LIFE FOR ART, AND ART FOR LIFE
Spinster Piano Teachers in The Work of Chopin, Welty, and Sandor

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I Beginnings

The first time I read Kate Chopin's "The Story of An Hour," I hated her. I was a college sophomore in an "Introduction to Literature," class and did not yet possess the skills for dissection I would gain from graduate English classes; and so I could not distance myself from characters or situations in the way my professor seemed to require of his students. Youth and modern sensibilities suggested to me that Mrs. Mallard was ridiculous. How foolish that she lived with a man she didn't love. How foolish that she hadn't made anything of her life, and that her only real freedom consisted of a few moments of staring out of a window on a spring day while she believed her husband to be dead. But my literature professor frequently divided us into discussion groups, and I ended up with a girl who adamantly defended Chopin and Mrs. Mallard, and helped me to understand the historical context surrounding the work. Because I liked this person's haircut and the clothes she wore, I listened. She talked like an English teacher—indeed what she told me had come straight from the mouth of her high school English teacher. "Women didn't have the same choices they have now," Catherine insisted. Had Mrs. Mallard left her husband, with whom she felt trapped, what else would she have done? Society would have shunned her. Her career options were limited. She most likely would have lived a sad life—one of isolation and poverty—in which the initial rush of freedom would have rapidly stilled. Perhaps, I felt, I was wrong in thinking of Mrs.
Mallard as weak and selfish. She is a feminist impulse, I decided. And yet this explanation felt too simple.

Fortunately, Chopin wasn't finished with Mrs. Mallard, or at least the idea of Mrs. Mallard. She would seek out broader canvases upon which to explore Mrs. Mallard's craving for freedom in its most pure and destructive form, and Mrs. Mallard’s sketchy desires would prove to be more than the frustrations of a petulant housewife.

Chopin's most stirring and well-known heroine, Edna Pontillier, came to me by way of a clearance bin at a bookstore. I admit that I bought the book mostly for its cover, just as I'd bought Catherine's insights due to her style. Chopin's ideas are adorned with similar loveliness. Her prose is clean but also sensual. Chopin writes of Edna:

She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her lawn sleeves above the wrists. Looking at them reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving the beach. She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm.

(20)

Perhaps because The Awakening offers a generosity of pacing that "The Story of an Hour" does not, I was able to enjoy Edna's descent or ascent (it may be viewed in both ways) into self-destructive freedom before I understood the terminus to which it would lead. Just as Edna was seduced by the concept of this freedom, I was seduced by her journey. In Beyond and Alone!: The Theme of Isolation in Selected Short Fiction of Kate Chopin, Katherine Anne Porter, and Eudora Welty, Hiroko Arima draws attention to Chopin's ability to win readers' involvement in an experience that should otherwise
repulse them: "The unhappiness and suicide of a woman with such affluence and leisure as Edna would have caused hardly any sympathy from ordinary readers, had it not been for Chopin's descriptive power and perceptive viewpoint as a writer" (45).

Though I loved The Awakening, as much as I had hated "The Story of an Hour," its close aroused a familiar sense of hatred. Though Edna had taken her own life, Madamoiselle Reisz seemed somehow responsible, though I didn’t understand how at the time. I knew this only by my feelings: Madamemoiselle Reiz, with her “rusty black lace,” and fake “violets,” cut through the light and color of the book like a black vein (44). Her dinginess and crazy Chopin playing had ruined the story, and somehow contributed to Edna’s suicide. Like many young women, I worshipped prettiness and mystery and did not understand that these things came to me by way of contrast. I did not understand that The Awakening, could not exist without Madamoiselle Reisz.

And I cannot know how, then, I would have reacted to Marjorie Sandor's, "Elegy for Miss Beagle," or Eudora Welty's, "June Recital." I wonder if I'd have detested Miss Beagle or Miss Eckhart as much as I detested Madamoiselle Reisz. Those damn spinster piano teachers. Why did they keep appearing in the work of writers I admired? But by that time, I’d lost some of my innocence–both as a person and, through MA coursework, as a reader. My feelings for superficially drab heroines were too complicated to allow for blind hate. Rather than dismiss them as I'd dismissed Madamoiselle Reisz, I felt ready and compelled to examine them in their dowdiness and isolation. Perhaps old maids in austere little apartments no longer terrified me because I had by then escaped their fate through marrying. Or perhaps the knowledge that Chopin herself had had a pleasant marriage made Edna's descent seem melodramatic. Or maybe I'd accepted these
characters because I'd convinced myself that they were more symbols than actualities—the symbolic significance of a lone woman given to art was far more attractive to me than an actual woman spending most of her time alone, playing the piano.

These characters haunt me. They are the shadow selves of any woman who finds herself divided between the nurturing of a family, and the nurturing of her imagination, just as this type of woman becomes a shadow self for Madamoiselle Reisz, Miss Eckhart, and Miss Beagle. But the idea of the piano teacher also transcends gender. A close examination of Chopin's work suggests that her concerns lie more with artistic freedom than early intimations of feminism. The role of "woman" is simply another entanglement along the way to becoming in full command of one's time, perception and being. Welty's work and sentiments, as expressed in interviews, would seem to correspond with the nature of this struggle. In her examination of Welty's "detestation" of her work being associated with the women's rights movement, Arima suggests that Welty does not concern herself with the plight of the female of her time so much as the plight of the individual (41). Marjorie Sandor's "Elegy For Miss Beagle," was inspired by Welty's "June Recital," and here too, though the story seems very much about being a woman, the implied questions—regarding how far one should carry her relationship with art, what it means to be an artist, and the paradoxical relationship between the inspiration for art and the isolation through which it must be born—affect all artists. In this essay, I am not concerned with solving what I believe to be an irresolvable complex, but rather intend to examine the way artists portray this complex in their work through the recurrent "piano teacher" figure, who in her marriage to art receives little, or relatively no material gain,
and acts as a catalyst for the heroines' transformations, or awakenings, in the following works.

II The apartment

It is typically rented and dingy. It smells funny. Inside of it the students or protégés become too intimate with the human substance of their teachers—the sweat and over-used furniture and unappetizing meals, the tangible stuff of poverty. To say that Madamoiselle Reisz, Miss Eckhart, and Miss Beagle share similar living spaces is an understatement.

Though Madamoiselle Reisz, technically, is not a piano teacher, she is certainly a teacher to Edna as fledgling artist, and absorbed by her love for music. Madamoiselle Reisz “always” chooses apartments “up under the roof . . . to discourage the approach of beggars, peddlers and callers,” and the open windows of her apartment let in “a good deal of soot and smoke,” as well as “light and air” (Chopin 83). And she keeps her belongings in a “rare old buffet, dingy and battered from a hundred years of use.” Her piano “crowds” the apartment (83). Miss Eckhart also rents, but, because she lives in an apartment attached to Snowdie McClain's house, has less privacy than Madamoiselle Reisz. The keys of Miss Eckhart’s piano always have a “little film of sweat” (Welty 38). And Miss Eckhart’s chair is “the kind of old thing most people placed by their telephones” (38). As Chopin emphasizes the dominance Madamoiselle Reisz's piano has over the rest of her living space, Welty writes that Miss Eckart’s piano is in the “very center,” of the room (39). Sandor emphasizes the piano by embedding it deep in the heart of the apartment. From the channel of Miss Beagle's “narrow kitchen” that smells of
“boiled egg and tinned vegetables,” Clara must pass through the beaded off section of the apartment and into what feels like a "cave" before she reaches the piano (46-48).

While Madamoiselle Reisz projects an air of mystery, she does not, with her open windows and contempt for society, project the sense of secrecy or sensuality that Miss Beagle and Miss Eckhart project. Madamoiselle Reisz is confident in her isolation--“the artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies,” she tells Edna--and the aforementioned description of her apartment reflects her resignation with the outside world (Chopin 85, 140). Though Edna brings the world with her into Madamoiselle Reisz's apartment, there is no evidence that this outside influence has exerted itself upon Reisz's living space. But Miss Eckhart and Miss Beagle share a beaded curtain that suggests an air of whimsicality and worldly pleasure. Miss Eckhart's curtain smells “faintly sweet,” and evokes images of “candy bottles,” and “licorice” (Welty 39). And Miss Beagle’s beads are “a gypsy’s curtain, a fortune-teller’s,” suggesting the aura of a traveler (Sandor 47). Unlike Madamoiselle Reisz, Miss Eckhart and Miss Beagle have failed to devote themselves totally to their music. Their personalities are tinged with a romanticism that renders them a little more human, more fragile--most evident in their struggle for dominance with their pupils--and this comes through in their desire to essentially separate their playing area from the rest of their apartments, and their failure to do so (beads cannot be walls).

In all three works, Beethoven is either present, or present in his absence. Miss Eckhart and Madamoiselle Reisz have busts of Beethoven in their playing areas and the narrator of “Elegy for Miss Beagle,” draws attention to the lack of a Beethoven bust in Miss Beagle’s playing area. The Beethoven bust, in its actuality, seems to progressively
disappear in these works. In *The Awakening*, the oldest work, Madamoiselle Reisz’s bust is “covered with a hood of dust” (Chopin 83). Miss Eckhart’s bust is “all softened around the edges. . . as if a cow had licked it” (Welty 39). And Miss Beagle’s studio is devoid of “chalk-white busts of Beethoven and Bach” (Sandor 49). Beethoven is important enough to be mentioned in each work, and yet he’s subtly challenged—he’s either dirty or “ licked” or purposefully absent. This phenomenon suggests multiple interpretations: a rebellion against the establishment, a renouncing of worldly ambition (Beethoven received some fame and success during his lifetime, while Madamoiselle Reisz, Miss Eckhart, and Miss Beagle practice their music in relative anonymity), or a comment on the patriarchal structure that both frustrates and acts as an impetus for the kind of life these women lead. For whichever reason, the bust, or lack of bust, enriches each character’s setting.

Other important objects—objects belonging to the pianists, and referred to more than once in each story—are Madamoiselle Reisz’s artificial violets, Miss Eckhart’s metronome, and Miss Beagle’s amber flasks. Madamoiselle Reisz’s fake violets attest to her lack of natural beauty—she has only the beauty of art—and lend a certain grossness to her person (the narrator mentions that despite Edna’s attraction to Madamoiselle Reisz, Edna also finds her person “offensive”). Miss Eckhart’s metronome represents power: it annoys her students yet it must remain on while they play. When Virgie Rainey refuses to play with the metronome on, the balance of power shifts. And when Miss Eckhart is apprehended for attempting to burn down Snowdie’s abandoned house, the metronome is knocked to the ground. Miss Beagle’s exotic amber flasks lend her person an air of sexuality and intrigue. These flasks also contribute to a shift of balance, in that Eva’s
sense that some “balance in the world has tipped,” follows the scene in which we encounter Clara lingering in Miss Beagle’s bathroom for the second time, examining the figures carved in amber, and contemplating their sensuality (Sandor 52).

In both *The Awakening*, and "Elegy," the apartment in which the piano teacher lives presents a choice or possibility to the narrator. Before Edna's first visit to Madamoiselle Reisz's Edna feels "unhappy," but doesn't "know why" (Chopin 79). To Edna, in the midst of this type of mood, "it did not seem worthwhile to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation. She could not work on such a day, nor weave fancies to stir her pulses and warm her blood" (79). In this state of depression she seeks out Madamoiselle Reisz. It is at Madamoiselle Reisz's, through a letter from Robert to Madamoiselle Reisz that Edna learns of Robert's continued interest in her. Madamoiselle Reisz's playing, coupled with Edna's reading of the letter from Robert, allows Edna to feel a passion for life again. Chopin writes, "Edna was sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her" (86). Confused over her affair with Alcee Arobin and her feelings for Robert, Edna again goes to Madamoiselle Reisz's apartment because, "there was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of [her] . . . senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (101). And it is at Madamoiselle Reisz's that Edna confesses, and perhaps realizes, her love for Robert. In "Elegy," the narrator's mother uses Miss Beagle as an example of the result of a choice—the choice to isolate oneself. Sandor writes:
a narrow kitchen, a tragic life—that's what she tells me now, how a
kitchen can tell the whole story. It's the stale smell of boiled egg and
tinned vegetables, the single saucepan poised in the dish rack, the stained
two-burner with a tiny oven beneath. She sighs as she says this and gives
me a serious look, as if it's her duties to tell me what my choices are. (46)

Here the narrator intimates that Miss Beagle's solitude is not something that has
been forced upon her, not a fate, but something she has sought out; in the same manner
Edna, who has both societal, financial and familial security seeks to endanger herself and
finally sever her relationship to this security.

III. Contrast & The Struggle For Dominance

In each of these stories, significant amounts of tension arise from character foils.
In The Awakening it first seems as if Edna’s foil is Madame Ratignolle, “the bygone
heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams” (Chopin 26). We are told that Edna
is not a “mother-woman,” while Madame Ratignolle obviously is (26). But the true foil
here stems from a juxtaposition of Madame Ratignolle and Madamoiselle Reisz.
Madame Ratignolle has many children. Madamoiselle Reisz has none. Madame
Ratignolle has physical beauty. Madamoiselle Reisz does not. Madame Ratignolle is
sensual. Madamoiselle Reisz seems to have no real interest in romantic relationships
with men or women. Both women, at some point in the story, take Edna’s hand. Chopin
writes, “Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pointellier, which was near
her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She
even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, ‘Pauvre
cherie’ (35). Madamoiselle Reisz’s touch is nearly opposite, cold and busy rather than warm and comforting. Chopin writes that Madamoiselle Reisz executed “a sort of double-theme . . . without warmth” on the back of Edna’s palm. While Madame Ratignolle "is keeping up her music on account of the children," and "because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home," Madamoiselle Reisz plays for herself, with the first song she plays for Edna being aptly titled, "Solitude" (Chopin 43, 45). Edna is caught between these women and the types of living they represent. Her suicide represents her inability to fully take on either role. She is too sensual too live like Madamoiselle Reisz, and it is difficult to determine whether her relationship with Robert has made her hear in Madamoiselle's Reisz's playing a catalyst for transformation, or vice versa; most likely both the music and her feelings for Robert act as one. But unlike Madame Ratignolle she cannot adequately deal with the natural results of a woman's sensuality–children. Chopin writes, "She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them" (37). And Edna tells Madamoiselle Reisz, "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" (68). With these lines, Chopin intimates that for Edna–who separates her physical life from her sense of self–the suicide at the end of the book is both an act of self-anihilation and self-preservation. In the end, Edna is drawn to solitude as the ultimate freedom and the ocean that draws her symbolizes this. Without Madamoiselle Reisz and Madame Ratignolle and the weight of their contrasting natures, we could not understand or appreciate the more amorphous quality of Edna's. Madamoiselle Reisz is significant not only because she helps stir Edna's "awakening," but because she
demonstrates the possibility of a woman being alone with her art within society, which for Edna isn't enough.

In “Elegy for Miss Beagle,” Eva serves as a foil for Miss Beagle. To her friends, Eva says, “You should see the teacher, poor thing. Lives on canned peas, an egg once in a while for protein, no fresh fruit! No family” (Sandor 52). Eva has family and friends, an established household. The large gift basket Eva sends to Miss Beagle suggests bounty and relative wealth, and Miss Beagle’s admission that she’ll take it with her into the “next world,” suggests her inability to adapt to Eva’s world (47). Eva knows that sending her daughter to Miss Beagle’s grave presents an “indelible lesson.” Eva “knew” that a “lonely death” should not be “romanticized” (60). Like Edna, Clara finds herself caught between two worlds. This is most evident in the story’s kissing scenes.

The first kiss occurs between Miss Beagle and Clara—“a kiss on the nape of her [Clara’s] neck” (Sandor 54). Clara seems to have an orgasm shortly after. Sandor writes, “why is down there a hollow bloom of light, a sudden cave where before there was none" (54). The narrator also tells us that Clara experiences this feeling at other unusual times, “whenever she puts her weight on a wobbling step; when she climbs a lookout for a panoramic view; on the one day in her life she stood too close to a different man . . .” (54). Clara’s orgasm seems to originate more from her question “sent out beyond herself,” and Miss Beagle’s approval of it, and less (if at all) from sexual feelings towards Miss Beagle (54). Sandor says:

Miss Beagle's kiss is linked to her art, and this is not about the blossoming of a young lesbian, or the gesture of an older one. This is too flat. . . . And anyway, Miss Beagle's a mystery to me, an outcast. No categories for her!
I guess I was trying to show a young woman (Clara) whose sexual and artistic instincts are just beginning to come to life up against the pot-lid of her mother's fears, and above that, the small-town culture's fears of different-ness. Somehow in this cauldron, the beginnings of sexual awakening (her awareness that "down there" has a life seemingly of its own!) is connected to the jolt of transcendence through art. And Miss Beagle gives her the tenderest of touches to acknowledge that shared, private experience of great possibility in both realms, and the kid has a tiny moment where she "recognizes it for what it is"--which you can totally believe and take literally--before convention and social fears of being outcast take over again. A shared experience of real art is not only transcendent, but transient.

The second kiss, occurring between Clara and “the boy” is a more traditional sort of kiss--the kind of kiss Eva might tsk tsk at, but will inevitably embrace as Clara grows older (57). The narrator does not tell us the boy’s name. In his presence Clara becomes “a Garbo, a Dietrich” (57). Miss Beagle steps outside and Clara orders the boy to kiss her “quickly” like he “means it” (58). She is driven to take this action by the “mere thought” of Miss Beagle’s unstylish shoes (58). Though Eva is not physically involved in this kiss, she’s still there, strong as ever in a sense. The tradition she represents and her disapproval of Miss Beagle’s lifestyle shine through these images. By kissing the boy, Clara is able to both reenact and correct her peculiar experience with Miss Beagle.

In “June Recital,” Cassie is a foil for Virgie. Mentioned previously, the story of Virgie and Miss Eckert come by way of Cassie’s reflections. Early on, when Cassie
spots Virgie in the old house, Cassie retreats from the window because she doesn’t want “to catch sight” of Virgie; she “especially” doesn’t want to be seen by Virgie (Welty Golden 36). Later we learn that “Cassie was so poor in music and Virgie so good (the opposite of themselves in other things!),” and that Virgie was a “secret love” and “hate” to Cassie (38). The audience “clapped more loudly” for Cassie than they did for Virgie, and they clapped “more loudly still” for Jinny Love Stark, one of the younger, and obviously less accomplished pupils (38). In all three stories, we glimpse this lack of sincerity, the proper and traditional favored over artistic genius; excellence dismissed or rendered trivial. Cassie is a good girl who tries her best, and it is she people want to reward. Virgie has talent, as well as contempt for society, and will be awarded nothing by the townspeople, with the exception of Miss Eckhart, the freak show, the outsider—the one Cassie will never please. Because the story is told from Cassie's perspective, the relationship between Virgie and Miss Eckhart is rendered in a light both mysterious and critical.

Like Clara and Miss Beagle in "Elegy,” Virgie and Miss Eckhart's shared love for music creates an awkward sense of passion between them. When Virgie arrives for her lessons she lets the front wheel of her bike, "bang into the latticework" of the house, and at this sound Miss Eckhart would, "put her hand to her breast, as though she felt the careless wheel shake the very foundation of the studio" (41). Virgie "would come through the beads carrying a Magnolia bloom which she had stolen," carrying it, "like a hot tureen" and present it to Miss Eckhart (40, 41). Cassie points out the impropriety of this, saying that neither Virgie nor Miss Eckhart "knew better," and that "Magnolias smelled too sweet and heavy for just after breakfast" (41). For the rest of Cassie's lesson
Miss Eckhart behaves as if Virgie isn't there, despite the fact of her holding the magnolia bloom, and its scent, which is "filling the room" (41). Welty understood the powerful significance of objects in a narrative. In a review of Virginia Woolf's, "A Haunted House and Other Stories," Welty writes of Woolf's ability to endow objects with meaning: "[T]he purpose of her 'still-life' technique is to say something always about the human being, the human world; the objects belong to someone, and are telling you, though without narrative, something of human thought and passion, as if even objects must speak of this" (Writer’s Eye 27).

Welty might as well have been writing of her own work. Because Cassie, a girl widely respected and admired within Morgana, so easily understands that it isn't correct of Virgie to bring in the magnolia blossom, or for Miss Eckhart not to notice its incorrectness, it is likely that the rest of the town would criticize this gesture; thus the sentiment that passes between Miss Eckhart and Virgie feels more intimate and sets them apart from the collective. Through the exchange of the blossom, we understand that they are exchanging other things that the general population would not grasp the meaning of.

Just as Clara vacillates between sharing passion with Miss Beagle, and feeling the need to rebel against her, Virgie hurts and attempts to dominate Miss Eckhart. As she uses a magnolia blossom to communicate the affection between Virgie and Miss Eckhart, Welty uses another object – a metronome (as mentioned briefly in the previous section)– to communicate Miss Eckhart's tyranny over the other students, and Virgie's ability to overturn Miss Eckhart's authority. From Cassie's perspective, Welty writes, "When Virgie began 'taking,' she was the one who made things evident about Miss Eckhart, her lessons, and all . . . there was a little weak place in her, vulnerable, and Virgie Rainey
found it and showed it to people" (Golden 45). All of the students know that Miss Eckhart keeps her metronome in a safe and regards it as her prized possession. Though it annoys the students, they fear Miss Eckhart enough to refrain from protest. But Virgie rebels:

Virgie . . . one day when the metronome was set going in front of her – Cassie was just leaving–announced simply that she would not play another note with that thing in her face . . . As time went on, Virgie Rainey showed her bad manners to Miss Eckhart still more, since she had won about the metronome. (46)

Here again, because Welty relates this incident from Cassie's perspective, the contrast between Cassie's and Virgie's characters creates a layered experience. Cassie feels some pity for Miss Eckhart, while Virgie seems pleased to have broken her. Also, through Cassie's fascination with Miss Eckhart and Virgie's relationship, the reader is consistently reminded of Cassie's jealousy. Before the lessons, Cassie already sensed something special about Virgie, "her secret love, as well as her secret hate," and only by observing what happens between Miss Eckhart and Virgie does Cassie begin to understand Virgie as an artist, as well as art itself (43-44). Near the end of the story, Cassie concludes:

Both Miss Eckhart and Virgie Rainey were human beings terribly at large, roaming on the face of the earth. And there were others of them—human beings, roaming, like lost beasts. Into her head flowed the whole of the poem she had found in that book. It ran perfectly through her head, vanishing as it went, one line yielding to the next, like a torch race. All of
it passed through her head, through her body. She slept, but sat up in bed once and said aloud, "Because a fire was in my head," Then she fell back unresisting. She did not see except in dreams that a face looked in; that it was the grave, unappeased, and radiant face, once more and always, the face that was in the poem. (96)

IV. *Music and sexuality*

In each of these stories, music serves as a catalyst for the protagonist's transformation, or enlightenment, and so the piano teacher's role comes near to that of a prophet. The piano teacher shows a new world—the world of art—to her protégé, and through the teacher the protégé sees both the value and cost of living in such a world. Edna’s appreciation of Mademoiselle Reisz’s playing is inextricably tied to her awakening. Chopin writes: “The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier’s spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth” (45).

As previously mentioned, Robert’s letters and his acknowledgement of his feelings for Edna come by way of Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna reads his letters while Mademoiselle Reisz plays and through this coupling Chopin binds Edna’s sexual and artistic awakening.

Like Edna, Clara’s artistic enlightenment is linked with her sexuality. In the beginning of the story, Clara suspects her father has a “nasty sex-disease;” next Clara, at
Miss Beagle’s, finds flasks decorated with sensual carvings; then the narrator jumps forward a year in time and describes a time when Clara allows a boy to touch “the edge of her brassiere,” and says that she realizes, “from this little touch to the vast terror of a man unzipping his pants there is no distance at all” (Sandor 45, 48). And, as already mentioned, Miss Beagle kisses Clara, the kiss resulting in Clara’s first orgasm (Sandor 54). The kiss comes about because of a question Clara poses about the ending of a musical piece—“she’s almost sorry when it comes back so small and peaceful,” the narrator tells us, and then says that Clara voices this concern to Miss Beagle—and so the kiss comes about because of the music (54). Virgie Rainey makes love to her sailor-boyfriend inside the abandoned house in which she once took lessons with Miss Eckhart. Welty writes of Virgie, “She looked like a tomboy but it was not the truth. She had let the sailor pick her up and carry her one day, with her fingers lifting to brush the leaves. It was she that had showed the sailor the house to begin with, she that started him coming” (24). While Virgie and her lover tease and then hold one another in the upstairs room, Miss Eckhart, old, deranged and wandering about town, enters the house and begins to play Fur Elise.

Though music seems to inform Edna’s, Clara’s, and Virgie’s sexuality, and the states into which the pianists enter when they play may be compared with the same sense of abandonment brought about by sexual intercourse, the piano teachers themselves—as they perform—appear disturbing and cold. When Madamoiselle Reisz plays piano, “her body” settles “into ungraceful curves and angles” that give “it an appearance of deformity” (Chopin 83). When Miss Eckhart plays her face loses its identity. Welty writes that her skin “flattened and drew across her cheeks, her lips changed. The face
could have belonged to someone else—not even to a woman, necessarily. It was the face a mountain could have, or what might be seen behind the veil of a waterfall” (Welty 56-57). And when Clara plays from her soul, she knows, by looking at Eva, that her appearance has changed: “my mother knew suddenly that she looked ugly and crazy, that her mouth was slightly open, her eyes were roving blankly over the keys,” the narrator tells us (Sandor 57). The piano teachers continuously crave a relationship with something inhuman—with the sublime—and the students understand on some level that this kind of relationship is always rejected by society. Hiroko Arima, in analyzing the first line of Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina,”—“All happy families resemble one another; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”—as it applies to her study of isolation in the work of Chopin, Welty, and Porter, writes:

If this axiomatic beginning of the world-famous novel is true, the statement by Tolstoy may well be the reason for serious novels and stories to have, at least some, or a great number of, “unhappy” developments and elements, because writers are always interested in creating unique experiences in their writings. (91)

One might conclude that this statement applies to music, and to the playing of music, as well. When Edna first hears Madamoiselle Reisz’s music, she is not happy so much as hyperaware. This awareness, which excites her and compels her more than any other feeling leads ultimately to her premature death. In each of these stories, Edna, Clara, Virgie, as well as Cassie, understand that while their teachers, in giving themselves to their music, possess some element of greatness, it is a greatness that cannot be had
without pain and isolation, and they know that choosing this life would, in effect, mean that they chose isolation—a choice that always marks the rejection of some form of love.

Ultimately, the students reject their teachers and in effect reject the kind of relationship the teachers have with art. At the same time, the students are unable to fully accept the traditional roles that these stories present as alternatives. Of the three students, Edna Pontillier meets the most dramatic end. In the last chapters of the story, she goes to visit Madame Ratignolle, who is dying, and from whom she receives the reminder of the life from which she’s trying to extricate herself: “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (Chopin 135). And when Edna swims out into the water so far that she knows she won’t be able to swim back, she thinks of “Leonce and the children,” but also hears Mademoiselle Reisz’s voice mocking her, “And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies” (140). She cannot reconcile herself to either the lonely life of Madame Reiz, or the family-centered life of Madame Ratignolle.

In, "June Recital," Virgie Rainey does nothing more with her talents than play "for the picture show" in town for "six dollars a week" (Welty 36). She brings her lover to the abandoned house in which her greatness, now diminished by a fairly common adulthood, was once acknowledged by Miss Eckhart, mingling sexual longing with a longing for a past self. The house is finally set afire by a demented Miss Eckhart, ending even Virgie's ability to have love affairs there. And because Welty revisits Virgie's character in another story, "The Wanderers," we know that Virgie comes to view her potential for greatness—for being an artist—as something inextricably bound to Miss Eckhart. Welty predictably and magnificently uses an object to illustrate this point, the
object itself having its own story—that of the myth of Perseus and Medusa. The myth comes by way of one of Miss Eckhart's prized pictures from Europe. Miss Eckhart tells Virgie that the story of Perseus and Medusa is like the story of Siegfried and the Dragon. Welty writes:

Miss Eckhart, whom Virgie had not, after all, hated—had come near to loving, for she had taken Miss Eckhart's hate, and then her love, extracted them, the thorn and then the overflow—had hung the picture on the wall for herself. She had absorbed the hero and the victim and then, stoutly, could sit down to the piano with all Beethoven ahead of her. With her hate, and with her love, and with the small gnawing feelings that ate them, she offered Virgie her Beethoven. She offered, offered, offered—and when Virgie was young, in the strange wisdom of youth that is accepting of more than is given, she had accepted the Beethoven, as with the dragon's blood. That was the gift she had touched with her fingers that had drifted and left her. (276)

As Virgie's gift leaves her, as she realizes that the teacher as much as the music is indeed the "gift," so does Clara understand what she loses with the death of Miss Beagle. Also understood is the cost of being like Miss Beagle—emphasized by Eva's warning—and the knowledge that the connection Clara shares with Miss Beagle will be repressed, something she will understand when she's older, as Virgie comes to an understanding of her relationship with Miss Eckhart, and the loss of some spark of greatness, of self-loss, that is permanent. Sandor writes:
Still, Eva never neglected anyone, not even the dead, and she watched her daughter more closely after that, too—until my mother gave up music and got engaged. But for all the years before Eva saw her safely married, she sent my mother to the synagogue cemetery on the anniversary of Kristallnacht to leave a vase of roses on Miss Beagle's grave. The first time Eva simply stood at the cemetery gate and pointed my mother in the right direction. After that, Eva sent her alone, knowing that even the smallest act teaches an indelible lesson. Telling me this, my mother gives a brittle laugh. "My God," she says, "I could get there even now—I could get there in my sleep." Her eyes are bright with grief as she stops talking, and I follow her in silence all the way out to the far fenceline, to the margin reserved for solitaries and suicides, far away from the family plots. (61)

Because these stories are about art, and because their Mandala-like designs allow the reader to see the artist's journey with a variety of tonal qualities and from a variety of perspectives, and the way in which these perspectives overlap, the stories are, in the end, for all their tragedy, harmonious creations—brilliant acts of balance against the music that unsettles the characters in each. In Chopin's story, the student is sacrificed, finding harmony only through ending the dichotomy that exists within her by ending her life, and in Welty's and Sandor's stories the teacher is sacrificed so that the student may be forced to take-in the full meaning of her life, and through it become aware of the dichotomy that lives inside themselves, which they are able to reconcile because of the sacrifice of the teacher. Stories about art also become stories about the act of writing them, and, in
effect, their writers. Does it matter that Chopin sacrifices the student, while Sandor and Welty sacrifice the teachers? While history tells us that The Awakening, in many ways ruined Chopin's career, causing plans for publication of her next story collection to be canceled, it also tells us that "June Recital," is regarded by many as one of Welty's most significant creations—the story that solidifies her reputation as a master of the story form—and that as this paper is being written Sandor's, "Elegy For Miss Beagle," is a part of a soon-to-be-published anthology, and part of a collection for which Sandor won The National Jewish Book Award.

Regardless of what is and is not sacrificed within and for The Awakening, "June Recital," and "Elegy For Miss Beagle," the childless, unmarried piano teacher emerges as a perfect vessel through which to explore the nature of art as a catalyst for both isolation and connection. As the piano teacher is loved and hated, outcast and sought out, so is the music she plays, and the potential for greatness she stirs within her students.
Works Cited


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