur her hopes dilated like lamps in a fog. She understood only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself; and the assurance that this miracle would take place within a short time, that there would be no tedious interval for suspense and reaction, relieved her. (85)

Many heroines of turn-of-the-century literature feature similar dualities. Charity Royall, the protagonist of Wharton's *Summer* "was [not untypically] blind and insensible to many things . . . but to all that was light and air, perfume and color, every drop of blood in her responded."⁷ In other words, she disregards reality as it is, but is attentive to what is pleasing. Edna Pontellier, too, "even as a child . . . had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life – the outward existence which conforms, the inward existence which questions" (1005).

Gertrude Stein contributes to the gallery of Sleeping Beauties with her novelette "Melanctha" (which is the major story of her early collection *Three Lives* [1909]),⁸ the only problem being that unlike Wharton's or Chopin's art, the fiction of Stein is highly experimental and abstract. There is little that can be said about the heroine of this work with assurance; the qualities featured by her, the ones that are most relevant to this essay, are not so much depicted by Stein as they are fully embodied in the form of her work. Consequently, since the story operates on the abstract level

⁷ Edith Wharton, "Summer", in: Elizabeth McMahan, Susan Day, Robert Funk, eds., *Nine Short Novels by American Women* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1933), p. 269. All references in the text will be to this edition.

⁸ Gertrude Stein, "Melanctha", in: *Three Lives* (New York: Vintage Books, 1936). All references in the text will be to this edition.

of mental processes, Melanctha's absent-mindedness and her incapacity for reflection make her almost disappear. While the characters with whom Melanctha is contrasted gradually emerge as quite tangible persons, she herself remains a mere presence, a potentiality or a craving. Compared with her lover, Jeff Campbell, Melanctha has no memory on which she could build her self-image. With her eyes fixed on "a free and whirling future" (98), she is in a constant process of becoming (it is not *development* though, for this would imply a sort of accumulative progress). She never stops to acquire palpable attributes; therefore, she never really exists:

Melanctha had not found it easy with herself to make her wants and what she had, agree. Melanctha was always losing what she had in wanting all the things she saw. . . . She was always full with mystery and subtle movements and denials and vague distrusts and complicated disillusiones . . . Melanctha wondered often how it was she did not kill herself when she was so blue. (89)

Curiously enough, though "all her life [Melanctha] was very keen in her sense for *real* experience . . . she knew she was not getting what she wanted" (97). The true nature of her experience is accurately rendered in a passage describing her fascination with railroad yards – a place of incessant action, where human sense of causing, controlling and possessing is constantly confirmed. Melanctha likes to watch the yards for hours, but her involvement clearly does not get beyond that of an audience during a theatrical spectacle. It is compared to the feeling of "a lazy man" whom the scene fills with "a sense of a strong moving power," who "need not work and yet he has it very deeply;" it parallels the involvement of "a child watching through a hole in the fence." Finally, it is implied that Melanctha belongs to one of those who "like to feel emotion without the trouble of having any suffering" (98).⁹

⁹ Donald Sutherland in his book *Gertrude Stein: A Biography of her Work* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1976) offers the historical background of Stein's *Three Lives*. Her argument helps explain why the use of female consciousness in fiction at the turn of century became so widespread and, as it will be argued, it points to what lies at the heart of this essay. "Melanctha," he contends, as well as the other two stories of the collection, can be seen as deriving from the tradition of realism at its best, that is, realism of Flaubert and James. In his historical analysis Sutherland goes back very far. While classicism, as he points out, is founded on the equivalence of the inner life to the outer events, romanticism breaks this unity and explores what heretofore has been disregarded – the irrational and often alienated self. Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, then, are the ones who try to return to the classical objectivity, yet they are unwilling to sacrifice the achievements of the romantics. In *Madame Bovary*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, or, for that matter, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the outer reality and the inner life coexist, they are "synchronized or made contrapuntal" (Sutherland 24). The events are misrepresented for they are reflected by consciousness which is often subjected to self-dramatization and aestheticism. The resulting grotesque was held by these authors to be the most important quality of the full reality. Not to put too fine a point on it, it seems

The breach in the female psyche, however, is anything but fixed. Rather than being an unfluctuating, solid duality, it repeatedly undergoes painful crises which, worse still, do not bring about any fundamental change. Lily Bart, for instance, every now and then poignantly experiences what is for most of the time hidden from her – only to equip her illusions with better safeguards. Distressful as these moments are, they never lead, on her part, to more radical re-evaluations of herself or her surroundings. Lily's incorrigibly false self-image, instead of collapsing, complicates itself and is obstinately sustained as long as possible.

The first of her insights into truer proportions and more accurate relationships occurred when she was nineteen. Lily was then "disturbed" by the reappearance of flowers on the luncheon-table, even though their freshness, as she keenly observed, began to dwindle. The ground of her indignation was twofold. Not only did she stubbornly persist in childish ignorance as to the dire financial situation of her family, but also she refused to acknowledge the natural process of the flowers' withering which symbolically stands for her own mortality (notice the parallel between her name and the name of the flowers in question – *lilies-of-the-valley*). During this evening she learned that her family was ruined; shortly afterwards her father, tired and distressed, dies a martyr's death, due to his wife's as well as his daughter's excessive spending. This episode, which would seem to many rather illuminating, did not become a turning-point in Lily's life. Instead of making her redefine her conception of the world, it simply sank into oblivion. The death of her father, who disturbed her conscience, was met with "relief" (33). And even his memory, apparently so threatening to her mental equilibrium, was scrupulously erased from her mind. "She seemed always to have seen him through a blur," we are told, but "now the fog has thickened till he was almost indistinguishable" (33).

Another disillusioning moment comes when Lily is lured by Gus Trenor into his townhouse. This scene unequivocally exhibits what heretofore has completely escaped Lily's notice, that is, the necessary connection between money and sex. Despite its potency, this moment, not unlike the previous one, fails to integrate the conflicting forces within her mind. On the contrary, it simply brings them to light – only to make this duality more painful. "She seemed a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained" (148).

that at this historical moment, with such understanding of what constitutes the full reality, the use of women as protagonists appeared to Flaubert, James and their followers possibly more fruitful than the use of men. It is females, alienated and estranged, that helped them bring out the incoherence between inner and outer reality – a quality which, incidentally, is to certain degree universal – which such a remarkable force. In short, women's consciousness, when set beside that of men, seemed an artistic tool of greater possibilities.

Paradoxically, those revealing moments only hasten the coming of the catastrophe. Once the heroine catches a glimpse of what she has heretofore been blind to, she clings to her private vision even more eagerly. And when this can no longer be sustained, when it begins to crash under the accumulated burden of irony and failure, her internal life disintegrates completely.

Lily Bart, for example, at the end of her life at last achieves an absolute lucidity of vision which is symbolically represented in a chronic insomnia. "Sleep", the narrator tells us, "was what she wanted;" ironically, in a sense she has always been in a deep sleep. One cannot help feeling that if only this utter wakefulness had come earlier, it would probably have saved her life; now she simply resorts to narcotics that grant her "brief baths of oblivion" and in the end almost half-willingly dies of an overdose.

Other heroines end up similarly. As their minds begin to crumble, their visions dissolve. Charity Royal in Wharton's novel *Summer*, after her visit to the Mountain "lost the exact sense of things . . . She had only a confused sensation of slipping down a smooth irresistible current; and she abandoned herself to the feeling as a refuge from the torment of thought" (375). Though she does not die physically, her utter passivity is tantamount to psychological death. In *The Awakening* Mrs. Pontellier, as if out of the blue, commits suicide. The fact that she does this so unexpectedly is paradoxically even more telling. Her apparent level-headed behaviour right before the tragedy occurs would suggest that the breach between her physical, social self and her emotional life has been completed.

The epilogue of Freeman's story "Old Woman Magoun" follows suit, too. Lily as well as her grandmother, both entrapped in their imaginary worlds, gravitate toward final alienation. The old woman, in order to protect Lily from sexual initiation, encourages her to eat poisonous berries. Her granddaughter symbolically goes blind before dying. But a new vision is put in place of that threatened one as the grandmother encourages her to see a world where "it is always light and the commonest things shine" (1118), in which Lily will never cease to be a sexless child. This world almost all too unequivocally resembles that of Lily Bart or Charity. The old woman, on the other hand, refuses to recognize Lily's death and goes mad.

In all these texts the dichotomy between the heroines' feelings and the outside world results from the fact that society does not proffer any satisfactory formulas for their adulthood. There are no legitimate mechanisms through which they could achieve maturity in the sense of tailoring their expectations to the conditions imposed by their surroundings. Rather than stimulating their emotional and intellectual growth, the environment impedes it. The women's development, which in the case of men would have led

to ever more profound personal integrity, is simply diverted and induces estrangement. While their interactions with the outer world dwindle, their inner selves become bleak territories full of dangerous repressions and frustrations. The stories, though originally not intended to be predominantly political, have now become essential to feminists' cause. And the tragic lives of Sleeping Beauties still remain central to their plea for social change.

Grzegorz Kość

ŚPIĄCE KRÓLEWNY: BOHATERKI WYBRANYCH UTWORÓW POWIEŚCIOPISAREK AMERYKAŃSKICH

Podstawą tego artykułu jest obserwacja, iż wiele bohaterek amerykańskiej literatury kobiecej przełomu XIX i XX w. łączy jedna wspólna cecha. Otóż sprawiają one wrażenie zaabsorbowanych wyłącznie sobą, nieobecnych w świecie, w który są przecież fizycznie i politycznie uwikłane i który w końcu doprowadza je do tragedii. W oparciu o wybrane utwory Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Gertrudy Stein i Mary Wilkins Freeman analizuję objawy tej alienacji, następnie pokazuję procesy jej powstawania i funkcjonowania. Postacie kobiece w tych książkach przypominają Śpiące Królowny, na pozór tylko trochę zadumane, tak naprawdę zaś stale, niebezpiecznie balansujące na granicy pomiędzy faktem a fantazją typową jeszcze dla wieku dziecięcego. Ich wyobrażenia o świecie nie przystają do rzeczywistości, gdyż wcześniej nie miały żadnej szansy weryfikowania ich poprzez własną aktywność i doświadczenie. Prawda dociera do nich zbyt nagle, by mogła umożliwić stopniowy proces adaptacji i zbyt późno, by dało się wyciągnąć z niej jakieś konstruktywne wnioski. Jest za to tak szokująca, że nieuchronnie prowadzi do stanów schizofrenicznych, a niejednokrotnie nawet do samobójstw. Losy tych kobiet, odciętych od naturalnych, dostępnych tylko mężczyznom procesów dojrzewania, doskonale ilustrują więc mechanizmy, przeciw którym wystąpił ruch feministyczny.