

## **She Is She: Existentialist Themes in the Works of Women Writers of the Southern Renaissance**

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### **Abstract**

*Female writers of the southern renaissance had to deal with a number of oppressive forces, encapsulated in the idea of "Sacred Womanhood." The way many of these women writers depicted this struggle parallels the struggle for authentic self-hood as proposed by existentialism, and by using the philosophy to inform the events of various novels from writers, such as Zora Neal Hurston, Carson McCullers, Kate Chopin, and Ellen Glasgow, the actions and words of the characters can be more fully understood.*

The concept of objectification has been researched in academia from many different viewpoints, most notably feminist theory. Searching for a way to understand better how gender issues have affected society and continue to persist today, feminists focus on objectification as one of the means of control enacted by men. Feminists, however, are not the only scholars to examine the process of objectification in-depth. Existentialist philosophers such as Albert Camus, Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Simone de Beauvoir have also studied how objectification affects the human mind and leads to a life of passivity, and attempt to illustrate how people deal with this problem and ultimately come to an awakening in the form of an authentic existence. This existential awakening parallels the rebirth women experience as they begin to fight back against notions of patriarchy and search for a new identity within a male-dominated culture. Considering that the Southern Renaissance<sup>1</sup> was a time when women were finding themselves more capable of speaking out against an unjust system and rejecting ideas of Southern tradition, it is not surprising that many women writers of the time period incorporate the theme of autonomous existence into their works. By reading the works of Southern women writers such as Kate Chopin, Ellen Glasgow, Lillian Smith, Zora Neale Hurston, and Carson McCullers alongside the works of existentialist philosophers, a new perspective is possible—one in which the explanations provided by the philosophers for a person's behavior inform the actions of the characters in the literary works and provide a fuller understanding of the characters' motives.

Before exploring the interrelationship between the problems facing Southern women and existentialist philosophy, it is important to outline the defining traits of "Sacred Womanhood" that many women writers of the Southern Renaissance were trying to expose or (in some cases) break down. In *Dixie's Diadem*, Anne Goodwyn Jones presents some of the adjectives meant to describe the Southern woman: "Leisure, passivity, dependence, sexual purity, submission, ignorance" (28). While intended to describe the perfect Southern woman, these terms also happen to describe what existentialists call an inauthentic existence. A life of "leisure" would generally conflict with the "essential *projects*" a person should work toward to find personal fulfillment (Barrett 225, italics in original). "Passivity" is a problem for all existentialists because an authentic existence requires a person to take an active role in deciding who he or she intends to be, to value, and to do. "Dependence" leads to passivity and contradicts the life of self-reliance promoted by the philosophy. "Sexual purity," that is, virginity for unmarried women and fidelity for married or widowed women, demands a person reject pursuing someone for whom they likely feel a true passion. In addition, the tenets of sexual purity are based in religious morality, which many existentialists rejected outright. All of the philosophers agree that "submission," particularly submission to the will or order of society, is the greatest injustice one can do to the self. Finally, "ignorance,"

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1 This literary movement beginning in the South concerned itself mostly with the conflict between the "old" pre-Civil War South and the post-Restoration South. Although scholars such as Carol Manning contest the years encompassed by the literary movement, arguing that the current dates do not acknowledge the contribution of many women writers working less than a generation before, the movement is generally considered to have occurred in the 1920s and 30s.

especially when one wishes to be educated, is an act of passivity and an abandoning of one's volitions. Considering that the ideal state of Sacred Womanhood parallels so closely the inauthentic existence described by existentialists, it follows that women characters attempting to escape the bonds of Sacred Womanhood share many experiences with those struggling toward the authentic existence described by existentialist philosophers.<sup>2</sup>

While critics in Southern American studies have written about existential themes, they have almost solely focused on the works of Southern male writers such as Faulkner to the exclusion of canonical women writers. While a large body of research does not yet exist on the subject, scholars looking at women writers of the same time period have still made connections with existentialism. Jones argues that Kate Chopin, like many other women writers of the time period, "seeks to find and articulate her individual voice in the face of terrible pressure toward uniformity, by seeking and speaking with the authority of her experience" (40). This struggle to find "individual voice" has its counterpart in existential philosophy; for both feminist and existential thought, the enemy is the same: "uniformity." Even the means for overcoming this problem is the same from both perspectives in that both require the "authority" of one's own experiences. Although she does not explicitly make the connection, Jones even enters the debate concerning to what degree women can be held accountable for not pursuing an authentic existence while being oppressed, stating, "as long as those feelings [desiring selfhood] and perceptions remained limited to the woman's private world, they could have little significant effect on the man's public world" (37). Jones acknowledges how little power women had in affecting "man's public world," but she still implies that writing fiction was a way to begin enacting change, therefore not completely excusing passivity as inevitable. In broader terms, Jones argues that forms of patriarchy "[a]ll deny to women authentic selfhood," which makes a woman's struggle two-fold—a struggle for existential selfhood and a *woman's* selfhood of the kind described by de Beauvoir. Both require the woman to stand against patriarchy, against societal norms, and against all that would force her to conform to something other than what she desires to be.

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2 Studying women's writing through an existentialist lens, however, a philosophy (like most) dominated by male writers, is itself problematic. Critics such as Michele Doeuff, argue that existentialism does not accurately reflect a feminine struggle because Sartre constructs certain metaphors that are meant to illustrate his concept of "nothingness," which Doeuff feels are sexist in that they present a world in which one must "penetrate" and "fill holes." She also points out that while Sartre argues that an inauthentic existence is the product of one's choosing not to pursue his or her own life, he does not allow for people who *cannot* choose because of social circumstances and therefore undermines what women have gone through historically. Doeuff even dismisses the work of Simone de Beauvoir, who identified herself as both an existentialist and feminist, because Doeuff maintains that de Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex*, is an attempt to further Sartrian ideas in a different framework. However, Doeuff's depiction of de Beauvoir as presenting a feminine-masked version of Sartre's philosophy is by no means the common consensus. Karen Vintges opposes Doeuff's argument: "Feminists who thought *The Second Sex* merely implies the necessity for women to become identical to men severely criticized it. Closer scrutiny of the text discloses that its aim is exactly the opposite, namely to make women free to create new situations, new cultural meanings, and new ways of experiencing life as a woman" (141). Vintges interprets de Beauvoir's work as containing a different perspective than Sartre's, one that allows for a woman's unique experiences while still endorsing many of the same tenets common in existentialist philosophy.

It is precisely this multi-faceted battle that women writers of the Southern Renaissance try to articulate in their fiction.

In order fully to understand the mindset created by the tenets of Sacred Womanhood, one must turn to Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*. The novel, part philosophical musing, part allegory about Southern tradition, attempts to expose the social and political structure of the American South and how it affects the women raised in such a system. Smith defines Sacred Womanhood, which is designed not only to control how women act but also specifically how they think of themselves and their role in Southern tradition. A powerful set of mannerisms and rules for living in the South, Sacred Womanhood requires women to conform or be ostracized for their defiance, and many women ultimately internalize its conventions. Smith states, "The majority of Southern women convinced themselves that God had ordained that they be deprived of pleasure, and meekly stuffed their hollowness with piety, trying to believe the tightness they felt was hunger satisfied" (141). The inability to pursue pleasure or desires because of social restrictions has its counterpart in existentialism; Sacred Womanhood would be a form of the "they," or the social mass that promotes definitions of one's existence. Like the life of adherence to Sacred Womanhood, the inauthentic life of existentialism occurs when one "subscribes to the mores of his [or her] society without even questioning the ultimate 'why' of such conformity" (Tulloch 41, original emphasis). The unquestioning mind is a problem for existentialists, but it is an even greater barrier for women of the South searching for selfhood because as Smith and others note, Sacred Womanhood requires ignorance from women (142). Therefore, questioning the circumstances of her life was taboo for a woman in this timeframe and even more difficult to overcome than it would be for a man.

One of the early women writers presenting characters trying to escape from underneath the veil of Sacred Womanhood is Kate Chopin. Although she was writing before the Southern Renaissance's traditional beginnings, critics such as Carol Manning argue that Chopin's themes and the male-bias of those dating literary movements justify her inclusion (xvii). *The Awakening* is the story of Edna Pontellier's search for authentic selfhood. By looking at the novel with existentialism in mind, some of the more ambiguous actions become clearer. Edna begins the novel in the throes of what existentialists call an inauthentic existence, in which she is beginning to understand herself: "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (6). The "oppression" she feels is the need to conform to what Mr. Pontellier later refers to as "*les convenances*," because those conventions do not reflect who she desires to be, they seem "unfamiliar" to her (51). Edna identifies that she "was not a mother-woman" or one of the women "who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals" (8). By identifying herself as such, Edna reveals that she wishes to escape her inauthentic life dominated by social norms for what a woman should be and pursue a more fulfilling existence, one in which she would not have to "efface" her individuality and can become the "the situated, sensitive self" de Beauvoir desires for women (Vintges 136). Other characters

in the novel embody certain ideals that help Edna come to terms with the warring factions in her life. In particular, Robert takes on the role opposite Edna's husband as someone willing to acknowledge her freedom and newfound selfhood, which is why she develops a passion for him.

Existentially speaking, one of the most important events in Edna and Robert's relationship happens when the two are sitting alone together. Robert "seated himself again and rolled a cigarette, which he smoked in silence. Neither did Mrs. Pontellier speak. No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire" (30). The scene is seemingly unremarkable, but it takes on greater meaning when viewed through the lens of existentialism. In Heidegger's terms, to keep silent Robert and Edna "must have something to say;" they must each be prepared to offer "an authentic and rich disclosedness of" themselves. (208). Through their silent moment together, Edna and Robert express more than they could have through conversation, a fact the narrator acknowledges. With this in mind, Edna's passion for Robert later in the book makes sense since he is the first person honestly to communicate with her, the first actually to experience the "authentic" and "rich disclosedness" of her selfhood instead of stifling it with meaningless small talk. In contrast to her scene with Robert, Edna also experiences a quiet evening with her husband, though the circumstances here are very different. Mr. Pontellier does not communicate authentically with his wife because he has nothing to offer her—he simply wishes to establish his dominance over her. After ordering her to come inside (an order she refuses to follow), Mr. Pontellier proceeds to remain outside in order to show that he has not submitted to her demand that he "go to bed," that somehow he wished to stay outside the whole time. He does not remain outside with his wife because he enjoys her company and desires to spend time with her as Robert does. Instead, he makes a statement about who is in charge. This power play is solidified by the fact that once Edna decides to go back inside, Mr. Pontellier remains outside, as if to prove he can outlast her in a battle of wills (32). Because Robert, unlike Mr. Pontellier, is willing to acknowledge Edna's selfhood, Robert comes to represent the different life Edna desires.

Midway through the novel, while Edna is "casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (57), she seeks out solitude, which may not seem that important until viewed through existentialism. Edna "found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested" (58). Edna searches for solitude to escape objectification because as Sartre states, "[b]y the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other" (*Being and Nothingness* 198). The existentialists argue that humans view each other as objects because they can never truly understand one another. According to Sartre, people are unlike objects in that they can change and have the capacity to become something new at any moment. Since the "Other" is unable to comprehend this change and possibilities for the future, it is easier to view a person as fixed in time and form, just like common household objects. Women during the Southern Renaissance had an even

greater struggle with this issue because although men could not know the changes the “Other” might go through, they were still acknowledged as having a potential for change. For the most part, women were given no such allowance, and men (and other women) had a tendency to view women as a passive entity ready to be used, the same way a hammer rests on the table until someone needs to drive a nail. Consequently, when Edna moves out of her husband’s house and into her own, she attempts to escape all the people “passing judgment” on her, forming her into an object, and ultimately making her consider herself an object as well. In her solitude void of distracting “Others,” she is able to focus on her autonomous self, which she manifests through her art. After coming to terms with authentic selfhood, she can then return to society and not completely lose sight of herself in the crowd, in the “they.” While Edna makes some great steps in the right direction, her fall is eventually brought about by Madam Ratignolle—Chopin’s embodiment of Sacred Womanhood.

Edna’s implied suicide at the end of the novel is the product of her realization that she cannot escape her circumstances and remain in this new authentic life she created for herself. The triggering event for the suicide is Ratignolle’s plea after giving birth: “Think of the children, Edna. Oh[,] think of the children! Remember them!” (111). Ratignolle’s words help Edna understand that her actions—particularly those she plans to pursue in her new life—have an effect on others, namely her children. In the next scene, Edna tells Doctor Mandelet, “[b]ut I don’t want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others—but no matter—still, I should want to trample upon the little lives” (112). While Edna has no qualms causing problems for her husband, she does not feel comfortable letting her children see the negative effects that will likely come of her authentic life of freedom, in which she plans to begin an affair with Robert. This desire not to “trample” the lives of her children is especially relevant in contrast with Edna’s statements about motherhood earlier in the novel: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (47). In this exchange, Edna claims she is willing to give her “life,” the physical act of being alive, for her children but not her “self,” which translates to that autonomy she desires. This decree poses a serious dilemma for Edna at the end of the novel: She does not want to give up her authentic life but at the same time cannot negotiate keeping it without having a negative backlash that will affect her children. The only other option for Edna is to give up the “unessential”—her physical life—in order to maintain autonomy and not trample her children’s lives. Her final choice to take her own life accomplishes her goal of not giving up her autonomy, but suicide is also, as Camus states, a “confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it” (497). Through her suicide, Edna concedes that she can find no answer to her dilemma—that she cannot “understand it.” Her inability to reconcile the pressure of Sacred Womanhood with a search for freedom illustrates the magnitude of what women living in the South had to contend with during this period.

Like Kate Chopin, Ellen Glasgow’s *The Sheltered Life* reveals a young woman’s struggle for authentic selfhood. Although Glasgow’s Jenny Blair has a much different experience

than Edna, Jenny Blair's actions are still marked by existentialist themes. From the beginning of the novel, the central concern is identified as Jenny Blair's "discovering her hidden self," which she articulates, "I am this and not that" (3). Even as a child, Jenny Blair starts to comprehend the difference between herself and the "Other," that she is a separate, sole entity. While Jenny Blair is starting her development earlier in the novel, the forces she will have to struggle with are present here as well. Discussing *Little Women*, a book Jenny Blair is reading, her mother tells her, "I remember I tried to form my character on Meg—or it may have been Jo" (7). Mrs. Archbald's declaration that she tried to live her life as a character in a book and the not so subtle implication that Jenny Blair should consider doing the same is both a statement about the social norms expected of women and a form of Kierkegaard's despair: "the lowest of all: in despair to will to be someone else, to wish for a new self" (52-53). To desire to live one's life as someone else, whether they be fictional or real, is a form of inauthentic existence because one can never truly accomplish this, and in pursuing this goal, one ignores his or her own unique experience. However, despite her mother's encouragement, Jenny Blair does not want to live as Meg, Jo, or anyone else and fall into a life of despair. As a result, from a young age Jenny Blair feels the need to reaffirm her identity, which she does by repeating a mantra throughout the novel: "I'm alive, alive, alive, and I'm Jenny Blair Archbald" (3). This technique works for Jenny Blair while she is still a child, but as she starts to get older and begins to understand more about the lives of the people around her, she realizes that maintaining her selfhood requires more than a few words spoken in times of self-doubt.

Later in life, Jenny Blair begins to understand that the people closest to her, such as her mother and Mrs. Birdsong, have all been severely affected by Southern tradition and the kind of falsified selves it produces. During a seemingly unimportant moment—dressing for a party—Mrs. Archbald says something that causes Jenny Blair to see beyond her façade that she has put up to appease Sacred Womanhood. Jenny Blair reacts by saying, "Oh, Mamma! Oh, Mamma, I've never seen you before!" (69). Mrs. Archbald dismisses the scene as the eccentric nature of a young girl, but the moment is important for Jenny Blair because she feels as though, in a moment, her mother becomes a completely new person. The occurrence that triggers this reaction is Mrs. Archbald's confiding that she does not wish to go to a party, which goes against Sacred Womanhood because women were expected to socialize in this era. Jenny Blair also comes across a more powerful image of the effects of Southern tradition in the form of Mrs. Birdsong, who toward the latter half of the novel is dying of "the long pretense of her life" (153). In the hospital, Mrs. Birdsong tells Jenny Blair that "you do take trouble if you have a reputation to keep up, and no fame on earth is so exacting as a reputation for beauty. [. . .] I sometimes think there is nothing so terrible for a woman [. . .] as to be loved for her beauty" (209). Mrs. Birdsong's admission is an expression of Sartre's claim that sexual attraction is one of the ways humans go about constructing someone as "Other": "I desire a human being, not an insect or a mollusk, and I desire him (or her) as he is and as I am in situation in the world and as he is an Other for me and as I am an Other for him" (*Being and Nothingness* 360). Therefore Mrs. Birdsong is

pointing out that valuing a woman for her beauty, as dictated by Sacred Womanhood, only sets her up to be further distanced from herself by the society that upholds those values. After internalizing these values of beauty and submissiveness, these women find authentic selfhood not only difficult but also seemingly impossible. Even seeing the stultifying effects of social norms playing out on those closest to her does not ultimately save Jenny Blair because according to existentialists, she must save herself.

Despite her experiences, Jenny Blair still comes to idolize Mr. Birdsong so much that he becomes an obsession, a great truth. While Camus states that “a single truth, if it is obvious, is enough to guide an existence” (561), Jenny Blair’s truth does not guide her existence. Instead, she lets her obsession with Mr. Birdsong shut out other parts of her life about which she previously felt strongly. About midway in the novel, Jenny Blair says, “I don’t care about men. All I want to do is to live my own life” (133), which reveals that she is more focused on her selfhood than falling into a patriarchal structure that dictates she find a man and marry. Her decision to leave home and move to New York, however, changes as her obsession with Mr. Birdsong grows stronger, so she essentially abandons the autonomy she felt she needed. Even Jenny Blair’s desire to leave Queenborough would not have necessarily provided what she needed, as John explains:

“The trouble is we imagine we can change ourselves by changing our scenery. [. . .] It is the same everywhere. People who have tradition are oppressed by tradition, and people who are without it are oppressed by the lack of it—or by whatever else they have put in its place. You want to go to New York and pretend to be unconventional, but nothing is more cramping than the effort to be unconventional when you weren’t born so. It is as hard on the nerves as pretending, like Cousin Eva, to be an ideal.” (217)

John tells Jenny Blair that simply leaving will not be enough and that even without Southern tradition bearing down on her, she still might find something else to oppress her. He also warns that even in New York, she might find herself pretending to be someone else, the same way Mrs. Birdsong pretends. John outlines the dual struggle that women face from an existentialist perspective: They must first escape Sacred Womanhood, but even after accomplishing that, they must not submit themselves to all the other oppressive forces in the world. He also comprehends and tells Jenny Blair that if she does escape the social norms of the South, it should not be by taking on some other false self since that type of pretending is just as destructive for an individual. At the end of the novel, therefore, when Jenny Blair witnesses the consequences of her obsession with Mr. Birdsong and by extension the consequences of Sacred Womanhood on Mrs. Birdsong, Jenny Blair, faced with the sight of Mrs. Birdsong holding a gun over her husband’s corpse, begins crying, “I didn’t mean anything, [. . .] I didn’t mean anything in the world!” (292). This final dismissal of responsibility for her actions does not suggest a positive future for Jenny Blair since dismissing her actions allows her to once again become the passive object Sacred

Womanhood demands. Ultimately whether she continues to pursue authentic selfhood or lets the trauma of the scene paralyze her into a life of submissiveness is left unclear.

While Jenny Blair's story is cut too short to see how her selfhood ultimately develops or fails to develop, Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* finds autonomy. Early in the novel, Janie is married off by her grandmother in order to "protect" her, though what she actually accomplishes is securing Janie under the veil of Sacred Womanhood. Janie eventually runs away from her first husband Logan with Jody Starks, a moment when she begins to truly understand how she will have to contend with social norms. Jody wishes to have "a big voice" in his community (28)—a problem for existentialists. According to Kierkegaard, the desire to become an important figure in the community has a tendency to lead to an inauthentic existence:

Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man. [. . .] Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. (33-34)

Jody Starks is a "mass man," one who wishes to become integrated in society; his success in "business and social life" are strong indicators of this. In order for Jody to secure his place among the masses, he must have a wife who fulfills the role as well, the role of Sacred Womanhood. As de Beauvoir states, "man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (5). Since Jody can only understand Janie as an extension of himself, as wanting the same life of social conformity that he wants, it is not long before Jody starts making demands of Janie as well, telling "her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang" (41). Jody objectifies her, turning her into the "bell-cow," a commodity that could be traded off just as any other property if need be. Jody starts removing Janie's selfhood and autonomy, but unlike Jenny Blair, Janie has a strong spirit and is willing to fight back against her oppression.

Janie's fight against the "they," embodied for her by her husband, begins in small ways. She contradicts her husband, "[s]ometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business" (75). Eventually the battle grows in scale, and Janie ends up emasculating Jody in front of the town, which for a mass man, is the greatest transgression she could perform. He shuns her from that point on, even through his terminal sickness. After Jody's death, a change takes place in Janie. One of the first things she does is "let down her plentiful hair," which as a part of a woman's body, had to be carefully restrained and monitored by Jody. It is not surprising that Jody's death has such an impact on Janie;

aside from freeing her from his control, his death also has existential significance. Death brings one closer to an authentic existence because

[o]nly by taking my death into myself [. . .] does an authentic existence become possible for me. [. . .] It frees us from servitude to the petty cares that threaten to engulf our daily life and thereby opens us to the essential *projects* by which we can make our lives personally and significantly our own. (Barrett 225-226)

After Jody's death, Janie feels "free" to pursue the project that is her life. One of her first decisions is to distance herself from the town and seek solitude, similar to what Edna did in *The Awakening*. While Janie is negotiating her new freedom and possibilities for selfhood, she meets Tea Cake, who offers her a perspective that reinforces what she is just beginning to understand, similar to what Robert was for Edna.

As Janie eventually comes to understand, Tea Cake is the antithesis of Jody. Where Jody wished to give Janie a set of instructions to follow, Tea Cake is interested in freedom. Janie was unable to learn checkers under Jody, but Tea Cake tells her, "You gointuh be uh good player too, after while" (96). He also contradicts the tenet that women should be weak, insisting that Janie could walk the seven miles he walks: "But Ah'm seen women walk further'n dat. You could too, if yuh had it tuh do" (97). Unlike Jody who attempted to make Janie passive, Tea Cake pushes her to be active and break free of the stereotypes of Sacred Womanhood. Janie could have come to these realizations on her own, but through exposure to her husbands and grandmother, she has come to internalize what women "are." Tea Cake not only offers the idea that it is possible for a woman to do all these things, he encourages Janie to do them, which if nothing else helps Janie resist some of the hegemony inflicted upon her. As their relationship develops, Janie begins to comprehend the difference between Jody and Tea Cake: "Tea Cake ain't no Jody Starks, and if he tried tuh be, it would be uh complete flommuck. [. . .] Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles" (114). Janie differentiates between Jody's social life, in the form of "business propositions," and what she sees in Tea Cake, whose attraction is that he does not force anything on her but instead lets her decide her fate. At the same time, however, not all is perfect between the two. Tea Cake becomes jealous of another man and the possibility, though unfounded, that Janie may run away with him. In response he "whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession" (147). Tea Cake is experiencing a frustration that is common to existentialists; Sartre points out that one cannot force the "Other" to be or act a certain way, though the desire to do so still exists (*Being and Nothingness* 385). At times, this frustration comes out in the form of violence, which is what happens to Tea Cake. He wants to force Janie not to leave him for another man, but since it is impossible, he lashes out in violence. If he could succeed in removing Janie's freedom, she would become an object, which is why Tea Cake feels reassured in his possession. Despite the problems that come up along the way, Janie's relationship with Tea

Cake is one that helps her achieve a more authentic life. Although the novel ends tragically (and absurdly<sup>3</sup>), Janie is ultimately a richer person for the experiences.

Perhaps more so than Hurston, Glasgow, or Chopin, Carson McCullers, with her connection to the French existentialists, presents women coming to terms with the oppression of their sex. In *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers creates Frankie, a young girl who “belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world” (3). This statement seems positive in that it acknowledges that Frankie has not joined in the social world; the problem is Frankie *wants* to be a part of the world—wants it to the point of obsession. She adheres to Kierkegaard’s definition of despair, or “to will to be someone else” (52-53), which Frankie actually articulates herself: “I wish I was somebody else except me” (7). Frankie has internalized social norms so fully that she believes if she does not find a place in society and fit into a role dictated for her, she will become like the freaks at the circus, who in her mind, whisper, “we know you” (17). She associates herself with outcasts, but she seems unable to view being an outcast in any sort of positive way. The concept that she would have freedom without society’s forcing tradition on her never occurs to her. Since she does not value authentic selfhood, obtaining it is nearly impossible for her. The fact that Frankie does not value autonomy like other characters in the works of women writers could be because she is young, though Jenny Blair takes the opposite view to Frankie’s. Although both Jenny Blair and Frankie come to understand their separateness from the rest of the world at a young age, Jenny Blair attempts to reaffirm her unique identity while Frankie attempts to find a way to work herself into a social group. Like Jenny Blair, Frankie also realizes that “[t]hey were them [. . .], and she was her” (24), but Frankie, in discussion about her brother and his fiancée, attempts to twist this idea into something new: “*They are the we of me*” (35). Similar to the existentialists, Frankie has turned social groups into a construction. Instead of the “they” of existentialism, Frankie uses the inclusive “we,” because she does not *wish* to be a separate and unique identity. She does not want to be “suddenly alone and without help” in the world—a problem that follows her throughout the novel (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 57).

Frankie’s desire to be one of Kierkegaard’s “mass men” manifests in many ways, particularly the fact that she “forgets [her] name divinely understood” (33). Throughout the novel, Frankie goes by three names: Frankie, F. Jasmine, and Frances. Frankie does not comprehend the significance of names or the identity they point to even after Bernice explains it to her: “Because things accumulate around your name [. . .] so that soon the name begins to have a meaning” (93). Frankie dismisses Bernice’s explanation because she does not value the freedom and self represented by her name and instead wishes something would “happen” to her. This happening that Frankie wants is some public event that will be

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3 This word is not being used according to its normal definition. In existential thought, absurdity is an acknowledgement of the meaninglessness of the world, so if a person continues living despite this meaninglessness, he/she is said to be living in absurdity. At the end of the novel, after having lost the love of her life to the circumstances of an uncaring world (an accidental attack by a rabid dog in a freak storm), Janie continues living despite her suffering.

acknowledged by the town. Since it has not happened, she instead decides to create new names which make her feel a part of her “we,” making her get lost in the social world.

Although Frankie seems to be wholly concerned with her “we,” she does manage to articulate, with the help of Bernice, some of the problems she is facing. Before she leaves for the wedding, Bernice tells Frankie about the existential state into which all people enter:

We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Bernice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself.” (98)

Bernice's description of everyone being “caught” is a reflection of the oppression imposed by social norms. She even acknowledges that people wish to “widen and bust free” from these constraints, although freedom is difficult to achieve. Finally, she also articulates the existential concept that everyone is a separate being. Although we may interact and have a relationship, we cannot truly share the experiences that make up our consciousness. Frankie seems to understand what Bernice tells her and even adds to the existentialist ideas, using the word *loose* instead of *caught* singularly: “You don't know where they all came from, or where they're going to. [. . .] People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and loose.” (99). Frankie's claim that people are both caught and loose is particularly relevant in existential terms because while people suffer oppression under social norms, they also have absolute freedom. As Sartre states, “there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom” (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 29). Frankie seems to understand this because she realizes that she cannot understand “where they're going to.” It is this very realization on the part of Bernice and Frankie that likely results in the silent crying session between them and John Henry, all of whom realize what Camus regularly referred to as the “absurdity” of the world.

However, while Frankie experiences this moment of clarity, she does not learn anything significant from it. She continues her obsession with becoming part of the wedding party and running off with her brother and his new wife, which does not pan out. She remains “in a jail you could not see” even after returning home and attempting to run away again (128). The fact that Frankie has not made any progress toward escaping the oppressive forces around her is revealed toward the end of the novel through Frankie's assertion that her previous life seemed like it belonged to “a stranger” (127). This observation echoes Camus's statement that “[f]or ever I shall be a stranger to myself” (508). Although tragic, Frankie's greatest opportunity to pull away from the “they” and focus on herself comes in the form of John Henry's death. It is possible that by experiencing the death of another, Frankie may begin to pursue an authentic life for herself, similar to what Janie experienced in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Unfortunately, McCullers ends the novel before this possibility for Frankie can be explored, leaving her still an inauthentic person.

The burden of Sacred Womanhood is a force that is difficult for the Southern woman to combat, since she must fight against its internalization in order to find autonomy. This battle against Sacred Womanhood mirrors the existentialist battle against the confining

and stultifying effects of the “they;” therefore, many actions taken by women—such as a search for solitude, a reaffirmation of separateness, and growth through experiences of death—all have existential ramifications that illuminate somewhat ambiguous or seemingly inconsequential events. Women writers of the Southern Renaissance regularly deal with these themes, although each of their characters reacts differently. Chopin’s Edna feels that although she makes progress toward autonomy, she cannot escape Sacred Womanhood completely and therefore kills herself as her only viable option. Like Edna, Glasgow’s Jenny Blair makes progress through observing the people around her and how Southern tradition affects them, but that same observation results in a traumatic experience that leaves Jenny Blair’s future search for selfhood uncertain. More so than Glasgow or Chopin, Hurston presents a woman who eventually lives an authentic life in the form of Janie; despite the tragic ending, Janie’s life seems to be impacted for the better. Finally, McCullers gives the reader Frankie, who even at a young age is so obsessed with becoming part of the “they” that she is unable to even acknowledge the value of her own individuality. By illustrating the wide range of possible effects that Southern tradition could have on a woman during the time period, these women writers honestly present the complexity of social constructions and reveal the difficulties of coming to terms with a seemingly simple concept: she is “she.” By resisting the rigid assignment to constructed identities of “they” and “us,” Southern women subjected to the demands of Sacred Womanhood can be empowered to embody their fullest sense of self as individuals equal to the challenges society levels against them.

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