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ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

**Woman's Revolt: Revolt in *The House of Mirth* and *The Awakening***

(Vzpouřa ženy: Vzpouřa v *Domu radovánek* a *Probuzení*)

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Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):

**doc. Erik Sherman Roraback, D. Phil (Oxon)**

Zpracovala (autor):

**Václav Kyllar**

Studijní obor (Subject):

**Anglistika – Amerikanistika** (English and American Studies), Politologie (Political Science)

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## Abstract

In my bachelor's thesis, I would like to research the subject of woman's revolt in late 19th-century and early 20th-century American women prose. I have been prompted to do this by a series of inspiring lectures on American literature provided to me by Charles University and especially by those discussing the work of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton. The arguably most famous works of these authoresses—namely *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*—deal with a woman's revolt against the patriarchal structures that are oppressing them. Their revolts succeed only to a varying degree and what is most important, they all end in the death of the main protagonist. Such a price for a revolt against the patriarchal rules made me wonder about a couple of problems involved in the relationship between women of late 19th and early 20th century and their society at large.

Firstly, I would like to explore the nature of these revolts—who was rebelling against what, why did they rebel and how? Secondly, I would like to answer the question, if the revolt that the heroines of the previously mentioned books succeeded and if not, if it was even possible to succeed (giving the prevailing patriarchal ideology of that time)? My objective is to provide sufficient answers to these questions. The core of my argument and thesis is that there was a very high price, for women living during the turn of the last century, for revolting against the patriarchal institutions, often leaving them no room for a meaningful and enjoyable life in their community and leading them to various neuroses, in the better case, and to death, in the worse. I will show this on a close reading of the two above mentioned books and present my views in accordance with the broader theoretical discussion of the topics.

My approach to the work will be mainly influenced by feminist and psychoanalytical criticism with figures such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Toril Moi (among others) providing the theoretical background for my work. Other purely feminist and psychoanalytical writing will also serve me in my efforts.

So far I have managed to read *The Awakening*, and *The House of Mirth*, a large number of peer-reviewed essays discussing these works, the principal works associated with psychoanalytical or feminist thought as well as some feminist essays and books related to my thesis. There is more than enough material available for my work. One of the severe obstacles for my research might be the variety of sources and their topics.

*Key words:*

- Revolt
- Patriarchy
- Identity
- Kate Chopin
- Edith Wharton
- Women's American Prose

## Abstrakt

V své bakalářské práci se pokusím prozkoumat téma revolty v ženami psané americké próze pozdního 19. a raného 20. století. Byla mi k tomu inspirací řada přednášek o americké literatuře, zejména těch pojednávajících o díle Kate Chopin a Edith Wharton, které mi poskytla Karlova Univerzita. Bez pochyb nejznámější díla těchto autorek—nejmě *Probuzení* a *Dům radovánek*—pojednávají o revoltě žen proti patriarchálním strukturám, které proti nim stojí. Jejich revolty jsou úspěšné jen do jisté míry a obě končí smrtí hlavní protagonistky. Taková cena za revoltu proti pravidlům patriarchální společnosti mě přiměla zamyslet se nad několika problémy týkajícími se vztahu mezi ženami pozdního 19. a raného 20. století a společnostmi, ve které žily. Nejdříve bych chtěl prozkoumat charakter těchto revolt—kdo se bouřil proti čemu, proč se bouřily a jakým způsobem? Následně bych chtěl zodpovědět otázku, jestli hdinky zmíněných knih ve své revoltě uspějí nebo ne a zdali je to vůbec možné (bereme-li v potaz převládající patriarchální ideologii oné doby). Mým záměrem je poskytnout dostačující odpovědi na tyto otázky. Jádrem mého argumentu a teze je, že pro ženy žijící na přelomu minulého století byla cena za vzpouru proti patriarchálním institucím velmi vysoká a mnohdy nezanechávala místo na smysluplný a příjemný život v dané komunitě. Dále tato vzpoura mohla vést v lepším případě k mnohým neurózám a v případě horším až ke smrti. Pokusím se to dokázat na pozorném čtení dvou již zmíněných knih a prezentovat svá zjištění v souladu s širší teoretickou diskuzí kolem těchto témat.

Můj přístup k práci bude ovlivněn převážně feministickou a psychoanalytickou kritikou a osobnostmi jakými jsou (mimo jiné) Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray a Toril Moi, které mé práci poskytují teoretické základy. Další čistě feministické a psychoanalytické texty také poslouží mému úsilí.

Doposud jsem přečetl *Probuzení* a *Dům radovánek* a podstatné množství akademických esejí, které se těmito texty zabývají, hlavní práce spjaté s psychoanalytickou a feministickou kritikou a také eseje a monografie související s mou tezí. Zdrojů pro mou práci je víc než dost.

Jednou ze závažných překážek mého výzkumu může být různorodost zdrojů a jejich široké zaměření.

*Klíčová slova:*

- Revolta
- Patriarchát
- Identita
- Kate Chopin
- Edith Wharton
- Ženská americká próza



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# 1 Introduction

From our point of view of the 21st century, it is clear that the rise of feminism during the second half of 20th century was not just a temporary and isolated outcry, but a cultural and political wave that changed the very foundations of our culture. The process of reexamination of our cultural history is still active, and the works of art that were salvaged by feminist and gender critics is fully integrated into our cultural canon. Feminist classics have pervaded school curriculums, literary canons, and social awareness and it is hard to imagine any of them without the presence of *Jane Eyre*, *The Awakening* or the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Numerous female writers who wrote about their daily struggles or tried to use their voice to comment on the state of society were silenced by the patriarchal values and the history these values wrote only to be rediscovered by the last few generations of feminist critics to whom they served as role models and inspiration in their work. Their struggle inspired and encouraged later generations of female writers, and artists and their lives gave hope to women who could not fully express themselves publicly because of their gender.

The lives of these feminist martyrs have been thoroughly studied and written about, but many of their biographies show a placid life without violence, death or any suggestion of heroic revolution. The upheaval and subversive power of writers such as Kate Chopin or Emily Dickinson was not in their day-to-day lives, but in their art. Specifically, the act of artistic writing gave them a new space for a certain kind of rebellion and for an expression of feelings and longings that were not possible to satisfy in the constricted patriarchal society of the US. Thus in many cases, we can see the revolt against patriarchy brought about by the imagination of women and by the creative act of writing as opposed to the violent act of political revolution often associated with political change. Every authoress has done so in her very own way and voice subsequently leaving the dynamics of her revolt different from that of her fellow writers. At the same time, we may find great similarities in the anatomy of revolt as constructed by some of the key feminist writers in American history—namely in Edith Wharton or Kate Chopin.

There have been innumerable articles, essays, and criticisms written on these authoresses and their work. This interest is easily explained by their mutual similarities that go beyond their common era, gender and topics they tackled reaching far into the very fabric of their art. Our inquiry into principal works of Edith Wharton or Kate Chopin (*The House of Mirth* and *The Awakening*) will take advantage of the research that was done on their work, but we will try to explore a new area of meaning within their work that has not been subjected to an independent research project as of yet. Namely, we will analyze the shape and inner dynamics of revolt in the before mentioned works and how their statement might influence our reading of their socio-cultural surroundings or the subsequent feminist discourse sprouting out of them. For this to happen, we must first provide a brief introduction to the time, space and lives that produced these works and their standing within the broader literary and cultural landscape.

Furthermore, we will analyze the texts themselves and provide an outline of the institutions of patriarchy as they are presented in them. Our primary concern is their inner dynamics and their interaction with the heroines of the respective novels. In the following, we will try to understand how they managed to deal with their limitations and to what extent can we, as readers, learn from their situation.

## **2 Contexts**

The conditions we live in have undoubtedly seen an unprecedented change for the better with the onset of the 21st century, especially as far as equality and equal rights go, but also in the general atmosphere in politics, culture and slowly even on an everyday workplace. This can be said almost in general for the whole Western world and the events of the last two years with movements such as #MeToo show both the depth and width to which these changes resonated but also the fragility of these victories for equality. Feminist ideas are more than ever interconnected with some of the outlets of mainstream media and politics which can be seen as a result of continuous lobbying on the side of feminists and the general acceptance of feminist ideas to such a degree that they became an integral part of the politically correct language. At the same time, we see, now more than ever, how fragile these achievements are as the rise of fascism, intolerance, hate-speech, and the reactionary tendencies (including, at its heart, sexism) flood the media, politics and our public space.<sup>1</sup> Precisely at a time when great victories for the feminist cause were won all over the globe, we see the fickle nature of these achievements, and even more so, we may (maybe for the first time since the Second World War) realize now that they are far from being irreversible.

The reason to believe that the feminist struggle was reaching its zenith and final goal together with the coming of “the End of History,” in the same way that Francis Fukuyama described the Western liberal democracy as the final point of human political evolution, may have been caused by an oversimplification of the problem feminism tackles. Is it merely enough to make the wages for men and women equal? To stop the sexual and political repression by passing laws that clearly define the instances where we can encounter them and how to, in turn, suppress and eliminate them for good? The common day understanding of the feminist struggle, that inevitably came to prominence in the broader social spectrum with the appropriation of feminism by the mainstream media and liberal politicians might see these steps as a final goal on its own.

The feminist ideas of gender equality made in the past decade have made a tremendous progress. However, even after making all this progress and being acknowledged as the right

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Day, “The rise of 'retro-sexism' – and what we can do about it,” *Glamour*, 6 Feb 2017 <<https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/the-rise-of-retro-sexism>> 13 Dec 2018.

direction in which we, as a world society represented by such worldwide organizations as United Nations, should be heading, the final results are still at threat. Some of the newly emerging cultural and political powers are in direct opposition to all the liberal values that are represented by feminism and to understand why all of these values are again under threat, we have to move beyond a simple reading of feminism.

Fortunately enough, there has been a multitude of writers and thinkers who acknowledged this problem and tried to provide a complex, thorough and daring interpretation of the feminist struggle. The reading that will be presented here will address and draw on a number of these thinkers, many of whom view the feminist problematic through the lens of deconstruction or psychoanalysis. These additional layers of awareness disclose the problematic nature of our present predicament. Our objects of inquiry—*The House of Mirth* and *The Awakening*—are perfect material for an analysis of the complicated power structures at play between women and the society they inhabit and hopefully, these examples will also indicate more general truths that transcend gender boundaries about our society and culture.

The crux of our work here is the struggle between an individual (in this case a woman) and the society that works against our heroines and tries to limit, check and mold them against their will and pleasure. The societal tendency that tries to control them will be here summed up under the term of patriarchy and will be after that discussed in greater detail.

However, what interests us most is the anatomy of the revolt against patriarchy. In other words, what can we learn from the two already mentioned texts about the struggle against patriarchy and the fight for personal freedom? Furthermore, we will assert to what extent the strategies of revolt present in our books succeed, and if the texts provide any viable path to freedom and self-discovery. Questions such as “Did Edna Pontellier find her own space outside of patriarchy or did she struggle in vain?” or “Whether the death of Lily Bart was her only way out of her predicament?” will surely be familiar to anyone who dealt with the criticism of our books as they are essential to them and cannot be omitted.

## 2.1 American society of the Gilded Age

The texts we are working with are primarily concerned with American society—as we can hardly speak of a fully unified society with a singular set of social norms, we instead mean the plurality of different communities that later came to be viewed as exemplary for different regions and social strata of the US—and its effect on the American individual. Both texts were written and published within a small range of six years, and the reason for their preoccupation with the social issues is no surprise when we consider the social and literary history of the fin-de-siècle period of America.

The fascination with the shackles that bind us to our fellow citizens and make us forget ourselves for an illusion of respectability and praiseworthiness give these novels the edge that makes them critically valuable even to this day. However, the seeming similarity of these texts and the environment that nurtured them can easily overshadow all the crucial differences separating and individualizing these books. Especially when seen from the comparative stance and with the historical and cultural background of their origin and source can we appreciate the differing testimonials of American society that they provide us. A middle-class woman living in the multicultural New Orleans finds herself under the social and cultural pressure of society just as much as the promising socialite in the upper-class New York, but the way in which they are pressured and, of course, the way in which they can oppose this pressure or succumb to it is crucial for our understanding of the multifaceted threat of patriarchy that threatened and, arguably, still threatens America. Do Edna and Lily find themselves in the same position but under different circumstances, or is the only thing they share a gender inscribed to them by their society? Moreover, to what extent can we generalize the similarity of their predicament, if there is any at all? These are some of the questions that can help us with both our reading of these novels and we can believe that these questions are essential to any successful comparison of these novels when accounted for with the central problem of feminism (present and past) in mind.

The society of New Orleans and Louisiana and its history is even more complicated and entangled than that of most of the other communities in the US as it is comparatively highly localized with particular influences that left the rest of the US unscathed by their touch. The geographical factors made the area opportune for early colonization and the setting up of New Orleans in 1718 signaled the beginning of a long period of settling—first by the French and later by the Spanish colonizers until it was, a hundred years from its settlement, purchased by the Americans and integrated into the US.<sup>2</sup> All the powers that held their sway over New Orleans left a visible (and audible, in the case of its bilingualism) mark on the city and its surrounding country. The Chitimacha tribe along with several other indigenous tribes inhabited the extensive marshland around the Mississippi River Delta and, even though they were forcibly integrated into the European community (often converting to Catholicism and adopting French or English) and eventually lost contact with their language, their presence did not die out. The intense contact between diverse cultures created a city with a unique, durable and independent atmosphere.

If Michel Foucault describes his concept of heterotopia as a place “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible,”<sup>3</sup> we can easily imagine New Orleans as a space that functioned along the same lines at least in the broader context of the US. Precisely through this juxtaposition of different sources, New Orleans and Louisiana became a place where the distinct style of Kate Chopin’s modernism could have been born.

During the 1890s, Louisiana, just as the rest of the South, was still recovering from the Civil War. Since most of the attention, both regarding print culture, capital or politics, was focused on the westward expansion or the industrialized east coast, Louisiana and New Orleans lagged behind the rest of the US in terms of industrial development and production. This marginalized position also arguably allowed the area to retain many of its distinctive traits and traditions. However, even the romantic southern landscape felt the impact of the US expansion and the state’s modernization.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Kelley, *The Shaping of American* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986) 144.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* (October, 1984): 6–7.



“The depression of 1893–96 accentuated class divisions, and urbanization and industrialization continued to challenge traditional ways of life”<sup>4</sup> while the introduction of segregation and Jim Crow laws also occurred during the 1890s.<sup>5</sup> These social tensions also accentuated “the woman question” that was already publicly debated for several decades, but with the influx of immigrants, the growth of industry and the creation of new jobs, the social tensions resurfaced and gained a new force. The idea of a New Woman was circulating in the cultural discourse of the US and women were starting to organize themselves into suffrage movements.<sup>6</sup>

Women voiced their demands for (among other things) voting rights and greater independence from their husbands or other patriarchal institutions. Even up until the end of the 19th century, women were considered the property of their husbands and before that of their fathers in Louisiana.<sup>7</sup> Although they could sue for a divorce, men had great advantages before the court and in the society. A mostly Catholic state, Louisiana was governed by conservative attitudes that prioritized family and tradition over individual needs.<sup>8</sup> With the slow rise of industry and a booming economy as well as an accelerated lifestyle, women started taking jobs and slowly penetrated into a majority of professions.<sup>9</sup> These changes brought more freedom to women as they had more options than to stay at home as housewives. Nevertheless, these changes also created frictions, and they were far from being widely accepted by the dominant religious or state authorities. When looking at the biography of Kate Chopin, we realize that she was very much aware of these changes and that her work directly reflected them.

Wharton’s America would have hardly been recognizable to someone who spent their whole life in New Orleans; and for a good reason. It was a city as unique in its history and importance as New Orleans, but where New Orleans stood as a regional capital with a characteristic and strictly

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<sup>4</sup> Margo Culley, “Social/Historical Background of *The Awakening*,” *Bloom’s Guides: The Awakening*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008) 66–68.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

regional culture, New York was in the center of American life until late in the 20th century. It served as economic and cultural capital, and it housed most of the American elite class. During the late 19th century, New York was at the forefront of most of the significant changes that happened in America. Most striking of these is the arrival of millions of immigrants at Ellis Island to find their American dream. At the same time at Lower Manhattan, bankers of Wall Street and various “robber barons” lead the charge of the railroad expansion, extensive farming, and mining schemes and stood at the beginning of what could easily be called the birth of big business and corporations. Every crises and conflict that happened in the US either originated at Wall Street or affected it in one way or another, while New Orleans, although far from being isolated or separated in any sense, led a provincial life that enjoyed the privilege of being far away from the seats of power in the north and was largely undisturbed by the advances that characterized the rest of the US.

Edith Wharton was well acquainted with this divided society of extremes that was at the inception of modern America. It was the society of Edith Wharton that exerted enormous power and influence over the rest of America, including Louisiana, and that while existing within an even more heterogeneous territory of New York (that was already bestowed with the nickname of “the melting-pot”) cultivated an almost impenetrable social isolation governed by its own separate cultural and social rules or norms.

This social environment was more sensitive to the external influences of the expanding American territory, but also to its internal political and economic changes, and as such was more telling of the contemporary events and attitudes that shaped America. *The House of Mirth*, so to say, had windows that overlooked the whole America and the short-term memory of its inhabitants could only remember the last season as contrasted with the isolated island of Grand Isle where a hundred years could pass in one drowsy afternoon, and one could not tell the difference. When surveying these historical spaces, we must court these sentiments and so to understand the New York society of Edith Wharton we have to look forward into the later part of the 19th century.

After the successful expansion to the West spearheaded by the growing railroad system, American society reached a new height of prosperity. In 1869, the Union Pacific and Central Pacific line connected New York with the Pacific Ocean and enabled the exploitation of the Great Plains region.<sup>10</sup> The agricultural and mining transformation led to an unprecedented growth of the economy and population.<sup>11</sup> The formation of the Interstate Commerce Commission enabled the creation of first corporations (for example Standard Oil, United Fruit or General Electric) with efficient bureaucracy and enormous profit.<sup>12</sup> Most of these companies were organized from New York or Boston and all their wealth concentrated in the eastern parts of the US.<sup>13</sup> These changes reshaped the fabric of American society as the small farmers and plantation owners lost their privileged position to the emerging class of wealthy industrialists that mingled with the Anglo-Dutch aristocracy of old New York.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the immigrants soared through the harbors of New York and provided a workforce for the modern industrial centers of New England. With them rose a new urban culture, a hotbed of modernity where different cultures and religions entered into contact with the growing socialist and suffragette movements within the space of a few square kilometers. This had a profound effect on the character of the urban environment and of human relations within it, as well as on the individual psyche of its inhabitants. Increased (social and spatial) mobility made the city more class-conscious than ever as the morals long associated with a separate part of society began to decay and shift under pressure from the newly forming industrial elite. Edith Wharton was well aware of these changes, and her fiction provides a testament to the anxious restlessness of her times that are in many ways not unlike our own era.

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Kelley 379–389.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kelley 389–393.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## 2.2 Kate Chopin

Kate Chopin was born as Katherine O’Flaherty on 8 February 1850 in St. Louis into a well-to-do Catholic family. Although her father was Irish, Kate Chopin was raised in a francophone and southern cultural environment that was further fostered by her mother and great-grandmother who were both of French extraction but also by her future husband Oscar Chopin who was educated in France and was from a family of French heritage.<sup>15</sup> Her connection with France was strong and beyond visiting the country during her honeymoon, she also widely read the contemporary French writers and even translated some of the works of her greatest inspiration, Guy de Maupassant.<sup>16</sup> Her artistic oeuvre consists of two short story collections (“Bayou Folk” and “A Night in Acadie”), several poems and two novels, namely *The Awakening* and *At Fault*. Chopin is often associated with the setting of her most famous novel from 1899, *The Awakening*, of New Orleans, but she only lived there between 1870 and 1879. She also lived in the American quarter of the city, and her

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy A. Walker, “Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts,” *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 3–7.

<sup>16</sup> Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1999) 158–159.

experience of Creole culture was of a second-hand nature from her summer stays at the Grand Isle.<sup>17</sup>

It remains a question as to what extent Kate Chopin even may be considered a Creole writer, but the important thing is that her work, which is known for its realistic and detailed description of the Louisianian society of the 19th century, is deeply grounded in her experience. Furthermore, her experience as someone who, although not an outsider, is still viewing the Creole enclave in Louisiana from some distance, whether it is the distance created by a language barrier, place of origin or more universally American perspective, gives us a glimpse of what the clash of different communal values and social norms meant for her.

The America of the second half of the 19th century was a place that was dominated by puritanical values and the big capital of New England and New York while being mainly constituted by an array of different communities with varying faiths, customs, and even languages. The American South that Kate Chopin experienced and wrote about was precisely that—a place disrupted by the Civil War and Reconstruction, primarily divided on racial lines and thoroughly culturally heterogeneous even on the American standards. The French community of southern Louisiana and New Orleans famously personified this diverse climate as it contrasted the mainly Caucasian, Protestant and Anglophone north of US. It was known for its openness with regards to race, language, and social mores and it proved a melting pot for multiple Caribbean cultures. Many freed slaves found their new life in New Orleans, which was the only genuinely metropolitan city of the Confederate South, more comfortable than in the rural regions and they brought the African culture in close contact with the colonial communities of mainly Spanish and French descent. A tradition of interracial marriage or concubinage known as *placage* was prominent in New Orleans and created a unique community of Creoles that moved on the margins of the Afro-American communities and the plantation owners' households. These diverse communities have also been divided on the lines of religion where most of the South followed an increasingly conservative form

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<sup>17</sup> Toth 65–66.

of Protestantism under the heading of Southern Baptist Convention but the coastal regions still retained their Latin and predominantly Catholic character.<sup>18</sup>

All of these peculiarities constituted the multicultural character of New Orleans of Chopin's time, and set it apart both socially and politically from the rest of the nation. New Orleans soon acquired a firm position in the American imagination as the place of the foreign and the exotic. It is the mixed cultural, racial and religious heritage that made New Orleans so (in)famous and was also crucial in producing a suitable *mise-en-scène* for the onset of American modernism. In this sense Kate Chopin found a perfect place of inspiration for her literary career as the different social norms of the city foreshadowed many of the insecurities that were tied to the rise of modernism—namely the contestation of gender-roles, racial stereotypes, and patriarchal authority.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the strange mixture of cultures undermined the social authorities and norms that ruled over the rest of the US and provided Chopin with ample material for her work that essentially did the same thing. To what extent was it her conscious intention or just a by-product of the environmental influences on her is debatable, but the importance and interconnectedness of Kate Chopin and Louisiana with all its vivid details is beyond doubt.

All of the aforementioned regional traits inspired Chopin to write fiction that drew heavily upon her environment and at first garnered her the considerable attention of several magazines, such as *Philadelphia Musical Journal*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* or *America*.<sup>20</sup> *The Awakening* was her first work to depart from the earlier pattern of local color and delve into the psychological and social problems that transcend the regionality of her previous work. This being said, some critics still consider her a local color author and see no significant shift in her artistic oeuvre. Whether her novel described a tragedy of a clash between two incompatible regional cultures and their ethics or

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<sup>18</sup> Culley 67–68.

<sup>19</sup> Avril Horner, "Kate Chopin, choice and modernism," *The Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*, ed. Janet Beer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 132–135.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy A. Walker, "Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts," *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 12.

a broader problem common to all womanhood divided critics for many years and determined the rise and fall of the book's popularity.

*The Awakening* has had a long history of critical reevaluation. It was one of the essential scavengings that the nascent feminist critics of the 1960s made for their canon and a part of this scavenging was done by those trying to prove that the book's value is largely independent of its ties to local color and to the picturesque depiction of everyday life in Louisiana. Although the merit of *The Awakening* and its universal value has been long argued for to an extent where it is often taken for granted, this discussion also shows how important is her regional setting and to what extent it can affect our understanding and reading of the story.<sup>21</sup>

It cannot be said with certainty, if Kate Chopin was a naturalist, local color or feminist writer—or if she was all of these things at once. However, taking into account and working with all the critical approaches might be beneficial for our understanding of the novel. Even more important is to see the limitations of these views. Some critics of local color might simplify Edna's position in the novel as one of the victims who was born into and raised in the puritanical culture. All the while, the critics who see *The Awakening* as a novel written in the same vein as Zola's or de Maupassant's (Chopin's major literary influences) might misread the liberating potential *The Awakening* undoubtedly has. Furthermore, we must also take into account the occasional narrowness of feminist critics who often distort the text to fit it into their particular political reading. Our goal here is to account for all the socio-historical and cultural implications that are tied to *The Awakening*, but ultimately look for what the text says and not for what it does not.

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<sup>21</sup> Nancy A. Walker, "Critical history of *The Awakening*," *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 172–175.

## 2.3 Edith Wharton

The world of Edith Wharton (born on 24th January 1862 as Edith Newbold Jones) was strikingly different from that of Kate Chopin, although they seemed to struggle and react to similar societal tendencies that were almost universal in the America of their time. Coming from an old and affluent Anglo-Dutch family that was long established in the New York society, she was surrounded by wealth from her earliest childhood. Edith Wharton had a problematic relationship with her mother who was often described as distant and cold while her father stayed mostly in the background of their family life.<sup>22</sup> The Jones family had two homes—one in New York City and the other in Newport, Rhode Island—and traveled extensively throughout Europe where Edith picked up French and German.<sup>23</sup> After Edith and her family returned from their European tour, she entered society as a debutante in 1879. In the same year, she had her first poems published in public magazines although she had to wait for another ten years until she returned to writing or at least publishing.<sup>24</sup> In 1885 she married Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton; however, they divorced in 1913 after years of separation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Shari Benstock, "Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 3–7.

<sup>23</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers Inc., 1975) 17–25.

<sup>24</sup> Shari Benstock, "Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 15–17.

<sup>25</sup> R. W. B. Lewis 332–334.



Her substantial literary output including several volumes of poetry, at least eighty-five short stories and as much as seventeen novels including her best-known works *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*. Most of them drew inspiration from her social background and often severely criticized it. However, Edith Wharton never managed to fully separate herself from the gilded society of her time. Her life is in this sense full of paradoxes as she fiercely criticized the hypocrisy of the American (and European) upper classes, but she succumbed to some of the same hypocrisies as well.

Edith Wharton was in many senses a literary person, but she was known to be quite conservative both in the matters of art and society. Socially and politically she never openly associated with the feminist or suffragette movement and her vocal support of imperialism and ignorance of racial issues that were moving with the rest of the American society does not throw the best light on her in the contemporary standards.<sup>26</sup> However, she was first and foremost a novelist with a keen eye for details and social mores, which enabled her to see into the soul of her society and capture its life with so much detail and color; something she would otherwise not be able to do, mainly if she was not a part of this world. Ironically enough, she produced a volume of texts that proved crucial in the growing field of feminist and Marxist criticism, and she did so only because she understood the constraints that capitalist and patriarchal society imposes on its members, notwithstanding the fact that she was complicit in its functioning and even promoted several of their fundamental mechanisms.<sup>27</sup> Another paradox of her life was that she was born into one of the wealthiest families in the US and yet could not fully control her wealth for most of her life, and had to live on allowances which were, arguably, given to her because she was a woman and as such she

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<sup>26</sup> Frederick Wegener, "'Rabid Imperialist': Edith Wharton and the Obligations of Empire in Modern American Fiction," *American Literature* (vol. 72 no. 4, 2000) 783–788.

<sup>27</sup> Shari Benstock, "A Critical History of *The House of Mirth*," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 313–318.

could not properly manage her own fortune (at least not by the standards of the end of the 19th century).<sup>28</sup>

Edith Wharton's life was full of hardship and privilege that coexisted at the same time as she suffered from several nervous breakdowns and her constitution forced her into long retreats from the city. Her marriage was also an unhappy one, and the relations with the rest of her family were often strained until the last of her days.<sup>29</sup> These experiences gave her the material for her work and the insight into the human mind with all its dilemmas and struggles. As is often the case, her affluent family roots and the society in which she was supposed to live didn't give her the space to nurture her artistic talent. She always strived to escape its constraints first by her seclusion within the US and later by emigrating to France (she even had to exchange Paris for the French countryside when the massive wave of US expats moved to the city after the first world war).<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, it was the allure of her background that helped her rise to fame and furnished her with a position among the cultural elite of the US. Among her many friends were Henry James, George W. Vanderbilt and Theodore Roosevelt and many other influential figures of that time.<sup>31</sup> This Janus-faced link to the American high society can partly explain why she could write novels of such sagacity and biting wit that showed the intimate details of American aristocracy while satirizing it without any hint of remorse.

However, her intimacy with the milieu of the ruling class and her complicitness with its norms and mores had an adverse effect on her work in the years leading up to her death in 1937. The world was preoccupied with more pressing matters and the second world war seemed inevitable, and this context left little space for the finesse of Wharton's prose that lived off the peculiar details of a social spectrum that was waning even during Wharton's lifetime. The subsequent rise of formalism in the US and the increasingly radical and liberal intellectual

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<sup>28</sup> Shari Benstock, "Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 15–16.

<sup>29</sup> Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Vintage, 2008) 187–192.

<sup>30</sup> Lee 519–533.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis 112–139.

atmosphere in Western Europe proved unfavorable to Wharton's work, and many of her books remained out of print for extended periods of time.<sup>32</sup> Even after several attempts to revitalize her legacy by critics such as Edmund Wilson, her work had to wait for reappraisal until the late nineteen-seventies and eighties when the move towards post-structuralism allowed for new critical perspectives and when the rise of feminism and cultural studies looked for texts that could be used as windows into American social history.<sup>33</sup> In 1976, R. W. B. Lewis won, among other awards, the Pulitzer Prize for Biography and Autobiography for his extensive biography of Edith Wharton and so he further helped to revive the interest of a broader audience in Wharton. Additionally, her estate was made public, and several of her first biographies appeared during a comparatively short time-span.<sup>34</sup>

The renewed interest, after a long period of nearly complete silence, proved beneficial for the general perception of Wharton and her work, because the manner with which we perceive and read her work is unfettered by the preconceptions of its character that were heavily embedded in the society of the early 20th century. The society Wharton describes in *The House of Mirth* feels distant and imagined to us, whereas during the 20s and 30s of the last century it could still incite hatred by its association with the corrupted elites whose opulence was much more visible in the inter-war era. We are also less prone to think of *The House of Mirth* as a bestseller of secondary literary quality that only tries what Henry James managed better. In the light of the 21st century with all its turbulent changes, we tend to see that *The House of Mirth* is a book that still has many insights to offer—both about society in general and the nature of human relationships in it—and fares even stronger when separated from the social context that gave birth to it.

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<sup>32</sup> Shari Benstock, "A Critical History of *The House of Mirth*," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 315–318.

<sup>33</sup> Shari Benstock, "A Critical History of *The House of Mirth*," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 318–322.

<sup>34</sup> Shari Benstock, "A Critical History of *The House of Mirth*," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock, 320–321.

### **3 *The House of Mirth* and the Anatomy of Oppression**

We will start with our close reading of *The House of Mirth* and proceed with our analysis of it and later move to *The Awakening* and some general observations. First, we will identify passages or aspects of the book that provide us insight into the society that forms the fabric of Lily Bart's life. Following this, we will see how her identity reflects the demands that society has of her and, most importantly, her response to these demands. However, before we do any of this, let us make a few general remarks on the structure and content of this book.

*The House of Mirth* excels in two things—in its accurate, detailed and layered portrayal of the high society and of the psyche of its main protagonist, and in the drama (and arguably also tragedy) of their fatal encounter. To a certain extent, we can speak of only three characters in this book, of Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden and the society that takes on different forms and possesses a variety of bodies but always maintains the same direction and goal.<sup>35</sup> This distinction is an obvious overstatement, but it serves to underscore that every other character in the book acts and behaves in a way that places him or her (at least from the point of view of the narration of Lily Bart) into one group that is ruled and defined by one set of rules.

It is paradoxically Lily Bart who, coming from the very heart of the New York society and being born and raised to play her part in its elaborate comedy of manners, stands out of the mold and cannot abide even if she would like to. This unwillingness to either cooperate with or stand out of the society's boundaries is of crucial importance for the book but serves as a hindrance to any simplistic reading of the novel. Lily Bart does not stand out because she decides to oppose a system that dehumanizes every sign of individuality and feeds hypocrisy, mindless consummation and

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<sup>35</sup> In the article we mainly worked with ("Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*"), Wai-Chee Dimock has also suggested the character of Mrs Fisher, but her analysis has an entirely different focus than ours.

inequality on all social fronts, nor does she stand out because her character or moral values forbid her to partake in a shallow charade of cruel exchange. This leaves us with a heroine that exposes the falsehood of her society and fights against it, mounting to a considerable personal revolt that does not go unnoticed and, although ultimately failing, exposes the insides of an organism that we are all part of, without any visible goal or aim but rather under the guidance of an unconscious drive. As much as we would like to “read” Lily Bart as a feminist moral vigilante in a personal war with the patriarchy that is determined to subdue her, we must reconsider our expectations and instead accept what the text can give.

As was already said, the portrayal of American high society that *The House of Mirth* presents is remarkable. It is drawn from the beginning of the book not by merely describing the lush spectacle of high society but mostly by showcasing its values, limitations, and potentials. The book also famously shows the high society in contrast to a working class environment. Of interest is also that we enter *The House of Mirth* through Selden and his encounter with Lily Bart. In other words, we, as the readers, approach Lily Bart from the same point of view as the men in the novel do; we perceive her visage and then try to establish a broader and more multidimensional image of her by questioning her actions or motives for her actions within her setting. However, we are also liable to simplify or misread her because of our own preconceptions that we bring into the process of reading this text. Selden presents us Lily Bart as someone who is, from the very start, rooted in her society. His attention is caught by the fact that she was “in town at that season”<sup>36</sup> and, instead, not spending her time at New Port or some other estate.

Furthermore, Selden seems to have a very definite idea about who Lily Bart is, an idea that is intrinsically tied to her social role (or its associated goal) and his expectations of her in that social role. He surmises that she was “wearing an air of irresolution which might... be the mask of a very

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<sup>36</sup> Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 1.

definite purpose”<sup>37</sup> and even when he admits that “he could never see her without a faint movement of interest” he remembers that “it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation.”<sup>38</sup>

Lily Bart is intentionally presented as someone who is well know (if not famous) for her place in society, and before we get any detailed description of her rich gown, the idea that her character is inextricably tied to her social persona is introduced to us. Lily Bart is a product of her society. Or, is she? Or rather, is she just that and nothing else?

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

### 3.1 The Power of the Market

Selden, Gus Trenor, Rosedale, and all the other men view Lily through their male-gaze and see her not so much as an object but as a product—and therefore also as a commodity, deprived of its intrinsic uniqueness, to be exchanged. As Wai-Chee Dimock adroitly disclosed in her essay called *Debasing Exchange*, the world of Lily Bart is governed by the logic of the market-place where social relations, personal histories and future possibilities all have a material value that can be, and often is, exchanged for money or different social currencies, such as dinner invitations.

The kernel of this world is dollar; not because of its inherent value but because it is generally agreed upon as a referential currency that has been widely entrusted with the faith necessary for a unified and universal market. In this sense, the dollar has become a kind of fiat money within the circles that Lily Bart frequents. So far, the social dynamics of *The House of Mirth* are similar to the present market, but we have to note two main differences (albeit they may be of a quantitative nature only, but more on this later) that separate it. Firstly, the system of exchange in *The House of Mirth* is inherently patriarchal as it reserves the contact with hard currency to men only (by a combination of laws and tradition) and reinforces this system by a number of external institutions such as religion, family values, culture and so on. Secondly, it lacks any fixed rate of exchange that has to be negotiated every time an exchange happens.

Moreover, although this enables a free and inclusive market, it also leaves space for misunderstanding, conflict and brutish dominance. Free and egalitarian as the market may ostensibly be, the negotiations within this social market are undemocratic, snobbish and elitist, to say the least, since the negotiating power is entirely in control of the selling party and the social or fiscal sturdiness of such a person conditions the rate of exchange. Only because of the weight that

Gus Trenor or Bertha Dorset receive from their wealth or social standing can they enforce their un-negotiated demands on Lily Bart.<sup>39</sup>

The uncanny cruelty of this system comes not from its destructive patriarchal character but from the unsettling invasiveness of its mercantile values that seem to overtake even the personal dimension of our lives, and Edith Wharton portrays this aspect of modernity with pressing realism. For example, Gus Trenor's outburst shows his twisted understanding of interpersonal relations as a process of exchanges, payments and debt-making "Ah—you'll borrow from Selden or Rosedale—and take your chances in fooling them as you've fooled me! Unless—unless you've settled your other scores already—and I'm the only one left out in the cold."<sup>40</sup> Dimock shows with equal conviction the unsettling character of Selden as someone who only appears to stand outside of the system but is in truth a constitutive part of it. Selden "remains a spectator when he cannot afford to buy, but he is not averse to pocketing little tidbits when they can be had for a small price"<sup>41</sup> and so we can speculate to what extent is his aloofness coming from his supposed intellectual superiority or taste and to what extent it is a necessity, the only way for a man of humbler means to join the crowd in the marketplace. Selden invests where he can and speculates where he cannot. His goods are that of the intellectual stock, and he seems to have invested well when he entered into a liaison with Bertha Dorset, a woman that values the artistic and intellectual sentiment in men considerably, as seen from the chapters taking place on *Sabrina*.

Nevertheless, an investment into Lily would be potentially dangerous for Selden as he could lose his freedom and aloofness and he is not willing to part with his stocks in exchange for a demanding wife. Although Selden might at first seem like the book's "hero" and although he surely holds a special place in the book, even by the virtue of introducing us into it and providing a more informed, detailed and critical view of the society we experience, he never escapes its perplexities and contradictions. Just like Rosedale and Trenor, he remains biased, to say the least, in the sense

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<sup>39</sup> Dimock, Wai-Chee. "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." *PMLA*, vol. 100, no. 5, 1985, pp. 783–792.

<sup>40</sup> Wharton, p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> Dimock, p. 786.



that his critical ability is still subordinated to the logic of the marketplace and to his male-gaze.<sup>42</sup>

We can understand Selden's conformity better, if we look at the language of the last chapter of the second book where he still clings to the market-language of the male-gaze:

“He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had *increased* his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically. But at least he had loved her—had been *willing to stake his future* on his faith in her<sup>43</sup>—and if the moment had been fated to pass from them before they could *seize it*, he saw now that, for both, it had been *saved whole out of the ruin* of their lives.”<sup>44</sup>

However, Dimock tends to overemphasize some of the aspects of these limitations, eventually drawing Selden as the most despicable and treacherous character in the book (“As a spectator Selden remains cynically amused by Lily; as an investor he seeks to acquire her hand. Disparate as these sentiments may seem, for Selden they are both "options," to be taken up or put aside at will, and he trades options with daunting facility”<sup>45</sup> and so on) which is a major simplification. She is right in arguing that Selden “too exudes a cold stinginess, a desire for acquisition without the risk and without expenditure”<sup>46</sup> but she completely omits any emotional dimension outside of the contractual which reduces both the characters and the drama that is inherent to this novel.

The discipline of business holds sway over *The House of Mirth* and the conflict between an individual, and the society is central to it. By erasing any individual will in the supporting characters and turning them into individualized speculating algorithms, we do not get a better understanding of the novel but simply a stiff and dry tool for viewing the rich and complicated story in front of us. Indeed, Selden cowardly retreats when he learns about Lily's dealings with Gus

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<sup>42</sup> Dimock.

<sup>43</sup> The strange use of religious language is perhaps also revealing of Selden's character.

<sup>44</sup> Wharton, p. 255; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> Dimock, p. 786.

<sup>46</sup> Dimock, p. 787.

Trenor, but we have little reason to believe that he does so primarily because Lily becomes a more risky investment than he previously thought and not because of reasons that ultimately refer to his feelings and emotions. Furthermore, Dimock presents Lily as a heroine that rebels against the cold logic of exchange in a moral crusade for a better and more “natural” society and she reads her actions as either errors or intentional moral gestures.<sup>47</sup>

We find little to no evidence in the text to suggest that a moral agenda motivated Lily's constant refusal of several marriage proposals or that her moral sense (which, indeed, is present) overcomes her social and material needs. Her character is presented as entirely ingrained in her society with all its values, and her aspirations are well fit for a lady of her age and position. All the while, her sharp insight into the dynamics of the social rules and mores might provide her with plenty of material for moral criticism. Hers is thus not so much a vision of a new system but a frustration with the fact that the old system is not accepting her. Furthermore, her deep understanding of the social rules, that were her only creed even from her early childhood, makes the argument that her fall was caused by errors, miscalculations or misreadings implausible. We could also easily counter-argue Dimock's claims with the fact that Lily's needs are too strong and evident for her to be directly exchanged for a moral high-ground that Lily barely ever preoccupies herself with and that her rejections and blunders are too expounding of an underlying pattern to be dismissed as chance. However, before we move to a more constructive reading of *The House of Mirth* and attempt to piece together all the clues we can find, let us examine a further example of yet another contradictory reading.

### **3.2 The Forms of Feminism in *The House of Mirth***

In the essay by Frances L. Restuccia *The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)*, Restuccia explains her presupposition that *The House of Mirth* is a feminist novel and that it contains as much as two different (and in many ways opposing) ideas of feminism. She states her claim thus: “Wharton's feminism, then, reflects a tension very much alive in contemporary feminist

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<sup>47</sup> Dimock, pp. 788–790.

theory: the apparent incommensurability of a social, humanist feminism that advances a position... and a more literary feminism that refuses definable positions for their masterliness, wishing to maintain perpetual openness and inaccessibility.”<sup>48</sup> Both of these ideas are found in their respective embryonic form and give us the ability to read this book as a feminist text, not from one but multiple points of view.<sup>49</sup>

Although we might be rightly suspect as to the original intent of Edith Wharton or her agenda, Restuccia provides ground for her claim and sets before us a polarity between feminism that lives within the boundaries of patriarchy and the other one, that positions itself (or at least tries to) outside of it. Luce Irigaray first elaborated this polarity in her book *This Sex Which Is Not One* from 1977 where she calls for the establishment of a new, more feminine language for which she argues by proclaiming that “If we keep on speaking the same language together, we’re going to reproduce the same history. Begin the Same old stories all over again.”<sup>50</sup> From this point on, Restuccia illustrates the former by providing context to Lily’s emancipation concerning her conscious usage of her abilities and utilizing her beauty for the sake of her happiness and comfort, but this strain of feminism is mostly found just on the surface level of the text.<sup>51</sup>

The concept of practical feminism (if we can call it that) supposes that the system itself does not have to be changed but instead merely adjusted so that more people could fit into it without being hurt; a solution which, as is evident from the novel’s ending, cannot work on its own. The latter form of feminism that could be related to the ideas of many French feminists and their understanding of femininity, further inspired by many post-structuralist ideas, can be found at the textual level and mainly through the character of Lily Bart. A more radical approach to emancipation, it aims for a new language that would exist outside of the patriarchal binaries, and as such we can see glimpses of this brave new world through Lily’s resistance to the simplifying

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<sup>48</sup> Frances L. Restuccia, “The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton’s Feminism(s),” *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 224.

<sup>49</sup> Restuccia, pp. 404–405.

<sup>50</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 205.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

forces of gossip and law. These forces aim to control her and curtail her existence to a mere part in a system governed not by her, but by men.

The notion that Lily finds a way to emancipate herself through language is central to many of the feminist criticisms of *The House of Mirth*, and it again shows how important is the idea of (self-)representation in this novel. If we accept the assumptions of this critical view, we can better understand why the figure of Selden (or, indeed, even Gerty) stands for the limitations that Lily encounters in the society and that ultimately help to cause her downfall. The logic of the marketplace governs the society that Lily inhabits, and none of the relationships we encounter throughout the story is exempted from the cruel social exchange mechanism. And yet, when we look closer, we realize that Selden does not fail Lily because he would fear to invest in her but because he fails to perceive her outside of the oppressive language of patriarchy. Restuccia also fails to resist the temptation to draw her criticism as far as saying that “Lily is murdered”<sup>52</sup> by the laws that govern her society and that Selden’s legalistic view of life represents.

The point she makes earlier in her essay stays valid since Selden fails Lily by being unable to see her less as an object of his imagination, “evidently a victim of the civilization which had produced her”<sup>53</sup> and more as an individual being. When Lily asks Selden “do you remember what you said to me once? That you could help me only by loving me? Well — you did love me for a moment; and it helped me. It has always helped me. But the moment is gone...”<sup>54</sup> it was Selden who let the moment go, not Lily.

Moreover, he did not hold onto it because he would fear to invest in her, but because he could not free himself from the oppressive, legalistic language. This language compelled him to view Lily as an asset he needs to protect or reshape to his needs; in the words of Restuccia “The more emotionally invested Selden is in Lily, the more he tries to mold her into his romantic ideal; the less invested, the more he allows Lily a freer play as cause and corollary of the free play of his

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<sup>52</sup> Restuccia 417.

<sup>53</sup> Wharton 29.

<sup>54</sup> Wharton 288.

admiration.”<sup>55</sup> Via this reading, we conclude that Lily does present a particular example of a proto-feminist character who embodies and foreshadows the theoretical notions of many French feminists of the 20th century. She stands for her sovereignty as she counters any attempt to reduce or totalize her existence employing reductive language — gossip, in the case of Berta Dorset, or the language of the law, mainly in the case of Selden.

These two essays indicate that the problem of patriarchy is inherently structural, an inequality that works through and takes the form of language or logic. In both cases, Lily refuses to participate in these totalitarian systems. Although Restuccia provided a more reasonable hint at a possible explanation, as to why Lily refuses to do so, than Dimock did, we still have to wonder why, of all the people, Lily decides to step out of boundaries that are drawn to her by her society and consequently pay a correspondingly heavy price for this decision. We now possess and have demonstrated, enough material to consider the outline and the character of patriarchy in *The House of Mirth* as we have enough material to judge on the mode and character of Lily’s revolt against it. However, we cannot move on to any useful conclusion unless we ponder the reasons for the revolt, that are, as of yet, mostly unexplored and insufficient for any complete analysis. In order to make a plausible inquiry into this problematic, we have to enlarge our theoretical apparatus and turn to a more psychological strain of criticism, that proves to be, in the case of *The House of Mirth* very fruitful.

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<sup>55</sup> Restuccia 410.

### 3.3 Psychology of Oppression

Ellie Ragland Sullivan in her essay “The Daughter’s Dilemma: Psychoanalytic Interpretation and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*” sets out to examine the interplay between Lacan’s restructuring of the theory of hysteria and *The House of Mirth*. Moreover, even though this reading of the novel intentionally positions itself within the field of psychoanalytic criticism, in reality, it is not very far away from the feminist point of view that we have encountered to this point as Lacan’s thought informed several of the French theoreticians of feminism.<sup>56</sup> Jacques Lacan stood at the birth of what we could call French feminism or even the whole area of gender studies because he helped to restructure the general understanding of gender and, most importantly, he debiologized

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<sup>56</sup> See for example Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 2007) 59–63.

it.<sup>57</sup> In Lacan's work, gender is something that is determined not by a specific set of organs but by the way in which our subjectivity is positioned within the symbolic order; Lacan's theory is then concerned not so much with gender and the human organism as with language and the symbolic realm we inhabit.

Within this context hysteria can be defined as "a lack of a signifier or representation for *being* as a woman,"<sup>58</sup> and Sullivan provides a plausible reading of Lily Bart as a hysteric in the sense that Lily is driven to her fall from society by an unconscious struggle to find her own identity. Sullivan analyses Wharton's life as well, in order to support her reading further, and she establishes a claim that Edith Wharton and Lily Bart shared many traits, namely that both of them had a strained relationship with their mothers and in consequence turned to their fathers which confused their respective identities.<sup>59</sup> The traumatic experience of rejection from their mothers and the confusing identification that arose from it created the lack of a signifier and potentially brought on the neurosis.

Instead of discussing the nature of sublimation behind *The House of Mirth* we will turn to our primary concern which is if and how can this state of lack, in which Lily supposedly lives, answer our questions about the nature of her revolt against patriarchy and the established order of things. In Sullivan's reading, the established order of things also interjects with language, although not solely, and the origin of the oppression comes from the personal experience of Lily Bart, her childhood and upbringing. Her dominant mother valued female beauty and social life most, and her father was "bald and slightly stooping, with streaks of grey in his hair, and a tired walk"<sup>60</sup>; someone who could not stand against "the vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to

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<sup>57</sup> Marie-Hélène Brousse, "Feminism With Lacan," *NFF Spring/Fall 1991, Volume 5, Numbers 1 & 2*, 113–114.

<sup>58</sup> Ellie Ragland Sullivan, "The Daughter's Dilemma: Psychoanalytic Interpretation and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 464.

<sup>59</sup> Sullivan 468–469.

<sup>60</sup> Wharton 47.

dance her ball-dresses to rags.”<sup>61</sup> Lily, nonetheless, unconsciously identified with him because her cold mother did not offer any chance for identification. This childhood dilemma led Lily to identify with the figure of her father rather than developing a healthy father-daughter relationship with him. This identification, in turn, prevented her from “introjecting (or psychically incorporating) the signifiers—the signifying chain of meaning—that would tell her what in the social conventions of a given moment a woman is supposed to be to a man.”<sup>62</sup> The subsequent neurosis is at the heart of Lily’s downfall, and we can look to it for an answer as to why she rejected all her suitors.

When Lily is almost sure of having Percy Gryce all to her own and after all the reasons that Lily has for marrying him she decides that “her course was too purely reasonable not to contain the germs of rebellion.”<sup>63</sup> For such an ambitious and socially intelligent person, Lily’s excuse that no one “could consent to be bored on such a morning”<sup>64</sup> seems out of place and almost nonsensical in the given context. Where in other instances we get a detailed description of motives, reasons, and feelings, at this point, we are not given much to account for apart from an impulsive (if not neurotic) and uncharacteristic, as Lily is far from being prone to inconsiderate and unforeseen acts in any normal situation, decision. When George Dorset pleads for Lily’s help and effectively offers her his hand we learn, that “if she came to him at such a moment he would be hers with all the force of his deluded faith. Moreover, the power to make him so lay in her hand—lay there in a completeness he could not even remotely conjecture. Revenge and rehabilitation might be hers at a stroke—there was something dazzling in the completeness of the opportunity.”<sup>65</sup>

However, Lily gets afraid and a “fear of herself, and of the terrible force of temptation” possess her and the only reaction she gives him is turning away, giving him her hand and saying “Goodbye — I’m sorry; there’s nothing in the world that I can do.”<sup>66</sup> We have to understand that Lily has shown great skill at handling even the most difficult of situations and that it is strikingly

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Sullivan 476.

<sup>63</sup> Wharton 72.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Wharton 232.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.



suspicious that she would show this lack of any constructive response. Nor are we given any clue as to why she chooses to reject him and the whole incident, which could have been of great significance and even overturn the story of the novel, goes without any worthwhile commentary. The book that shines with minute details (both material and psychological) leaves us with no explanation of these events not so much as to leave space for the reader to make his own assumptions<sup>67</sup> but more so for the lack of words that could possibly explain something that is emotionally concrete but yet intangible. It is in these moments that we see deep into the soul of this work and also into the character of Lily Bart; and what we see there is precisely the aforementioned lack, a lack of words, a lack of any signifier that informs the hysterical neurosis.

What these quotations show, when they are viewed attentively, is that what halts Lily in her social and personal progress are not only the limitations imposed on her by the male language and the driving force of market-logic behind it but mostly her own experiences and her own language that did not internalize the market-logic as much as it did the paradoxical balance of her childhood environment and its corresponding (lack of) signifiers. Although this reading might at first resemble the deterministic criticism of Blake Nevius that views Lily fundamentally as a victim,<sup>68</sup> applying psychoanalysis (especially the Lacanian strain) shifts our concern away from seeing Lily as a victim of her society and its cruel rules to a more personal and understanding perspective.

We can ultimately apprehend her compulsions without forcing an external set of views and ideologies on her and making the same mistake as Selden, Trenor, Rosedale or Grace did. Acknowledging the primacy of Lily's psychology in the power struggles in *The House of Mirth* does not furnish a new, happier ending to the book that remains tragic and perhaps becomes even more sorrowful when we realize the inescapable personal dimension of Lily's own, lonely house of mourning. However, comprehending the inner logic of the text (as opposed to the logic of the society that the text describes) inevitably leads us to a concern that is at the heart of every

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<sup>67</sup> That would be something we could expect from a more contemporary literary work but Edith Wharton seems to have favored being in control of the meaning when she could.

<sup>68</sup> Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953) 56–57.

sophisticated reading experience—to what extent can we, as readers, impose our judgments on the matter of any text? Lily Bart struggles in order to maintain the autonomy of her experience, which is misread by everyone around her and yet she also fails to make sense of her experience that dominates her and keeps her in a vicious circle of unconscious self-denial.

*The House of Mirth* is a complex portrait of personal struggles in the social environment that is insistently exclusive, even to the point of hurting and mutilating their members. What we saw, were three different perspectives that expose several aspects of this portrait, their mistakes or shortages and an analysis of the two main characters with their subsequent characterization in the context of our analysis. We enquired into several critical sources in order to ground our reading in a broader theoretical background and provided a close reading of several passages that furnished us with focal points of interest as far as the logic of the book goes. To summarize the main points of our research, we will restate and simplify the necessary points on which our research concluded.

Lily Bart lives in a society that is full of cruel objectification, and that leaves next to no space for an individual expression outside of the boundaries it sets out by its rules. It is inherently patriarchal from both the perspective of the practical feminism and the theoretical one that was introduced earlier. Practically, *The House of Mirth* hands all the power to men since they are the ones who have access to the market, whether it be real-estate one or the stock exchange. This happened to the extent that most women of means had to have an intermediary who could withdraw, deposit or transfer money for them, and therefore to the fiat currency of the dollar that rules society. The market is in turn governed by laws that are, again, set by male lawyers and lawgivers as higher education and politics were reserved for men. Theoretically, the whole society is governed by a reductive, inherently male language—the language used by men and that originates solely within the homosocial environment of clubs, markets or government institutions (not to mention the church). The logic of the marketplace rises above as the most reductive and totalizing of these male-dominated modes of speech, and it pervades every social interchange.

However, Lily knows that this is the nature of her world and she willingly accepts the rules it sets for her even though her marginal position in it and her considerable wit enables her to view the social mechanisms in a critical light. Her rebellion against these structures consists in her unwillingness to conform, and it is through her unconformity that she commits the only crime that society is not willing to forgive or forget. The reasons for her rebellious (non)action are not governed by a conscious strategy or a vision of a gain (whether it be a moral high-ground or ultimate freedom). Instead, Lily finds herself unable to react to the only opportunities she has of saving herself from a social downfall because her speech betrays her. She is unable to articulate her response since it lays entirely outside of her symbolic realm. The limitations of her language as much as the fact that the society does not provide a place for her (just as was summed in the preceding paragraphs), therefore, cause her tragic end. These limitations do not arise from the exclusive quality and oppression of the masculine language but instead from the childhood trauma that left her with no option to identify herself within the position society wants for her. It is a personal drama of a neurotic and a cruel and an unforgiving society.

We will return to *The House of Mirth* once more after our detour to an analysis of *The Awakening* so that we can examine if and how does our understanding of this book change when compared with the work of Kate Chopin.

## 4 The Awakening of Revolt

*The Awakening* is in many ways a more optimistic and at times even a seemingly utopian book, especially when compared with *The House of Mirth*. The potential for emancipation is clearly hinted upon, and the sensual and emotional take the lead where *The House of Mirth* dealt mostly with the economic and political. The main character of the book, Edna Pontellier, is a sensuous woman who is less inhibited by her social surrounding and shows both more intention and courage when it comes to her attempts at emancipation. The patriarchal structures differ as well, and we have to approach the social environment with a distinct set of notions and from a new theoretical perspective. In other words, *The Awakening* shows us a portrait of the American patriarchy at the turn of the 19th century, but it is an altogether different portrayal than what we get in *The House of Mirth*. When analyzing this, we will pay close attention precisely to these socio-cultural aspects but also to the aforementioned liberating potential of emancipation. Firstly, we will see to what extent is the tragedy of Edna Pontellier caused by the social and cultural institutions surrounding her and later we will analyze the linguistic restrictions imposed on her.

What is more important, *The Awakening* goes even further with its idea of emancipation and sets to explore the vitality of different approaches to it. Chopin left more freedom to Edna

Pontellier<sup>69</sup> so that she can explore scenarios that were unusual for her time and whose novelty was shocking to most of its readers. The effect of this experiment was not an acceptance of the ideals held by suffragette agendas but an original and thought-provoking analysis of a situation where the main heroin tries to transform the very nature of our language and what it can do to her quest for self-awareness, personal freedom, and fulfillment.

Edna Pontellier is a married and settled woman whose place in society is secured for her. She has a husband, children, and a family; her society seems to accept and respect her (at least as they imagine her) and we have many reasons to consider her position as highly desirable from the perspective of our previous heroine, Lily Bart, and yet we clearly realize that her condition is far from ideal. Edna Pontellier does not find herself in the extraordinary situation and environment of Lily Bart, and it is entirely feasible to imagine the rest of her life without her awakening. Where Lily Bart found herself pressured by her advancing age, diminishing funds and the stigma that slowly arose around her, the situation of Edna Pontellier is universal, and her desires and needs are easily understood across regional and social boundaries. *The Awakening* draws a more clear-cut picture of patriarchy and its effects on an individual, and in doing so, it comes closer to the practical feminism that we already alluded to earlier. The institution of marriage and also that of motherhood are presented and scrutinized by the critical portrait that the book presents but when read closely it also shows the nuances and shades of inequality as they are exposed through language and symbolism.

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<sup>69</sup> Toth 224.

## 4.1 *The Awakening* and the Question of Ownership

A convenient point of departure for our analysis is the characterization of Edna Pontellier and the way in which she is presented or conceived by the people around her and, of course, by the way in which she sees herself. The book starts with an image of a parrot to which we will return later, but the first person we encounter is Mr. Pontellier, the husband of Edna. We see him “unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort” and leave “with an expression and an exclamation of disgust.”<sup>70</sup> Again, we enter the text through the male-gaze of Edna’s husband just as we enter *The House of Mirth* through Selden and his ruminations over the character of his interest. Mr. Pontellier speaks the male language even more clearly than Selden does, and he seems to be preoccupied with all things practical, economical and exact. Chopin shows us the stern and shrewd character of Mr. Pontellier by using a language fitting for a man of such rigid and limited nature. We can see this when he seats “himself in a wicker rocker chair which was there, he once more *applied* himself to *the task* of reading a newspaper. The day was Sunday; the paper was a day old.”<sup>71</sup> The language in which he is described gives us a clue as to how he sees life and what language constitutes his mind. He *applies* himself to *a task* of reading a newspaper without any visible sign of pleasure or nonchalance; he reads the newspaper just because it is his habit.

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<sup>70</sup> Chopin 22.

<sup>71</sup> Chopin 22–23; emphasis added.

Furthermore, we read that “He was already acquainted with the market reports, and he glanced restlessly over the editorials and bits of news which he had not had time to read before quitting New Orleans the day before”<sup>72</sup> and we have to wonder whether the green and yellow parrot who spoke “a language which nobody understood”<sup>73</sup> was not as much out of place as the man who was irritated by rereading the old news while staying at a luxurious Caribbean resort. The nervous tone and the twitchy statements of fact (such as what day it is) stand in direct contrast with the relaxed, Caribbean environment and the nonsensical speech of the parrot.

Within the first two pages of the book, we already have the central conflict foreshadowed on the level of language with the oppressive, factual and proprietary language trying to escape the noise of a more natural one. The book shifts the focus of this conflict from the linguistic to the physical. This shift happens when Edna enters, and it is carried by the same language of property that hangs around Mr. Pontellier as he gets upset about the sunburnt hands of Edna. When he sees her approaching, he scolds her, “You are burnt beyond recognition,” while he looks at her “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage. She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands and surveyed them critically...”<sup>74</sup> which is something that indicates that the physical aspect of Edna comes into consideration not by her feelings but only by the possessive instincts of Mr. Pontellier. In other words, her body is firstly considered (and presented) as a possession and only later as Edna herself. If she is to find a way to live free from patriarchy and its institutions, she has to re-establish a new understanding of her body and language.

At first, Edna does not have any point of reference she could hold onto, and her life experience does not provide her with an alternative. Nor is she altogether miserable, also because she does not perceive that there could be a different order in her life; a different means of fulfillment than the submission to socially preordained roles. The change comes around with her growing dissatisfaction, and intimacy with Robert Lebrun. Through their friendship and mutually

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<sup>72</sup> Chopin 23.

<sup>73</sup> Chopin 22.

<sup>74</sup> Chopin 24.

supportive relationship (“Robert had pursued a system of lessons almost daily” so that he could teach her how to swim),<sup>75</sup> she decides to plunge into the sea and symbolically find her selfhood or *ipséité*. She plunges into the sea and finally succeeds in swimming which is an experience that brings about “a feeling of exultation” almost “as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul.”<sup>76</sup> We can see here that her awakening is both of a physical and psychical nature and as self-realization, it is only hers and belongs to nobody else. Edna experiences “a quick vision of death” while showing that what was at stake for her, at the moment, was her life. The subjective perception of her first swim and the strength of this experience opened up new possibilities to Edna as she felt through her body and mind outside of the social conventions that lingered with the rest of the party at the beach and with it (maybe even because of it) she realized the ever-present threat of death.

Immediately after she returns to the shore she tells her husband that she “thought (she) should have perished out there alone,” and he replies to her “You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you.”<sup>77</sup> Another contrast between the normative, exact and oppressive language that Léonce wields and the depth of an individual experience that Edna struggles to articulate that shows us the difficulty a woman could face while living in a world dominated by a male language. Edna’s struggle begins only after her awakening as she realizes that she can find a new way of expression for her thoughts and feelings or her body. Her thoughts and feelings struggle to free themselves from the patriarchal traditions and even to find a self-justification while her body is held by the patriarchal laws that effectively make Edna a possession of her husband.

Margit Stange in her essay “Personal Property: Exchange Values and the Female Self in *The Awakening*” examines how “Edna’s perception of her own body is structured by the detachability of the hand and arm as a sign of Léonce’s ownership of her.”<sup>78</sup> In order to achieve self-ownership, a

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<sup>75</sup> Chopin 49.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Chopin 50.

<sup>78</sup> Margit Stange, “Personal Property: Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*,” *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and*



vital part of the early feminist agenda, women had to be in control of their sexuality. The right to refuse marital sex whenever they did not consent to it was crucial for this as it gave women the ability to decide if and when they want to get pregnant and become mothers.

When Léonce views Edna as a part of his possession and treats her accordingly, he has her both for an object of surplus value<sup>79</sup> and a sexual object that has two roles. Firstly, Edna is to Léonce a “status-bearing wealth” that reinforces his social standing through her excessively luxurious lifestyle, consumption, and its conspicuous public presentation. Secondly, Edna is to Léonce the mother of his children and a provider of the future generations of Pontelliers, something that cannot be disposed of even by the patriarchy. For most women in the 19th century, motherhood was not a choice but a duty that was sealed by the act of marriage. Men were to provide for the future family (although this was arguably not always the case) but they were simultaneously the owners of it. Stange references the Napoleonic Code “which was still in force in Louisiana in the 1890s,” and that ensured that “wives were legally identical with their husbands” and thus had no separate identity outside of the marriage.<sup>80</sup> The sum of these patriarchal measures was that both woman’s physical body but also their sexuality and identity was created and maintained only in reference to their husbands (and to a lesser degree by their fathers, nation, religion and so on) and was also owned by their husbands. Without any authentic subjectivity of her, Edna Pontellier is nothing more than a material to be utilized by her husband.

Edna is tied to Léonce by all the secondary attributes of her identity that are given to her by Léonce. Her rings signify that she is the wife (with all its implications) of Léonce Pontellier as much as the luxurious lifestyle and the “very charming home on Esplanade Street”<sup>81</sup> signify her husband’s wealth. Moreover, the children are also a sign of her submission to Léonce and the ideal of the traditional family as they translate for her duty to produce offspring. In order to create an

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*essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 275.

<sup>79</sup> Stange 278.

<sup>80</sup> Stange 280.

<sup>81</sup> Chopin 71.

identity of her own and gain self-ownership over herself, she breaks off from these secondary attributes and supplants them by herself. Although we cannot judge whether this process is fully or even partially conscious, we see several instances where Edna struggles for a space of her own. Edna eventually decides to move out of Esplanade Street after the late developments with Alcée Arobin give her the self-confidence to articulate some of her concerns. She announces her plans to Mademoiselle Reisz with great excitement and provides several reasons for her incipient moving:

“Just two steps away.” laughed Edna, “in a little four-room house around the corner. It looks so cozy, so inviting and restful, whenever I pass by; and it’s for rent. I’m tired looking after that big house. It never seemed like mine, anyway — like home. It’s too much trouble. I have to keep too many servants. I am tired bothering with them.”

“That is not your true reason, *ma belle*. There is no use in telling me lies. I don’t know your reason, but you have not told me the truth.” Edna did not protest or endeavor to justify herself.

“The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine. Isn’t that enough reason?”

“They are your husband’s,” returned Mademoiselle, with a shrug and a malicious elevation of the eyebrows.”<sup>82</sup>

This conversation gives us insight into Edna’s reasoning and to the awakening which brought about the comprehension of her situation. “Edna did not protest or endeavor to justify herself” when Mademoiselle Reisz questioned her list of material and practical reasons to move because she is partially conscious about her motivations. The only answer that can satisfy Mademoiselle’s doubt and also show the true nature of Edna’s motivations is to point out that her house is not her own; that her life is not her own.

The emancipation Edna is to achieve through separation from her husband gives her the freedom to choose who she is but also how she will use her newly gained selfhood. Her womanhood is a currency whose value is determined by the laws of supply and demand. When she

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<sup>82</sup> Chopin 102.

decides to withhold herself as a mother and as an object of sexual satisfaction she takes charge in determining her value to others; or as Stange puts it “The freedom to withhold oneself has its complement in the freedom to give oneself.”<sup>83</sup> Edna, however, maintains the status-quo of the patriarchy by still reflecting her price in the demand of men she finds attractive. Freedom from her husband only leaves more space for an extramarital influence of Robert or Alcée and for the same suffocating language of patriarchy under which she suffered before her awakening.

Furthermore, her refusal to participate in the parenting role only reinforces her identification as a mother, this time in a negative way. Stange summarizes Edna’s position by saying “Indeed, Edna is inescapably a mother. Motherhood is what Edna withholds and thus she, too, is essentially a mother-woman.”<sup>84</sup> By “daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world”<sup>85</sup> Edna realizes herself through her opposition to the ideology she tries to escape. Moreover, when Edna leaves Adèle, she remains haunted by the phrase “think of the children, Edna”<sup>86</sup> because it reminds her of the bonds that tie her new identity with the one she tried to escape.

Slowly, Edna develops a sense of her own *ipséité* by shedding the layers of her identity that bind her to Léonce and their marriage and replacing them with her experience. She moves into her new house, establishes an independent means of income and intimate relationships that stimulate her without stifling her social independence. This goes along the lines of practical feminism that we used to describe a tendency to stress the practical readings of *The House of Mirth* (and, indeed, also of *The Awakening*) and their subsequent emancipatory potential in our earlier analysis of this book. However, this reading, although altogether positive and to be supported as an instinctive and empowering act, goes against the text and on more than one level. If we consider the tragic ending of the novel, we realize that even though Edna found a way to free herself in as many ways as was possible (a luxury that many other women, even of her social standing, could not enjoy) she

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<sup>83</sup> Chopin 282.

<sup>84</sup> Stange 284.

<sup>85</sup> Chopin 79.

<sup>86</sup> Chopin 134.

nonetheless remained a victim of the same rhetoric of patriarchy. Luce Irigaray, from whom we borrowed the idea of (at least) two different feminisms comments on the problem of complicity in her book *This Sex Which is Not One* by saying “If we play along, we let ourselves be abused, destroyed. We remain indefinitely distant from ourselves to support the pursuit of their ends.”<sup>87</sup> If we can learn one thing from *The Awakening*, it is that practical improvements and emancipatory acts are futile if they are brought about without any relevant and corresponding change in the language of the power relations between given actors.

Edna Pontellier is in many ways a successor of Lily Bart, and it is not impossible to imagine her story as a sequel to *The House of Mirth*. The obstacles she faces must be alien to Lily Bart because Lily never ventured so far in order to gain her freedom and also because her suffering is of a more personal nature with its origin firmly grounded in her personal history and within her society. *The House of Mirth* is a text concerned with the particular restrictions put on Lily Bart both by her past and by her society. *The Awakening* is then a text which, although it retains some of the traits of Chopin’s earlier local color fiction writing, concerns itself with the general and whose characters are not as detailed as those we find in *The House of Mirth*. Chopin chronicles an awakening of Edna Pontellier and the subsequent emancipatory actions she takes in order to establish her independent self-hood so that afterward, she can ask the crucial question — is that enough? Is it enough to move into a separate house, find a job and enjoy the possibilities of extramarital passion?

In *The Awakening*, we can find answers to these questions, and the real depth and wealth of this text shows itself only when we inspect the closer linguistic and structural details. Let us now inspect whether the text suggests something more about the state of oppression Edna undoubtedly found herself in.

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<sup>87</sup> Irigaray 211.

## 4.2 A Language to be Understood

As we already mentioned, the beginning of *The Awakening* is especially important as an indicator of what to expect in the rest of the book. We have analyzed the parts showing Edna's first appearance and her interaction with Léonce as well as Léonce's language with its implications. However, the very start of the book, the first sentence, we left for a later time that has now come.

“A green and a yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over:

“*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!* That's all right!”

He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence.”<sup>88</sup>

The language which nobody could understand introduces us to a world where men like Léonce speak in a very understandable language, a language of patriarchy. This language does not allow Edna the space to express herself and her emotions in any intelligible way. When Léonce disinterestedly asks Edna what happened during her swim, she tries to narrate her experience, with Robert's help, but soon realizes that it was “some utter nonsense; some adventure out there in the water, and they both tried to relate it at once. It did not seem half so amusing when told.”<sup>89</sup> There is no framework or a signifier that could translate her experience and allow her to communicate without the loss of her self-hood, or at least there is none such framework in existence yet, although Edna can create it.

Her awakening is characterized by the seclusion from the society and all its conventions, her stirring sense of self-hood and the discovery of her physical abilities but also the “vast expanse of water” that is “unlimited” to the extent that she could “lose herself” within it.<sup>90</sup> This experience is

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<sup>88</sup> Chopin 22.

<sup>89</sup> Chopin 24.

<sup>90</sup> Chopin 49.

first articulated through an allusion to her childhood as Edna is described as “the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence.”<sup>91</sup> This is significant as we see that even the text itself struggles to find words that could describe Edna’s experience without choosing phrases that are depersonalized either by their clichéd use or connotations to any totalizing discourse. Edna (or the text) instinctively return to the memory or image of her childhood as a source of untainted images that still maintain their correspondence to the feelings that encompass her. Another example of this can be found in a passage where Edna and Madame Ratignolle spend some time talking together and away from all the other influences which leave them to themselves and their thoughts. Adèle asks Edna: “Of whom—of what are you thinking about?” as if the only natural thing Edna could think about was another person. She, in return, says “Nothing,” but quickly realizes that that is not true and tries to retrace her thoughts. Her thoughts take her back to the time of her childhood, and she returns there in a series of free associations:

“First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. The hot wind biting in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace—of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water.”<sup>92</sup>

This free association demonstrates the connection between her childhood (this memory in particular) and her awakening in the sea. It is merely by the resembling body movements that Edna can conjure up a moment of freedom and happiness but also a moment where she could have expressed these feelings. Patricia S. Yaeger provides a reading of Edna’s ordeal in the context of Julia Kristeva’s theory, specifically her notion of the phobia she espoused in *Powers of Horror*. Yaeger says, in her essay named “A Language Which Nobody Understood: Emancipatory

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Chopin 37.

Strategies in *The Awakening*,” that “Edna Pontellier has no language to help her integrate and interrogate the diversity of her feelings; she experiences neither world nor signifying system capacious enough to accommodate her desires.”<sup>93</sup> Moreover, she quotes Kristeva in order to further establish this claim:

“(this subject) produces them in the very material of the drives—and it turns out that the only rhetoric of which he is capable is that of affect, and it is projected, as often as not, by means of *images*. It will then fall upon analysis to give back a memory, hence a language, to the unnameable states of fear, while emphasizing the former, which make up what is most unapproachable in the unconscious.”<sup>94</sup>

In this way, Edna uses the images from her childhood to supplant for her emotional expressions. We may suppose that this would lead her to develop a more elaborate way of expression, but she never has the chance to as all her small “awakenings” are thwarted by the intrusion of an external language with demands on her.

Let us take, for example, what follows after the honest and open conversation between Adèle and Edna and the digression into the past of Edna, after Edna begins to be “intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor.”<sup>95</sup> Just when she begins the analytical process of delving into her feelings and memories, she is disturbed by “the sound of approaching voices” and “Robert, surrounded by a troop of children, searching for them.”<sup>96</sup> Robert brings along the children and fills out all the space that there was for free thought and self-exploration. Her sweet memory of a childhood in Kentucky and also the only image she can connect to any feeling of freedom is connected to her escape from her father’s gloomy sermon; her moment of intoxication with herself is brought to an end by the arrival of Robert with the kids; her

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<sup>93</sup> Patricia S. Yaeger, “A Language Which Nobody Understood: Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*,” *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 334–335.

<sup>94</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 37.

<sup>95</sup> Chopin 40.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

awakening is immediately counterposed to the cold and uninterested response of Léonce and others seeking a claim on her new-found ability to swim. We see here that all opportunities to free herself and build a self-reliable language for her experience are countered by the interference of a male voice as much as they arise from an escape from it. The reason for Edna's suicide can be found in her inability to detach herself from these voices, and it is crucial for us, as readers, to see her love affair with Robert critically.

Yaeger discussed the intricate nature of the relationship between Edna and Robert in her essay mentioned above where she argues that "insofar as feminist critics read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as a novel about sexual liberation, we read it with our patriarchal biases intact."<sup>97</sup> By committing adultery, Edna may exercise her newly realized sexual freedom, but by falling in love with Robert and accepting the sentimental love discourse of her time, she merely changes one man for another. The discourse of romantic adultery in which she begins to see herself as her romance with Robert develops is as patriarchal as the discourse of marriage she tried to escape. Her value is again judged by another man who decides how and why their lives will look and what their future will be. The only difference is that Robert offers Edna a more democratic and shared future than she could expect from Léonce.

The shape of this future can be seen through their shared fantasies they indulge in at different times such as when Robert, at Madame Antoine's, answers her question about how long she slept. He says "You have slept precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers; and for one hundred years I have been out under the shed reading a book..."<sup>98</sup> and in doing so he offers Edna an escape from the oppressive reality of her life into a fantastical space; in this space, nonetheless, all the preconceptions own to patriarchy stay the same. As Yaeger puts it she "Although Edna initially attempts to move into an arena in which she can begin to explore

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<sup>97</sup> Yaeger 311.

<sup>98</sup> Chopin 60.



feelings which lie outside the prescribed social code, can only act within some permutation of the subject-object relations her society has ordained for her.”<sup>99</sup>

However, the book does not end on a wholly pessimistic note, and its entire structure goes against the oppressiveness of patriarchy, normative language, and every social or moral prescriptivism. Its power lies in the subversive use of language and its modern sensibility which allows it to say things that were way ahead of their time and are still relevant today. What we have uncovered during our analysis is that there are at least two levels at which we can understand the relationship between Edna Pontellier and patriarchy. Firstly, her position is unequal with that of the men around her, and she suffers from a number of policies that are unjust and discriminatory. Her position as a woman, wife and a mother means that she has to surrender all her claims to fulfilment or happiness for her husband and children to please the society. In every other case, she is under threat to be judged and marginalized. All of her opportunities are curtailed by the sexist laws that were still in power during the 1890s in Louisiana, and she has a general difficulty to escape this oppressive atmosphere into a space of her own.

Secondly, her oppression is characterized precisely by this lack of space for any manner of individualization as Edna Montpellier cannot voice her feelings, passions or needs in a way that would be authentic and yet remain acceptable by the society. In other words, the role that she is allotted is hopelessly alienated from any of her characteristic traits, predispositions or hopes. She tries to establish herself as a self-reliant new woman, but the real tragedy of the story is that she fails to find a new language or a signifier through which she could express her desires. She succeeds as far as the material side of her emancipation goes; her own house, income and a set of friends are a luxury that would be rare, to say the least, for an American woman at that time. However, all of this progress counts for nothing if she cannot liberate herself internally and she ultimately fails to do that, although she tries and goes through a number of authentic moments of self-recognition.

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<sup>99</sup> Yaeger 314.

The voice of the traditional values and narratives just as much as the voice of Robert seduce Edna away from the momentary self-awareness she achieved during her awakening. Also, instead of giving us a bleak and pessimistic image of the impossibility of emancipation, the text instead tries to make us aware of the subtle hardships that we can go through as we navigate our lives in a society that does not forgive anyone who does not conform.

## **5 Conclusion**

In closing, we may summarize the main points and findings of our analysis. First, we formulated our question while providing some theoretical background to it. We followed with a general introduction into the historical and biographical material available to our use when approaching *The House of Mirth* and *The Awakening*. This background proved very helpful as our analysis relied on our knowledge of the historical conditions of the era in question and also of the psychological criticism, which partly relies on biographies. Starting with *The House of Mirth*, we

conducted a close reading with the aim to understand the structure and dynamics of the relationship between the main heroine and patriarchy as portrayed by the book.

Our inquiry relied mostly on critical studies conducted by Dimock, Restuccia and Sullivan and the rereading of *The House of Mirth* that followed found that several crucial insights were already made by these critics. We tried to free these points of insight from any form of totalizing narrative that some of the mentioned critics pursued and instead combined their approaches to establish a new, broader understanding of our problem. The result was satisfactory since it showed the complex nature of patriarchy at work in *The House of Mirth* and the implications it had on Lily Bart but also because we managed to expose a strong psychological factor in the story of the book. This psychological dimension is crucial in understanding the motivations of Lily Bart and cannot be tied to any social agenda without forcing a simplified reading of the book.

Furthermore, we analyzed *The Awakening* and used the insight we gained thus far in another close reading. *The Awakening* needed more close attention to the text because the textual strategies that Kate Chopin employed were more language rather than story focused. We separated Edna's attempts to emancipate herself into two different groups — practical emancipatory efforts and her personal awakening. The practical measures have to be viewed in the light of contemporary society and its patriarchal institutions whereas Edna's personal awakening is an experience related more to her ability of expression. The way in which she explored her body and physique as well as her emotions led to the moment of empowerment. Nevertheless, Her attempts to achieve emancipation on an emotional level were met with failure as she succumbed to the ingrained romantic ideas of gender.

Our analysis of *The House of Mirth* and *The Awakening* have shown that both books have many things in common and deal with strikingly similar questions. In each case, they present a story of a woman seeking emancipation and freedom in the cruel societies of there time where women are taken to be a commodity. Lily Bart is especially aware of this fact, and through the sensitive display of her social environment, we realize to what extent her role in the society was limited and

circumscribed to that of an ornamental accessory that man can buy and own. In the same way, Edna Pontellier suffers from the patriarchal rules that govern her marriage that is blatantly oppressive and leaves no space for individual expression or experience. In both cases, the patriarchy works through social institutions, laws, traditions, and customs or market but most importantly through language. Lily finds her demise in the impossibility to express herself through language while Edna dies because of her inability to find a way out of this language.

We have found that the books mentioned above are multilayered and complex texts and can be seen both as empowerment but also as a critique of the structural aspects of patriarchy, something we might find especially pressing in the recent years. Because of this complex character that evades any definite and final way of reading these texts, it is difficult to assess whether the death of Lily and Edna is more a gesture of despair or a rallying cry. Their deaths are not meaningless; they show us the cruel and senseless character of patriarchy and the importance to find a new, authentic way of living within a society. Yet, they at times seem to be dismissive about the possibility of practical emancipation (such as an over-emphasis on economic and day-to-day self-reliance) that is divorced from any thorough understanding and sensitivity of the underlying issues embedded in the very way of our thinking. Nor do we get any proposal as to how one can emancipate themselves from the oppressive language of patriarchy. However, we can view the process of writing and reading novels such as *The House of Mirth* or *The Awakening* as an emancipatory act as well and stress the social context in which these books were written or in which they are read today.

After all, Kate Chopin outgrew the struggles of her heroine by writing *The Awakening* and withstanding the upheaval that followed its publication. To the same extent, Edith Wharton rose above the societal expectations for a woman to have a husband and be his private property, a beautiful piece of art he can spend money on, by finding her vocation in writing and sublimating whatever traumas she might have had into her art.

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