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## More Awesome Than Infinity: Explorations of Sea Imagery and Sexual Deviance

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More Awesome Than Infinity:  
Explorations of Sea Imagery and Sexual Deviance

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty and the Honors Program  
Of the University of San Diego

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By  
Kelly Ann Lonergan  
English  
2015

## **Introduction**

Water imagery is abundant throughout literature, enough so to have become an omnipresent archetypal symbol. Generally, water imagery symbolizes renewal, birth and rebirth, or some sort of transformative experience. It is all too easy to set forth with a Freudian interpretation of this literary trope—though in reality, Freud only addresses water in his writings on dream interpretations, of which there are surprisingly few. What little he does say on the matter relates precisely to conventional notions of water imagery: birth and “phantasies of intra-uterine life, of existence in the womb” (Freud 399), which can in turn be projected onto his theories about sexuality. These dreams about water and wetness relate to his theories about wish-fulfillment, especially in regard to sexual deviance, and he considers water-related dreams of this sort to be “a perfectly transparent symbolism” (Freud 402). Freud classifies the connection between sexual deviance and water as a fetal one, yet it is the subtle link he makes between sexual deviance and the repression of desire that I intend to focus on, especially in regard to Nietzsche’s works. Nietzsche frequently uses the sea as a metaphor for the vast unknown and unexplored ways of being that arise when traditional modes of morality are abandoned. The sea’s role as an opportunity for exploration in literature and in philosophy offers a critique of the nature of morality as a whole, particularly in regard to its effect on the individual’s spirit and identity.

Nietzsche frequently returns to the image of the open sea in his works and urges people to embark on a journey into uncharted moral waters. He links a lack of morality to godlessness, which he feels will cause men to “shatter the good and the law-tables of the good” in order to “embark mankind upon its high seas” (Nietzsche 230). Without God, he argues, humanity may flounder in a space where it is impossible to discern right from wrong,

which in turn breeds moral decay on multiple fronts; this paper will intentionally focus on how this is brought forth in regard to sexuality.

Though the ocean (and a Godless, moral-less world) may at times seem freeing, as if the ocean “lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness” (Nietzsche 180), the unexplored territories of no moral guidance are actually “infinite, and there is nothing more terrible than infinity” (Nietzsche 207). Along with this potential depravity comes an infinite freedom, however, and an ability to create identity in a completely authentic way; Nietzsche argues that doing so allows people to “realize great fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence,” which is “to live dangerously!” out on “unchartered seas” (Nietzsche 208) where the individual decides for him/herself what desires to act upon, even if that means giving in to “this longing that is worth more to us than any pleasure” (Nietzsche 205) as they cross into the sea of the unknown. He urges humanity to “live in conflict” (206) with the self and with the world in order to find true identity. Yet I argue that the literary characters who embark on this open sea do so not to instigate conflict, but to avoid the troubles that may befall them if they remain (with authentic identity intact) in structured society with pre-established morals. As such, their actions that may traditionally be deemed morally questionable or reprehensible can unfold in this liminal space on the open sea. In addition to fictional uses of Nietzsche’s metaphor, female poets like Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson also allude to this oceanic third space as an expansive opportunity for moral (and in some ways, sexual) exploration even as they write over a century apart. This oceanic space must exist in order to explore “new suns” (Nietzsche 208) of moral direction, ones unshaped by belief in a deity or in a higher social order.

Nietzsche argues people are hesitant to embark on this journey of moral questioning because “we stand too much within the *immediate consequences*” (Nietzsche 209) of our actions; be it incest or a sexual awakening, we are acutely aware of the potential fallout of engaging in socially condemnable acts. By setting out to sea, literally and figuratively, even the “the unfortunate, the exceptional man” whose desires are at odds with general cultural values has the opportunity to embrace “his philosophy, his rights, his sunshine!” outside of accepted understandings of the world (Nietzsche 208). It enables people to live their fullest lives, even if that life is unconventional and a source of discomfort among those ascribing to traditional mores.

I aim to explore how this idea of morality as liminal on the sea has been taken up in works of literature where unpermitted ways of being are adopted by characters that cross the precipice into the morally ambiguous open sea. In doing so, these literary characters who are willing to embark on a journey into the unknown find their own new horizons where “every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted [and] the sea again lies there open before us” (Nietzsche 210). Using a Nietzschean framework these sexually deviant relationships can be explored in a manner that, rather than condemning or judging, explores their existence in “a land beyond all known lands...a world so over-full of the beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine” (Nietzsche 187). The works I have selected reflect literature across cultures and time periods that contain morally and sexually deviant behavior; in all instances, they align with Nietzsche’s writings on unexplored morality as deserving of pursuit in order to gain personal fulfillment.

However, poetic employment of this metaphor by women points to a more nuanced and complex understanding of Nietzsche, a man who cannot be separated from his often

sexist writings. By exploring how the image of the sea appears in poetry penned by females, I hope to point out the futility of female autonomy in society and in sexuality, and how it manifests itself in poetic works. I argue that all these works serve as a favorable assessment of exploring the open sea of morality that exists beyond societal expectations, especially in relation to Nietzsche's metaphor—but how this space of freedom, while perhaps not accessible to all, is especially unreachable by women due to the overwhelming social, political, and moral restraints burdened on the female sex.

### **Magical Realism and the Novel**

Gabriel García Márquez' novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* certainly reflects both Freudian and Nietzschean modes of thought in regard to repressed desire. As a work of Magical Realism, *Love in the Time of Cholera* repeatedly calls into question the validity of categories like 'real' and 'unreal', which can easily be connected to Nietzsche's urges to explore individually what moral reality should look like. Journey by way of open water as an exploration of the unknown manifests itself in the novel's final scene, where García Márquez presents the river as a space of "displacement, self-exile, or ecstasy... a disorientation of sensibility associated with passion" (Mattessich 334) just as Nietzsche encourages.

After a lifetime of repressed desire and love, Florentino and Fermina are finally united in old age after the death of Fermina's husband. They are fully aware that their relationship is not one condoned by society due to socio-economic class difference, Fermina's recently acquired status as a widow, and most particularly due to their old age. Though Florentino always lived a sexually explorative life, he knows that being with Fermina in infirmity will be met with much social disdain, for "the idea of physical passion between two people whose skin is no longer tight, whose hair (what there is of it) no longer shines, whose bones may

now creak with arthritic pain” will create discomfort and incite judgment from both of their social circles (Palencia-Roth 55). This awareness of social disgusts what leads them to embark on the literal and figurative open sea to explore their feelings and attraction to one another.

Florentino and Fermina take a journey by boat to explore their long-anticipated love, but are anxious about the transience of their river cruise and the liminal space it has created for their love to exist. They experience bits of the terror Nietzsche described in morally ambiguous journeys, which plays a role in how they perceive the aqueous environment that surrounds them, especially since they perceive the change to be a temporary one. Fermina is disenchanted by how the river has been destroyed by “fifty years of uncontrolled deforestation” (García Márquez 331), much like their love of fifty years is now tainted in society’s eyes by their infirmity. The river is a familiar one, just like their love, but experiencing the water as a vehicle to their sexually deviant behavior casts the experience in a darker, more threatening light, especially with the full knowledge that at some point they must return to society and face the social reactions to their relationship. As such, Fermina observes with disgust “the river muddy and narrow... flatlands stripped of entire forests that had been devoured by the boilers of the riverboats,” and is fearful at how “all that was left was the vast silence of the ravaged land” (García Márquez 336). Returning to society after experiencing life together on the sea would be precisely that: returning to lives ravaged by societal expectations and ideals, desolate and desperate for love and freedom but constantly lacking both. As Nietzsche describes this feeling, “how, after such prospects, could we remain content with the *man of the present?*” (210). Florentino and Fermina decide they cannot remain content with their lives and social roles in society, and instead choose to

remain in their liminal space on the water indefinitely in order to live their lives as they see fit.

Florentino orders the ship's captain to put up a flag indicating the contraction of cholera aboard the boat, which exiles them to the river forever. Florentino and Fermina willingly choose this morally and spatially transient existence because it allows for them to explore the unknown territory of their long-denied love and avoid "the pestilential stink of [the shore's] glories...the horror of real life" (García Márquez 346). Indeed, once Florentino and Fermina decide not to return to life on land, even their perceptions of their surroundings begin to change and reflect the freedom Nietzsche outlines in respect to moral ambiguity. As they move away again from the harbor and back onto the water, Fermina watched "the muddy, frugal estuary of the Great Magdalena River spread out to the other side of the world" (García Márquez 347). Florentino similarly reflects upon their new uncertain future with peace as he gazes out at "the clear horizon, the December sky without a single cloud, the waters that could be navigated forever" (García Márquez 348). Choosing a life of love and sexual fulfillment, even when it is not socially acceptable for a myriad of reasons, can only be done in a liminal and unexplored space like that of the water.

By choosing to spend the remainder of their lives together out on the vast river, Florentino and Fermina shuck social roles and responsibilities and take up "a different disinterested space, one from which they see the consequence of their misrecognitions" (Mattessich 352). Consequently, this provides them with the "chance to disengage from an identification with the authority that makes this sacrifice [of abandoned livelihoods on the shore] their own" (Mattessich 352). As such, García Márquez takes up the mantle established by Nietzsche that urges individuals to choose for themselves what morality

actually is. With the sea comes freedom, and with freedom comes joy, as Florentino and Fermina come to discover. García Márquez goes about this in a way that subtly “draws the reader into the problem of his or her own equivocal relations to a modern life,” at once making the issue of moral and sexual stringency bigger than Florentino and Fermina, but also “shrewdly staging it as a love story” (Mattessich 334). García Márquez wields the genre of magical realism as a tool to further critique the supposed ‘innateness’ of morality that both he and Nietzsche call into question through sentencing Florentino and Fermina to a life alone, but free, on the vast water.

### **Puritanism and the Novella**

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, a classic American novella, similarly revolves around a need to be freed by the water—but unlike in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the book’s protagonist is unable to make a life for herself in this liminal space and instead chooses death by drowning in the ocean as a form of freedom. This action is surrounded by personal and critical debate: is her suicide one of resignation, or liberation? Yet to reduce her action to simply one or the other “implicitly overlooks the courage and discipline of women like Edna,” who abandon social roles “in favor of an enticing yet ever-elusive freedom—a freedom from identity” (Ramos 146). Indeed, from Nietzsche’s perspective Edna’s suicide seems to contain elements of both empowerment and surrender. There is an immense freedom in shirking social and moral restraints, but also a great terror and desperation in the unknown that necessarily accompanies freedom and exploration.

Edna, who undergoes a sexual awakening in her experiences in the sea while learning to swim, is a human manifestation of how the book explores “divided loyalties toward its own subject: the collision between French Catholic culture and the American mainstream”

(Deblano 92), two cultures with very different ideas about sexually appropriate behavior. Her Creole upbringing is one of abundant affection and public intimacy, but American Protestantism rejects this in favor of painting women as free of sexual qualities whatsoever. Both, however, employ “the hegemonic institutions of nineteenth-century society” that required women to be “objects in marriage and in motherhood, existing as vessels of maternity and sexuality, with little opportunity for individuality” (Gray 53). Edna is conflicted and thus unable to cognitively reconcile the varying and contradictory messages about moral and social sexual expectations of her. Not only are the messages irreconcilable between one another, but they also do not align with her own internal desires once the ocean awakens her sexuality and sense of self.

It is in her initial encounter with the sea that Edna first enjoys physical and literal manifestations of Nietzsche’s metaphor, for as she swims Edna is “reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself...she wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin 33). Edna is transformed and desires to embark on a journey that enables her to explore the depths of her soul and her being, even if it may be at odds with expectations set forth for her by others. Learning to swim “inspires a growing sense of self-awareness, both spiritual and physical” (Gray 69) as she gains autonomy in the space of the vast water. She begins to create “a significant amount of agency for herself after she comes to realize, when she learns to swim, the extent to which identities are *fluid* and fictitious” (Ramos 148). Edna now understands how identity, like Nietzsche’s sea, is fluid and ever-changing, always available for negotiation and renegotiation. The self is a tangible manifestation of Nietzsche’s metaphor, for though it is initially tethered to the world, eventually Edna’s identity becomes indistinguishable from the water and its fluidity,

vastness, and formlessness. Edna herself is certainly “described as possessing liminal features” (Giorcelli 111); much like the ocean itself is unknown and ephemeral, Edna herself embodies those same qualities, creating a unity between Edna and the sea that can only be actualized in her suicide.

This becomes increasingly evident to Edna as she tries to assert her own identity and authority in a world with such bizarre and strict expectations of her, so she falls into “a terrible limbo” (Deblanco 98) as she attempts to “distinguish between the life assigned to her and the possibility of fashioning herself anew” (Deblanco 95). Edna first asserts her sexual identity by refusing to have sex with her husband Leonice, who frequently “hails her as his sexual property” (Gray 69), once she better understands her own sensuality after exploring the sea. She is no longer dependent on him to define her role in sexual encounters, and continues to explore it herself. She rents an apartment of her own, seeks out multiple lovers, and “engages in sexual affairs as much as a man in her society might do, considering only sexual gratification and attraction” (Gray 70). Throughout this personal and sexual journey, Edna begins to comprehend the “existence of an irreducible self” (Deblanco 95) that is at odds with the self expected of her by society. Edna is compelled to live a life like the one Nietzsche describes, and is constantly drawn to the seductive sea and its subtle call, “never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” (Chopin 17). Edna knows the life she is living is not congruent with her internal desires, but cannot see a way out of this dismal and inauthentic way of being other than death, since her self-awareness and newfound sensuality in the morally liminal ocean cannot successfully be brought back into her world on land and in society. The freedom of identity she desires is “an unrestricted, undefined, and ultimately impossible state” (Ramos 146) in

the real world, according to current literary critics, yet this is precisely what Nietzsche advocates. He does not acknowledge this liminal space as impossible or stripped of identity; he does not comment on the plausibility of such a life at all. Rather, he sees the sea and moral ambiguity as a space where identity may be created anew, something which Edna is unwilling to accomplish within societal restraints on land.

Consequently, Edna sees the only way to return to this space of utter freedom is through the ocean and through death, where she no longer must “live in conflict with [her] equals and the self” (Nietzsche 208) in a manner that was overwhelming during her life on Earth. In accordance with Nietzschean thought, Edna begins to “live at another level of existence” (Giorcelli 109) in her death, and finds a “precarious, quasi-divine wholeness” (Giorcelli 122) by choosing to live—and end—her life on her own terms, rather than live in the safe, socially acceptable sexual and interpersonal existence demarcated for her by society. Edna understands that “no matter what the danger” (in this case, the danger and unknown of the afterlife), “every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted...the sea, *our* sea again lies there open before us” (Nietzsche 210). The cost of her life is worth, to her, freedom from social constraints and expectations, in her opinion. Though this is an extremely controversial stance, it is precisely opinions like hers that Nietzsche feels suffer in our stringent society that does not give credence to unconventional modes of thought. In the sea and in her death, Edna escapes a universe where “the moral earth is too round” and there is no place for the “exceptional man” (or woman, in this case), who dares to think in alternative manners. Indeed, Edna’s desire to live outside of socially ordained sexual identities cannot “be realized, because such an existence, even if achievable, cannot be

sustained” (Ramos 150). Expectations of role-fulfillment are too great, and so the only way Edna can truly be free is uniting with the sea in mortality.

As she swims out to her death, Edna “recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore” (Chopin 133) when she first learned to swim. But this time, she was calm. The safety of the shore was more stifling than comforting, and the endless, unknown sea is appealing and “sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 133). Its vastness allows Edna to project her own needs and desires onto the ocean and its uncertainty, which is comforting when compared to the repressive, but perfectly safe, society and life she leaves behind. She, in death, becomes “enfolded in [the sea’s] vast space of innumerable waves,” (Gray 73), a place of both possibility and chaos. Possibility and uncertainty are the consequences of embarking into the unknown, which is a very isolated journey, but not necessarily more isolating than living an inauthentic and incongruent life that represses personal desire. *The Awakening* calls into question the price of living a safe existence, and perfectly encapsulates many of the questions Nietzsche raises in regard to the nature of goodness and the human need for freedom and true independence. Edna’s journey and transformation through the sea reflect the literal and moral changes that come about with a rejection of social norms just as Nietzsche encourages.

### **Nietzsche and Women**

Interestingly, Edna’s journey ends in death, while Florentino and Fermina’s remains permanently liminal—but notably alive. This becomes an interesting point of exploration in regard to Nietzsche’s writings about women and how they may (or may not) relate to his metaphor about the morally ambiguous open sea. Reconciling these two stances are imperative for understanding what Nietzsche advocates, and how this manifests itself in

literature. Doing so in relation to a feminist text like *The Awakening* provides a concrete example of how these all relate. At large, Nietzsche was a man “too willing to rest content with truisms about women and to vent personal rage in the guise of philosophy” (Higgins 229). In many of his works, his comments about women are overtly misogynistic, making it difficult to understand how his otherwise compelling arguments are meant to be understood in regard to the female sex. A man who “is often held up as an exemplar of all that is misogynistic in the philosophical tradition” (Higgins 229) was likely not writing for a female audience. However, his exclusionary silence in regard to women’s role in exploring unknown moral waters points out precisely why this sea of space and freedom is especially inaccessible to women: the societal burdens they carry are exceptionally heavy, and not easily discarded or even acknowledged.

In *The Gay Science*, where the sea metaphor is prominently introduced, Nietzsche also comments on how habits and norms become internalized; he explains how “what at first was appearance becomes, in the end, almost invariably, the essence and is effective as such” (Nietzsche 121-22). In regard to women, this notion reflects the way that hegemonic practices and ideals become internalized: females become what we characterize them to be, generation after generation. Nietzsche describes this sexual socialization process as one that leads men to see women as “the quiet, magical beings gliding past him and he longs for [women’s] happiness and seclusion” (Nietzsche 124). Edna is a prime example of what happens when this socialization process goes awry and a woman does not blindly fill the role set up for her. Furthermore, Nietzsche acknowledges the contradictory expectations set forth for women, who must simultaneously be the bearer of children but also seem free of sexual desire. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he articulates this process as “the enormous expectation in

sexual love and the sense of shame in this expectation soils all perspectives for women from the start” (Nietzsche 715). In these words Nietzsche seems, if not sympathetic, at least cognizant of the plight of women to negotiate a sexual and moral identity in the male-dominated world. He articulates the way that women like Edna cannot truly reconcile all the conflicting identities society forces upon them. This seems to mean that women deeply need the open space of the morally ambiguous sea that Nietzsche describes, yet he notably leaves them out of the discussion.

In her critique of *the Gay Science*, Kathleen Higgins argues that perhaps Nietzsche does not deliberately leave out women, stating that “it is as inappropriate to foreground women and their concerns [in this book] as it has been traditionally been to push women consistently into the background” (229). Using her logic, there are no qualms with utilizing Nietzsche’s metaphor unilaterally, for all genders, races, and situations in the real world and in the literary cannon. Yet I feel this ignores the socio-political context in which the metaphor was developed. Ignoring the female role in philosophy and in moral ambiguity further disempowers the female sex and adds to their inability to embody the sea metaphor that Nietzsche advocates for his male audience. Perhaps he envisioned this moral exploration as a place solely for men, while women sit back docile and content (or at least unaware of alternatives) in the lives preconceived for them, spending their days on the safe and monotonous land far away from the moral expanse of the sea. Edna, for one, is not content to remain on the safe and boring shore, and thus must die. There is no space in the living world for a woman of her autonomy, and certainly no space for her to question morality and sexuality as publicly as she did. So while Nietzsche advocates for men to explore their untapped desires, it seems that Edna taking this journey alone is destined for failure due to

the coupling of male-dominated society with the societal expectations that all genders must learn to navigate. Fermina in *Love in the Time of Cholera* can find safety in the morally liminal space on the sea, but she has a male guide (Florentino) to make her identity valid. Fermina's deviance is not a solitary, female-driven act, making it feasible; Edna's exploration alone is too risky and empowered to be sustainable. Perhaps women have too many restraints to do anything more than dabble in sexual deviance; perhaps they can only stick their toes into Nietzsche's morally ambiguous sea.

### **Dickinson and Purity**

Emily Dickinson is one such woman who, while briefly touching on Nietzsche's metaphor in her poetry, did not live a personal life that aligned with notions of the sea as a liminal place of exploration. A figure infamous for her reclusive nature, Dickinson often wrote poems that challenged the Puritan stringent moral codes that contained notably strict views on sexual behavior. She often posed questions in her works, rather than providing answers. She questioned God's existence, his benevolence, his lack of accessibility. In many ways, her poems embodied the same queries that Nietzsche raised. But while her poems addressed and often challenged these moral restrictions, her daily life did no such thing. This is especially interesting because, as a poet, Dickinson is difficult to separate biographically from her work. However, comparing her writings and use of sea imagery to the facts of her withdrawn existence sheds light on how Nietzsche's urges to set forth on uncharted moral waters cannot be embodied in real life, especially for women within patriarchal society.

In her collection of poems titled *Part One: Life*, Dickinson weaves a metaphor relating the human brain to elements of the natural world. The first two stanzas articulate her comparison:

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—  
For—put them side by side—  
The one the other will contain  
With ease—and you beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—  
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—  
The one the other will absorb—  
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

(Dickinson 632)

Here, Dickinson posits the human mind is the ultimate place where exploration can occur. There is no need to literally or figuratively travel in order to explore morality and individuality, for the true growth occurs within the self. She creates a sort of internalized version of Nietzsche's metaphor that manifests itself in her work. Instead of doing so in a plotline as in *Love in the Time of Cholera* or *The Awakening*, Dickinson uses the "figurative language of art and poetry to say possibly more about how mind (and brain) work than we have so far assumed" (Sielke 70). Rather than employ layers of meaning and complex metaphors to make her comparison as Nietzsche does, Dickinson simply and clearly states that "the brain is deeper than the sea," and consequently opens up much more room for possibility in understanding and employing the uncharted ocean of Nietzsche's writings as a literary device. Though the poem contains no explicit connections to sexuality, her own life in conjunction with her philosophical musings in the poem can fill in the pieces and

allow for connections between the two topics. Though New Critics may disapprove of this approach and its melding of biography and literary creation, most scholarly research acknowledges a profound connection between Dickinson's personal life and her poetry.

That said, *why* Dickinson chose to live a life as alienated from human contact as she did becomes rather clear: there is no greater place for exploration than within her own head. The external world contained almost nothing that her own psyche could not provide her—that is, except for love. At age thirty, she retreated into her home for the rest of her life and rarely connected with society again. She grew up in a church largely influenced by Puritan beliefs with a father who had a large (and extremely sexist) influence on the upbringing of his children. Within this oppressive culture at home and in the community Dickinson felt alienated, which was likely a huge contributing factor to her withdrawal. She resigned to her home in that thirtieth year wearing a white habit, a gesture so symbolically connected to virginity that her obsession with the minister Charles Wadsworth becomes all the more interesting. He was a married man and there is no evidence that they ever had an affair in spite of her obsession with him throughout her poetry, but he is a huge influence on her works, especially those written during her reclusive period. Though Wadsworth may not have even known about her love, Dickinson frequently describes him as her “Earthly lover” in her poems, many of which he was the subject. This unrequited love, coupled with her staunchly Puritan and sexually oppressive upbringing, may have led to her seclusion. She was unable to access sexual freedom and fulfillment in the physical world, and so resigned herself to a life of writing and solitude in order to create some sense of autonomy and exploration within the vast sea of her own brain. In this way, she was able to explore beyond her own, relatively small, lived experience.

Her poetry, specifically “The Brain—is wider than the Sky” reflects the reality of women’s historical oppression from a first-hand, lived experience. Her poems “employ eternity as a metaphor to grasp aspects of existence that remain unspeakable” (Sielke 70), much as Nietzsche attempts to do with his own metaphor of embarking upon the sea. But the gendered difference between their approaches to making the subliminal appear tangible speaks volumes about gender dynamics in philosophical musings, in literature, and in personal freedom. While Nietzsche encourages exploration of the self by actively embarking on the sea with a spirit of adventure, Dickinson turns the gaze inward, to the vastness of the mind. As a man Nietzsche has no obstacles to action or grand voyages, either mental or literal. Dickinson, contrarily, must operate within the confines of socially constructed female passivity, which manifests itself in her emphasis on personal, internal reflection. She does not have the option of a grandiose, externally-driven metaphor like Nietzsche does to explore godlessness and lack of morality. She must bring the sea into her being, into the mind, where she can there explore the same issues—though admittedly, in a less free and arguably less empowering way. The “vast sky” of her mind and the sky that expands above “the unchartered seas” that Nietzsche describes are one and the same, yet Dickinson is limited in her ability to manifest this vastness in the earthly world. Perhaps with both metaphors, the authors are merely trying to grasp and describe a feeling of vastness, of powerfulness, of self-discovery that cannot be articulated without connection to something larger and visual, like the ocean. The enormity and awe-inspiring potential for exploration and creation that accompanies questioning conventional modes of morality—like Nietzsche does outright in his works, and Dickinson does implicitly through her use of metaphor and in her personal life—creates spaces where sexual deviance and desire can be investigated and evaluated,

though in Dickinson's case, not necessarily acted upon. Much like in Chopin's novella, Dickinson's access to sexual deviance is limited by the alienating experience of womanhood.

### **Plath and Desire**

Sylvia Plath also grapples to reconcile personal identity exploration with social roles in a uniquely female-oriented manner. Again, her personal life provides insights into her poetry, and scholars acknowledge that since "Sylvia and Ted [Hughes] put their personal life on paper as literature, and a public has read the intricacies of its sexual politics, it is difficult if not impossible to avoid the biographical when analyzing Plath's man" in her poems (Hunter 49). Her widely-anthologized poem "Daddy" provides a poignant example of the intersection of her identities as a female, as a poet, as a daughter, and as a sexual being. In it, she describes her deceased father as having "a head in the freakish Atlantic/ Where it pours bean green over blue/ In the waters off beautiful Nauset/ I used to pray to recover you" (Plath 298). Plath longs to "recover" her father from the depths of ocean and of death where she lost him, for she "Was ten when they buried [him]" (Plath 299). He alone floats out in the uncharted sea of death, where she cannot venture while she is still alive—but also, perhaps cannot venture for other, more morally pertinent reasons.

There are certainly sexual undertones in "Daddy," ones that make her father's placement in the sea seem like a manifestation of Nietzsche's metaphoric relationship between the sea and moral deviance. Her father's head—a place of reason, of rationality—is at rest in the chaotic, deep, and unexplored sea, implying a desire to merge the head and rational thought with subconscious desires—a claim Freud would likely agree with. In her own life, Plath "in a broadcast once spoke of an Electra complex—a fascination with one's own father" (MacBeth 305). The Electra complex, however, goes beyond mere fascination and interest in

the father. It is the inverse of the Oedipus complex, which is overtly sexual in nature. As such, naming and owning her own Electra complex shows an awareness on Plath's behalf of her own socially condemnable fixation on her father. Additionally, she refers to her father in interviews as her "sea-god-muse," an interesting combination of words that reflects both Nietzsche's writings and Plath's own sexual desires. Classical conceptions of the muse depict it as a figure, usually female, who was "powerfully attractive and somehow unattainable" (Rietz 419) and who has a profound impact on the creator's art. In turn, the poet or artist's career is "thus built on sublimated desire" (Rietz 419). By aligning her father with—one she deliberately confines to the sea—the muse, she draws even more attention to her questionable obsession with her father in the years following his death and preceding her own.

It is something she struggles with throughout the poem, oscillating between calling her father a "bastard" and claiming "the villagers never liked you," while only a few lines later proclaiming that in his death he "bit her pretty red heart in two" (Plath 299). Plath's obsession with her father moves beyond that of a grieving child and more onto a fetishization of a man torn from her life at a vulnerable age, which consequently affected her development as a sexual adult woman. Even years later when she wrote the poem, the "tone suggests that the obsession has not in fact been fully sloughed off or lived through," and rather is one she must struggle to understand for the rest of her life (MacBeth 305). She is haunted by her inappropriate obsession with her father, and seems to acknowledge this inappropriacy by claiming his head resides in the "freakish Atlantic." The space of the sea and what it reflects in her own internal desires are both freakish deviations of societal norms and expectations. Her father was torn from her life too soon in his death, but also it is her *father*, not Plath

herself or the poem's female speaker, who is able to reside in the morally ambiguous sea. As a woman, rather than succumbing to the urges to explore uncharted moral waters (through her underlying sexual attraction to her father), she displaces these desires onto her deceased dad. As an adult male with much power in the patriarchy, Otto Plath's head in the sea serves as a stand-in for her own exploration and growth while she fearfully attempts to "recover" him from the liminal space and bring him back to the land of living, where both parties have more clear-cut societal roles.

The sexual undertones of her relationship with her deceased father and how this is displaced onto the sea come even sharper into focus when examining the context in which the poem was written. In her personal life, Plath was "abandoned by her husband" and "wrote 'Daddy' on the day she learned Ted Hughes had agreed to a divorce" (Hunter 51). She projected her spurned sexual desires for Hughes onto her deceased father in a period of grief, leading her to make "an eroticized, hateful construction of Otto Plath" (Hunter 53) in the poem. Her father is "an outsize statue in the sea" (Rietz 425) who is not only unattainable to her personally, but who has access to something she does not by existing out in the sexual and morally free space of the ocean. She projects her sexual desires out onto the statue-self (not the literal self) of her father, and by connecting him to this space she provides herself with an outlet to explore her sexually deviant fixation on her father that is inaccessible to her alone as a woman. The poem is one "of deep ambivalence" (Rietz 425) in regard to Plath's opinion of her father, but also reflects her internal ambivalence to her vaguely sexualized obsession with him and her desire to join him as a statue in the sea of freedom and exploration. Instead, she remains petrified and equivocating on the shore, unable to truly explore her underlying desires as Nietzsche would urge his readership to do. Like Edna and

Dickinson, Plath's journey of sexual exploration is one that a woman alone cannot achieve on the morally ambiguous sea, and thus must reconstruct Nietzsche's metaphor in a way that reflects the limitations of the female experience.

### **Ambiguity and the Sea**

While these female poets' works and Edna's reactions to her stifling life on the shore reflect the impossibility of women to embark upon Nietzsche's morally liminal sea, perhaps it is not simply gender that limits human beings from freely exploring their sexual morality and independence. Attempts to do so may be futile universally, for all human beings. Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* shows the most pristine embodiment of Nietzsche's image of the sea in relation to sexually deviant characters, and yet even in this instance his characters cannot escape the constraints of society. Little critical attention has been paid to Lefty and Desdemona's relationship, likely because studying Calliope, the novel's hermaphroditic main character, is already such a rich and nuanced topic. Yet Calliope's entire situation stems from the sexual digressions of her grandparents. Siblings Lefty and Desdemona, forced from their home in war-torn Smyrna, take up this opportunity of travel by sea to the United States to reinvent themselves as lovers. The possibility of an incestuous relationship began as early as adolescence for both Lefty and Desdemona, who try to suppress these desires and become anxious when they notice their attraction to one another. Lefty spends his days at a harem, where "the limbs of the prostitute become those of another woman" (Eugenides 32) as he fantasizes about his older sister. Desdemona, in turn, has dreams where "she and Lefty are children again (except they have adult bodies). They're lying in the same bed... They shift their limbs in sleep (and it feels extremely nice, how they shift, and the bed is wet)" (Eugenides 37) where her repressed sexual desire for her brother emerges from the

subconscious. A Freudian reading of these events would be quite obvious, but more interesting is how their once repressed desires manifest themselves and leads to a complete reinvention of identity when they take to the sea for the United States.

Eventually, they succumb to their sexual compulsions and playful affection turns much more intimate than “the usual displays of sibling affection...and announced a whole new message in the silent room” (Eugenides 39). Yet both parties feel immense shame after they have sex, and Desdemona even tries to revert to a socially acceptable sibling relationship. Lefty becomes angry with Desdemona “for rebuffing him, and angry with himself for being angry at her, because he knew she was right” (Eugenides 49). They acknowledge, if only internally, that their attraction is inappropriate and would be seen as reprehensible in the eyes of the community. It seems as if their incestual tryst may, in fact, never be acknowledged again if not for the invasion of Smyrna that causes them to flee for America.

When they board the boat and set forth upon the open sea, Lefty and Desdemona “watched the airy blanket” (Eugenides 64) of their homeland float away, and with it their identities float away as well. They pretend to be strangers who meet and fall in love on the boat, “seizing the opportunity of transatlantic travel to reinvent themselves” as a socially acceptable sexual pair (Eugenides 67). They set forth on the sea just as Nietzsche encourages, and decide for themselves that social mores about incest do not apply or matter—a realization that can only come with “the driving spirit...of self-transformation on the boat” where “Europe and Asia Minor were dead behind them,” along with their former selves and ways of being (Eugenides 68). The journey to the “new world for them means salvation” (Trendel 3) from their war-torn homeland, but also salvation from a life that is undesired but socially acceptable. Lefty and Desdemona’s sexual relationship may make the

average person recoil in disgust, but it is a life that they chose in their freedom, knowing full well its deviance and the potential social pitfalls, just as Nietzsche advocates. The incest, then “offers a hold on their genetic and historical inheritance” of social expectations, of roles, of morality, while “the journey stands as a metaphor for their passage through a middle space to a fresh, alien identity” (Shostak 394). The incest reflects their desire to live freely and deviantly, which they achieve, to a certain extent, by traversing the sea to America.

In this instance, the sea is more of a conduit to sexually deviant behaviour than an invitation to commit it in the first place. Lefty and Desdemona use the sea to flee the constraints of their old world, but still must conform to the norms of their destination, America, where incest is also socially unacceptable. Yet their choices are still crucial in understanding the prevalence and influence of the images of the sea on literature and literary characters, for in abandoning their former selves, Lefty and Desdemona are “aware that what happened now would become the truth” (Eugenides 75). They choose a truth and freedom that does not align with social values, but manage to hide their deviance by setting forth upon the sea and seizing the liminal space as an opportunity to finagle social expectations and personal desire. This careful manipulation of sexual standards by Lefty and Desdemona, on the open horizon of the ocean, is what allows them to create whole, happy, free selves in the New World, unlike Edna who must die, and Florentino and Fermina, who forever remain in the liminal realm. They find a balance between sexual and individual moral freedom by using the ambiguous sea as a conduit to normalizing their sexually deviant pairing. Eugenides draws the sea to the forefront in his “attachment to metaphors—hybridity, doubleness, the middle betweenness—to convey the utopian fantasy into the everyday” (Shostak 391). To a certain extent, Lefty and Desdemona do in fact bring their romantic

utopia to fruition, but cannot entirely escape the consequences of their attempts to make the liminal a reality.

Ironically enough, by reinventing themselves as a socially normative couple Lefty and Desdemona destine their grandchild to a life as a hermaphrodite, which comes with immense amounts of social backlash and uncertainty. Calliope learns of her hermaphroditism around puberty, and must abandon the known shores of a female existence in order to seek true self-actualization, just like Nietzsche advocates. Cal chooses to navigate a new sense of identity as male, for Foucault argues “sex is discursive and entirely constructed” (De Boever 45) and as such, is yet another instance where staying on the safe shores of known ways of being is detrimental to personal growth and freedom. Callie “experiences her sexuality as governed by social and cultural laws” (De Boever 52) for many years of her life, but is “in need of a new justice” (Nietzsche 208) that allows Cal to exist outside the oppressive constructs of the world. Cal even equates his own identity journey to the one his grandparents took by sea, and speaks of how “a ship didn’t carry me across the ocean...[but] I was becoming a new person too, just like Lefty and Desdemona, and I didn’t know what would happen to me in this new world” (Eugenides 443). The immense ambiguity of identity, though terrifying and infinite, is what allows Cal to find true freedom and authenticity in his life. Much like his grandparents, Cal must explore uncharted territories( which he describes using sea imagery) in order to mark a freedom from biological, social, and moral constraints in order to forge an identity and way of being for himself—an identity purely the result of his grandparent’s journey by sea.

Also notable is how even Lefty and Desdemona, with all their manipulation and reinvention of social expectations, are unable to entirely escape the forbidden reality of their

relationship. In old age as Lefty's dementia sets in, Desdemona prays that she "may die now. Before Lefty gets back to the boat" (Eugenides 268) and reveals to the true, familial roots of their union. She is aware that on some level, they have not actually fled the stigma of their incestual relationship, by existing in society with rules, behavioral codes, and expectations, judgment is unavoidable and true freedom is impossible. This is precisely the problem with the liminal and morally ambiguous space of the sea. It cannot truly exist in its pure, expansive, judgment free entirety in our world marred by social expectations and constructs. By choosing to take part in our restrictive world, Lefty and Desdemona cannot fully go forth on the awe-inspiring and terrifying open sea that Nietzsche describes. In this way, "no matter how generous and optimistic Eugenides' novel is, it demonstrates the virtual impossibility of such a 'third space'" of freedom from conventional notions of sexual morality" (Shostak 387). Through Lefty and Desdemona and the biological fate they bestow on Calliope, Eugenides "exposes the impasses in the politics of gendered and social identity that, in turn, highlight the distance between theory and practice" (Shostak 387) of exploring true moral freedom like Nietzsche advocates.

### **The Liminal as Impossible**

There is a crucial existential importance to this realization, one that has manifested itself in all three novels discussed though they vary in time, place, and content, as well as in the lives of emotionally and physically isolated female poets. It is impossible to wholly separate oneself from society and its expectations; our mere existence in the world makes the individual and the group inextricably linked, even as the sea beckons to the "unfortunate, exceptional man" whose desires are at odds with cultural values. Nietzsche offers, even encourages, a departure from such modes of existence, but feels that godlessness is what will

give way to moral ambiguity. Such a world, like the vastness of the ocean, would be overwhelmingly terrifying, but also overwhelmingly free—and with that freedom comes immense individual growth and happiness. The difficulty, then, comes in manifesting this freedom in the very world that oppresses personal moral individuation. In literary imagery and in Nietzsche's writings, no real solution is offered up on how to achieve this, which brings into question the possibility of being truly free at all. Literary attempts to utilize the liminal space of the sea in order to attain personal fulfillment seem often to fall just short of achieving their goal, due to the reality of inescapable social pressure and limitation. The nuanced connection between literary and philosophical uses of sea imagery points out a disparity between what individuals desire and what the world offers to them, shaping a critique of the current oppressive systems of morality to which we all ascribe.

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