# "ABYSSES OF SOLITUDE":

# THE SOCIAL FICTION OF

# KATE CHOPIN AND EDITH WHARTON

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ABSTRACT

The fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton stands as a clear link between 19th and 20th century literary and cultural sensibilities as well as a critique of social theory and practice. Both Chopin and Wharton worked primarily with literary forms defined by male discourse--psychological realism, local color fiction, the novel of manners--yet also embedded within these fictional boundaries a response to patriarchal language and ideology. In their social fiction, Chopin and Wharton spoke in particular of and to the "woman question," offering both realistic and critical portrayals of American women in search of selfhood. Their work is part of the first modern female literary discourse in America, one in which women's experience is no longer marginalized but is given centrality and expression.

## ABRÉGÉ

Les oeuvres de Kate Chopin et d'Edith Wharton représentent un lien évident entre les sensibilités culturelles et littéraires du 19$^{e}$ et du 20$^{e}$ siècles ainsi qu'une critique de la théorie et de la pratique sociales. Les deux auteurs travaillèrent avec des formes littéraires définies par le discours masculin--réalisme psychologique, cultivation de couleur locale, roman de manières--en introduisant une réponse au langage et à l'idéologie patriarcaux à l'intérieur de ces limites formelles. Dans leurs oeuvres sociales, Chopin et Wharton s'adressèrent en particulier à "la question de la femme," tout en créant des portraits réalistes et critiques de femmes américaines à la recherche d'elles-mêmes. Leurs oeuvres font partie du premier discours littéraire féminin moderne en Amérique, dans lequel l'expérience féminine n'est plus marginale mais s'exprime de façon centrale.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

The work of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton stands as a clear link between 19th and 20th century literary and cultural sensibilities as well as a critique of social theories and practices. They were two of the first major American women writers to break with the established dicta of "feminine" or sentimental fiction. Reacting equally against the strictures of genteel and regionalist fiction, Chopin and Wharton experimented with new content within old forms in order to conceptualize their socially and morally responsive and responsible concerns. This is seen in their general themes: the individual's revolt against the inequalities manifest in genteel or bourgeois society; the decay of such a society and its replacement with the new money class and ethics of 20th century industrial entrepreneurs; the role of social determinism in class and personal crises; and the conflict between individual freedom and social responsibility. It is seen as well in their subverted and therefore subversive renderings of traditional literary conventions and characterizations of social securities, limitations and types, which undercut, for example, the critically accepted readings of the same done by George Washington Cable or Henry James. In

particular, they effected a new perspective on their societies' cult of true womanhood, a cultural signifier central to early 20th century American literature and an ideological formulation still of major concern today.

It is a given that literature in itself can only offer a somewhat obscure critique of bourgeois ethics--that is, if it is to maintain its literary nature and not descend into mere polemic.[1] In their social fiction, Chopin and Wharton implicitly stated their social criticism in similar and stealthy fashion: both portrayed the modern alienated individual--either a specific woman or a specific man who perceives specific women as ideological types--on the verge of class rejection or ejection. They also offered alternatives, albeit tentative ones, to such self-abnegation and social compromise. In their literature of protest, Chopin and Wharton in particular spoke of and to the woman question, offering both realistic and critical portrayals of American women in search of selfhood. As will be discussed, their work is part of the first modern female literary discourse in America, one in which women's experience is no longer marginalized but is given centrality and expression.

An issue of immediate concern in the study of women writers is the reexamination of their works within the proper historical and cultural contexts. This can be effected by careful research in areas usually considered supplementary to literary criticism: ideology, economics,

science, and so on. It is, of course, only a first step to place the work in its temporal reality; we obviously read the work from our time and in its textual non-time but should also attempt to do justice to the writer's intent and expectations. One must "enter" the text, as recent critics would have it, but one need not break into it through the back door. It is, however, crucial to clarify how one enters and for what purpose.

Feminist literary analysis is one such means of entry into texts and requires a brief introduction as it is the mode or methodology of this study. Feminism within the last two hundred years has steadily approached the status of a major political and cultural theory and philosophy; feminist literary criticism within the last fifteen years has also become a system of methodologies to contend with and that with far-reaching consequences. From the outset, feminist critics have focussed on the rediscovery of a usable, feminist American literary past and the formulation of radically new critical theories and methods to inform and analyze both refound and new texts as well as to reevaluate canonized literature. Feminists seek, variously, separatist, liberal, radical culture and consciousness. Most critics center on--at least in America--class, race, or sex, the hierarchical relationships of power within a society. In addition, feminist literary critics are working for the most part

with products which have not been and are not considered mainstream or traditional, those artifacts not readily accepted into the canon.

Feminist critics, then, while diverse in political strategies and critical intent share one ideological line in that they do speak to and of one another sympathetically but with critical fervor and rigor. For them, the basis of all political and critical action is clear: the subject is woman (as literary character, as social individual); her subjugation is to be treated both objectively and subjectively but always with the intent of transformation and transcendence. Feminist critics wish to deconstruct and to reconstruct--to defalsify and to reinterpret--traditional history, to discover a female/feminist cultural tradition, and, finally, to effect a system of aesthetics that acknowledges female/feminist discourse and which can enter knowledgeably into it. This is a critical movement, then, in the stage of formation and formulation. It is, as yet, a movement without established theories or shared critical discourse; it is between sentiment and discipline.

A brief look at the history of feminist literary criticism clarifies the above statements. Feminist criticism in the early 1960s, the time of its first important emergence in the United States, was, to be exact, not criticism at all. It was, instead, spadework and identification. This was only to be expected, of course,

since literary criticism requires a body of work about which to be critical, and it was more than evident to feminist scholars that the body of work was there only in spirit but not in its materiality. Thus, the first phase of critical involvement and evolvement required pinpointing the lacks in the canon and verifying this assumption of present lacks by finding the actual works which had been relegated to positions outside the canon. At the base of all this activity was the belief in a female countertradition, that women throughout history have written against the patriarchal culture and, in some cases, outside of it. Critics sought female discourse, one, to borrow from Michel Foucault, that was not "dans le vrai"[2] and which was and still is on the edges of the true, accepted patriarchal discourse. The first stage then was to identify true female discourse and acquire a body of texts through which critical modes and theories could be generated.

In the 1960s, one saw re-editions of "lost" works (for example, Chopin's The Awakening), a proliferation of anthologies of women's fiction and poetry, and the first wave of studies from a clearly feminist viewpoint grounded in women's history and culture. In the main, these works established a tradition parallel to patriarchal culture and history but did not bridge the gap between that "true" culture and that of the female Other. Like the feminist literary criticism of earlier

scholars, such analyses remained informative at times, polemical in the extreme. The only connection made between the male true and female Other was the cursory one of Other as victim of the true, woman and her culture as martyr and sacrifice to patriarchal ideology. This criticism does, however, mirror early findings in female discourse: early literary works both in content and form reflected the power of patriarchal ideology, in particular the ideology of true womanhood, but did not go far beyond showing the negative aspects of this and did so only to a limited and ineffectual degree.[3] Both early writers and recent feminist critics have been affected, as Mary Jacobus states in her "The Difference of View," by

> the rift experienced by women writers in a patriarchal society, where language itself may re-inscribe the structures by which they are oppressed....In this scheme, woman as silent bearer of ideology (virgin, wife, mother) is the necessary sacrifice to male secularity, worldliness, and tampering with forbidden knowledge. She is the term by which patriarchy creates a reserve of purity and silence in the materiality of its traffic with the world and its noisy discourse.[4]

Women writing within male discourse, such as in the case of the Brontës, George Eliot, Chopin or Wharton, seemingly produced a defeminized discourse, a literature of martyrdom and compromise; it definitely resulted--in the case of early critics such as Wollstonecraft, Woolf, Ellmann, Millett--in finger-pointing polemics against men but not necessarily for women. Such critical works denied or

overlooked the possibility that earlier writers might have themselves been creating a new and subtle female discourse by subverting the male discourse wherein theirs emerged.

Consequent phases of feminist criticism show again more political concern than critical conceptualization, but the modes of critical discourse become less polemical and more aesthetically and philosophically informed. In 1971, both Tillie Olsen and Adrienne Rich presented talks at the MLA session on "The Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century," essays which would become touchstones for feminist critics. Ironically, the writers shared feminist sentiment but not critical approach and discipline.

In her "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Adrienne Rich called for a new political poetics:

> Re-vision -- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction -- is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival....A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name -- and therefore live -- afresh....We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.[5]

Rich's presentation was highly subjective and focussed

on her duality of selves and the problems facing women writers. Her suggested critical methodology implied an equally subjective dependence on text and, as has become clearer in her recent articles and speeches, the responsibility of the critic to work with politically correct texts or, at least, to make politically correct readings.[6] Despite the lack of clear critical method, her statements were taken up wholeheartedly by feminist critics, and the concept of re-vision remains an essential one in feminist critical theory.

Tillie Olsen, while equally personal in her "One Out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century," refocussed on collective concerns: canonical lacks, the power of patriarchal ideology, the material reality of women writers as portrayed in texts and found in actuality.[7] Her suggested methodology depended on a body of texts approached with critical objectivity and the responsibility of critics to read and teach women's works and experience. Olsen moved outside pure textuality into materiality, past and present, and asked critics to do the same.

Most recent criticism has also moved beyond the dichotomies of textuality versus materiality, subjectivity versus objectivity, politics versus poetics and toward critical pluralism. The multiple approaches available do not, however, lead to critical enervation because they are at variance; if put to correct use, each

mode fulfills a critical task and elucidates a portion of the larger feminist project which Rich aptly perceived as breaking the bonds of the anti-female world.

The second wave of feminist criticism, which overlaps the first and third, resulted in such a multiplicity of modes. Carol Neely and Annette Kolodny in recent articles effectively differentiate and analyze earlier methods, and they stand themselves as initiators of a third wave in critical discourse.

In the second wave, we see a split between textuality and ideology. Carol Neely, in her "Feminist Modes of Shakespearean Criticism: Compensatory, Justificatory, Transformational," offers a neat tripartite separation of methodologies in an attempt to order somewhat the chaotic theory and praxis of feminists, avoiding at the same time deep analysis of the convergence and recoil of feminists' critical sympathies (for example, lesbian, Marxist, Freudian, separatist, and so on). Neely's first mode is compensatory criticism, this coming fast upon and at times simultaneously with a second mode, that of justificatory analysis. Compensatory analysis uses women as point of entry into the text; it is, again, less a critical mode than a form of potential self-identification. It seeks to identify the images of women in literature in a search for heroines or role models and, as Neely points out, "is embodied in the notion, 'Images of Women in Literature,' the title of numerous pioneering women's studies courses."[8]

It is, finally, a critically dubious mode and is, as Neely states:

> vulnerable to objections of ahistoricity and wishful thinking and, what is worse, subject to contamination by the sex-role stereotypes of the culture in which the criticism exists and which it is reacting against....Influenced by their own battles for equality, feminist critics may over-compensate and attribute inappropriately or too enthusiastically to women characters qualities traditionally admired in men -- power, aggressiveness, wit, sexual boldness. Reversing but not discarding the conventional stereotypes, they may compromise both their interpretations and their feminism.[9]

The justificatory mode, on the other hand, also seeks to identify female images but here with the aim of disclosing stereotypes, absence, woman as subordinate and victim to male domination, or, in other words, negative role models. This mode accepts "the traditional dichotomy, the stereotyping of women, of the constraints of patriarchy"[10] and attempts to justify the powerlessness of women characters by drawing from historical, economic, social, and cultural studies which verify the powerlessness of women in the writer's world. Neely shows that this mode also has distinct critical weaknesses:

> As the first mode has difficulty defining the characteristics of the heroines without reverting to some version of sex-role stereotypes, the second mode has difficulty assessing patriarchy's varied quality and weight...without falsely rigidifying it....Such criticism may be led to make the structures more monolithic or oppressive than they are, to minimize both the freedom of action of individual women within them and the part such women play in determining their shape; the result may be depressing -- and also unbalanced.[11]

Neely clearly sees and warns of the thin line between

criticism and polemic.

These first two modes of analysis were most useful for revisionary reading of patriarchal discourse and were means of spadework and identification. Again, the final insights of second wave critics concerned canonical lacks and the presence of female/feminist discourse situated outside or submerged within male discourse. These modes, however, were not particularly useful to critics whose concern was the study of authors, male or female, who were reexamining or reinterpreting patriarchal ideology and symbolic systems of power relationships within their texts. The various modes offered some entry points into the texts but perhaps only to just inside the front door.

The most useful mode for Neely is the most recent, one that has been attempted since the early 1960s but which has proven fairly impossible because of lack of material and critical discipline until now. This final mode is transformational analysis in which critics "interrogate the relations between male idealization of and degradation of women, between women as heroines and women as victims, between the patriarchal text and the matriarchal subtext."[12] It is a mode which has its own clear ideological base but which can incorporate, borrow, and transform methods from male critical discourse. It is the potential link between feminism and formalism, feminism and post-structuralism, feminism and deconstruc-

tion, in short, ideology and aesthetics. It is an analytical mode which simultaneously draws from male discourse, thus drawing itself nearer to the patriarchal true, but which attempts finally to transform both the symbolic and experiential universes of male and female actions. How it is to make these transformations, how a critic discovers and uses this mode, Neely does not say; that these transformations will be made is her dream of third wave criticism.

Similarly, in her "Dancing Through the Minefield," Annette Kolodny reinvokes Rich's call for re-vision and survival and, like Neely, criticizes early critical work for its fall into traditional ideological traps: emphasis on archetypes, stereotypes, victimization, dichotomies, women as victims rather than women as agents of power. She praises, instead, such critics as Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert for their search for a female tradition and sensibility. Equally important for Kolodny are the works which perceive "literature as a social institution embedded not only within its own literary traditions, but also within the particular physical and mental artifacts of the society from which it comes."[13] Kolodny goes on to suggest that we do not stop with the ideology within the text but instead go further to analyze the ideology of the text itself as cultural artifact and of the enterprise of critical analysis as well. She calls into question acts of canonization,

acts of reading, acts of criticism, and acts of politics:

> (1) Literary history (and with that, the historicity of literature) is a fiction; (2) insofar as we are taught how to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms; and, finally, (3) that since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must reexamine not only our aesthetics but, as well, the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape our aesthetic responses.[14]

Following these premises, Kolodny sees feminist criticism as

> that locus in literary study where, in unceasing effort, female self-consciousness turns in upon itself, attempting to grasp the deepest conditions of its own unique and multiplicitous realities, in the hope, eventually, of altering the very forms through which the culture perceives, expresses, and knows itself.[15]

Again, as in Neely's piece, the multiplicity of realities require an equal multiplicity of modes of analysis, and Kolodny is comfortable with the pluralism of the third wave. She does, however, make clear that feminist critics cannot merely borrow critical techniques piecemeal from male critical discourse but must either transform these to complement female self-consciousness or discard them entirely. The task of the feminist critic, then, is a continuous one of continuous change: one seeks self-consciousness within and without texts; one reads and re-reads as an increasingly self-informed, informing, and, as Judith Fetterley puts it, resisting reader.[16] The convergence of life and art for the writer and critic of female/feminist discourse is dynamic and dialectical both

in its disclosure and re-enactment of ideological oppositions.

The third wave, thus, centers on consciousness of self and consciousness of difference. Feminist critics seek elaboration and analysis of not only cultural constructs and imperatives--received ideas such as the ideology of true womanhood--but also the specificity of woman's experience and art. Virginia Woolf's questions "Ah, but what is 'herself'? I mean, what is a woman?" have yet the same answer: "I assure you, I do not know."[17] Neither has the issue of woman's specific social and critical discourse, despite Woolf and the French feminists, been fully analyzed nor can it be without further extensive work in, as Kolodny and others point out, linguistics and language acquisition as well as revision in the fields of psychoanalysis, anthropology, biology, and so on. What is immediately open to the critic, as Mary Jacobus points out, is the complementary process of analyzing "the extent to which representation oppresses women to the ways in which it may be challenged from within and transformed by women themselves."[18] In other words, while elaboration of difference continues, the literary critic can study the causality of difference: the material reality of difference and the processes by which difference is expressed and given power by women artists.

In his The Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault studies the problems facing critics who seek

reinterpretation of history and culture:

> ...in any case, we must reconstitute another discourse, rediscover the silent murmuring, the inexhaustible speech that animates from within the voice that one hears, re-establish the tiny, invisible text that runs between and sometimes collides with them. The analysis of thought is always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs. Its question is unfailingly: what was being said in what was said?[19]

Jacobus, in her "The Difference of View," places equal emphasis on seeing and speaking what is said; though she admits writing to be marginal and diffusive, she is certain that there is a "quietly subversive power of writing, its power to destabilise the ground on which we stand."[20] Jacobus and third wave critics seek the true history and discourse of women, ones which decenter in crucial ways the patriarchal world view. They cannot as yet delimit woman's specificity, but they can analyze the process of woman's convergence and recoil with male discourse and worlds. Difference for them is no longer a term of dichotomy but of power and is a continuum to which feminist criticism responds and in which it exists:

> Difference is redefined, not as male versus female--not as biologically constituted--but as a multiplicity, joyousness and heterogeneity which is that of textuality itself. Writing, the production of meaning, becomes the site both of challenge and Otherness; rather than (as in more traditional approaches) simply yielding the themes and representation of female oppression. Difference, in fact, becomes a traversal of the boundaries inscribed in Virginia Woolf's terms, but a traversal that exposes these very boundaries for what they are--the product of phallocentric discourse and of women's relation to patriarchal culture. Though necessarily working within 'male'

> discourse, women's writing (in this scheme) would work ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written.[21]

As Foucault writes, "the problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits; it is no longer one of lasting foundations, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations."[22] First wave critics uncovered a subversive line of female discourse, thus providing a body of writing about which and with which feminists could speak. Second wave critics, for the most part, focussed on unities--establishing a counter-canon, unmasking female sensibility and tradition--as well as continuing the polemics against patriarchal theories and practices. The third wave critics are attempting to traverse between pure polemics and pure aesthetics; their aim is that of social reintegration primarily achieved through the recognition and valorization of female tradition, discourse, and culture. The new feminist criticism would be, as Neely hopes, transformational and radical in that it would shatter the boundaries of patriarchal critical discourse as it informs and is informed by the process of rebuilding the foundations.

The following work will study the female discourse of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton and will look at their work as both challenge and difference. Both Chopin and Wharton worked primarily within boundaries set by male discourse--psychological realism, local color, the novel

of manners--yet also inscribed therein a response to patriarchal language and ideology. They are both, thus, social critics, and theirs is a socially significant fiction. Unlike comparable male writers of their time, their focus was not on individual aesthetics or portrayal of individual vices and virtues; both merely used criticism of a particular, individual case to disclose larger social structures. Neither do they resemble the political ideologues of their day; the deep structural and ideological contradictions within their discourse are left purposely unresolved. Theirs is a nonpolemical but political art in which the disruption of the rules of male discourse and of the patriarchal world view are deeply but obviously embedded within character, plot, theme. They focus their discourse relentlessly on the traversals and boundaries as well as on the "abysses of solitude"[23] and alienation effected by social and ideological imperatives into which their characters wander or fall.

Chapter One will explore the major extant criticism on the authors. Chapter Two will offer brief biographical background and elucidate the authors' own critical views on art. As an entry into their discourse, I will analyze in Chapter Three what they did: the ideology of true womanhood. This construct of conventions, beliefs, and prescriptions is central to their discourse and intent. Chapters Four and Five will focus directly on their discourse and analyze selected works as representative of

their major concern: the portrayal and analysis of the limited world for women and thus the limited world of and for men. Chapter Four will discuss Chopin's major transformational works and include readings of selected short stories, her historical materialist novel, At Fault, and her major work, The Awakening. Her last novel is both a historical and a literary/philosophical foreshadowing of Wharton's more detailed exploration of social alienation, consciousness, and revolt. These analyses of Chopin's work will, then, lead up to the more selective readings in Chapter Five of Wharton's early novels, novellas, and short stories which fall into five progressively inclusive categories of ideological content and theme: woman presented as willing martyr (short stories from 1893-1900, The Touchstone, Sanctuary); woman as social capital (short stories from 1900-1905, The House of Mirth); the paradigmatic portrayal and rejection of the sacrifice-domination theories (Ethan Frome, Summer, The Reef); woman as social entrepreneur (The Custom of the Country); and a final compilation of preceding ideological prescriptions and rejection of the same as presented in The Age of Innocence. This final section acts as a natural conclusion to the dissertation since with this work Wharton comes to terms with her life search and offers her most radical social commentary and a final optimistic world view of the individual reconciled to partial rejection of the old "true" way of patriarchal ideology and

partial sympathy with a new reconstituted world in which women's experience and desire achieves centrality. As a coda, I will offer brief remarks about Chopin's final awakening and Wharton's later works as well as comments on the further work called for in my own text.

Chopin's and Wharton's female discourse, then, will be presented as transformational in that it "dares and defies"[24] that which is both alienating and destructive. As will be discussed, theirs is a fiction of limits in which, as Jacobus writes:

> The transgression of literary boundaries--moments when structures are shaken, when language refuses to lie down meekly, or the marginal is brought into sudden focus, or intelligibility itself refused--reveal not only the conditions of possibility within which women's writing exists, but what it would be like to revolutionise them.[25]

## ENDNOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

[1] On the subject of literature as ideological criticism, see John Goode's "Woman and the Literary Text" in The Rights and Wrongs of Women, edited by Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley (New York: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1976), pp. 217-255 as well as recent works by Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson.

[2] Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language" in The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), p. 224. For further discussion of Foucault's general relevance to feminist critical theory, see Marcelle Thiébaux' "Foucault's Fantasia for Feminists: The Woman Reading" in Theory and Practice of Feminist Literary Criticism, edited by Gabriela Mora and Karen S. Van Hooft (Ypsilanti: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1982), pp. 44-61.

[3] See for example the critical works of Virginia Woolf who, despite her concern for women, continually wrote to a male audience and for their approval, a fact pointed out by numerous feminist critics including Adrienne Rich in her "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision (1971)" in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979). This limitation in self-expression is even more apparent in the works of the earliest writers in England and America whose discourse was clearly not within their control (implicitly or explicitly): see here the works of Margery Kempe, Alice Thornton, Fanny Burney, or Anne Bradstreet as examples of this.

[4] Mary Jacobus, "The Difference of View" in Women Writing and Writing about Women (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1979), pp. 10-11.

[5] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 35.

[6] Rich's theories have at times come close to pure dogma; until recently, radical separatist theory and practice was, for her, the only correct way.

[7] Tillie Olsen, "One Out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century" in Silences (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1979), pp. 22-46.

[8] Carol Thomas Neely, "Feminist Modes of Shakespearean Criticism: Compensatory, Justificatory, Transformational," Women's Studies, 9, no. 1 (1981), 6.

[9] Neely, "Feminist Modes," 7.

[10] Neely, "Feminist Modes," 7.

[11] Neely, "Feminist Modes," 8-9.

[12] Neely, "Feminist Modes," 9.

[13] Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," Feminist Studies, 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980), 4. See also responses to this article by Judith Kegan Gardiner, Elly Bulkin, Rena Grasso Patterson, and Annette Kolodny in "An Interchange on Feminist Criticism: on 'Dancing through the Minefield,'" Feminist Studies, 8, no. 3 (Fall 1982), 629-675.

[14] Kolodny, "Dancing," 8.

[15] Kolodny, "Dancing," 16-17.

[16] Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

[17] Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women" in Women and Writing, edited by Michèle Barrett (New York: Harçourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 60.

[18] Mary Jacobus, "Preface and Acknowledgements" in Women Writing and Writing About Women (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1979), p. 7.

[19] Foucault, Archaeology, pp. 27-28.

[20] Jacobus, "Difference," pp. 18-19.

[21] Jacobus, "Difference," pp. 12-13.

[22] Foucault, Archaeology, p. 5.

[23] Kate Chopin, The Awakening in The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, edited by Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), II, p. 893.

[24] Kate Chopin, Awakening, II, p. 946.

[25] Jacobus, "Difference," p. 16.

## CHAPTER ONE: CRITICAL OVERVIEW

The easiest yet the most distressing phase of feminist criticism is the study of previous critical responses to women writers. It is easy in that it is spadework which usually uncovers little that provokes serious critical thought; it is almost stultifying in that it uncovers so much which is eminently facile, spurious, and, worst of all, considered as definitive and which therefore necessitates serious critical attention. Both Chopin and Wharton, unfortunately, are model examples of women writers who suffered at the hands of critics not because of critical disagreement but, rather, because of ideological biases which are external to proper critical processes. A brief overview of major criticism on Chopin and Wharton will make this clear.

Kate Chopin is perhaps best known for the critical damnation exercised against her. It is literary legend that critical and popular responses to The Awakening killed her. One can certainly speculate that the attack on her work hastened her death, but such conjecture has little to do with literary criticism. It is, however, a significant fact that the critical onslaught in 1899 killed her literary reputation and destroyed her marketability and, hence, audience. One can also postulate

that her pre-1899 criticism helped in her literary demise. The response to her before The Awakening did not shore up her reputation and defenses for the battle to come.

Chopin at first was simply seen as another local colorist in a long line of Southern writers of whom the greats had already been designated, notably Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable. Even recent critics of regionalist literature include her in lists of authors, noting as an aside that she actually did not and does not fit the conventions or concerns of local colorists. Sentimental and regionalist women writers of the 1800s, with few exceptions, advocated traditional social models; their reflective consciousness determined literary modes--romance and melodrama--and stressed acceptance and, consequently, alienation of unactualized individuals from their social selves. Local color fiction was profoundly negative in that it was a looking backward for a golden age which, of course, had never existed. It denied progress, transformation. It is clear from Chopin's earliest stories that looking backward was not her intent nor that regionalist fiction was her only forte or limitation, but critics would not applaud this until long after her death. Instead, her contemporary critics avoided detailed analysis of her work and seemed content to offer impressions, suggestions, gracious compliments and various sketches of the artist at work. This type of analysis was

undoubtedly considered adequate both as criticism and reportage in its time, and examples are now readily available to modern critics in A Kate Chopin Miscellany (see, for example, Sue V. Moore's authorized sketch or William Schuyler's review/interview).[1] Such criticism offers valuable information and some random critical insights, but it is certainly not a critical discourse establishing a major writer in the canon.

Chopin was also classified early on as a mistress of the short story form but not of the novel. This indicates the critics' desire to label and confine her as local colorist yet again: the short story was the forte of regionalists or of "clever" writers such as Guy de Maupassant. In addition, since the short story form was a minor one, a writer of the same was therefore equally minor. To complicate the issue further, the criticism on her stories was similar to that discussed above, itself minor in its critical intent and acuity. Moreover, no major criticism on Chopin's first novel, At Fault, appeared until very recently. The novel itself was hard to come by because of its limited publication. This last fact merely points out the concerted attempt by critics and publishers to disregard Chopin the novelist and to keep her writing short stories. It was not until she was fully established as a short story writer that her third novel was accorded "critical" attention.

This proper attention, of course, was the nailing

down of the coffin lid. Earlier correspondence between Chopin and her various editors reveal that she had been asked in several instances to rewrite stories considered too indelicate or immoral for her audience. Certain pieces were refused; others were never even submitted; a second novel was destroyed after fruitless attempts to find a publisher. Yet even this correspondence--and critical muttering--could not have prepared Chopin for the critical reaction to The Awakening nor can recent critics fully realize what can only be called the hatchet job done on Chopin the writer and woman. Margaret Culley's excellent edition of the novel now makes available a collection of contemporary reviews which are astounding for their rabidity, morbidity, intolerance, and venomous sexism. Chopin's themes of the sexual and social awakening of a woman clearly insulted or frightened her audience and the literary establishment; the challenge of the book, the transformation effected within, clearly boded ill if translated into the world outside the text. Chopin was castigated for writing unhealthy sex fiction, flawless art without morals, a study in morbidity better suited to psychological textbooks, animalism in words which debased human nature, proved vulgar, corrupted, smelled.[2] Perhaps the most interesting critical statement is that of the Providence Sunday Journal critic: "We are fain to believe that Miss Chopin did not herself realize what she was doing when she wrote it."[3] By late 1899, then, Chopin in the

eyes of her critics and audience was no longer a quaint regionalist or a feminine Maupassant; she was not even Kate Chopin. An extraordinary incident of critical and personal erasure, this: however, the woman writer would not remain silent.

Between 1900-1930, Chopin was brought back into the fold but--again--within studies on regionalists and short story writers. Daniel S. Rankins' published Ph.D. dissertation of 1932, Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories, offered new biographical material and a collection of her stories. His analysis of her works and notably The Awakening, nevertheless, did not offer significantly revisionary readings. Little major work appeared until Cyrille Arnavon's 1953 introduction to a French edition of The Awakening, retitled as Edna; this important piece, however, was virtually unavailable to critics until recently with its inclusion in A Kate Chopin Miscellany. Chopin remained for all intents and critical purposes a shadowy figure on the edge of the canon.

Present-day Chopin critics can virtually recite a litany of those scholars who beginning in the 1960s reawakened interest in Chopin. Again, Margaret Culley's book is invaluable in its overview of recent criticism on Chopin. Viewing the entire body of critical thought, one finds essays of bewilderment concerning Chopin's silencing and neglect, for example those of Larzer Ziff, Edmund Wilson, and Stanley Kauffmann. One sees, finally, serious

literary criticism on Chopin's form and content, for example in the essays of Kenneth Eble, Robert Cantwell, and Lewis Leary. Most important for critics and readers alike, of course, is Per Seyersted's 1969 edition of The Complete Works of Kate Chopin. The body of work is, at last, available, and clearly critical interest intensifies.

In the last decade have come both the most critical and most problematic studies of Chopin. On the one hand, one is offered the analytical and biographical work of Seyersted in his Kate Chopin and the critical and sociological readings done by Emily Toth and Robert Arner in their dissertations and articles. On the other hand, one has to contend with the veritable outpouring of compensatory and justificatory feminist analysis on Chopin and notably her last novel. The recent criticism is highly valuable in that it points to literary and ideological concerns and methods, yet it is also clear that only now with the full availability of Chopin's papers and access to existent critical discourse on Chopin can her work be entered correctly and completely. It has become accepted to view Chopin as a potentially major literary figure, but a more transformational feminist criticism is necessary before it can be determined exactly where Chopin's social fiction stands in relation to canonic and female discourse. Anne Goodwyn Jones' excellent chapter on Chopin in her very recent Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936 is such a new direction in critical

analysis.

Much the same case is true for Edith Wharton. That her work stands as a link between 19th and 20th century literary and cultural sensibilities is evident. It is customary to place her in the traditional and progressive Howells-James-Fitzgerald line; or, as Michael Millgate has astutely observed:

> Edith Wharton occupies an extremely important intermediary position between James and Fitzgerald: indeed, we might argue that Fitzgerald could hardly have written The Great Gatsby without The Custom of the Country, and it is beyond argument that The Custom of the Country itself could not have been written without the whole body of James's achievement behind it.[4]

Beyond this elementary point, however, there is little critical agreement; indeed, to paraphrase an early critic's jab at Wharton, in most cases it seemed to be the critics' only aim "to dish /Wharton/ for the sake of the sensation of dishing her."[5] Wharton's work, from its publication date to the present day, has been criticized for its supposed dated content and reactionary philosophy. Marilyn Jones Lyde, in her 1959 study of Wharton, summed up the situation:

> Too liberal for the Victorians, she was overly moralistic for twentieth-century naturalism. Worst of all, from the modern point of view, she was writing of the wrong class; in a period which the critics like to describe as an age of brute struggle for survival, she continued to concern herself with the nice moral issues which confront the privileged set and have nothing to do with the rise of the masses or the union demand for a higher wage.[6]

More recently, in his 1978 introduction to The Edith

Wharton Omnibus, Gore Vidal has spoken against a more personal bias evident in criticism on her: "Due to her sex, class (in every sense), and place of residence, she has been denied her proper place in the near-empty pantheon of American literature."[7] A brief overview of major critical trends will make clear the need for a total re-evaluation of Wharton's stature as writer and social critic.

Ironically enough, it is Henry James who must bear partial blame for the critical biases against Wharton. James became a close friend of hers in 1903 and remained so until his death. However, their critical disagreements were many; their friendship was obviously not one of master and disciple. By the mid-1900s, Wharton was already staggering under the weighty title of "Great American author" or considered, at least, as the greatest woman writer of her day. James read her first two books in 1902 and, in a much-quoted letter, wrote that he wanted only "to get hold of the little lady and pump the pure essence of my wisdom and experience into her. She must be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a back-yard in New York."[8] He also spoke of her "cleverness," a label that--coupled with the equally if subtly condescending term "brilliancy"--would haunt her throughout her career. Later, in James's important review of The Custom of the Country, he further set her up for critical misreading by praising Wharton's "particular fine asperity" as

her chief literary virtue, extrapolating that talent into, what seems now, a sort of literary transvestitism:

> A shade of asperity may be in such fashion a security against waste, and in the dearth of displayed securities we should welcome it on that ground alone. It helps at any rate to constitute for the talent manifest in 'The Custom' a rare identity, so far should we have to go to seek another instance of the dry, or call it perhaps even the hard, intellectual touch in the soft, or call it perhaps even the humid, temperamental air; in other words of the masculine conclusion tending so to crown the feminine observation.[9]

Singlehandedly, then, James promulgated the myths of her discipleship to him, the coupling of her genius with residency in New York, and the superiority of masculine sensibility to feminine sensitivity. Unfortunately, these biases remained constant, in varying degrees of intensity, until very recently.

James, of course, was writing in tune with the times--supporting the still active 19th century concepts of womanhood and art--as well as in defense of his own aesthetic formulations and, at that time, waning popularity. His true disciples, who were many, carried on his, as it were, critical damning with faint praise. Particularly notable is Percy Lubbock in his Portrait of Edith Wharton (1947) which was considered a critical biography but reads, rather, as a snappish personal attack on Wharton as woman and Wharton as impatient and limited student of the Master. A majority of 1950s criticism continued in the same vein; at that time, interest in the

area of literary technique was paramount, and both James and Fitzgerald reigned supreme in the pantheon of form. Wharton was interesting only as a somewhat dulled mirror image of James's technical precepts, and her work was not viewed as original in either form or content. This traditional attitude toward Wharton began to break down only with the publication of Millicent Bell's book, Edith Wharton & Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (1965), in which Bell disproved Lubbock's assertion that Wharton "was herself a novel of his [James's], no doubt in his earlier manner."[10] However, many 1960s critics--such as the self-labelled Jacobite, Louis Auchincloss--upheld the Jamesian domination theory, and it is only with the clearly Whartonian studies of the 1970s--for example, Cynthia Wolff's A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton and R.W.B. Lewis' Edith Wharton: A Biography--that one sees Wharton "moving down from the literary attic--where she was relegated until recently as a sort of Henry James in corsets--into the front parlor."[11]

The biases of sex and class die hard in that they are perhaps more personal and are also more socially conditioned responses than cultivated biases of aesthetic preferences. Edith Wharton was for critics and public alike one of a new breed of American writers: she was a member of the affluent upper class as well as Scribner's chief moneymaker whose novels focussed unremittingly upon dark visions of alienation and compromise. As John

Harvey wrote in "Contrasting Worlds: A Study in the Novels of Edith Wharton": "That a member of this inbred, over-civilized society should become a professional writer was in itself unusual, that a woman should do so was incredible."[12] More nearly impossible than incredible is that Wharton could have been accepted widely as a great writer--regardless of her sex--by her contemporaries. The standard response up to the 1930s toward Wharton, as to any woman writer, is succinctly represented by Elizabeth A. Drew's piece, "Is There a 'Feminine' Fiction?" in which she writes:

> ...when all is said, and in spite of the feminists with the queen bee in their bonnets, the fact remains that the creative genius of woman remains narrower than that of man, even in the novel.... In spite of equal education and equal opportunity, the scope of woman remains still smaller than the scope of man.[13]

Of course, Wharton, as James intimated and Lubbock castigated, was considered to have "a very feminine consciousness and a very masculine mind."[14] This concept of bisexual mentality led to her being attacked on both sides. She was criticized by female critics as being too cruel a writer--too masculine or inhuman--versus, for example, Sarah Orne Jewett; male critics lambasted her for being "an elderly semi-male Minerva,"[15] an essentially "sexless"[16] --here read defeminized or inhuman--writer. Wharton was more than aware of this form of prejudice; though she often jokingly spoke about herself as a self-made man, she requested that her private papers remain sealed until 1968,

"'till,' she said, 'I shall be no longer regarded as a woman but only as a writer in the long line of writers.'"[17] However, one particularly injurious form of critical analysis arose directly from Wharton's reticence toward self-exposure: that is, critical interpretation based upon biographical speculation. Avoiding direct sexual assault, critics indirectly censured Wharton by treating her work as the psychological working out of the traumas of childhood, feminine sexual frustration, extramarital dalliances and consequent guilt. Edmund Wilson's essay, "Justice to Edith Wharton" (1938), most clearly opens this line of inquiry; sadly, it has been revitalized by the release of her private papers as can be seen in Cynthia Wolff's 1977 major study, A Feast of Words.

Some recent critics, fortunately, see no need to discount either Wharton's sex or aesthetics. On the other hand, feminist criticism can offer new trapdoors of misreading in its rationalization or condemnation of Wharton's supposed attitudes toward women, another instance of forcing contemporary labels--here "feminist" or "anti-feminist"--upon the material under investigation, labels that are not strictly applicable in either a historical or sociological sense. In contrast, Elizabeth Ammons' recent study of Wharton and the "woman question," Edith Wharton's Argument with America, suggests the highly critical and scholarly mode of transformational analysis available to feminist critics today.

One further bias must be considered: prejudice under the guise of social consciousness. Wharton did not have to wait until the 1930s to be attacked for her non-proletarian material. Early in the 1900s, she was criticized for her status in the upper class. For example, Julia R. Tutwiler, in her 1903 "description" of Edith Wharton, writes:

> For Mrs. Wharton belongs to that small and exclusive chapter of artists who have achieved without the accepted incentives to achievement. In one sense born to the place she has made her own in creative art, in another she has won it from the inaccessible seclusion of wealth and social position--she is wholly without the knowledge of life learned through study of the sordid and brutal face it turns upon those who struggle with 'the meanness of opportunity' or are intimate with the clamoring needs of the body.[18]

Easily grafted onto this view is sexual prejudice as can be seen in John Curtis Underwood's remarks on Wharton's "brilliancy":

> Brilliancy is a patrician quality, of the superficial, by the superficial, for the superficial. It is intrinsically alien to the genius of the Anglo-Saxon world, in particular to that of its male half; and the great mass of the world in general has some reason for looking at it with suspicion.[19]

In the 1930s, this view all but consigned Wharton to the clever but forgettable genteel tradition. V.L. Parrington called her a "temperamental aristocrat,"[20] a conservative on the side of a "sterile world of class conventions and negations; a decadent Victorianism."[21] Granville Hicks cited her as a sort of genteel muckraker but, on the

whole, Wharton's form and content were considered reactionary (here read both politically wrong and aesthetically spurious), and she was ignored or "put in her place" by radical critics. Again, in the late 1930s, this bias became less pronounced; however, as late as the 1960s, one finds counterattacks to a disguised but still operative class bias as when Patricia Plante writes in her 1962 "Edith Wharton: A Prophet Without Due Honor": "It is an inverted form of snobbery to hold that truth can only be found among the poor and the under-privileged."[22] Generally, one finds Wharton discussed as an anthropologist of a vanished era, a novelist of manners--that is, a snobbish social reporter for New York's 400--but little more. She is considered by traditional critics to be a major woman writer (here read of minor importance to male discourse), but she, like Chopin, remains a figure on the edge of the canon.

Such excessive terminological baggage--"woman," aristocrat, reactionary, expatriate, Jacobite--lies heavily on Wharton's work, and in order to avoid the critical pitfall of such facile labelling, one must return to the texts--both fiction and non-fiction--in order to redetermine Wharton's contribution to the tradition of American literature, female discourse, and her relevance for modern day readers. So too the tagging of Chopin--regionalist, local colorist, sentimentalist, short story artist--must be reexamined in terms of her own intent and

aesthetics as well as in her fictional creations and transformational content.

## ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

[1] See "Letters, Statements, and Articles" in A Kate Chopin Miscellany, edited by Per Seyersted and Emily Toth (Natchitoches: Northwestern State University Press, 1979), pp. 101-188.

[2] See various contemporary reviews in Kate Chopin's The Awakening, edited by Margaret Culley (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976), pp. 141-159.

[3] Culley, p. 149.

[4] Michael Millgate, "Edith Wharton" in American Social Fiction: James to Cozzens (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), p. 63.

[5] Francis Hackett, Horizons: A Book of Criticisms (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1918), p. 39. Hackett criticizes Wharton for her cruel treatment of Charity Royall in Summer.

[6] Marilyn Jones Lyde, Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist (Normal: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), p. xv.

[7] Gore Vidal, "Introduction" to The Edith Wharton Omnibus (New York: Nelson Doubleday, Inc., 1978), p. vii.

[8] Henry James, The Letters of Henry James, volume I, selected and edited by Percy Lubbock (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1920), p. 396.

[9] Henry James, "The New Novel: 1914" in Notes on Novelists; with some Other Notes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), p. 356.

[10] Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton & Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 21.

[11] Ralph Tyler, "Edith Wharton," Bookviews, I, no. 12 (August 1978), p. 26.

[12] John Harvey, "Contrasting Worlds: A Study in the Novels of Edith Wharton," Etudes anglaises, 7 (April 1954), p. 190.

[13] Elizabeth A. Drew, "Is There a 'Feminine' Fiction?" in The Modern Novel: Some Aspects of Contemporary Fiction (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1926), p. 116.

[14] Percy Lubbock, Portrait of Edith Wharton (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947) p. 57.

[15] John Curtis Underwood, "Culture and Edith Wharton" in Literature and Insurgency: Ten Studies in Racial Evolution (New York: Biblo & Tannen, 1914 and 1974), pp. 351-352.

[16] Joseph Collins, Taking the Literary Pulse: Psychological Studies of Life and Letters (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924), p. 54.

[17] Grace Kellogg (Griffith), The Two Lives of Edith Wharton: The Woman and Her Work (New York: Appleton-Century, 1965), p. 14.

[18] Julia R. Tutwiler, "Edith Wharton in New York City" in Women Authors of Our Day in Their Homes: Personal Descriptions and Interviews, edited by Francis W. Halsey (New York: James Pratt & Company, 1903), p. 245.

[19] Underwood, pp. 389-390.

[20] Vernon L. Parrington, The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920, Volume Three of Main Currents in American Thought (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1930 and 1958), p. 381.

[21] Parrington, p. 382.

[22] Patricia R. Plante, "Edith Wharton: A Prophet Without Due Honor," Midwest Review (1962), p. 19.

## CHAPTER TWO: LIFE AND ART

Kate Chopin was born in 1850 of Irish and Creole parents in the slave city of St. Louis and lived to see the emancipation, the industrial transformation of feudal plantation life, and the arrival of seemingly "every facet of the world's achievement, in industry, science, literature and the arts"[1] to her South before her death on 22 August 1904. Her extended family on her mother's side was an established and prosperous Creole clan; her immigrant father was a successful merchant and railroad founder. After the father's accidental death in 1855, she was brought up by a French matriarchy of three generations of related Creole women.[2] Her family supported the South during the Civil War, and Kate's activities earned her the nickname of "St. Louis' Littlest Rebel." After the war, she was schooled outside the home and received the necessary education of a Southern lady, coming out as a debutante in 1868.

In 1870, she married Oscar Chopin, a Creole who was distantly related to her, moved to his plantations in Louisiana, and led a genteel and somewhat independent life as his chatelaine. Before the age of thirty, she had had five sons and one daughter. At thirty-two, she

was widowed, and after overseeing the plantations for a year, she returned to St. Louis. By 1885, she was without close relatives, her supportive matriarchy ending with her mother's death. It was only after this and at the urging of a family friend that she turned to serious and salable writing. Between 1888 and 1904, she produced three novels, some one hundred stories, various sketches, poems, a one-act play, and several critical essays, many of these written in her living rooms while she was surrounded by her children. She was considered a successful and fashionable writer before The Awakening; after 1899, she produced little work, and much of this remained unpublished.

Her writing career and deep interest in literature began, of course, long before her widowhood. Contrary to contemporary reports, she was not a spontaneous and aesthetically naive writer arising from the legion of "scribbling ladies." Her mental preparation and study of technique were in fact quite extensive; Per Seyersted and Emily Toth, notably, offer detailed, verifiable, and conjectural background on her artistic development and influences.

Chopin, unlike many women of her time, read and read widely; she seems not to have suffered the restrictions of censorship Wharton did. In addition to written texts, Chopin was steeped in oral story-telling by her great-grandmother who favored historical and fanciful tales of

those who defied social expectations. Chopin also kept various diaries and commonplace books, and from these we can reconstruct her self-education as a writer.

By the age of twenty, Chopin had studied and at times critiqued "such authors as Dante, Cervantes, Corneille, Racine, Molière, Mme. de Staël, Chateaubriand, Goethe, Coleridge, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Longfellow."[3] She was also drawn to literature of rebellion, particularly that focussing on the woman question. Her private notes contained numerous quotations on the subject, some with marked copy but none with her own commentary. However, it is certain that one such unconventional story, in this case Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's The Fisher Maiden, inspired her earliest extant piece, "Emancipation. A Life Fable" written in 1869 or 1870 and left unpublished in her lifetime. It is not surprising, moreover, that she gave up writing for nearly twenty years; no matter how liberal her early life might have been, the content of this fable and the progress of her self-education showed her consciousness of the difference between liberal ideology and a liberated life. For half of her own life, she was a dutiful and seemingly contented daughter, wife, and mother; she spent the final half writing at her best about women who could neither make the leap she had toward personal liberation nor content themselves with traditional and restrictive feminine roles advocated by society.

Five years after her husband's death, Chopin began her career as writer with a public. By then she had read widely in science, philosophy, and literature, works which influenced not only her private philosophy but also the public expression of the same through her fiction. Her earliest stories showed a marked concern with psychological symbolism, psychological portraiture of women at odds with the world, and distanced or amoral narration. This also holds true for her first novel, At Fault (1890), which she published and promoted herself. Parts of the novel are preferable to the whole; in particular, the previously taboo subject of divorce is openly treated and central to the work. However, as has been previously stated, this novel was consciously ignored by critics who preferred Chopin as short story artist though she herself denied a skill and preference for one literary form over another.

Nevertheless, after the rejection of a second novel, Chopin did seem to return to the short story form. Between 1891-1894, she wrote some forty stories and sketches. She published these first in national magazines and later collected twenty-three pieces in Bayou Folk (1894). By then she was firmly established with the public and critical press as a local colorist. This position was maintained with the reception of A Night in Acadie (1897) which collected pre-1896 stories;

however, this anthology was less popular than her first since few of the stories were obviously local color but many were small Awakenings. So too were most of her stories written in 1897. It is evident that Chopin intended her third novel to be her most polished and deliberate work, and that many of her earlier pieces, though masterful in their own right, were partial, rough sketches for this final masterpiece.

Equally important at this point in her career was the publication of a series of short critical essays, Chopin was extremely reticent about discussing her specific techniques and intention or of offering herself as artistic model. She also was loathe to suggest any interpretation or view of her work which might be taken as definitive; for Chopin, "truth rests upon a shifting basis and is apt to be kaleidoscopic."[4] One can conjecture, then, that her intent in these essays was to show her literary influences and sensibility, if obliquely, and to position herself within specific literary movements, if only by implication.

What is immediately evident is that Chopin did not consider herself one with the regionalists or local color artists. In her "The Western Association of Writers," she makes clear that the limited scope of those writers denied the true subject of art: "human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have

draped it."[5] Furthermore, in her review entitled "'Crumbling Idols' by Hamlin Garland," she showed little sympathy for social problem fiction in its pure form; neither did she show any favor toward didacticism or sentimentality. Rather, she seems closer to what Adrienne Rich recently states as the design and intent of feminist writers: "to render those parts of the truth that we are best able to embody, knowing that others are at work on other parts of the project...."[6] Chopin saw art as a form of individual expression of individual truths, some individual truths being shared by many individuals, and for her and for her favored authors, art was an expression which was seemingly amoralistic in its form but extremely moralistic in its content in that there were no subjects true to the life of the writer that could or should not be presented. Her appreciation of Maupassant, Whitman, Jewett, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, in particular, reveal her affinity with practitioners of masterfully controlled technique--particularly in the areas of characterization, plot development, and point of view--and with purveyors of a new, modern fiction of passion, psychological insight, and social realism.

Chopin would publicly maintain that her writing was "the spontaneous expression of impressions gathered goodness knows where" and that she was "completely at the mercy of unconscious selection."[7] This appears to have been a reaction against critics and the invasion of her

privacy; or, as Chopin writes: "the victim cannot take herself too seriously."[8] However, her private diaries and some few comments in her essays point to the contrary: that she was highly aware of her own style and limitations and that she avidly studied and imitated the technique of Maupassant and Jewett. Her "Impressions" of 1894 also indicate her preferred content; for her, Freeman's "Pembroke is the most profound, the most powerful piece of fiction of its kind that has ever come from the American press."[9] That grim novel of passionate, unconventional love was adjudged by major critics as a crude, salacious local color piece; just so would Chopin's The Awakening be received in 1899. Chopin, in brief, did make clear what company she kept. When critics finally heard her, they consigned her and some of that company to a literary limbo.

Chopin does not, however, ever openly state her central subject or theme. Most critics readily agree that her major theme is the defiance of woman against social convention and patriarchal ideology. Emily Toth, in her Ph.D. dissertation, links Chopin with the domestic and plantation traditions and, more importantly, delineates the all-pervasiveness of the woman question in the social criticism and fiction of the day.[10] Since the ideology of true womanhood was central in Chopin's life, it is not surprising that this was the major impression or truth she might wish to express. What is astonishing

is that she had the temerity to present implicit critiques of social conventions and ideology within her fiction. Her subversive artistry can best be understood as an extension of her private philosophy and pessimistic world view. She did not believe in either ethical absolutes or total absence of ethics, nor did she see her world as progressive or retrogressive. For Chopin, each individual--particularly each woman--possessed infinite potential for self-fulfillment and expression but also, at the same time, the greater possibility for self-compromise and self-destruction. And these two faces of the same coin were not purely of nature but also of nurture: "Human impulses do not change and can not so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began."[11] Her finest fiction, then, like Edith Wharton's, presented the reader with women who defied the longstanding social and sexual relations even though the women fall at last into abysses of solitude and alienation.

Edith Wharton was born in 1862 and died in 1937, or, as Vito J. Brenni writes, she was "born during the American Civil War and died in the same year in which, the late George Orwell was convinced, 'history ended.'"[12] Her family was related to the Rhinelander and Schermerhorn-Jones clans whose money came chiefly from real estate speculation. Though her upbringing was genteel and

upper-class, her family's social standing was on the lowest rung of the New York 400. Wharton received no formal schooling but was privately educated by her father and governesses; indeed, her mother considered literature so inherently spurious that Wharton was not to read contemporary fiction until after her marriage. Due to economic depressions after the Civil War, Wharton's family chose to live abroad, where American money went further, and the greater part of her childhood was spent touring the Continent. She married Edward Robbins Wharton of the Boston aristocracy in 1885 and was divorced from him in 1913 after his long and traumatic decline into insanity. After 1913, she returned to the United States for only one brief visit, preferring instead residency in France.

During the first World War, Wharton was actively involved in charity work and used her social connections to help finance workshops for unemployed seamstresses, the American Hostels for Refugees, The Children of Flanders Rescue Committee, and several American Convalescent Homes. At the same time, she worked as a war correspondent, an exceptionally rare position for a woman, for the New York presses. For her war work, she was made a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor and awarded both the Medal of Queen Elizabeth and the Order of Leopold by Belgium. Similarly, she amassed rare honors for her work in fiction. In 1921, she was awarded the

Pulitzer Prize--the first given to a woman--for her The Age of Innocence. It was, however, an honor tinged with compromise as the Pulitzer was only given to Wharton--the choice of the Columbia University trustees--in order that it not be given to Sinclair Lewis--the original choice of the jury. In 1924, Wharton again broke through sexual barriers when she was granted an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by Yale University. Also in that year, she became the second novelist--following W.D. Howells--and the second woman--after Julia Ward Howe--to be recognized by the presentation of a Gold Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Her writing career, like Chopin's, is notable at first inspection for its early beginnings, long hiatus, and late fruition. This was due in great part to her social background and upbringing; as Wharton wrote in her memoirs, A Backward Glance: "In the eyes of our provincial society authorship was still regarded as something between a black art and a form of manual labour."[13] This upper-class prejudice against the craft of literature remained constant throughout her life and was made evident to her through various forms of social censure. Wharton wrote, for example, of being invited early on in her career to a party at which a "Bohemian artist" would be introduced; she was more than a little astonished to find herself pointed out as that same artist. In her last years, Wharton wrote of the social ostracism incurred as

a consequence of her "scandalous" novels:

> I remember once saying that I was a failure in Boston (where we used to go to stay with my husband's family) because they thought I was too fashionable to be intelligent; and a failure in New York because they were afraid I was too intelligent to be fashionable.[14]

Indeed, Wharton's career was almost nipped in the bud at its earliest stage when, at the age of twelve, she presented her first novel to her mother who read the opening sentences and told her that the portrayal of manners therein was incorrect and unseemly; the novel was destroyed. Despite continual criticism from all sides, Wharton became a professional writer and maintained an active career into her seventies, leaving unfinished at her death her potentially greatest work, The Buccaneers.

Wharton wrote her second novel at the age of fifteen for a girlfriend. Fast and Loose, found among her private papers, is notable chiefly for the bogus reviews Wharton wrote and appended to it. Her satiric sense and attitude toward critics were already sharp as can readily be seen in lines taken from the mock Nation review: "The English of it is that every character is a failure, the plot a vacuum, the style spiritless, the dialogue vague, the sentiments weak, & the whole thing a fiasco."[15] Fast and Loose, however, was a purely personal undertaking (which later became an elaborate private joke, appearing in various reincarnations in several short stories). Wharton did not attempt serious fiction again

until 1890. Instead, she turned to poetry and was published, both privately and professionally, by the age of seventeen. Her poetry, unfortunately, was conventional at its best; one reads the poems as documents of apprenticeship and not as early unappreciated masterpieces.

After her marriage, Wharton began work on a series of short stories that were published separately between 1891-1899. During that period, she also co-authored, with Ogden Codman, Jr., a book on interior decoration entitled The Decoration of Houses that was and is still considered radical in its aesthetic pronouncements. Ever interested in form and style, as can be seen in her later studies of Italy and France, Wharton found this type of work amusing but noted that it "can hardly be regarded as a part of my literary career."[16] Her three short story collections--The Greater Inclination (1899), Crucial Instances (1901), and The Descent of Man, and Other Stories (1904)--and her first two novellas--The Touchstone (1900) and Sanctuary (1903)--were more serious literary endeavors. Still, for Wharton, they were beginner's material treated in a novice's manner. Nor did she consider her first major work, The Valley of Decision (1902), a personal artistic success:

> 'The Valley of Decision' was not, in my sense of the term, a novel at all, but only a romantic chronicle, unrolling its episodes like the frescoed legends on the palace-walls which formed its background; my idea of a novel was something very different, something far more

> compact and centripetal, and I doubted whether I should ever have enough constructive power to achieve anything beyond isolated character studies, or the stringing together of picturesque episodes.[17]

Wharton, then, was aware of the necessary development of technical skills as well as that of her own formulated aesthetic code. While many of her early stories were brilliant examples of "disengaging of crucial instances from the welter of existence,"[18] she was still searching for a predominant style and subject, a cogent moral philosophy expressed through her particular brand of the novel of manners. She succeeded, in major ways, in resolving technical and aesthetic problems in her first bestseller, The House of Mirth (1905).

As documented in her The Writing of Fiction (1925), Wharton believed her major influences to be European. In particular, she admired and emulated the social fiction of Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy, and George Eliot which agreed with her precept that "the bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things, "[19] a construct not far from Chopin's own belief in psychological symbolism. Further, for Wharton, such works--as well as those of Whitman--exemplified her major theory of selection and organization. For her, form and content were indistinguishably one:

> There seems to be but two primary questions to ask in estimating any work of art: what has the author tried to represent, and how far has he

> succeeded? -- and a third, which is dependent on them: Was the subject chosen worth representing -- has it the quality of being what Balzac called 'vrai dans l'art'? These three inquiries, if duly pressed, yield a full answer to the aesthetic problem of the novel. Outside of them no criticism can be either relevant or interesting, since it is only by viewing the novel as an organic whole, by considering its form and function as one, that the critic can properly estimate its details of style and construction.[20]

In brief, Wharton believed that once an author's moral or social statement was established in the mind, the proper form for its effective presentation would become evident. Wharton, then, unlike James, had no set rules of design. In fact, she found James's theories of concentrated point of view and symmetric construction prescriptive and stultifying; similarly, she criticized the concept of dominating plot as banal. Nor did she find the proletarian or Naturalist movements progressive; for her, they were mechanical, non-selective, critically inept and morally limited. Instead, Wharton favored a mild form of aesthetic anarchism: "General rules of art are useful chiefly as a lamp in a mine, or a hand-rail down a black stairway; they are necessary for the sake of the guidance they give, but it is a mistake, once they are formulated, to be too much in awe of them."[21] More explicitly--and more typical of Wharton the shrewd businesswoman--she wrote: "There is no fixed rule about this, or about any other method; each, in the art of fiction, to justify itself has only to succeed."[22]

By 1905, Wharton was aware of the need for

focussing and solidifying her subject matter and social philosophy; as she wrote later: "In the House of Art are many mansions, and the novelist's business is to stick to the one in which he feels himself at home."[23] Wharton's home, both figuratively and literally, was New York society, whether it be in New York or abroad, in the 400 itself or wherever its conventions touched and were observed. Some of her early stories had centered on various incidents within this society; it was obvious that these situations lacked necessary significance for expansion into novel-length treatments. Wharton wrote, in her memoirs, of her search for a truly "crucial instance":

> In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the 'old woe of the world,' any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart.[24]

Wharton had found her centripetal subject and philosophy: "Such groups always rest on an underpinning of wasted human possibilities; and it seemed to me that the fate of the persons embodying these possibilities ought to redeem my subject from insignificance."[25] Thus, Wharton set her hierarchy of values with The House of Mirth.

Wharton's moral hierarchy, however, contained neither absolute good nor absolute evil; she, like Chopin, had read many of the scientific and philosophical treatises considered radical in her time. For Wharton,

repressive forces such as provincial, tribal society could offer the positive values of social continuity and security, while progressive forces such as the individualistic Lily Bart were subject to base materialistic motives. In that sense, Wharton's stance on the war of social forces--and the longstanding relations between the sexes--was seemingly non-partisan. While it is true that Wharton was obviously pro-society (that is, society as she knew it at its best: genteel and highly moral), she was not one to disguise or justify the degeneration of her society's morals and traditions. Her attitude is clearly seen in her mid-career works ranging from The House of Mirth through the problematic social reform novel, The Fruit of the Tree, to her last finished novel on Old New York, The Age of Innocence. Despite her experimentations with technique--as in the Jamesian The Reef and the anti-pastoral Ethan Frome--her intention was constant: analyzing the causality of individual alienation. She wrote continuously of societies which build prisons with traditions, applaud limited perceptions instead of a constant questioning of inherited values, and renounce social evolution while evolving themselves into a wasteland of lost hopes and living dead. Wharton's is an essentially despairing world view, one shade darker than Chopin's bleak outlook:

> The welter is always there, and the present generation hears close underfoot the growling of the volcano on which ours danced so long; but in our individual lives, though the years are sad, the days have a way of being jubilant. Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death....[26]

The following chapters will discuss Chopin's and Wharton's major works of dark social visions, what Cynthia Griffin Wolff has termed "the fiction of limits,"[27] what is essentially a fiction of defeat. Specifically, as a means of speaking about relationships of alienation and negation, analysis will begin with an examination of true womanhood ideology, a set of received ideas about woman which permeate Chopin's and Wharton's fiction and world views. The remainder of this work will offer ideological readings of their social fiction in which their women characters stand on the brink of the social abyss, on the edge of social and class rejection or ejection, and face the moral frontier in and beyond society's sink of immorality.

## ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

[1] Per Seyersted, Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 185.

[2] It should be noted that Chopin's first language was French, yet she wrote in English throughout her life.

[3] Seyersted, Kate Chopin, p. 25.

[4] Kate Chopin, "Émile Zola's 'Lourdes,'" The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, edited by Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), II, p. 697.

[5] Kate Chopin, "The Western Association of Writers," Complete Works, II, p. 691.

[6] Adrienne Rich, "Literary Concept of 'The Universal' is False Notion," College English, 43, no. 2 (February 1981), 192.

[7] Kate Chopin, "On Certain Brisk, Bright Days," Complete Works, II, p. 722.

[8] Kate Chopin, "On Certain Brisk, Bright Days," Complete Works, II, p. 723.

[9] Kate Chopin, A Kate Chopin Miscellany, edited by Per Seyersted (Natchitoches: Northwestern State University Press, 1979), p. 90.

[10] Emily Toth, "That Outward Existence Which Conforms: Kate Chopin and Literary Convention," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, John Hopkins University, 1975).

[11] Kate Chopin, "'Crumbling Idols' by Hamlin Garland," Complete Works, II, p. 693.

[12] Vito J. Brenni, Edith Wharton: A Bibliography (Morgantown: West Virginia University Library, 1966), p. x.

[13] Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1934), pp. 68-69.

[14] Edith Wharton, Backward Glance, p. 119.

[15] Edith Wharton (David Olivieri), Fast and Loose: A Novelette by David Olivieri, edited by Viola

Hopkins Winner (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), p. 121.

[16] Edith Wharton, Backward Glance, p. 112.

[17] Edith Wharton, Backward Glance, p. 205.

[18] Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 14.

[19] Edith Wharton, Writing of Fiction, p. 7.

[20] Edith Wharton, "The Criticism of Fiction," Times Literary Supplement, no. 643 (14 May 1914), p. 230.

[21] Edith Wharton, Writing of Fiction, p. 42.

[22] Edith Wharton, Writing of Fiction, p. 100.

[23] Edith Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," Spectator, 141 (3 November 1928), supplement page 45.

[24] Edith Wharton, Backward Glance, p. 207.

[25] Edith Wharton, "Introduction" to The House of Mirth (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. vii.

[26] Edith Wharton, Backward Glance, p. 379.

[27] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Kate Chopin and the Fiction of Limits: 'Désirée's Baby,'" Southern Literary Journal, 10, no. 2 (1978), 133.

## CHAPTER THREE: IDEOLOGY OF WOMANHOOD

The ideology of true womanhood, the cult of domesticity, and the separation of private and public spheres were not original 19th century formulations and practices. The rise of this 19th century social and sexual ideology had its foundations in longstanding philosophical and scientific beliefs of the natural inferiority of women coupled with, in America at least, the development of modern capitalist theories and practices. It is indeed romantic to believe that colonial or preindustrial American women suffered no such subordination of self and will. To the contrary, early democratic statemakers such as Thomas Jefferson, for example, made clear that three classes would always be excluded from power: children, slaves, and women. In addition, careful historical study of patriarchal cultures reveals a well-established conceptualization, objectification, and institutionalization of woman as lesser being, as "other," as secondary adjunct to man.[1] What is notable about 19th century American true womanhood theories is the complex and explicit codification of such a social and sexual ideology. This formalization served distinct functions in a time of cataclysmic change which saw the

rise of industrial capitalism, the emergence of a strict and necessary class system, the separation of economy from the home and the consequent breakdown of traditional family structures. The very real possibility of familial and cultural degeneration, the actual bifurcation of social life into two spheres--home and marketplace--grafted onto the accepted construct of woman as companion and commodity all effected the highly prescriptive and oppressive true womanhood abstraction and actuality.

Social historians as varied as Nancy Cott and Carl Degler agree on the centrality of true womanhood ideology to American social and economic transformation if not on the eventual value or cost to individuals--particularly women, of course--and society as a collective whole. The majority would agree, however, that the ideology of true womanhood was simultaneously an attempt at social acculturation of men and women into a class system and an increasingly obvious refutation of its own abstractions and American progressive social theory on the whole. This tension between abstract ideology and actual social practice becomes explosive by Chopin's and Wharton's time, and this is at the heart of their social fiction.

The doctrine of true womanhood was simple. Woman, in essence, was to be preserver of culture, herself the finest product of capitalism, and the sympathetic and supportive bridge between the private realm

of the home and the almost exclusively male world of the public marketplace. She was to embody and maintain social stability in a volatile time of class struggle and economic amorality or immorality through the nurturance of her womanhood self and her family. She was also to provide a haven of beauty, grace, and refuge for the makers of the new world: her men.[2] The basic tenet, then, was the old one with the added fillip of financial backing: "'Man is a doer, an actor. Woman reacts, she reflects rather than creates, is the moon to his sun.'"[3]

The complementary behavioral code was equally straightforward. Barbara Welter in her seminal essay, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," delineated it succinctly as a system of principles and prizes:

> The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife--woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.[4]

Furthermore, a true woman "was destined to bring comfort and beauty into man's life and to combat his more sensual nature and the materialism of business."[5] She was, as Coventry Patmore would name her and Virginia Woolf would contest against her, the Angel in the House.

These precepts and ideals were supported by scientific theories--women were considered physically and mentally inferior to men--and religious beliefs--

women were more susceptible to grace because of their emotive, supra-rational natures and were thus spiritually superior to men. In brief, as Sheila M. Rothman writes in Woman's Proper Place:

> The ideology rendered them at once incompetent and competent, broken and whole, to be pitied and to be emulated. But whatever the contradictions in this perspective, they disappeared in one grand edict: Women had better stay very much in their own sphere. They did not belong in the world of men.[6]

Women might be angels, but men would always remain gods.

One immediate and serious limitation of the true womanhood ideology was that it was an expression of upper-class interests and did not reflect the reality or potential reality of lower class or immigrant women. It purposely did not acknowledge the growing work force of women nor did it sanction professionalism and careerism for women. But that was the point after all: class aspirations and distinctions of class status were at the core of the ideological model. True womanhood both necessitated and justified the emergent class structure. It delineated a microcosmic enactment of capitalist principles while simultaneously romanticizing the inherent contradictions between capitalism in practice and democracy in theory. As Lawrence J. Friedman writes in his Inventors of the Promised Land, true womanhood was "to reconcile the irreconcilable" on both an individual and a collective level.[7] As will be seen, the doctrine could not even offer reconciliation of its own dual nature.

For example, social aspiration was implicit in the theory. To be a true woman required financial stability; wealth was simultaneously the support and prize of the true lady and, later, the woman of leisure. Because a woman could only respectfully gain money and leisure through marriage, her first "work" was to supply a true woman self in accordance with ideological paradigms. Ideally, every woman had the opportunity to advance to the true calling of wife and lady; she need only incorporate ideological dicta into her presentation of self. The theories of true womanhood were thus propounded as egalitarian and democratic. In reality, relationships between the sexes reflected basic capitalist principles of supply and demand in the marriage marketplace, self-aggrandizement, unequal opportunity and the preservation of class distinctions. The received romantic idea of marriage, as Barbara Welter writes, was patently false:

> Marriage was a demonstrable step up in the hierarchy of society, one of the few ways in which a woman could make such a move. Marriage could provide for a woman the improved economic and social benefits which men received through education, speculation, the professions, business, and marriage. Most American girls believed that this new state automatically brought happiness, because they believed that to marry for anything but the purest love was unworthy of their sex and nature. This freedom of choice was more apparent than real; most American girls married within their own class, religion, and geographic background.[8]

Furthermore, as touched on above, women by the very prescriptions of the code could not enter into the competi-

tiveness of the marriage marketplace; to do so would be to prove unwomanly. Rather, the woman must remain passive even concerning this her one opportunity for the American Dream. As Welter points out, "The major events of a girl's life were to be products of arrangement and fate, not of intellect and will, and she was expected to passively await them, as she awaited the arrival of her love."[9] The true woman, thus, was denied even her first work: the effecting of a socially acceptable self, however alienated that be from individual will and self-fulfillment.

What then was the positive value or appeal of true womanhood to women if they appeared to be at the mercy of fate and the sometime receivers of a limited existence? First of all, the ideology did codify a system of values and did prescribe a code of behavior that was advantageous to some women. Carl Degler, for example, theorizes that the ideological tenets put into practice allowed women more control in their sexual relationships and, therefore, in childbearing and rearing. However, for the majority of women for whom the ideology remained abstraction and not reality, such advantages were minimal or non-existent. Furthermore, the new ethics justified a natural double standard: women, after all, were to be pure and so could not capitalize on any increase in sexual control beyond--perhaps--the number of children they might bear by one man. Neither did

her spiritual authority enable woman to reform male behavior; submissiveness, after all, was a given. As for the social and economic securities accrued by women in good marriages, the ideology did not change the pattern of social and class relationships and so proved of little value to those women not already in possession of social status and economic security by virtue of their birth lines.

A second appeal of the sexual/social ideology was that it seemed to give some degree of social control to woman, making her powerful within her own sphere of the home. She was, despite the limitations of her personal world, supposed to influence indirectly and to maintain culture and society through sacrifice of her self for the education of future generations and the spiritual upliftment of male society. Domesticity did indeed become woman's art and work; Catherine Beecher's treatises show the extreme seriousness with which women took their roles as educators and moral guardians. Yet again, the limitations within the ideology were revealed as contradictory to its purported social ends: if women were to educate, they must themselves leave their sphere, go into the world and be educated; if women were to maintain society, they must have direct influence on social theories and practices. If women were truly moral and spiritual superiors, they could not in good conscience remain within their sphere content with

passivity and denial of self. Still, the basic tenets of the code required limitations of any power gained.

Finally, the ideology of true womanhood advocated specific social roles for women--that is, a degree of possible self-fulfillment as mother, wife, and lady free from the toil and exploitation of the marketplace. The romanticism of this has already been discussed. The consequent alienation of individual self from social self is what is most crucial. As has been made clear by numerous critics, here Barbara J. Harris, "the woman who approached the ideal obliterated her sense of self and virtually existed only in relation to others."[10] The ideological demands, in other words, necessitated that woman exploit a male vision of womanhood and eradicate her own individualism and self-will. For example, as Caroline Hazard, president of Wellesley College in 1900, sermonized, a woman's first lesson was to learn social obedience: "Obedience implies absolute unselfishness. One gives up one's own will, one gives up one's own desire of expression, one puts all one's powers at the command of another."[11] The life, then, of a woman was to be one of submissive sacrifice, self-martyrdom, profound alienation of self for the good of a patriarchal society; the dreams and aspirations which she was to cultivate and maintain, the roles she was to fulfill, the influence she was to wield were barren, predicated on the denial of her self, denial of women as individuals,

denial of the American Dream of men and women together making the new Promised Land. That female reality was clearly one of severe limits and inevitable compromise.

However, ideology--no matter how powerful--is not synonymous with absolute reality. Mary Kelley writes in Woman's Being, Woman's Place:

> Woman neither totally fulfilled the stereotype nor remained completely immune from its dictates. Instead, the relationship between prescription and behavior was an extraordinarily complex one which varied with individual and historical circumstances. Equally important,... women were not only affected by the process of socialization, but they affected that process as well. In short, women were active participants as well as passive recipients in the elaboration of culture.[12]

One immediate byproduct of sexual and social ideology was that an increasing number of women began to perceive themselves as a specific group, a first step in social consciousness.[13] Women also became aware of new areas of social responsibility, this realization in part stemming from ideological concepts of female moral superiority. Indeed, since the true womanhood prescriptions were so innately contradictory, both feminists and anti-feminists could support its tenets. Anti-feminists had only to follow the code to the letter; feminists subverted further its irreconcilable self-refutations, moving into the public sphere and beginning pragmatic social reforms under the guise of spiritual and ethical guardianship. One tenet, however, that even feminists could not maintain was the double standard and the subor-

dination of women to male interests and desires. This conflict between self-compromise and self-realization obtains to the present day and offers incitement to both conservative and radical feminist movements.

For the majority of women, however, the myths of male supremacy and feminine submissiveness were and are deeply embedded as conscious and nonconscious ideologies and are only too evident in social and historical reality. Sandra and Daryl Bem in their "Case Study of a Nonconscious Ideology: Training the Woman to Know Her Place" speculate that beliefs and attitudes about women held by both men and women make up the most pervasive nonconscious ideology in America and that at the root of this nonconsciousness is the inability to conceptualize alternate social realities or world views.[14] Yet some women did attain a deep consciousness of sexual and social ideology, a profound awareness of cataclysmic social change and the consequent reordering of values and power. And, simultaneously, patriarchal society was quite aware of the subversive power of these women among whom stand Chopin and Wharton.

Barbara Welter insists that "no matter what later authorities claimed, the nineteenth century knew that girls could be ruined by a book....Books which attacked or seemed to attack woman's accepted place in society were regarded as equally dangerous."[15] Helen Papashvily in All the Happy Endings has argued that domestic and

sentimental fiction--for example, Fanny Fern's Ruth Hall--was a first literary reaction against and subversion of true womanhood ideology.[16] However, sentimental novelists, if for no other reason than to remain marketable, maintained romantic and finally traditional views of social roles and expectations. It is not until the late 19th century and early 20th century that readers were offered the clearly dangerous works of the new social realists and critics who defied the social givens, the received ideas, and the reactionary belief in magically happy endings. In these works, as Virginia Woolf suggested by her own case, women writers killed the Angel in the House in themselves and levelled a continual barrage of words against ideological angels in their fiction.[17]

Just so did Chopin's and Wharton's books, for their works were portrayals of women within their societies doing battle with both ideological theory and practice. Theirs is a fiction of limits, an exploration of the abysses of solitude, alienation, and death which enclose women at odds with their worlds. Florence Nightingale, no feminist but no angel either, wrote in her "Cassandra":

> Women dream till they have no longer the strength to dream; those dreams against which they so struggle, so honestly, vigorously, and conscientiously, and so in vain, yet which are their life, without which they could not have lived; those dreams go at last. All their plans and visions seem vanished, and they know not where,

> gone and they cannot recall them. They do not even remember them. And they are left without the food either of reality or of hope.[18]

By representing in detail the dreams, ideological beliefs, and social realities of women, Chopin and Wharton offered readers both criticism of what was and implicit visions of what could be, alternative worlds imagined if only through annihilation of romantic dreams and negation of the patriarchy. The following chapters will discuss selected works which speak of and to this purpose.

## ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

[1] For example, one need only skim through a work such as Rosemary Agonito's History of Ideas on Woman: A Source Book (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977) to understand the pervasiveness of sexual and social theories of oppression and subordination in western culture.

[2] A more modern example of sexist ideology used to justify economic and social inequality between the sexes for the good of capitalist society as a whole is the rebirth of true womanhood as the post-World War II feminine mystique. Again women were forced out of the public sphere and back to the private, including the new world of suburbia. Even more recent--and more dangerous-- is the promotion of total womanhood and the concerted efforts in the U.S. by such groups as the Moral Majority to reinstitute and institutionalize through law the doctrine of separate spheres and sexual inequality.

[3] Barbara Welter, from a 19th century liberal magazine, The Present, quoted in Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), p. 77.

[4] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly, XVIII, no. 2, pt. 1 (Summer 1966), 152.

[5] Barbara Welter, Dimity Convictions, p. 57.

[6] Sheila M. Rothman, Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1978), p. 26.

[7] Lawrence J. Friedman, Inventors of the Promised Land (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 109.

[8] Barbara Welter, Dimity Convictions, p. 8.

[9] Barbara Welter, Dimity Convictions, p. 17.

[10] Barbara J. Harris, Beyond Her Sphere: Women and the Professions in American History (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 34.

[11] Caroline Hazard, Some Ideals in the Education of Women (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., Publishers, 1900), p. 13.

[12] Mary Kelley, ed., Woman's Being, Woman's Place:

Female Identity and Vocation in American History (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1979), p. 89.

[13] Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nancy E. Schrom make this point in their Women in American Society (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Radical America, 1972).

[14] Sandra L. Bem and Daryl J. Bem, "Case Study of a Nonconscious Ideology: Training the Woman to Know Her Place," in Beliefs, Attitudes, and Human Affairs, edited by Daryl J. Bem (Belmont, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 89-99.

[15] Barbara Welter, "Cult of True Womanhood," 166.

[16] Helen Waite Papashvily, All the Happy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America, the Women Who Wrote It, the Women Who Read It, in the Nineteenth-Century (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1956).

[17] Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women" in Women and Writing, edited by Michèle Barrett (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 57-63.

[18] Florence Nightingale, Cassandra (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1979), p. 49.

## CHAPTER FOUR: KATE CHOPIN'S SOCIAL FICTION

### Introduction

The social world of Chopin's and Wharton's works is one in a state of transition and upheaval, a society simultaneously frozen in its past and ostensibly certain of its future authority. The writers' ability to perceive and argue both sides of the social evolution issue reveals a historical perspicacity and a social consciousness unmatched by the majority of their contemporaries. In particular, their portrayals of women in their relationships to men, to each other, and to their social world are literally nonpareil for their time.

Kate Chopin's fictional world encompasses the 19th century South--New Orleans to St. Louis--and is one contemporaneous with her life. She is writing, then, of enormous transmogrification: the pre-capitalist, patriarchal plantation economy built on slavery giving way to industrialization of the land and economic assimilation of the South into a post-Civil War "united" state built on a new class system and based, in part, on the retantion of a large working class and the subordination of women of all classes. In addition,

she depicts experienced social stratification--for example, the social, economic, and sexual segregation of Creoles, Arcadians, poor whites, frontiersmen, new money Southerners, and blacks in the South--as both reality and root of individual and collective alienation.

Her South is not the romantic vision put forth by many of her contemporary regionalist writers; instead, the real metamorphoses occurring in her time stand as constant background and touchstone to her major theme: the emergent selves of women defying the social and ideological securities and strictures of the old South, judging and being judged by the ideological parameters of the true womanhood code. Chopin writes across class and color lines effectively portraying virtually every Southern "type," but she, like Wharton, focussed in her major works on her own class and sex: Creole or upper middle-class society and the position of women within it. The ideology of true womanhood is as basic to her work as women are central to society.

The cult of domesticity and true womanhood outlined in the last chapter was particularly exaggerated in the antebellum South. As historian Anne Firor Scott points out, "Women, like slaves, were an intrinsic part of the patriarchal dream."[1] Plantation life necessitated hierarchic systemization of all social relation-

ships--master/mistress to slave, man to woman--as well as ideological justification for ruling class practices. Again, the ideal Southern woman was not just a distortion of male demands but a realistic construct of immense value to the patriarchy. Yet, to cite Scott again: "Motherhood, happy families, omnipotent men, satisfied slaves--all were essential parts of the image of the organic patriarchy. In none of these areas did the image accurately depict the whole reality."[2] For most women, life was extremely limited, circumscribed within the domestic sphere which included the maintenance of slavery. Even so, the variance between ideological abstraction and actual reality could not remain unchallenged as long as slavery was at the root of the doctrine. Again, the moral double standard espoused by true womanhood tenets proved the irreconcilable contradiction between theory and social practice, and, in particular, "miscegenation was the fatal flaw in the patriarchal doctrine."[3] Male sexual practices refuted the set hierarchy, breaking down the distinction between woman and slave. Furthermore, if women were to act out fully their role as moral and spiritual guardians, they could support slavery as a system of labor but not as a system of oppression. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly stands as a model for the true womanhood literary response to unchristian acts but not

to slavery as a productive if exploitative system of labor. Chopin evoked the slavery issue and woman's response to it in several stories--notably "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde"--but in general, specific social and economic problems are secondary in her fiction to larger philosophical issues made comprehensible by their individualization. Chopin correctly saw that for women--of any color--life in the antebellum and postbellum South was not that different. The struggle against cultural imperatives still obtained.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her "Kate Chopin and the Fiction of Limits: 'Désirée's Baby,'" points this out in general terms:

> A majority of Chopin's fictions are set in worlds where stability or permanence is a precarious state: change is always threatened --by the vagaries of impassive fate, by the assaults of potentially ungovernable individual passions, or merely by the inexorable passage of time. More generally, we might say that Chopin construes existence as necessarily uncertain.[4]

More specifically and reinterpreting Wolff, we can see that because Chopin chose to portray women schooled in piety, purity and passivity, she could not have produced anything other than a fiction of limits and, in many cases, of defeat. Social and sexual ideology which had never fully acknowledged the self-will and personal aspiration of women could only prove more alienating to the individual faced with the shifting reality of the

old patriarchal order giving way to a modern, amoral world which still maintained contradictory patriarchal doctrines concerning women. As Wolff writes of Chopin:

> ...what she sees is the ominous and insistent presence of the margin: the inescapable fact that even our most vital moments must be experienced on the boundary--always threatening to slip away from us into something else, into some dark, undefined contingency.[5]

Indeed, in Chopin's world view and fiction, the minimalization of women's lives and desires and the consequent alienation of individuals within and from their social collectives become the central issue, the boundaries suddenly brought into sharp, clear focus.

## I. Early Short Stories: First Women

As several critics have pointed out, Chopin's earliest stories effectively delimit a range of responses to womanhood ideology and offer characterizations of women that will inform her entire opus. There is, in other words, a direct link between her earliest complete story "Emancipation. A Life Fable" (ca. 1869-1870) and The Awakening (1899); Chopin begins and ends with works that dare and defy, simultaneously deconstructing romantic rebellion and elucidating the pragmatics and penalties of actual individual revolt against society. The stories written by early 1891 set out in microcosm the grander pattern of Chopin's literary explorations and effectively introduce all her work and the reigning

concerns within: the awakening of woman to her true self (or selves) and the abysses of solitude and alienation in which the self wanders in her quest for fulfillment.

Chopin's women are not as easily compartmentalized as Wharton's: not for her the straightforward portrayal of ideologically stereotypical women--martyr, mistress, masterpiece. However, Chopin does make up her own continuum of females responding to ideology: woman as "true woman," a seemingly helpless being who has purpose only in relationship to and with men; woman as outsider, an artist of a new world view; woman as dual self, a female who precariously balances between submission and self-will.[6]

However, Chopin first created a patently romantic response to entrapment, a rebellion that is neither willful revolt nor, indeed, female or human in body or soul. Nonetheless, even though it can be read as female adolescent wish-fulfillment, the animal and animalistic fable of "Emancipation" cannot be denied its importance to Chopin's development. This early work acts as contrast and kernel for The Awakening; further, it offers the sentimentalist and romantic response to life that Chopin will reconstruct, analyze, and then destroy in her later fiction.

In "Emancipation. A Life Fable," an animal born

and bred in a cage moves from satisfied, solipsistic existence to isolation in and partial consciousness of a larger world. The male animal while entrapped is nurtured by "an invisible protecting hand"[7] and believes himself to be the center of the universe: the hand that feeds him and the light that warms him exist, he believes, only for those purposes. By chance his cage door is left open. Since he is a "pet" animal and also a creature without knowledge or consciousness, he cannot either close the door or ignore its intrusion into his world; more and more "Light" (37) shines in on him until he leaps out into it. Still without consciousness of his true self, "heedless that he is wounding and tearing his sleek sides" (37), he rushes into the world and experiences a sudden and dangerous sensuous awakening. He is no longer kept and cossetted but must now seek his own sustenance and discover his own substance. Despite his isolation and suffering, the animal remains in the world: "the cage remains forever empty!" (38)

Chopin's moral is clear: one must live in the world and be of it; one must discover a self in body (the senses) and mind (Light) even though that quest be painful and, at first, disillusioning. However, Chopin's romantic means toward this radically open-ended statement are clearly unequal. The first false note which points to her lack of authorial self-consciousness and philo-

sophical maturity is the chosen form for her self-expression: the allegorization of her clear concerns--entrapment within a society and alienation from a true self--and the distanciation of sex and species, both of which formalize, sentimentalize, and undermine her social critique. The emphasis placed on purely animalistic or sensuous self-knowledge also clouds her vision of rebellion: the animal primarily moves from selfishness to limited consciousness despite Chopin's attempt to indicate the emergence of total selfhood (consciousness of mind and body rather than body split from mind). Furthermore, that the "revolt" of her brute antagonist is effected by accident romanticizes the actual process of coming to consciousness, making of it a chance and momentary leap from an accepted and good enclosure to an accepted and better "Unknown" (37). Finally--and to be expected from so young a writer--such an emancipation is rewarded, and even suffering is ameliorated by the "seeking, finding, joying" (38) of the animal's continued journey through life. Chopin was clearly aware of the power of nonconsciousness implicitly revealed in the protected life of a nurtured pet and sympathetic to defiance. However, she was not yet able to elucidate the dialectical tension between submission and rebellion, the process of coming to consciousness which informs and is The Awakening. The seeds of revolt, in any case, are there, and her focus on ideological conflict has been set down. Having

once romanticized the struggle for selfhood, Chopin would hereafter deromanticize ideological entrapment and meticulously disclose the individual's slow crawl toward true self and, in Chopin's world view, into the abysses of solitude and alienation.

Three of her earliest stories flesh out in female characters her first brutal reading of individual within and without society. All are built upon the ideology of true womanhood; each is strikingly dissimilar in its portrayal of woman reaching toward self-consciousness. "A No-Account Creole," first written as "Euphrasie" in 1888 and rewritten in 1890 and in January-February 1891, reveals a woman within the traditional patriarchy. "Wiser Than a God," written in June 1889, draws the world of the woman as artist. "A Point at Issue!" written in August 1889, examines the woman as divided self desirous of both self-fulfillment and union with another.

Chopin's renaming of "Euphrasie" as "A No-Account Creole" perhaps best reveals her theme and self-consciousness, in the negative sense, as a writer. Although Euphrasie is the center of the story, she is, like the animal in "Emancipation," a paragon of passivity. Despite Chopin's female allegiance, it must have seemed obvious finally to both editor and writer that a title indicating the agent of the plot would be more acceptable to conventional, ideologically bound readers.

Euphrasie inadvertently instigates the action and conflict detailed in the story when she writes her father's New Orleans creditors about the sorry shape of their plantation. She does not do this out of sheer willfulness but for the sake of duty, justice, and perhaps a bit of excitement. In any case, this action takes place before the story proper begins. The conflict and drama depicted is, for the most part, between Euphrasie's two men: Placide Santien, the darkly handsome, violent Creole of the second title; and Wallace Offdean, the "well-clipped and groomed,"[8] cool creditor. Who will win Euphrasie is the central question; the oppositeness of the two men is the dramatic mechanism of the tale. Euphrasie is at the center of the conflict, yet she does not move nor is she particularly moved or moving as a character. A dutiful daughter, student, plantation mistress, she wishes only to become a dutiful wife. She is first affianced to Placide: it is an obvious union, and he loves her. Although she is attracted to Wallace, and he to her, she is content to fulfill her obligation to Placide. In short, Euphrasie believes in the ideological precept that a woman's fate rests in man and is effected by men.

Indeed, Euphrasie would be taken care of well by these two men. Placide prepares assiduously for the moment he is to bring her to his plantation home.

Wallace, in turn, proffers her a better plantation when he offers his hand. She can choose, of course, only one and that one has already been named, a fact which Wallace is oblivious to until she blurts it out at his proposal. While Chopin incorporates passages on love and romance within the text, it becomes clear at this point of disclosure that Chopin's story is, finally, not about love but about honor: not Euphrasie's sense of honor which is touched upon as being somehow tainted because she kisses a man she doesn't love, not Placide's honor which would be insulted by Wallace's behavior had Wallace acted knowingly against him, not Wallace's honor since he has been done no willful wrong. Chopin's ostensible subject is male honor toward women, or as Wallace tells Placide, "The way to love a woman is to think first of her happiness" (101). So, when Placide jilts Euphrasie, he proves doubly honorable: he leaves the door open for Wallace; he saves Euphrasie, as she makes clear, from the sin of having to make love to the wrong man (102).

Finally, the last "action" of the story is telling. Wallace asks Euphrasie if he can return to her, and she says nothing. He tells her that if she does <u>not</u> speak, he will know he can return. Again, she says nothing. It is clear, then, that she is a "true" woman, one who does nothing yet all comes to her. She is one of Chopin's few perfect Southern belles, women who would keep to their place although it mean the ruination of their souls.

It is interesting that this story takes "Emancipation" one step further without freeing itself completely of romantic melodramatics. Here the door to Euphrasie's senses is opened by Wallace; here the way for Wallace to win Euphrasie is made clear by Placide, who merely follows Wallace's advice. In both actions, the power comes from without Euphrasie--notably, from men. Most striking is that Euphrasie's nonconsciousness of her own power--over men, over her own fate--never changes, never becomes even a partial consciousness, remains marginal throughout the plot. Yet the trace of Euphrasie's power and the fact that her passivity masks an inner torment reflect Chopin's own authorial passivity and desire. The reader is made aware, even in this conventional tale, that surface does not necessarily reveal substance; the assumption that silence equates with acquiescence need not be true. That Chopin will later offer detailed portrayal of the ideologically true woman who speaks of and to her situation, notably in her characterization of Adelle Ratignolle in The Awakening, suggests that even in her earliest and seemingly most conventional fiction, Chopin was subtly subversive, if not speaking clearly her discontent or disbelief, at least murmuring the same in her submerged text.

"Wiser Than a God" presents the highly dramatic and at times also melodramatic moment of crisis in the life of pianist Paula Von Stoltz: she must choose

between the call of art and the call of love. Again, Chopin draws the mind/body split, this time, however, without recourse to fabular conceit or marriage; Chopin will allow no conventional compromise here. It is mildly astonishing to read Paula's refusal of George Brainard's proposal. At the same time, it is not unexpected, at the end, to see Paula rewarded for her show of will with the admiration of Professor Max Kuntzler, "her teacher in harmony."[9]

Chopin's revelation coupled with the unconventional resolution and conventional conclusion is that of Paula's character, the pragmatic but determined artist. Paula is neither the dilettante nor the starving bohemian (characterizations seen in Wharton's similar art versus marriage stories). It is true that she stands outside of high society because of her art: she produces on demand what George Brainard's class desires. More important, however, is the fact that she is socially alienated because of her class, nationality, and--by the story's middle point--her solitude.

Despite this negative background--neither wealth nor community--Paula perceives herself as a self-fulfilled and self-fulfilling individual. George's marriage proposal necessarily places the call of womanhood above that of artist. Paula's rejection reveals her determination to support herself, albeit through temporary compromise of her full aspirations, and to produce art but not to be

consumed by its buyers (a decision strikingly similar to Chopin's case). She is a woman artist who addresses her mental powers to the realization of deep desire: to speak her body through her art. In the story, she comes to understand fully the opposition and interrelationship of illusion and reality, sentiment and emotion, desire and need. Paula chooses to follow the purpose of her life even though she be deemed "a mad woman" (46) by George and his ilk. By the conclusion, it is clear that the narrator/author, not one of George's world, believes Paula to be wiser than a god.

Foreshadowing another important subtext in The Awakening, Chopin here also goes beyond stereotypical romance to effect a separation of male attitudes toward women. In brief, Chopin at this point portrays men as either friends or lovers, companions or husbands. Chopin in turn sets out female responses to the ideological roles called into question: women either become wives and mothers--as George's unnamed "pretty little black-eyed fairy" (43) does, eschewing even the mundane art she appreciates--or exiles--as Paula becomes when she purposely moves to Europe. Of course, Chopin suggests that one might have the best of both worlds--harmony in every sense of the word--but it is not within the story itself. Paula's abyss of solitude is sweetened by her eventual renown and Max's presence in her life. We are not, how-

ever, led to believe that her self-exile is any less real and painful. Chopin makes clear that women love, but for the salvation of their selves, they cannot allow themselves to live out that love. Such will be the dilemma facing Edna Pontellier; such will be the life choice of Mademoiselle Reisz in The Awakening.

In "A Point at Issue!" Chopin further complicates the theme of pure intellect in conflict with pure emotion as well as her neat bifurcation of male roles. Charles Faraday, a mathematics professor, meets student Eleanor Gail, is first physically attracted to her, and then comes to perceive her as "his ideal woman,"[10] "a logical woman" (49). In short, she shatters his first expectations--"an adorned picture of woman as he had known her" (49)--and becomes the new woman of whom he has heretofore only dreamed. Perceiving her as his ideal equal, he would be both friend and lover, beyond ideological constraints:

> Marriage was to be a form, that while fixing legally their relation to each other, was in no wise to touch the individuality of either; that was to be preserved intact. Each was to remain a free integral of humanity, responsible to no dominating exactions of so-called marriage laws. And the element that was to make possible such a union was trust in each other's love, honor, courtesy, tempered by the reserving clause of readiness to meet the consequences of reciprocal liberty. (50)

Eleanor wholly acquiesces to this, finding Charles equally ideal, although in different ways. Charles is notably conservative, is a man of reason

despite his desire to make a different kind of union. He is a secure member of society and academia. Eleanor, on the other hand, is the true revolutionary despite her decision to be, at first, led by Charles into an "intellectual existence" (50). She is outside his established world but is also determined to remain free of "public notice" (48). She is weary of compromising social proprieties and instead wishes her union to effect "the satisfying consciousness of roaming the heights of free thought, and tasting the sweets of a spiritual emancipation" (48). For her, solitude and contemplation are to be transformed into intercourse and revelation. For him, the best of both worlds remains. And it is this incompatibility between the worlds of men and of women--ideology of womanhood, finally--that ruptures their new marriage and destroys Eleanor.

Both ostensibly live up their pact. Eleanor stays in France after their honeymoon to perfect her French; Charles returns to the university. The difference of view, however, is immediately obvious. Eleanor progresses; Charles regresses. She surrounds herself with books and throws herself into a new world; Charles returned to his old one, "to his duties at the university, and resumed his bachelor existence as quietly as though it had been interrupted but by the interval of a day" (51). Eleanor sees them as two selves with one

purpose; Charles makes them one--"She was himself" (52)--thus denying their individuality. Most important, Charles returns not only to his secure, staid world, but he also begins to act and communicate as one deeply entrenched within society. He is attracted to another woman and writes Eleanor of her, knowing himself that this is just social flirtation and ego-gratification. Eleanor, since she lives outside society and is unaware of Charles' metamorphosis into his social self, assumes their pact has begun in earnest: they are living an open marriage. And she follows suit. When they reunite several months later, it becomes clear that they can no longer communicate but that neither understands or wishes to comprehend why.

Charles' true possessive nature has, by the end, come to the fore: he has not thought it out, but "he began to wonder if there might not be modifications to this marital liberty of which he was so staunch an advocate" (56). Eleanor has also surrendered her intellect to her emotions; she reveals:

> 'I have been over the whole ground myself, over and over, but it is useless. I have found that there are certain things which a woman can't philosophize about, any more than she can about death when it touches that which is near to her!' (58)

Charles consults only with himself and remains deluded in the end; however, he loses neither self nor Other: "'I love her none the less for it, but my Nellie is only

a woman, after all!'" (58). Eleanor explores her self and reveals it to Charles, yet in doing so, she surrenders herself to him and can no longer philosophize about her own self death: "'I think nothing!'" (58).

Chopin here clearly delimits the boundaries of sexual and social ideology and elaborates the result of self-compromise. She reveals a possible alternative to patriarchal convention and then how impossible, at least in this case, it is to attain. Close examination of her character development further reveals that it is the boundaries of a woman's life that are the points at issue. Charles is from beginning to end at the secure center of the societal web. Eleanor who begins almost beyond it and who attempts to reform its boundaries by her very act of living is finally brought into the center as well; she becomes not Charles, as he romanticizes, but merely his shadow and the shell of her true self. The mind/body split seen in the first story is re-enacted, but this time the mind is surrendered, the inner self lost through capitulation. For Chopin, at this point, there is only pessimistic realism; the fable and romances of her earlier work are critiqued by this story and illuminated. And except in those works wherein Chopin falls back on myths and melodrama, there will be no more simple happy endings. Chopin, even if just for a literary moment, had found her voice.

## II. *At Fault*: Old Worlds, New Worlds

*At Fault*, written between 5 July 1889 and 20 April 1890, marks Chopin's first full-scale attempt at controversial content expressed through conventional form. Like her earliest stories, this first novel shows her artistic and philosophical development as well as her shortcomings. *At Fault* is both unexpected revelation and partial compromise. As with her earlier work, it is necessary to pay attention to both what Chopin explicitly says and what she cannot yet say but embeds in her text. To do so, one must pull apart the multiple layers of her novel to get at her core concerns.

Simply, *At Fault* is a story of problematic love. Thérèse Lafirme, a widow in her thirties, inherits her husband's Cane River plantation, Place-Du-Bois. Through a business venture, she meets David Hosmer, a northerner, and they quickly fall in love. So too do Grégoire Santien, Thérèse's nephew (and brother of the hot-blooded Placide in "A No-Account Creole") and Melicent Hosmer, David's sister (and, incidentally, an almost caricatural new woman). David, however, is divorced from an alcoholic, and his wife Fanny still lives. Thérèse, a Catholic southerner of the old morality, cannot accept new mores and, in essence, forces David to rewed Fanny and bring her to Cane River so that Thérèse can have David with her while they ostensibly live out her moral

code by making Fanny happy. Fanny eventually succumbs to her weakness and, in a purely melodramatic climax, drowns. Similarly, Grégoire's and Melicent's affair is destroyed when he kills a black who has burnt down David's sawmill. That cold-blooded murder, even if of a dangerous terrorist, morally disgusts Melicent, and she leaves Grégoire. Grégoire then dies violently, leaving Melicent to grieve in her melodramatic fashion. Finally, as in the best of all sentimental romances, Thérèse and David are married and, one assumes, live happily ever after.

It should be evident from the above that Chopin's experimentation lies in her premises and not in her conclusions. Perhaps because she chose to focus on such original and controversial issues as divorce and the rise of industrial capitalism, she felt compelled to end her various plots with convenient and seemingly conventional conclusions--in other words, to make a last curtsy to propriety and popular taste. Even so, the revisionary intent of her text cannot be denied, and, indeed, the title of her work is, one can argue, consciously self-reflexive. Just as the reader is led to see that everyone in the novel is flawed in some crucial way, so too does Chopin suggest that conventional literature and the world it depicts and glorifies are dangerously at fault.

The few critics who have done serious study of this work tend to analyze the most obvious yet crucially innovative level of the text: the economic setting. Unlike local colorists, Chopin is not intent on painting a picture of an idyllic South. Instead, she places her novel in a post-Reconstruction South and focusses on the changes occurring on the land and in the industry because of the arrival of Northern capitalist methods and ethics. At Fault is, then, a political and economic battleground. Furthermore, as Joyce Ruddel Ladenson writes:

> The dialectic is right out of Marx: feudal power conflicts with rising bourgeois power, with the inevitable triumph of the latter. The catch here is that contrary to the standard class conflict which at the highest levels takes place between men, this conflict combines class and sex, the feudal world represented by a woman tied to an older European culture.[11]

Thérèse and David, therefore, are not merely romantic individuals; more importantly, they are members of two different but now conjoined ensembles of human and economic relations. Chopin's presentation and development of characters, thus, complementarily offers socio-political analysis and criticism.

For example, Thérèse's world is seen, on the one hand, as built on firm and high morals, on individual sacrifice for the common good, the "sacredness of a trust"[12] Thérèse shares with other living and dead southerners to uphold the old true way, feudal agrarianism.

On the other hand, that Thérèse's morality is relative and, indeed, based on oppression of the common people and not always willful self-sacrifice is also shown: the grave of McFarlane who was the historical basis for Harriet Beecher Stowe's Simon Legree character is on her land; not all her ex-slaves, notably the rebel Joçint, are as content as her old mammy, Marie Louise, is with their state of powerlessness in her world; more explicitly, Grégoire, her blood relative, stands as a negative exemplar of Southern consciousness. Similarly, David's world is seen from opposing viewpoints. That his true world, industrial capitalism, allows new freedom for workers and women is obvious, particularly in the case of his sister who is both a new woman and a woman of leisure. That his system is also based on oppression and relative morality is again made clear through the actions of Joçint, the slave's son become wage slave, through description of Fanny's bourgeois, morally corrupt friends, and through his sister Melicent's own response to events, particularly her hypocritical "mourning" of her moral counterpart, Grégoire. As Lewis Leary makes clear, it is not for either world a case of absolute good or evil:

> The fault may be interpreted as that of an agrarian, land-preserving South, lulled by traditions of ease and morality and religion, as it fails to respond to the industrial, land-destroying North, whose morality is modern and utilitarian. Or it may be the other way round.[13]

Chopin's acknowledgment of moral relativity and self-doubt in times of social and economic transformation is farsighted, and it is her movement away from absolutes which informs her romantic text and makes of it more than what it at first appears to be. Indeed, to understand fully Chopin's final political position and statement necessitates moving to another level of the text, that of the story of the individual's search for a moral and self-fulfilling existence. It is also at this level of Thérèse's and David's love story that Chopin's critique of the ideology of true womanhood, implicit in the economic subtext, becomes evident.

Thérèse Lafirme is, first and foremost, a Southern lady of the old tradition. She is fully complicit with womanhood ideology, so much so that she moves residence away from the newly built railroad to avoid the encroaching hordes of Northern, capitalist barbarians of whom David Hosmer is one. She rebuilds in the old style and, in fact, attempts to uphold single-handedly the way of plantation life even while she capitalizes--personally and financially--on her relationship with David. Though she passes a singular year in his company, she still advocates true womanhood precepts: she reminds him continuously that she is no individualist and that she gladly sacrifices her own fulfillment for that of others. Her self-martyrdom excuses her powerful position

as plantation mistress: she acts as overlord merely to comply with duty and not as an expression of self-will. Similarly, once she learns of David's marital situation, she sacrifices her own desires for the sake of another and in doing so, simultaneously acts as martyr and moral guardian to David and Fanny. Thérèse thus appears to be morally and spiritually superior, sexually pure, the womanly ideal. By the novel's end, however, Chopin exposes such firm attachment to ideology as morally ambiguous (at best), individually destructive, and, in the case of Fanny, death-dealing.

As Thérèse's ideological counterpart, David is equally pure in his behavior. Once Thérèse tells him that he must be a man and face the consequences of his actions, he willingly accepts her as moral guide: "He felt her to be a woman with moral perceptions keener than his own and his love, which in the past twenty-four hours had grown to overwhelm him, moved him now to a blind submission" (769). Though he is in "anguish of spirit" (770), he returns to Fanny, remarries her, and attempts to live up to Thérèse's standards for him. He continues to do so even after he realizes he hates Fanny, even after he moves Fanny to Place-Du-Bois and must then see both women each day, even after Fanny descends into alcoholic schizophrenia again. By the novel's end, Chopin makes clear once more that such

self-martyrdom is not only repressive but also hypocritical and, again for Fanny, lethal.

It is through the disturbed character of Fanny that Chopin disorders the neat sexual and moral hierarchies at the base of womanhood ideology and her text. One would assume Fanny to be pure stereotype: the fallen woman. Chopin makes her more than that by offering in a minimum of words Fanny's side of the story. Through Fanny's eyes, the reader sees another David, as real a man as Thérèse's lover, and learns why after the first marriage Fanny "began to dread him and defy him" (779). David's relationship with Fanny had been superficial from the start; Fanny had quickly "felt herself as of little consequence, and in a manner, overlooked" (798). Her desires and self-will are never acknowledged; she is at most David's helpmeet and, during the second marriage, treated as his child. In essence, David drives her to desperate means and to the eventual despairing end. For example, after their reunion and despite his knowledge of her sensitivity, he uproots her from her secure if morally tainted world and forces her move to an alien and alienating land. It is not surprising that on her first night in Thérèse's world Fanny finds "a certain mistrust was creeping into her heart with the nearing darkness" (794). It is not only night that Chopin invokes here, nor is it the mental darkness of Fanny's stupors. It is a foresha-

dowing of Fanny's end as well as recognition of the truth of Fanny's existence and perceptions: the moral murkiness of her marriage, the rude erasure of her dreams as when she later hears David call Thérèse's name in his dark delirium, the moral and spiritual blindness she faces as she realizes that neither David nor Thérèse sees her true self, the final inky blackness which is her death.

The destruction of Fanny's precariously maintained self--and, coincidentally, the death of Marie Louise, symbol of the old life--because of the moral theories and practices of Thérèse and David judges darkly both womanhood ideology and the patriarchal, whether feudal or capitalist. If an individual, even if only a weak woman, be driven into solitude and alienation by accepted morality, what then is the difference between morality and immorality? Similarly, if a man destroy his life to save his soul, what is the worth of morals? Finally, if a woman were to realize the cost of womanhood's morality and that there is not one true, faultless way of being, how then does she live? Chopin's answer to the last is the "moral" of her tale: some women and men do not survive; some do, but only after questioning authority, admitting self-will, and accepting self-doubt and continual self-transformation as the basis of existence in an, at best, amoral world.

Chopin suggests such a survivor in the character counterpart to Fanny: Homeyer, the man closest to David.

Homeyer's philosophy of life and reaction to David's actions are continually recalled by David at crucial moments. For example, David reviews Homeyer's response to his remarriage and the moral issues involved:

> And what had Homeyer said of it? He had railed of course as usual, at the submission of a human destiny to the exacting and ignorant rule of what he termed moral conventionalities. He had startled and angered Hosmer with his denunciation of Thérèse's sophistical guidance. Rather--he proposed--let Hosmer and Thérèse marry, and if Fanny were to be redeemed--though he pooh-poohed the notion as untenable with certain views of what he called the rights to existence: the existence of wrongs--sorrows--diseases--death--let them all go to make up the conglomerate whole-- and let the individual man hold on to his personality. But if she must be redeemed--granting this point to their littleness, let the redemption come by different ways than those of sacrifice: let it be an outcome from the capability of their united happiness. (777)

David, the slave to "Love's prophet" (777), Thérèse, cannot at this point accept Homeyer's advice but neither can he totally cast it from his mind. Later, David recalls another conversation concerning religions, applicable to Thérèse's Catholicism, and social evolution, ideas unheard of in his and Thérèse's philosophy:

> 'Homeyer would have me think that all religions are but mythological creations invented to satisfy a species of sentimentality--a morbid craving in man for the unknown and undemonstrable.' (792)

> '...he believes in a natural adjustment...In an innate reserve force of accomodation. What we commonly call laws in nature, he styles accidents --in society, only arbitrary methods of expedi-

> ency, which, when they outlive their usefulness to an advancing and exacting civilization, should be set aside. He is a little impatient to always wait for the inevitable natural adjustment.' (792-793)

Homeyer, then, is a man beyond the manners and morals of David and Thérèse, a sophisticated realist coupling a long-range optimism with immediate pessimism. Homeyer is also a character beyond the text: he neither appears, nor is he given a verifiable existence. Homeyer is such an illusory and visionary being, in fact, that Thérèse early on surmises he is David's alter-ego. Chopin never corroborates this interpretation in her narration but instead leaves Homeyer as a voice deeply embedded in David and strangely distanced from the text. Just as Thérèse speculates that Homeyer is David's inner voice, it is textual counterpoint to conjecture that Homeyer is the other narrator, Chopin's secret critical voice. This theory is given substance by Thérèse's awakening to new consciousness and the lover's final discourse.

Thérèse begins to question her moral allegiance and goals once Fanny arrives at Place-Du-Bois. Thérèse hears Fanny's story and thereafter sees before her the effects of her moral stance. Her self-sacrifice is shown to be futile, and her morals become less self-glorified: she thinks, "Were Fanny, and her own prejudices, worth the sacrifice which she and Hosmer had made?" (808) Later she ponders whether her morality is finally a nurturance

or denial of life: "the doubt assailed her whether it were after all worth while to strive against the sorrows of life that can be so readily put aside" (810). At the same time David comes to realize that their morality costs too much but that he cannot break faith with Thérèse. At this point, however, it clearly becomes solely Thérèse's duty to offer moral support to both of them: it was her will that their lives be so, and it is now only within her power to make those lives bearable. Shortly thereafter, Thérèse dreams that her actions to save David had only served to kill him. She has here subconsciously recognized the relativity of her morality:

> She had always thought this lesson of right and wrong a very plain one. So easy of interpretation that the simplest minded might solve it if they would. And here had come for the first time in her life a staggering doubt as to its nature ....She continued to ask herself only 'was I right?' and it was by the answer to that question that she would abide, whether in the stony content of accomplished righteousness, or in an enduring remorse that pointed to a goal in whose labyrinthine possibilities her soul lost itself and fainted away. (840)

But there are no easy either-or answers for Thérèse, and she consciously enters a state of contemplation and self-doubt. Grégoire's death, as well as Joçint's murder, makes righteousness impossible: Grégoire is of her blood, and she therefore believes that she shares responsibility for all the bloodshed. The ideology of her world has proven to be at least partially based on immorality and hypocrisy. Her relationship with David

and Fanny only serves to force this realization deeper into her consciousness. As she tells David after Fanny's death, "'I have seen myself at fault in following what seemed the only right. I feel as if there were no way to turn for the truth. Old supports appear to be giving way beneath me. They were so secure before'" (872). And so Thérèse arrives at the brink of social and self alienation.

David offers Thérèse and himself a way out but not, as one would expect of a less sophisticated work, by offering his new supports--bourgeois ethics--as alternative world view. David has also seen into the heart of his morality which is, obviously, not that different from Thérèse's. For all their seemingly crucial differences--sex, class, manners, mores--David and Thérèse are still identically caught in the deadly web of patriarchal ideology, and, as David points out, it is not within those traditional boundaries that they will find the limits of self and knowledge:

> 'Thérèse,' said Hosmer firmly, 'the truth in its entirety isn't given to man to know--such knowledge, no doubt, would be beyond human endurance. But we make a step towards it, when we learn that there is rottenness and evil in the world, masquerading as right and morality--when we learn to know the living spirit from the dead letter. I have not cared to stop in this struggle of life to question. You, perhaps, wouldn't dare to alone. Together, dear one, we will work it out. Be sure there is a way--we may not find it in the end, but we will at least have tried.' (872)

It is a declaration such as Homeyer would have made.

The novel's conclusion re-establishes difference and offers a quick glimpse at transcendence of separation. David and Thérèse have married and have clearly begun a new life which incorporates the best of their old worlds but which is beyond the strictures and norms of the traditional. David while still the sensible capitalist has learned sensitivity through his experience with Thérèse. Similarly, Thérèse while yet the plantation mistress is no longer a cold saint but has instead come to acknowledge and express her individuality. The joining of old and new worlds, the marriage of land and industry, of South and North, of woman and man result finally in a utopic union of profitable and promising love. Chopin, however, does not descend into romance here. She makes clear that transcendence and self-fulfillment are possible but that the potentiality lies solely within the power and will of each individual; the reader is not privy to David's and Thérèse's last whispered words; self-fulfillment is not an end but a process. Chopin only notes that such words can be said and heard by those who go beyond acceptance of alienation and continually strive to understand the "living spirit." Opposite to the dead ending of "A Point at Issue!" At Fault's conclusion is open-ended "natural adjustment" which offers not so much a resolution as a sense of a positive future, a new world.

The partial compromise of the text lies in the

forms and techniques Chopin uses. Chopin is not yet a sufficiently sophisticated writer and social critic to be able to produce a completely unified work of social fiction. Too often her central concerns play second role to stereotypical characterization, witty stabs at minor issues, and her expert but disruptive introduction of dialect. The melodramatic Grégoire-Melicent love story does not finally add as much as it distracts from the development of the realistic main plot. The conflation of fate and self-will is also heavyhanded since it is abruptly and violently forced as climax. This was, of course, her first novel, and in several sections it reads as such.

That Chopin herself realized her inadequate skill is also evident. She seemed to comprehend that her own critical impatience made her resort to textual methods of expediency to reach her philosophical end statements, that she had attempted too much too soon. As the next section will argue, she turned back to short fiction and used it as a testing ground for the themes, images, and techniques later brought together in her final masterpiece, The Awakening. She would there pay special attention to the process of coming to consciousness, a critical process only partially realized in At Fault.

## III. Selected Short Stories, 1891-1897: Women in Old and New Worlds of Ideals, Sacrifices, and Desires

Though Kate Chopin would continue to experiment with various fictional forms, her post-1891 work focusses more and more on the oppressiveness of womanhood ideology and the arduousness of woman's quest for self. This fact is particularly striking when one considers the popularity of Chopin's less adventurous work--for example, her local color stories. That Chopin had more to say than what could be said in conventional fiction is patent; that she had the courage to do so, risking the loss of reputation and audience, is strange and rare.

One cannot know what made Chopin follow the literary course she did. One can speculate that after the total rejection of her second novel, Young Dr. Gosse, begun almost immediately after At Fault and finished in November 1890, she clearly realized what was acceptable and what was not. One can go further and theorize that her post-1891 stories reveal that she chose to remain centered on what was not to be written or said in polite literature. Perhaps that had been her conscious intention all along, one which she did not state in so many bold words for her critics. In any case, the increasingly narrowed subject of her mid-career stories suggests that Chopin both wished to subvert and challenge true womanhood

ideology in her work and that she was herself progressively informed by the critical process she persistently pursued despite censure. Thus her major stories of this period center on three themes under the heading of ideology: the solitary awakening of the alienated individual, the virtues and failings of motherhood as self-fulfillment, and the realm of the senses as battleground for the self.

Her 1891 stories for the most part break no new ground and read as fairly conventional historical and local color tales. Her main energy was then going toward the promotion of her two novels. There are, to be sure, unconventional heroines even here: Marianne in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe" (written 19 April 1891), Fifine in "A Very Fine Fiddle" (13 September 1891), Boulotte in "Boulôt and Boulotte" (20 September 1891), Lolotte Bordon in "A Rude Awakening" (13 July 1891). All are social exiles because of class or circumstance; except for the mythic Marianne, all are pragmatic survivors who break convention for good reason and thus are finally not as rebellious as appears on first reading. It is only when Chopin purposely focusses on alienation that her stories begin to rise above the ordinary. Even so, two of her earliest stories in this vein--"Beyond the Bayou" (7 November 1891) and "After the Winter" (31 December 1891)--fail to show the roots of social conflict that effect an

alienated life. In both, the protagonists--respectively, the black La Folle and the ruined Southerner Michel--have been driven insane by the experiences of war and atrocities. Both abjure society until, by accident, they are brought back into the fold through the acts of children. Chopin does not investigate the causes of self-exile nor does she seem to desire anything less than full reconciliation of individual with society. There is a hint, however, that society has changed its ways at least partially because of the actions of its self-exiled; in both stories, society waits with open arms for the return of its critics, and it is a warm world of "infinite peace."[14] At the same time, it is a radiant world only at its center; as Michel perceives, even in his transcendent moment, there is always "the hill far off that was in black shadow against the sky" (188). Hereafter, Chopin will concern herself almost obsessively with the black shadows on the social margins. No longer will she be contented with emancipation from alienation if it only leads to return to the old world that is still bordered in darkness.

"Ma'ame Pélagie," written 27-28 August 1892, and "Désirée's Baby," written 24 November 1892, clearly mark her break with traditional reconciliation themes and superficially happy endings. In both, she takes up the true woman paradigm, sets it in the historical contexts of an antebellum and a postbellum South, and subtly

exposes the power and the base of womanhood ideology.

"Désirée's Baby" takes place in the old South, and the reader is presented with two portraits of that time and place. One centers on the genteel and peaceful Valmondé, grand plantation of a couple of the same name. Here Désirée is abandoned as a baby and taken up as the Valmondés' own child. At the outset of the story, she is eighteen, has grown "to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,--the idol of Valmondé."[15] She has just left her perfect world for L'Abri, the plantation of her impassioned husband, Armand Aubigny.

L'Abri is the black horizon glimpsed in Chopin's earlier story. Unlike Valmondé, it is a dark world of sadness and barely restrained brutality. The passions of its master result not in love and fruitfulness for this world, as they do at first with Désirée, but in ruthlessness and barrenness. It is a world of power in which Armand's will and desire color everything, just as the oaks around his house "shadowed it like a pall" (241). Désirée's dual emotions of happiness and fear early in their marriage (242) foreshadow their fall into individual darkness and despair. And it comes as no surprise at the end that the one symbol of a new bright world--Désirée's newborn son--should prove death-dealing precisely because it has been darkened--both figuratively and literally--by Armand.

Because their son is seen to have black blood, Désirée loses everything: she falls from ideal to animal, even though Chopin immediately clarifies for the reader that it is Armand who is the inhuman beast and not she (243). The checked cruelty of Armand is unleashed: the slaves suffer as does their supposed sister, Désirée, and it is all her fault. That Désirée is blamed for the impurity of their son is both circumstantial and telling. Monsieur Valmondé had foreseen such a situation before the wedding. Armand had responded to his warnings about her obscure past by saying that the Aubigny name would make Désirée into the compleat ideal. Here Chopin reveals the base of true womanhood--male power--and the agent of feminine self-fulfillment--male desire. Furthermore, even though Armand has a somewhat shadowy past and an equally dark present, there is never a moment--until the final disclosure--that suspicion falls on anyone but Désirée. It is clear that Chopin here utilizes the theme of racism to illuminate her critical reading of women's powerlessness and defencelessness if women live within the true patriarchal world. Chopin drives home the truth that no matter how a woman lives, no matter what she makes herself to be, she can be destroyed--and with full social sanction--if she does not fit the specified model in every way, even in those points outside her power.

In Armand's world, Désirée deserves social oblivion or death since she has passed herself off as other than what she really is: her reality, rooted in her body, is a black stain on him and his world, "upon his home and his name" (244).

Désirée also comes to believe herself doomed, though not at fault. Ever a true woman, she remains oblivious to the very last of her rights and her power. She is the last to realize her child is black; she is the last to accept that she must be the cause of this since her husband has said it is so. However, she also never accepts her fall from true womanhood, and this is what finally destroys her. Her identity is inextricably rooted in her relationship to Armand as his wife and mother of his child. If he deny his child and cast her off as wife and lover, Désirée is not only abandoned, but she is no longer Désirée. Schooled too well in the manners and constraints of true womanhood, Désirée herself denies escape from the patriarchal world and instead chooses a literal and suicidal descent into and not beyond the bayou. Even though Chopin makes clear at the end that Désirée was not at fault--Armand's mother was part black--Chopin also indicates that her exoneration is not the point at issue but that her self-destruction is.

Chopin does suggest ways of escape for women.

One is the path chosen by Armand's mother, again a woman whose life was dependent on male compassion and power. The father proves more humane than the son, but this does not compensate for the mother's life of exile and burial in an alien land. Another way is offered by Madame Valmondé. Though she accepts the "fact" of Désirée's blackness, she does not deny Désirée's person. After Désirée writes her for self-confirmation and solace, Madame Valmondé answers: "'My own Désirée: Come home to Valmondé; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child'" (243). She does not verify Désirée's whiteness because she cannot; she does not negate Désirée's relationship to her because she chooses not to do so. She is the character with greatest consciousness, then, a woman who will transcend racist and sexist ideology to protect her own and, in this case, the female. Désirée, of course, does not even perceive the possibility of a female world; unlike her mother, she proves to have less consciousness of her innate self. She has accepted herself as an idol and like all idols is "silent, white, motionless" (243), unconscious, easy to destroy. Once accused, she can never, unlike her mother and perhaps Armand's father, find the depths of her true self as anything but black oblivion; as she tells her mother, "'I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live'" (243). And, as in <u>At Fault</u>, Chopin leaves the reader with an awareness of where the fault lies: not merely in the frail hands of

powerless individuals but in the actions of all the individuals who support the patriarchal world whose social faults widen finally into the black abyss that embraces Désirée.

"Ma'ame Pélagie" more openly points to the ruin effected by adherence to reactionary ideology. The story is set in a postbellum South and portrays two sisters caught between the old and new worlds seen in At Fault. Pélagie and Pauline Valmêt, respectively fifty and thirty-five years old, live in a comfortless log cabin beside the ruins of their mansion which was torched during the Civil War. Pélagie's only desire is to rebuild the mansion and die there. Their niece La Petite comes to visit and despite her love of life tries to fit into their backward looking existence, finally rebelling against living solely in the past. Pauline, who has come to love La Petite, tells her sister she will die if the niece leaves since there will then be no present or future for Pauline on the Côte Joyeuse. The conflict is thus seen to be between two worlds, both symbolized by women: the old true womanhood ways of Pélagie; the new life, "the pungent atmosphere of an outside and dimly known world,"[16] embodied in La Petite and desired by Pauline. Unlike that in "Désirée's Baby," the battle here is simple and the outcome almost a given; however, the final resolution for Pélagie is stringly parallel to Désirée's final walk away from the old world.

Pélagie is the true Southern woman. Despite the loss of home, wealth, and power, she clings to the past and the dream of what once was. Even though she eventually perceives the falseness of her dream, the basic corruptness of her world, she never renounces her past or her true womanhood conception of self as queen and martyr. She remains imperious and self-alienated to the end.

From the outset of the story, it is clear that Pélagie is a woman of great will and power. She has effectively ruled her sister's life for thirty years and has attempted to train her to be "a true Valmêt" (233). It is Pélagie's dream--and passion--to resurrect her past, not Pauline's since she cannot remember it, but the quest is less personal than political: the past holds a place for Pélagie in which she was socially secure, part of a whole which sheltered each individual from accusation and consciousness of fault. Like Thérèse in At Fault, Pélagie thinks the old way is the only way.

Her denial of reality is strong even in the face of La Petite. In one of their first embraces, Pélagie looks only for "a likeness of the past in the living present" (234), refusing to see anything other than her dream. She is untouched when her niece later states that life at Côte Joyeuse is killing her and them, at the same time gently offering criticism and a way out of entrapment:

> '...it is as though a weight were pressing me backward here. I must live another life; the

> life I lived before. I want to know things that are happening from day to day over the world, and hear them talked about. I want my music, my books, my companions. If I had known no other life but this one of privation, I suppose it would be different. If I had to live this life, I should make the best of it. But I do not have to; and you know, tante Pélagie, you do not need to. It seems to me,' she added in a whisper, 'that it is a sin against myself.' (234-235)

For Pélagie, La Petite is a new woman and not a true Valmêt: La Petite thinks of herself instead of Pélagie's collective, and it is of no consequence to Pélagie that that community is nearly dead. On the other hand, Pauline sees her niece as her "'saviour; like one who had come and taken me by the hand and was leading me somewhere--somewhere I want to go'" (235). It is only when Pauline says that she will die if La Petite is forced to leave because of Pélagie's morbidity that Pélagie's dream and world fall apart. Pauline is the last but for Pélagie, and Pauline has now rejected the dream for reality. Pauline is also Pélagie's charge, for whom she has always sacrificed. Pélagie has now been called to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give up her dream for someone who no longer loves her in the old way, and as a true woman she does so. The ideological similarity between Pélagie and Désirée is obvious, but Pélagie is finally revealed as the perversely dark womanhood exemplar.

Chopin portrays Pélagie throughout as a harsh and narrow-minded woman. Despite her calculated appear-

ance as a concerned and self-sacrificing sister, Pélagie is exposed as an unmoved and self-seeking tyrant. She is thus also similar to Armand, both being bound to concepts of honor and loyalty that deny individual desire or being beyond their own. It is after her scene with Pauline that the reader sees the true Pélagie: a living ghost whose reality lies not in this world but in the ruined and ruinous past. She walks through the destroyed mansion, ironically oblivious of actual "light or dark" (236), "to see the visions that hitherto had crowded her days and nights, and to bid them farewell" (236). She relives her past, her initial denial of war threats, her romanticized remembrances of the slaves' lot. Even when she recalls the slaves' revolt, she remembers her nonconsciousness, her complicit denial of the knowledge that her world could be so built on violence and oppression. Abruptly, she feels again her desire to kill a black woman, to then die in the fire "to show them how a daughter of Louisiana can perish before her conquerors" (237). Her visions are both cruel and wildly sentimental, and her dream is clearly seen as just that, a superficial rendering of the actual nightmare past. The reader also sees that Pélagie's reactionary and racist nonconsciousness is her past and her quest and that it is only Pauline who has made her live on precisely because Pauline has never fitted in Pélagie's vision of self and world. Pauline kept her from the perfect heroine's death;

Pauline, no matter what now occurs, will always keep her from recapturing the whitewashed past. Yet Pélagie is a survivor, and she finds a use for Pauline: Pauline will be the recipient of Pélagie's greatest gift--her dream and her desired self. Pélagie thus creates an almost equally romantic and repressive vision of martyrdom to replace her primal dream. She has chosen to live alienated and alienating to the very last.

At the end, the land lives up to its name: a new house stands on the site of the ruins, one complete with pleasant companions and music. Pauline has been reborn, and La Petite no longer denies her true self. However, like the shadows of L'Abri, Pélagie stands alone, draped in black, just on the edge of this new world. As Chopin concludes, "How could it be different! While the outward pressure of a young and joyous existence had forced her footsteps into the light, her soul had stayed in the shadow of the ruin" (239). Unlike Madame Valmondé, Pélagie could not transcend her social prejudices, ideological upbringing, and her patriarchal consciousness of self and others. Chopin presents nothing positive in Pélagie or her past. Furthermore, at the end Pélagie is seen to have aged suddenly as if she had been denied vampiric sustenance, her living off the past and those who made her past possible. It is Pauline and her reality that will live, like Thérèse in <u>At Fault</u> and

her new world; it is a time and place of unknowns, but it is at least of "the living spirit." More important, that the new world is born through the influence of a new woman, small but sure of self, is indicative of Chopin's belief in women's positive power and will if they go against the accepted ways and seek self-fulfillment.

Chopin had earlier written another story on this theme of moral guardianship and blind social nonconsciousness, "Miss McEnders" (7 March 1892), and would continue to explore this topic in later pieces. Woman's complicity with corrupt social systems and ideologies would also remain a central subject throughout Chopin's career. So too would Chopin continually return to the dilemma of desire versus duty, self-fulfillment versus social sanction--for example, in such stories as "La Belle Zoraïde" (21 September 1893) and "Lilacs" (14-16 May 1894). Her most complex stories, however, take up the secondary characters seen in the stories discussed above: the Paulines, the Madame Valmondés, the women who experience some sort of personal and social awakening. Chopin began to explore in detail that quickening of consciousness and the effects of that process, what a woman does with her past, present, and future once she perceives her individuality and her self-desire. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," written 19 April 1894, is undoubtedly her

most famous and intense reading in this line.

Before discussing that story and those that follow and point to The Awakening, it is important to note that Chopin first penned another portrait of a highly unconventional woman. Her development as a writer can be marked by these singular pieces, the first--"Wiser Than a God"--coming at the beginning of her career, "Azélie" written on 22-23 July 1893 and closing off the second stage and introducing the pre-Awakening stories, "An Egyptian Cigarette" written in April 1897 just before she began The Awakening, and "The Storm" written 19 July 1898 soon after she had finished her masterpiece. One could argue that each story acts as Chopin's release from the pessimism seen in her work; each piece centers on a strong woman who is virtually untouched by the despair and dilemmas found in Chopin's more realistic fiction.

"Azélie" is conspicuously unlike Chopin's other work and, indeed, is a rustic fable with an almost feminist but quite implicit moral. Azélie is a poor farmer's daughter who neither acts nor thinks like a conventional woman. In short, she is a seemingly amoral, nearly Amazonian female who barely acknowledges male reality. She first offends the shop-tender 'Polyte when she refuses to act according to his sexual ideology:

> There was no trace of any intention of coquetry in her manner. He resented this as a token of indifference toward his sex, and thought it inexcusable.[17]

Later she further disorders his actual world and his ideological world view when she breaks into his store and takes what she and her father need:

> She seemed to have no shame or regret for what she had done, and plainly did not realize that it was a disgraceful act. 'Polyte often shuddered with disgust to discern in her a being so wholly devoid of moral sense. (295)

Even so, he falls in love with her, primarily because he misreads her actions and presentation of self as those of a helpless damsel in distress who needs a knight in shining armor to tame and protect her:

> He would keep her with him when the others went away. He longed to rescue her from what he felt to be the demoralizing influences of her family and her surroundings. 'Polyte believed he would be able to awaken Azélie to finer, better impulses when he should have her apart to himself. (296)

These romantic and ideologically conventional notions are given short shrift by Azélie, who cooly dismisses his advances: "She was not indignant; she was not flustered or agitated, as might have been a susceptible, coquettish girl; she was only astonished, and annoyed" (295). Refusing his proposal and thus his world, she suddenly leaves with her family for warmer climes. She is throughout her relationship with him untouched and untouchable. Though the reader is offered little insight into Azélie's personal sense of self and world, it is obvious that she, like Paula in "Wiser Than a God," is outside society and content to remain there. She is alien to 'Polyte's class,

undesiring of his love and salvation, and, unlike Paula, she is firmly attached and responsible to her small community. She appears content, strong in will and self, and her power finally draws 'Polyte away from his world at the end as he quits his store to follow in her footsteps.

Chopin perhaps suggests in this open ending that despite appearances and expectations, the alienated may lead a desirable, even enviable, existence based on responsible and responsive affection and concern. But, of course, Azélie is forever a social anomaly, like the animal in "Emancipation." Her particular case offers implicit morals but not a model of consciousness or struggle. Hers is a complete, self-contained, self-sufficient world in which all good things come to her at last. This is not the typical condition explored in Chopin's later fiction.

"The Story of an Hour," on the other hand, details a very ordinary reality and is a conscientious analysis of that moment in a woman's life when the boundaries of the accepted everyday world are suddenly shattered and the process of self-consciousness begins. Louise Mallard, dutiful wife and true woman, is gently told that her husband has been killed in a train accident. Her response is atypical, and it is this that is the subject of the story: what Louise thinks and feels

as she finds herself thrust into solitude and self-contemplation for the first time.

Louise appears in the opening as the frail, genteel, devoted wife of a prosperous businessman; she is at first only named as such: Mrs. Mallard. However, her first response to the tragedy indicates a second Louise nestling within the social shell:

> ...she did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms.[18]

Chopin thus implies that some part of Louise readily accepts the news. She also intimates that since Louise unconsciously chooses to enfold herself in a female embrace and not in the arms of the male friend who tells her of Mallard's death, Louise has already turned to a female world, one in which she is central. It is in the mid-section of the story, set in Louise's room, that Louise and Chopin's reader explore and come to understand reaction and potential action, social self (Mrs. Mallard) and private, female self (Louise).

Louise sits before an open window at first thinking nothing but merely letting impressions of the outer and inner worlds wash over her. She is physically and spiritually depleted but is still sensuously receptive. She sees the "new spring life" (352) in budding trees, smells rain, hears human and animal song as well

as a man "crying his wares" (352). She is both like a tired child dreaming a sad dream (353) and a young woman self-restrained but with hidden strengths. She is yet Mrs. Mallard.

As she sits in "a suspension of intelligent thought" (353), she feels something unnameable coming to her through her senses. It is frightening because it is not of her true womanhood world; it reaches to her from the larger world outside and would "possess her" (353). The unnameable is, of course, her self-consciousness which is embraced once she names her experience as emancipation and not destitution: "She said it over and over under her breath: 'free, free, free!'...Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body" (353). It is at this point that she begins to think, once she has been reborn through and in her body.

Louise is immediately aware of her two selves and comprehends how each will co-exist, the old finally giving way to the one new self. Mrs. Mallard will grieve for her husband who had loved her, but Louise will eventually revel in the "monstrous joy" (353) of self-fulfillment, beyond ideological strictures and the repressive effects of love:

> ...she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they

> have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.
>
> And yet she had loved him--sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being! (353)

It is only after Louise embraces this new consciousness--her sense of personal and spiritual freedom in a new world--that she is named, ironically, by her sister, who does not even imagine the revolution that has taken place in Louise's own room and person. Yet Chopin does not allow simple utopian endings, and Louise's sister's intrusion into Louise's world prefigures the abrupt end to her "drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window" (354).

Louise leaves her room and descends again into her past world. Though she carries herself "like a goddess of Victory" (354) and has overcome the constraints of her past self, she is not armed for the lethal intrusion of the past world through her front door. Brently Mallard unlocks his door and enters unharmed. His return from the dead kills Louise, and Chopin's conclusion is the critical and caustic remark that all believed "she had died of heart disease--of joy that kills" (354). It is beyond irony to be left at the end with the knowledge that only Louise and the reader perceived the earlier

"death" of Mrs. Mallard and true womanhood and that, indeed, it was a monstrous joy--the birth of individual self--and the erasure of that fulfilled desire by the return of her husband and, necessarily, her old self that murdered her. Far from being a melodramatic ending, the conclusion both informs and warns: should a woman see the real world and her individual self within it and then be denied the right to live out that vision, that way lies non-sense, self-division, and dissolution. Chopin's analysis of womanhood ideology and quest for self here takes on a darker hue: her earlier stories examined the destruction of women who lived within traditional society; this piece offers no escape for those who live outside of that world but only so in themselves. Either way, Chopin seems to be saying, lies self-oblivion if only the individual change and not the world.

At this time, Chopin also explored motherhood in several stories, no doubt as part of her own process of consciousness. Louise was alone and had no other acceptable world--as ideology had pictured the world of mothers and children--in which to fulfill herself. In such works as "Regret," written 17 September 1894, and "Athénaïse," written 10-28 April 1895, Chopin depicted the female desire for children as well as the supposed power and strength granted to mothers. Athénaise, for example, is transformed by her pregnancy which is described as her

sensuous awakening and her self-contained experience. Chopin, however, moved quickly from that line of argument and later focussed on motherhood as yet another form of ideological entrapment which some women accepted, along with the loss of self, and some did not. "A Pair of Silk Stockings," written in April 1896, shows the dark side of motherhood and repeats major elements from "The Story of an Hour" with only a few shifts in class and setting.

In this piece, a genteel but poor woman, seemingly without support and alone except for her children, experiences an awakening of sensuous self. Mrs. Sommers is a woman born to a better class than the one she married into, but she is also a true woman who neither shirks sacrifice for her family nor thinks of anything beyond her immediate life as mother and martyr:

> She had no time--no second of time to devote to the past. The needs of the present absorbed her every faculty. A vision of the future like some dim, gaunt monster sometimes appalled her, but luckily to-morrow never comes.[19]

As in Louise Mallard's case, the unexpected occurs: Mrs. Sommers comes into a veritable fortune, fifteen dollars, which she originally plans to spend on her children. Also like Louise, she is physically and spiritually exhausted when she arrives at the moment of contemplation and action; one begins to see here clearly Chopin's definition of the usual effect of womanhood life: self-depletion. Again just like Louise, she

experiences a sensuous moment--here the particularly female response to a specifically feminine luxury, silk stockings--which reawakens her female self, an experience which simultaneously embraces and engulfs her in monstrous joy from which there is no desire for escape.

After she buys and puts on the stockings, she too comes to a suspension of intellectual thought prior to rebirth of her self:

> She was not going through any acute mental process or reasoning with herself, nor was she striving to explain to her satisfaction the motive of her action. She was not thinking at all. She seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her of responsibility. (502)

She feels, she is sensuously alive, she begins to be her old self made new by her greater enjoyment of self-fulfillment. Of course, tomorrow does come for her just as Brently Mallard returned to Louise, and while the realization of her momentary freedom--she spends the money on herself--and her permanent obligation--that to her children--does not kill Mrs. Sommers, it is clear that she is thrown into a despair from which there is no rescue. For Chopin, there is never an easy resolution to woman's quest for self and fulfillment of desire.

It is the theme of desire that threads through Chopin's major stories written immediately prior to her work on The Awakening. Even as she celebrated the senses as the breaking ground for consciousness, she

also portrayed the purely sexual as another trap into which both men and women fall. Desire becomes passion in these works, and passion proves as much an entrapment as ideologically conventional love.

"Her Letters," written 29 November 1894, is important both because it examines male and female passion and because it contains what will become the central image of The Awakening. In this short story, a woman "pained and savage"[20] with passion goes to destroy her lover's letters. It is a leaden day of "no gleam, no rift, no promise" (398), when she can no longer think but only feel and act as a wounded animal would:

> With her sharp white teeth she tore the far corner from the letter, where the name was written; she bit the torn scrap and tasted it between her lips and upon her tongue like some god-given morsel. (399)

Unable to give up the letters, she entrusts them to her husband's care: he will destroy them without reading them.

A year later she has died, and on another leaden day of "no gleam, no promise" (400), he finds the letters, suffers a conflict of will about reading them, and finally throws them unopened into a river. His initial discovery illuminates for us the relationship and rift between husband and wife, a point brought home by the bleak refrain, and his later journey to water clarifies the emptiness of ordinary life and the despair which go

hand in hand with willful nonconsciousness. He realizes that he will never know her true self and that he is forevermore alienated from her: "The darkness where he stood was impenetrable...leaving him alone in a black, boundless universe" (402). His passion for the now forever unattainable union and his "man-instinct of possession" (401) lead him to see her as his only salvation: to know "the secret of her existence" (404) will be to know his own self and the meaning of his existence. It is the romantic dream of At Fault become nightmare, a path to madness and self-destruction instead of new life.

It is now that Chopin empowers her water symbol, as will occur in The Awakening, here making it the unnatural subject of a madman's perverted passion to know and to be known by another. The husband returns to the river and the darkness, emasculated by his inability to know, savage in his need for consummation. He believes he hears the call of the water:

> It babbled, and he listened to it, and it told him nothing, but it promised all. He could hear it promising him with caressing voice, peace and sweet repose. He could hear the sweep, the song of the water inviting him. (405)

He answers by drowning himself, "to join her and her secret thought in the immeasurable rest" (405). Both now "rest" in the same final state but not, as the romantic madman would have it, together; instead, they are forever alienated in death--the ultimate dissolution--as they were

in life. Passion makes no new worlds.

Chopin's exploration of the dark side of desire illuminates only the funereal breach of self-faith and the impenetrable state of demented nonconsciousness which passion gives birth to and nurtures. For Chopin, passion alone is eventual death and not the way toward self-fulfillment.

The themes of mind split from body, dual and conflicting selves, the entrapment of wifehood, motherhood, and sex, the pull of desire and the pain of passion introduced in the stories discussed above will all become central issues in The Awakening. Through the creation of these works, Chopin had informed herself of subjects crucial to women and, at times, men. She had seen the fissures in the social fabric and would now proceed to tear apart that neat cover cloth after one last strange fictional release--a story which both encapsulates the last major images of The Awakening and remains distanced from the apprehension and comprehension shown in that work.

"An Egyptian Cigarette," written in April 1897, is Chopin's concentrated primal version of The Awakening, a dream within a tale in which the dreamer escapes the nightmare. Again, Chopin creates a highly unconventional woman and situation which allow a nontragic if perplexing ending. That the female character who dreams is similar

to the female writer who creates is obvious; indeed, that the fictional woman maintains firm grasp of her self-possession despite her visions must have been a desire and dream of her creator as well.

In this short work, a cosmopolitan woman is given a box of Egyptian cigarettes which contain some sort of hallucinogenic drug. She smokes one and immediately experiences a distorted and perverse vision of passion and despair. In the dream, a woman driven wild with longing lies in the desert abandoned by her lover. She dreams of following him to entrap him once more with her love. Ensnared by her own passion, she lies dying in the heat and thinks finally only of reaching the river. She considers the irony of her life and its end:

> I laughed at the oracles and scoffed at the stars when they told that after the rapture of life I would open my arms inviting death, and the waters would envelop me.[21]

Like Edna at the end of The Awakening, she reviews her life, how she had lived outside of religion and society for the sake of her love and how she is now abandoned by all. As she is physically tormented by sun and sand, she experiences a momentary shift in consciousness: "It seems to me that I have lain here for days in the sand, feeding upon despair. Despair is bitter and it nourishes resolve" (572). Above her, as will be above Edna, she hears "the wings of a bird flapping above /her/ head, flying low, in circles" (572). She too reaches

water and goes into it; like Edna she suffers a moment of fear at its embrace; like Edna she moves toward resolution into "the sweet rapture of rest" (572), her senses alive and fulfilled at last.

The dreamer awakens at this point, disoriented and distressed after having thus "tasted the depths of human despair" (572). She contemplates the other dreams waiting for her in the remaining cigarettes:

> ...what might I not find in their mystic fumes? Perhaps a vision of celestial peace; a dream of hopes fulfilled; a taste of rapture, such as had not entered into my mind to conceive. (573)

But she is not, finally, a seer. She destroys the cigarettes and is only "'a little the worse for a dream...'" (573). Chopin, however, does not deny her visions nor forget those that have come before. Her resolve moves her to final exploration of woman's complicity in her self-oppression and her ability to overcome self-repression. Two months after writing this story, Chopin began The Awakening.

## IV. The Awakening: The Death of the Self

The Awakening, originally entitled "A Solitary Soul" and written between June 1897 and 21 January 1898, begins with an assault on the senses and intellect. A brightly colored parrot caged just outside the door of a Grand Isle resort screams "'Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en!

Sapristi! That's all right!'"[22] as another pet beside it, a mocking bird, sings "with maddening persistence" (881). Thus, ambiguous warnings and wild elation open Edna Pontellier's experience of self-awakening and an accounting of the dangers of such attempted self-fulfillment. That her history is tied inextricably to that of men and patriarchal ideology is made clear by the first introduced characters--her husband, children, and future lover. That her story will not be a simple happy one is foreshadowed by the music chosen for the opening: "Zampa," a highly sentimental opera of romance and death by water. Furthermore, that Edna is at the point of rebellion, at the moment before the quickening of consciousness, is made evident in the very first pages of this brief but intensely antiromantic work.

Again, Chopin presents us with a woman as outsider, Edna, whose case is made more complex by her apparent security in and attachment to her husband's world. Married to the consummate businessman, Léonce Pontellier, she is accepted in his Creole society as an enchanting if somewhat naive lady. In actuality, she is forever outside the ideals of that society but simultaneously entrapped in the social and sexual business of that world. Raised in Kentucky and Mississippi, she is neither Creole nor part of the old way; instead, she is "an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost

in dilution" (884). Though she is part of Creole society by virtue of her marriage, it is markedly clear she is alien: she, unlike the other women in the novel, is named the American way: Mrs. Pontellier. Later, the reader learns that Edna herself is "not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles" (889), that the supposed freedom of that people coupled with their steady repression of female self-will confuses her. Indeed, she is unlike the other women and, as is pointed out in the first incident of the novel, does not play her ideological roles well.

In the first chapter, Edna has been swimming in the heat of the day with Robert Lebrun, son of the Creole hotel proprietess, a man strikingly similar to Edna in appearance, age and temperament. This harmless experience coupled with Léonce's annoyance with the womanhood world of leisure leads to a series of accusations and arguments between the Pontelliers. Léonce first admonishes her for her devaluation of the wife self he owns: "'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (882). She responds by looking at her tanned hands, realizes she lacks her wedding rings--Léonce is keeping these safe for her--and submissively puts them back on, putting on her wifehood as well. However, Edna cannot long keep up the show of

compliance, instead turning her attention to Robert. Léonce then goes to a men's club, returning late in the night and willing to play husband again to Edna. She disappoints him by giving less than full attention to his anecdotes, failing a second time as wife: "He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation" (885). His second line of attack is to fault her mother self; he tells her a patent lie that one of their sons is deathly ill, and when this elicits no quick response, Léonce "reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" (885). In a parodic echo of the birds in the opening--which, in fact, drove Léonce out of the hotel with their noise--he steadfastly and verbally assaults her in "a monotonous, insistent way" (885) until he drives her from bed and rest. He then sleeps, and, of course, Edna discovers that there is nothing amiss...at least with her children.

This, as Chopin makes clear, is the stuff of normal marriages, incidents such as the above that occur and are as quickly forgiven and forgotten. Léonce, for all his boorishness, is not a poor husband in the world of true womanhood ideology. He is a conscientious provider, a distantly affectionate father, a true man who pulls his weight in the business world and expects his

familial sphere to give proof of this while offering him respite. In terms of reactionary ideology, he is, in fact, an ideal husband, a truth, as Chopin ironically shows, which even Edna cannot dispute (887). That he cannot personally understand his wife nor fully "define to his own satisfaction or any one else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children" (887) is perplexing but not, finally, solely his problem. For, as Chopin makes obvious, Léonce's feelings are correct: Edna is not the ideal helpmeet or mother.

Edna is a solitary soul, "different from the crowd" (894). She is described as "young, light, with eyes that are quick and bright" (883). She sees things in a different way than others do, albeit not necessarily at first with insight but, instead, with inner sight: "She had a way of turning [her eyes] swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought" (883). Just so does Edna perceive the altercation with Léonce; that night she sits alone outside, surrounded by "the everlasting voice of the sea" which comes to her like "a mournful lullaby" (886), and like Chopin's other water creatures, she begins to feel the entrapment of self:

> An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It

was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. (886)

Thus does Edna's apprehension of self begin, as with Chopin's other rebel women, out of a state of physical and spiritual depletion; this self-dramatization, however, is cut short by a too real invasion of mosquitoes. Chopin will not now descend into romanticization unless it be to detail and expose it as such. Her concern is always to portray phases of nonconsciousness and self-consciousness, and despite the seeming camera-eye objectivity of her narrator, she makes clear throughout the difference between reaction and action, stasis and self-discovery. Chopin would have the reader see, just as Edna understands herself, that Edna is feeling but not thinking: "She was just having a good cry all to herself" (886).

Shortly thereafter, Chopin indicates that Edna has begun thinking, in part because of her relationships with Adèle Ratignolle and Robert. Adèle is what Edna is not: "a mother-woman" (887), one of the reigning types at Grand Isle. For all Edna's glorification of Adèle--for example, she pictures her as a Madonna--Edna also realizes that Adèle is a willing self-martyr: she is one of those "women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (888). Edna is too much a realist and individu-

alist to deny immediate experience for ideological subordination. She is also incapable of devaluing her emotions and playing games of love; her knowledge that Adèle does so--for example, in past flirtations with Robert--merely serves to confuse her. Though drawn to Robert who appears to be almost her male soul, Edna herself cannot play romantically but must take Robert seriously or not at all, or, as Adèle later warns Robert, "'She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously'" (900). Edna is thus faced with more living reminders of her alienation and her limited consciousness, and she must find some individual or entity beyond these to help her understand that which entraps her.

The sea which surrounds her, sings to her in her sadness, and engulfs her in "seductive odor" (892) is that which awakens her senses and self. It mirrors her own philosophical predispositions--like the rivers in earlier stories do for their listeners--and offers beyond self-confirmation the sensual fulfillment of self-desire:

> The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.
>
> The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (893)

The sea washes over her senses at all times and, as with the sense experiences of the solitary souls in the short

stories, awakens both her body and mind. What it shows her is that she cannot lead the dual life of Adèle, cannot be a true woman who willfully sublimates self-consciousness: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (893). Chopin indicates that this movement of quickening consciousness cannot be anything but "vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing" (893) and that, again, process instead of singular revelation is all.

That Edna has from early on been predisposed to seeing the individual or abnormal instead of the socially determined or acceptable is shown in her childhood remembrances:

> Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions. (893)

She has always been both susceptible to the sensuous and intuitively aware of her circumscribed female existence; her awakening, however, comes only after intellectual apprehension of her feelings. First, Edna's attraction to Adèle's beauty and Adèle's sympathetic response to Edna's tentative self-disclosures encourage Edna to explore the continuum of her experience, the past out of which comes her present and on which her future is pre-

dicated. Shortly after her confrontation with Léonce, Edna and Adèle sit alone by the sea. Edna stares into the water, and in answer to Adèle's question about her inwardness, she consciously explores the maze of her inner contemplation: "'I was really not conscious of thinking of anything; but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts'" (896). The sea has made her recall another "sea" of her childhood: she thinks 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. (896)

Edna further recalls her childhood sense of self-limitation and unending search: "'My sun-bonnet obstructed the view. I could see only the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it'" (896). More importantly, she understands the connection of that self to her present, how her horizons are yet unsighted and her search bewildering: "'sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided'" (897). Adèle's response is to enclasp Edna's hand, an affectionate but ultimately futile sign of feminine sympathy about the womanhood condition. This first caress, however, serves to provoke Edna's further self-exploration; the sensuous, even in small ways, leads to self-realization and denial of blind

and habitual or nonconscious behavior.

Edna begins to analyze her past and sees the roots of her self-alienation in her childhood's lacks--her motherlessness and her father's coldness--as well as her propensity for romantic self-delusion. Her infatuation with unattainable men--most notably and ironically that with a famous tragedian--and her businesslike alliance with Léonce only furthered her duality, the split between inward and outward expression, her desires versus her fulfillment of social expectations. She had, like so many women, effected the sealing off of her self-will and knowledge by romantically separating unrealizable passion from received adoration; like Désirée, she had settled herself securely in idolness:

> As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams. (898)

So too does she take on the role of mother, "a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (899). It is only now, with Adèle by the sea, that she begins to perceive the dark side of mundane romance, that to be a wife and mother is, for some, only another denial of self-reality. She is, however, despite the concern and show of affection from Adèle and Robert, alone with this realization, and she cannot, again, take her intuitions a step further toward

consciousness until inspirited once more by the sensuous embrace of the sea.

After her experience with Adèle, Edna couples the role of mother with the call of self, playing with her children by the sea. So weeks pass, her reality unchanged. Then, at a dinner, the parrot again shrieks, music from "Zampa" echoes, and Edna experiences another quickening of consciousness. After dancing, she sits alone on the gallery, halfway between society and the sea, able to survey both. Mademoiselle Reisz, a consummate artist in the mold of Paula Von Stoltz, plays Chopin specifically for her. Since Edna is susceptible to aesthetic sensuousness, music speaks to her in a personal way; she "sees" it and names it. For example, when Adèle played, Edna entitled the piece "Solitude" and envisioned a highly romanticized portrait of the solitary soul:

> When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him. (906)

When Reisz plays, Edna does not experience social and sexual alienation or romantic fatalism; instead, because she is predisposed "to take an impress of the abiding truth" (906), she feels self-will and desire:

> She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. (906)

This time Edna enclasps another woman's hand, and thus begins a female world, unlike Adèle's, which will inform and urge Edna forward in her quest for self. Finally, this show of deep sympathy and self-exposure readies Edna for the monstrous joy she embraces in her moonlight swim that night.

Up to this point, Edna, not surprisingly, cannot swim nor can anyone succeed in teaching her. It is the individuality of the activity and not the physicality which frightens her: "A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her" (908). Suddenly, however, those fears leave her, and, indeed, she desires precisely the singularity that intimidated her before:

> A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (908)

She swims out alone, searches for "space and solitude" (908) by gazing at the moonlit horizon and, finally, reaches "for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (908). That she does not seek physical annihilation is made clear by her momentary terror of death by drowning. Edna desires only to embrace self and simultaneously to free herself from womanhood bonds. To that effect, she leaves the swimmers and walks home alone, claiming her experience

as her own despite the private self-congratulation of others. She also rejects Robert's romantic, mythic reading of her swim, determined instead to value and attempt understanding of the "thousand emotions /that/ have swept through /her/" (909). Still, she allows Robert, her supposed psychic twin, to sit with her in the night and become part of her self-desire.

That night, the second confrontation between Edna and Léonce occurs, but this time Edna is not oppressed by his possessiveness and stubbornness. She refuses to go to their bed, preferring to rest outside so that she can hear the sound of the sea. She is not asleep as in the first altercation; she is in fact intensely awake and alert to her dual life staring her in the face as Léonce commands her in:

> She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did. (912)

This time she does not weep, and there are no mosquitoes. Instead, she experiences physical and mental fatigue coupled with the insistent and irritating presence of Léonce hovering about her:

> Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities

> pressing into her soul. The physical need for sleep began to overtake her; the exuberance which had sustained and exalted her spirit left her helpless and yielding to the conditions which crowded her in. (912)

After this and in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, Edna will attempt to make her dream of self-fulfillment a reality.

She begins by recapitulating her past, this time willfully forcing every experience to its ultimate conclusion. Edna has first been a babe in the sea. She has moved from childlike helplessness and submissiveness to a preconsciousness of her sensuality and self. She next relives her romantic adolescence, this time with a supposedly attainable man, Robert.

The day following her swim, Edna moves into a state of nonconscious reaction and frenzied action: "She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility" (913). She calls Robert to her for the first time, and together they leave for an out island, a romantic haven. Edna now seems to accept Robert's romantic vision of herself and revels in their shared experience in near solitude: they are together outside the Creole society both reject, in another world in which their coupled experience is nurtured. Edna, fatigued after her self-awakening, re-enacts a female version of the Sleeping Beauty tale: she goes to a pure

white room within sound of "the voice of the sea" (917), lies in a virginally white bed, and perceives her own body "as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh" (918). Robert waits for her and tells her later she has slept "precisely one hundred years" (919). Chopin here indicates, however, that Edna's romantic chatter is self-irony and idle play; Robert is and remains the one true romantic. In fact, Edna is more radical than sentimental; while Robert would be her unchanged and unchanging lover, Edna envisions massive social change which would leave them both behind and alienated:

> 'How many years have I slept?' she inquired. 'The whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics.' (919)

Despite their philosophical differences, Edna finds that this journey and adventure revitalize her new self. After their return, she sees again that her singular though still limited insight has changed her forever:

> ...she tried to discover wherein this summer had been different from any and every other summer of her life. She could only realize that she herself--her present self--was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect. (921)

Edna need not realize her life's permanent alteration since her everyday existence, even her romance, at Grand Isle still fits the norm. It is only when the

unusual occurs--Robert's abrupt departure for Mexico--that Edna faces how unconsciously she had expected him to remain a part of her immediate world. Furthermore, Edna now must name her feelings, although this shows only partial consciousness of how inextricably bound her new self is to her relationship with Robert. She is in the adolescence of her new life:

> For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman. The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelation by any suggestion or promise of instability. The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded. (927)

After Robert's abandonment, Edna turns to the first link to her new self: the sea which offers her now "the only real pleasurable moments that she knew" (927). She also grows increasingly obsessed with any traces of Robert--photos, letters, anecdotes--since this fetishism both keeps at bay her dull existence as Mrs. Pontellier and continuously reminds her by association of her discovered self-will and desire. She protects her inner self from violation and is virtually untouchable, especially with her husband and children. Only at the end of her vacation is she forced into a relationship with someone, Reisz, one which becomes crucial later on since Reisz sees

both Robert and Edna in a different way. In the meantime, however, Edna moves to another re-experience of her dual existence.

Edna next takes up again her roles as wife and mother as the Pontelliers return to New Orleans. The latter part is particularly shortlived since even at Grand Isle Edna had made clear that she could not subsume self in motherhood:

> Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one....'I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.' (929)

Neither can she long sustain the illusion of devoted wife. She rejects the simple social conventions of reception day, thus withdrawing her interest from the business of society. The materialistic base of the Pontellier marriage becomes clear when Léonce attacks her both for hurting his business by neglecting hers and for mismanaging his familial establishment. Throughout this confrontation, Edna deliberately maintains her self-composure and then retires to her room alone. There she attempts a reversal of her initial submissiveness: she tries to crush underfoot her wedding ring. Her failure to do so--the maid hands it back to her undamaged, and she puts it on--implicitly discloses that the individual cannot so easily destroy such a powerful ideology and society. Although Edna does not

yet conceive of an alternative to her society, she clearly sees the dangers of the old ways.

Indeed, unlike Louise Mallard, Edna never romanticizes the world beyond her window but instead perceives it as enemy to her inner self:

> She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vendor, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic. (935)

Even when she sees the seeming faultlessness of Adèle's marriage and sphere, she cannot accept that ideological role and realm as self-fulfilling. It is after her visit to Adèle that she gives up all pretense of social conformity and is thus judged insane by Léonce, though not by the narrator or resisting reader:

> He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world. (939)

Edna's process of self-realization begins in earnest with yet another recapitulation of experience. She turns to her art for which she has a "natural aptitude" (891) but which before was mere "dabbling" (891). She now takes it up seriously in an attempt to express and discover herself; as she tells Adèle, "'I believe I ought to work again. I feel as if I wanted to be doing something'" (937). Again, this action provokes Léonce into attack: for him, her work should be within pre-

scribed womanhood roles; the artistic impulse can be icing on the cake but should never be the full repast. Edna, wavering between joy and despair as she seeks her way alone, naturally turns to Mademoiselle Reisz, and it is in this confrontation that Edna is offered the two life possibilities open to her.

Edna tracks down Reisz through Madame Lebrun who also passes on inconsequential news of Robert. On the other hand, Reisz has only significant words for Edna. Theirs is not a polite, reserved conversation like that of Edna and the Lebruns: they face each other without pretense of affection and are ultimately revealed to each other as kindred souls housed in arrestingly dissimilar bodies. Reisz strokes Edna's hand and nurtures her body and soul: she feeds Edna, gives her a highly revealing letter from Robert, plays again Chopin's "Impromptu" recalling for Edna the "one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her" (946). More importantly, Reisz speaks seriously with and to Edna of her "'becoming an artist'" (946):

> /Reisz says,/ 'To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts--absolute gifts--which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul.'
> 'What do you mean by the courageous soul?'
> 'Courageous, ma foi! The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies.' (946)

Because Reisz feels deeply for Edna, she feeds both Edna's

desire and self-desire. The reader sees here the two paths Edna has discovered and will later analyze through experience: one is to succumb to romance with Robert and move away from full self-fulfillment; the other is to rebel completely, following Reisz into alienation and giving body and soul to the new life. The remainder of the novel focusses on these two alternatives and Edna's growing consciousness about how limited these life options are. Herein lies Chopin's most acute social criticism, that which shocked her contemporaries and still proves stunning today.

In essence, Chopin has Edna realize that there are no life options for her, that there is only illusion and compromise. Neither can she long sustain herself in solitude, no matter how peaceful it seems. Instead, she would be part of the world:

> It was not despair, but it seemed to her as if life were passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled. Yet there were other days when she listened, was led on and deceived by fresh promises which her youth held out to her. (956)

Edna's weakness is her desire for action coupled with her own conditioned passivity, her desire for experience coupled with her ignorance of life: she hungers for "something to happen--something, anything; she did not know what" (958). Thus she is drawn to the dynamic world of men seemingly unlike those she has known and becomes even more entrapped in a mire of deception.

Since both Robert and Léonce have left her, Edna is "free" to explore "the animalism" (961) awakened in her. She takes up with Alcée Arobin, a known libertine, and is drawn to him both because of his forceful sensualism and his extreme passion. Furthermore, early on she discovers his duelling scar, an insignificant mark in itself save that it reflects her own wounds of self-repression and her duelling selves: "He stood close to her, and the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness" (959). Even though Edna understands that he is "absolutely nothing to her" (960), he too acts as both reminder of and respite from her struggle with self-consciousness. Her naivety is such that she initially believes his presence will offer some sort of self-illumination. However, she also discovers--too late--that his is a world of deception and not compassion, just as Léonce's was. More important is her realization that her natural sensuality is not "devilishly wicked" (966) but that she has wasted her expression of self in the alienating experience of passion:

> She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips. (967)

After their first night together, then, Edna comprehends

that this path--passion becoming romantic entrapment--is futile and only another way to alienation. Though their relationship continues, Edna feels nothing, neither "despondency" nor "hope" (988). It is not the way to self.

Edna's other clear option, one which she actively pursues for some time, is to immerse herself in art, in her case notably a world of women, hoping to find the truth of herself. This world is neatly divorced from that of men--she will not allow Arobin in her atelier--and it is based on ruthless honesty. Edna here deepens her emotional relationship with another one who recalls her to true self: Reisz, "the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free" (961). While Edna philosophizes with Arobin about her self-discovery, she discusses pragmatics with Reisz. Edna speaks first to her of her resolution "never again to belong to another than herself" (963) and her decision to have rooms of her own, supporting herself with her mother's legacy and money earned from sale of her art. She also openly names her love, Robert, and is advised by Reisz who warns her that he is but another ordinary man, like Léonce, who wants to have her "'belong to him'" (964). Reisz further offers counsel on the search for union, that which she has not herself fulfilled; she tells Edna to seek instead a man of "'some <u>grand esprit</u>; a man

with lofty aims and ability to reach them; one who stood high enough to attract the notice of his fellow-men'" (964). Finally, Reisz forces Edna to contemplate a life of solitude--and, one surmises, celibacy--as alternative. The true artist who gives voice to self is one who can stand alone; as Reisz tells Edna, "'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth'" (966). Even though Chopin surrounded Edna with such sympathy and though it is clear that Edna now desires self-expression and transcendence of the oppressive ordinary, the reader is also made aware that Edna is "devoid of ambition" (956), yet too passive to effect full private revolution.

Edna becomes fully conscious of this fact at her last dinner at the Pontellier home. She is surrounded by friends and lovers, is about to move to her own residence, is proving successful as an artist, seems to be beginning a new life on this her twenty-ninth birthday. However, she is also crowned by Léonce's jewels and toasted with a concoction made by her father especially for "the daughter whom he invented" (971). Furthermore, Arobin's presence suggests that new roads merely lead back to the same old world in which men possess women. Edna sees her bacchanal for the "stupid" (976) debacle it is. Her "coup d'etat" (969) fails.

Despite a brief reunion with her children and Adèle, Edna moves herself firmly into the solitary life, even though she knows herself incapable of maintaining such independence. There is seemingly only one path left open to her now: her union with Robert whom she believes to be Reisz's man of grand esprit. They meet by accident at Reisz's apartment, and thus begins Edna's final self-deception. Her idealistic visions of him and their relationship are first undercut by the awkward reality of chance encounter, trivial chatter, Robert's reticence and evasiveness. Once he accompanies her home, she finds him to be momentarily "like the old Robert" (983), but he finds her a "cruel" (983) mimic of his romantic self. Their relationship is further complicated by his jealousy over Arobin, and indeed, as Reisz foresaw, Robert quickly reveals his man-instinct of possession. Robert wishes to be her husband and not her lover, master and not equal. When Robert tells Edna so, her response speaks her awakened self:

> 'You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose.' (992)

However, Edna is not in firm grasp or full control of her true self--as is Reisz, for example--and still depends on Robert to reflect self so that she might capture whole the truth of her single being and their double union. That

Robert does not prove equal to her desire is obvious; that he, finally, rests in a world of romantic deception and self-delusion is also clear in the note that he leaves her: "'I love you. Good-by--because I love you'" (997). The world of such men will offer no assistance to the awakened woman.

Edna also fully realizes that the world of womanhood is for her a potentially deadly one. She sits by Adèle during her delivery, reliving her own experiences of giving birth, aware at last of the effect of passion, the union of male and female worlds: "...Edna did not go. With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture" (995). Stunned and emotionally drained, Edna senses even then that she can no longer fill any of these womanhood roles--martyr, beautiful object, social capital, the beloved--and that the loss of social security and consequent alienation is not too high a price to pay for self-knowledge:

> 'Yes,' she said. 'The years that are gone seem like dreams--if one might go on sleeping and dreaming--but to wake up and find--oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life.' (996)

Robert's letter and second abandonment are her final moments of disillusionment, the experience which sends her, depleted spiritually and physically, back to Grand Isle, nine months after her first awakening in the sea.

Edna thinks before she returns: she comprehends that she is beyond traditional society because of her sexuality, trapped in it by virtue of her maternity, alienated from all, even Reisz who is too much above her. When she reaches Grand Isle, however, she is beyond contemplation and no longer duelling with incompatible selves. Instead, she answers the voice of the sea which now calls her into eternal "abysses of solitude" (999), not of contemplation but of self-experience and annihilation. Chopin's imagery defines Edna's alienation and singularity. She stands alone watching the embodiment of her attempted self struggle against her old self: "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (999). Yet Edna transcends despair, if only by embracing death.

She had said earlier that she "would give up the unessential" (929) but not herself. Now she throws aside her life as easily as she does her old bathing suit so that she might feel "like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (1000). She descends into the sea, re-experiencing for the last time her childhood, motherlessness, adolescence, infatuation, womanhood, terror and exhaustion. And at last she feels in sensual explosion a self that could never have endured a world in which a woman's life is inessential, in which dualities can never be transcended save by self-destruction. Edna has only one experience that is not com-

promised; that this is necessarily her death is Chopin's most radical statement about and to her civilized, genteel world.

The heart of Chopin's social fiction, then, is darkness. Chopin offers no ready solution for the social problems portrayed within her work since to do so would be to descend into polemic or romance. She does, however, offer implicit alternatives to alienation and self-annihilation, revealing through all her texts a new "structure of feeling," an embryonic social consciousness which cannot yet be fully articulated either by character or creator.[23] In Chopin's fiction, one hears finally the constant murmur of a then unrealizable text and social construct, one in which women's experience and desire are no longer marginalized or erased but have become critically central.

## ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

[1] Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850's," Journal of American History, LXI, no. 1 (June 1974), 53.

[2] Scott, "Women's Perspective," 63.

[3] Scott, "Women's Perspective," 59.

[4] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Kate Chopin and the Fiction of Limits: 'Désirée's Baby,'" Southern Literary Journal, 10, no. 2 (1978), 125.

[5] Wolff, "Kate Chopin," 126.

[6] A similar categorization of character types in the early stories is Per Seyersted's differentiation of "feminine," "emancipated," and "modern" in Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 107. These terms are too static and timebound, a fact of which Seyersted was himself aware. In his "Introduction" to The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, he purposely smudges the too sharp distinction between types: "/Chopin/ saw and understood all aspects of the female psyche, and her particular interest was woman's awakening to her true nature, whether traditional, emancipated, or a mixture of the two," Complete Works, I (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 27.

[7] Kate Chopin, "Emancipation. A Life Fable," Complete Works, I, p. 37. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[8] Kate Chopin, "A No-Account Creole," Complete Works, I, p. 88. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[9] Kate Chopin, "Wiser Than a God," Complete Works, I, p. 44. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[10] Kate Chopin, "A Point at Issue!" Complete Works, I, p. 49. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[11] Joyce Ruddel Ladenson, "The Return of St. Louis' Prodigal Daughter: Kate Chopin after Seventy Years,"

Midamerica: The Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, II (1975), 32.

[12] Kate Chopin, At Fault, Complete Works, II, p. 741. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[13] Lewis Leary, Southern Excursions: Essays on Mark Twain and Others (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p. 178.

[14] Kate Chopin, "After the Winter," Complete Works, I, p. 188. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[15] Kate Chopin, "Désirée's Baby," Complete Works, I, p. 240. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[16] Kate Chopin, "Ma'ame Pélagie," Complete Works, I, p. 233. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[17] Kate Chopin, "Azélie," Complete Works, I, p. 291. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[18] Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour," Complete Works, I, p. 352. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[19] Kate Chopin, "A Pair of Silk Stockings," Complete Works, I, pp. 500-501. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[20] Kate Chopin, "Her Letters," Complete Works, I, p. 399. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[21] Kate Chopin, "An Egyptian Cigarette," Complete Works, II, p. 571. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[22] Kate Chopin, The Awakening, Complete Works, II, p. 881. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[23] Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 131-132.

## CHAPTER FIVE: EDITH WHARTON'S SOCIAL FICTION

### Introduction

Edith Wharton's fiction is more openly rooted in reality and the confluence of reality and ideology than are Kate Chopin's psychological texts, but both individualize the general to offer clear examples of particular limits and defeats. The social world of Wharton's novels --from The House of Mirth through Ethan Frome to The Age of Innocence--is Chopin's taken one step further and relocated in the North; it is a world wherein the old order is giving way to the new and in which women have gained little and lost much at the behest of progressive social theories.

Wharton's fictional social world is specifically that of New York, 1870-1920, that contemporaneous with her own life. Prior to 1870, New York was predominantly middle-class in tradition and manners (what we now qualitatively call upper-class in terms of quantitative wealth). However, in the 1870s, genteel society began to lose its social clout in the face of Big Business and frontier money, the frontier being literally everything west of the narrow East Coast. Infra-class struggle was openly fought in New York's opera houses, dining salons, and

ballrooms between genteel and parvenu manners; less evident but nonetheless crucial was the subtler conflict between Wall Street and Fifth Avenue, two separate worlds for the genteel, one and the same for the new money class. Wharton's fiction chronicles the progressive stages of this social war in which genteel society's rules of the game continually shifted in order to first spurn, then tame, and finally assimilate new wealth into its economic coffers. Wharton, then, focussed in the main specifically on her own genteel world disintegrating under the onslaught of new money and parvenu manners. She also, however, censured that same "genteel" society for its inherent materialism and for its willingness to sacrifice its own ethics and traditions for hard cash. In short, Wharton portrays the metamorphosis of her supposedly genteel world into a modern, seemingly barbaric society. In all her fiction, the social status and accepted roles of woman act as a thermometer by which to measure the heat of the social battle and the changes in social consciousness. Wharton, of course, does not rest with symbolic use of women; instead, she simultaneously chronicles the reality of women at, again, a time of social transformation and ideological mutation. More importantly, Wharton's mid-career fiction goes beyond focus on female reality and effectively portrays the limits and dreams of both men and women in search of self and collective.

Wharton's earliest fiction thematically centers on woman as willing martyr and sets forth the special 19th century variant of true womanhood ideology. The basic tenets of this doctrine, as previously discussed, were woman's mental, physical, and economic subordination to man, an accepted sexual double standard, and the concept of female moral and aesthetic superiority or, as Janet Flanner writes, "a hard hierarchy of male money, of female modesty and morals."[1] At the base of this ideology was the belief in woman as sacrificer; as Jean Turner succinctly puts it in her excellent dissertation on 19th century ideology in Wharton's works, "a woman achieved fulfillment only through serving others."[2]

Post-1870 society merely extrapolated these concepts in order to justify its more openly materialistic orientation. If woman were the purveyor and guardian of aesthetics, it was only one more step to objectify woman herself into a work of art, an acknowledged ideological construct criticized severely and notably by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Thorstein Veblen among other contemporary social critics. Money replaced lineage as the standard of social status, and woman became a social asset, "the showpiece of American capitalism,"[3] "an emblem of some man's power to waste--a measure of his competitive superiority over other men."[4] Woman was both the objectification and ultimate object of conspicuous consumption:

> The speculative fortunes gained from the Industrial Revolution and from the Civil War thus fostered the development of possessive tastes. The ultimate possession, of course, became Galatea: the artfully trained woman, bereft of economic assets but possessed of the capacity for tastefully dispersing and displaying a man's wealth.[5]

This construct of woman as a form of social capital lies at the center of Wharton's The House of Mirth and various stories of that period.

This objectification of woman, however, reveals society's conscious separation of ideology and practice, appearances and reality, a mystification of the already mythic American Dream--the "Age of Innocence"--which fostered alienation of the individual from material actualities and self-fulfillment. The irreconcilable becomes horrifically obvious. Further, the ideological standards of honor in business and private life were clearly non-operative in a world in which women were to produce selves that were merely walking art works seemingly unconcerned with their upkeep and wherein men were equally required to maintain a nominal separation of Wall Street from home, on Fifth Avenue even though, as is more than evident, the entire society and its social ideology were based on money and the getting of money. The bourgeois sexual and social relationships had reached a particularly virulent level of distortion and destructiveness which could no longer remain unchallenged. Olga de Valdivia points out the inherent consequences of such severe dis-

parity between ideological theory and practice:

> But what happens when the society is not morally conscious, or even worse, when it is unconsciously immoral? If this be the case, the individual has to choose between the two ways: either to follow the line of least resistance and be drowned in the immorality of his age, or to fight against it and be drowned in a sea of incomprehension.[6]

Wharton's response to this were her three novels of individual revolt against society--Ethan Frome, Summer, and The Reef--none of which takes place in New York proper, all of which speak of extreme forms of individual and collective alienation present in all social worlds based on a romantic and reactionary set of cultural and sexual imperatives.

Wharton next focussed upon an alternative to nihilistic negation; she had reached and passed through her fictional heart of darkness. She reinstates the theme of "social art as capital"[7] but now satirically portrays both men and women as social and financial entrepreneurs. Thus, her The Custom of the Country studies the birth of a rapacious society--headed by Undine Spragg and Elmer Moffatt--out of the death throes of the genteel.

Finally, in 1920, Wharton produced her great American novel, The Age of Innocence, which spans two generations and various social worlds. Here, Wharton explores fully the transformations and painfully attempts to reconcile the good from the past with the positive of the present, imagining briefly an unchaotic future of indivi-

dual and collective fulfillment and peace.

## I. Woman as Willing Martyr

Wharton exposed in two of her earliest stories, "The Fullness of Life" (1893) and "The Lamp of Psyche" (1895), basic forms of alienation--those between husband and wife, woman and society--as inherent givens effected by 19th century limited social consciousness. In the first piece, a woman dies and is offered eternal happiness with her ideal mate by the Spirit of Life. Her marriage had been a socially genteel but personally unfulfilling affair, and the woman realizes the cause of this as rooted in the ideological conditioning which demands limited and specific role-playing from men and women and which denies satisfaction of woman's desire to know and to be known:

> But I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.[8]

We see here Wharton's negative reading of separate spheres and female isolation. In the later story, we are presented with the complementary, traditional ideological

construct of man's nature from a woman's point of view, her interpretation following fast upon a discovery of a reprehensible act in her husband's past:

> Formerly he had been to her like an unexplored country, full of bewitching surprises and recurrent revelations of wonder and beauty; now she had measured and mapped him, and knew beforehand the direction of every path she trod. His answer to her question had given her the clue to the labyrinth; knowing what he had once done, it seemed quite simple to forecast his future conduct.[9]

Clearly, here, woman is spirit to man's circumscribed, earthbound mentality, moral superior to his potentially base pragmatism. In both cases, however, and despite the irreconcilable natures of the partners, the women compromise their individual wills and spirituality, choosing to remain with their husbands. Wharton thus introduces the 19th century concepts of woman as aesthetic and moral ideal for man and willing martyr to social duty.

These themes are fleshed out in her "Friends" (1900) which relates the aftereffects of Penelope Bent's ignominious return home after abandonment by her fiancé. Her teaching position--the one genteel career open to her--has, in the meantime, been awarded to her less talented but poverty-stricken girlfriend. In this case, after much bathetic breastbeating, Penelope decides to disguise her own financial and personal needs in order to persuade her friend to keep the job:

> The experience of the last weeks had flung her out of her orbit, whirling her through spaces of moral darkness and bewilderment. She seemed to have lost her connection with the general scheme of things, to have no further part in the fulfillment of the laws that made life comprehensible and duty a joyful impulse. Now the old sense of security had returned. There still loomed before her, in tragic amplitude, the wreck of her individual hope; but she had escaped from the falling ruins and stood safe, outside of herself, in touch once more with the common troubles of her kind, enfranchised forever from the bondage of a lonely grief.[10]

Thus, sacrifice--a submerging of the female individual will for the sake of family or class, a standing outside of one's self-will--is here equated with moral rectitude, mental and social security, and salvation from individual alienation.

Similarly, Wharton's first two novellas--The Touchstone (1900) and Sanctuary (1903)--focus obsessively on separations between male and female consciousnesses and the absolute social necessity of woman's role as moral guardian: the sacrifice of individual will and desire for the sake of fulfillment of social expectations.

In The Touchstone, Stephen Glennard finances his marriage to Alexa Trent through the sale of personal love letters written to him by a famous woman author. By doing so, Stephen ostensibly compromises both the social and patriarchal codes of honor and is consequently consumed by self-hate. Alexa, however, rescues him; her moral superiority enables her to comprehend and accept his past actions and to devise some sort of mental and material

penance which will exonerate him of his sins. Thus, Alexa stands by her corrupted man and finally, through a sharing of his penance, raises him to her morally purer level.

So too in Sanctuary does a woman offer herself as sacrificial lamb in atonement for a man's wrongdoing. Kate Orme discovers her fiancé has unethically acquired his inherited fortune, his actions literally costing two lives. Her initial response to this scandal parallels Penelope Bent's mental travail on her own dilemma:

> Her survey of life had always been marked by the tendency to seek out ultimate relations, to extend her researches to the limit of her imaginative experience. But hitherto she had been like some young captive brought up in a windowless palace whose painted walls she takes for the actual world. Now the palace had been shaken to its base, and through a cleft in the walls she looked out upon life. For the first moment all was indistinguishable blackness; then she began to detect vague shapes and confused gestures in the depths. There were people below there, men like Denis, girls like herself--for under the unlikeness she felt the strange affinity--all struggling in that awful coil of moral darkness, with agonized hands reaching up for rescue. Her heart shrank from the horror of it, and then in a passion of pity, drew back to the edge of the abyss.[11]

Kate's impulse is to break with Denis, thus maintaining her purer moral nature. Yet, after a scene with her mother, she is awakened to her proper and expected (if almost unbelievable) role in the eyes of society. Kate realises society's moral code is superior to her own, that collectivity transcends individuality:

She had begun to perceive that the fair surface

> of life was honeycombed by a vast system of moral sewage. Every respectable household had its special arrangements for the private disposal of family secrets; it was only among the reckless and improvident that such hygienic precautions were neglected. Who was she to pass judgment on the merits of such a system? The social health must be preserved: the means devised were the results of long experience and the collective instinct of self-preservation. (60-61)

Society, then, is "a rampart to lean on" (26), and Kate, following its ideological code, sacrifices her individuality by taking on the role of moral guardian to Denis' unborn children. That her willing martyrdom is socially fruitful to her class is proven in the second half of the book. Despite the wiles and machinations of a new woman, Kate's son chooses personal honor over public material success--that is, proves himself free of the sins of his father--and, ultimately, finds a sanctuary in Kate's (and society's) breast. Woman's sacrifices, then, sustain society, however immoral that society might be at base.

The above works are patently melodramatic and put forward the concept that compromise of the female self for the furtherance of society always results in societal fulfillment: fantastical happy endings are the rewards of individual martyrdom for both the individual and the collective. But Wharton also wrote of the opposing view, that the willing submission of woman to family and society, woman's complicity with the patriarchal code, had an equal potential for tragic resolution. Her excellent satire, "The Pelican" (1899), pointed out that personal sacrifice

for others might be materially necessary at times but beyond that, as a way of life, could become unethical and unfruitful. In "A Cup of Cold Water" (1899), the protagonist speculates that the moral code which justifies sacrifice is a sham:

> Was not all morality based on a convention? What was the staunchest code of ethics but a trunk with a series of false bottoms? Now and then one had the illusion of getting down to absolute right or wrong, but it was only a false bottom--a removable hypothesis--with another false bottom beneath. There is no getting beyond the relative.[12]

Nevertheless, he submits himself to society's punishment for his admittedly illegal actions; furthermore, he counsels a woman to humble herself before her husband and his family in order to be re-instated into their society. However, in that same volume--The Greater Inclination--Wharton included "The Muse's Tragedy" (1898) which poignantly delimits the martyr's life. After experiencing a truly individualistic relationship with a man, the heroine sees her previous life of sacrifice as sterile: "...it [his love for her] has shown me, for the first time, all that I have missed."[13] Similarly, in "The Quicksand" (1904), Wharton explores another obsessive mother-son relationship; here, however, the mother's sacrifice for her son has no positive results. In the end, she convinces her son's fiancée to abjure a life of sacrifice by leaving him. The moral is clear: an unethical life justified by equally unethical sacrifice is a life of

alienation and self-compromise.

Wharton's most detailed analysis and rejection of the martyr's consciousness is seen in her novella, The Bunner Sisters--written in 1892 but unpublished until 1916--which is, curiously enough, Wharton's only major study of lower working class life. The story focusses on Ann Eliza's sacrifices for her younger sister Evelina, these sacrifices ranging in degree from a larger portion of pie at dinner to Ann Eliza's only suitor. Both sisters suffer from mental and financial constraints; at the outset of the book, both clearly desire escape from the near-sordid confines of their hat shop. Ann Eliza meets Mr. Ramy when she buys Evelina a birthday present, and he quickly becomes an integral part of their lives. Ramy proposes to Ann Eliza, but she, aware of Evelina's attraction to him, gives him up, for "she was well-trained in the arts of renunciation."[14] She does this only to push Ramy on Evelina; Ann Eliza's sole sense of identity is that of martyr to her sister's well-being. Mirroring the heroine of "The Muse's Tragedy," Ann Eliza finds solace in ultimate self-sacrifice: "She knew the crucial moment of her life had passed, and she was glad that she had not fallen below her own ideal" (369). She does not realize that her ideals are only those accepted along with an ideological code that is itself unethical.

Self-renunciation does not automatically effect

fulfillment for others as Ann Eliza discovers in the end:

> For the first time in her life she dimly faced the awful problem of the inutility of self-sacrifice. Hitherto she had never thought of questioning the inherited principles which had guided her life. Self-effacement for the good of others had always seemed to her both natural and necessary; but then she had taken it for granted that it implied the securing of that good. Now she perceived that to refuse the gifts of life does not insure their transmission to those for whom they have been surrendered; and her familiar heaven was unpeopled. She felt she could no longer trust in the goodness of God, and that if he was not good he was not God, and there was only a black abyss above the roof of Bunner Sisters. (420-421)

Ramy proves to be a drug addict, and Evelina's marriage is a bitter failure. Evelina, abandoned by Ramy, returns home mortally ill after the death of her child; Ann Eliza loses the shop after paying for her sister's funeral. Thus, the concept of woman as willing martyr is proven to be destructive in the extreme, killing both the supposed receiver of the martyr's self-offering and the generations to come after the sacrifice. In addition, society, which sanctions and demands sacrifice as a fundamental tenet in its ideology, ultimately closes its doors to the martyr. While society uses its sacrifical lambs in the maintenance of its class and sexual hierarchies, it offers little compensation or consolation for sacrifices that prove socially negligible, here those of working class women done for other working class women.

Wharton, then, comes to perceive that her society's code of ethics is not a rampart protecting one

from indescribable moral and social chaos nor, as Ann Eliza imagines with her limited consciousness, is immorality above the comprehension of the individual. Instead, Wharton suggests that society itself has accomodated unethical compromises and practices through its adherence to womanhood ideology and, further, that each of its collective members thus sustains a heart of darkness within.

## II. Woman as Social Capital

Wharton's intense and detailed critical analyses of a morally disintegrating or, as R.W.B. Lewis posits, reintegrating society properly begin with The House of Mirth (1905) and include all major works thereafter. The martyrdom paradigm had led her quickly to a critical and literary dead end; Wharton perhaps saw her reading of ideology as too straightforward and simplistic. Instead, Wharton now turned to the more complex construct of woman as social capital.

As set out in the opening section of this chapter, the role of woman as social capital superceded by incorporation the more traditional one of woman as martyr. Several of Wharton's early stories pointed to the concept of marriage as business--men as dealers in the property of women--as well as the conventional belief that a man's status was reflected by the appearance and manner of his

wife and material possessions. For example, the satiric "The Line of Least Resistance" (1900) recounts the acknowledged domination of a rich man by his wife and his compromised ethics when he discovers and finally conceals her unfaithfulness to him. The tale clearly shows that the husband's social consciousness lies in and is reflected by his mirror-image mate and that the loss of self-esteem is less cataclysmic than the ruination of social appearances, a literal losing of face. Even more cynical is "The Other Two" (1904) which exposes a husband's attitude toward his twice-divorced wife, Alice. Waythorn is continually and disconcertingly thrust into the company of the other two husbands. At first, he mentally belittles his wife for too openly appearing as used goods:

> She was 'as easy as an old shoe'--a shoe that too many feet had worn. Her elasticity was the result of tension in too many different directions. Alice Haskett--Alice Varick--Alice Waythorn--she had been each in turn, and had left hanging to each name a little of her privacy, a little of her personality, a little of the inmost self where the unknown god abides....With grim irony Waythorn compared himself to a member of a syndicate. He held so many shares in his wife's personality and his predecessors were his partners in the business.[15]

At the conclusion, however, Waythorn rationalizes a means of profit-making from his partners' work:

> He even began to reckon up the advantages which accrued from it, to ask himself if it were not better to own a third of a wife who knew how to make a man happy than a whole one who had lacked opportunity to acquire the art. For it <u>was</u> an

> art, and made up, like all others, of concessions, eliminations and embellishments; of light judiciously thrown and shadows skillfully softened. (394)

This theme of woman objectified through her social art as capital stands at the center of The House of Mirth, and it is in this work that Wharton reveals in detail the "concessions, eliminations and embellishments" necessary to both profitable social art and effective social survival.

The House of Mirth, originally entitled "A Moment's Ornament" and then "The Year of the Rose," recounts the social decline and final annihilation of Lily Bart. It is, as Louis Auchincloss writes, "the drama of the hunt of a beautiful and desperate creature by a pack of remorseless hounds"[16] in which both hunters and hunted are complicit. The novel portrays the old money class of the 1900s wherein, as Louis Kronenberger notes:

> ...society itself, though distinct inroads have been made on the correctness of its manners and the roster of its memberships, is still an identifiable and despotic collective force, not only for those waiting to get in or being shown the way out, but even for those who are at home in its drawing rooms.[17]

However, even though this society appears to be still genteel and morally steadfast, it is in reality one corrupted through its basic materialist orientation and its attempted assimilation of the morally unstable new money class. The House of Mirth is in essence a bitter cata-

loguing of monetary and human values. Herein, social status and moral integrity are determined by wealth and, as Marie Bristol writes, "society people use each other constantly; the women use the men for money, the men use the women for sexual and display purposes."[18] The book also criticizes a society which thus favors appearance over reality and the limited and limiting consciousness of the collective over the potential and awakened consciousness of rare individuals. In particular, Wharton speaks of these issues through the analysis of Lily Bart's conditioned feminine role-playing and of society's judgment on her as reflected through male characters.

Lily Bart was born into society and inculcated with the ideology of true womanhood. She defines her social self as that of a beautiful object to be bought and maintained by the highest bidder and, at moments of extreme stress, spouts out or thinks in deterministic rhetoric justifying this determinedly limited social consciousness:

> Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast? And was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples?[19]

Lily's search for a buyer is a desperate one. Her family

was financially ruined when she was nineteen, thus materially forcing her out of the central, secure society and into its buyer's market. At twenty-nine, her value as a beautiful object is fast diminishing, and the spectre of the "dingy" life of genteel poverty is anathema to her. Her social goal is "to go into partnership" (18), to find a husband for whom she can act as "the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it" (78). However, inherently incompatible with her social sense of self as capital is her personal sense of self as pure moral and spiritual being. It is these clashing consciousnesses --duelling concepts in one sexual/social ideology--which alienate Lily first from herself and eventually from society. She cannot morally play her social role to the hilt; neither can she completely give up the game and find solace in her womanhood ideals. Ultimately, for Lily, the resolution to her dilemma is movement out of a world wherein "the men and women she knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance" (516) and into "the dim abysses of unconsciousness" (521) and death. Unlike Edna Pontellier, she does not experience a positive awakening of self: Lily only learns what she is not and what she cannot be.

Lily's social decline--from upper class status down through the parvenues to the working class--occurs as both the cause of and her response to various relationships she has with men. These relationships prove conti-

nually ineffective as a means of social salvation as they too reflect the alienating consciousnesses present in Lily herself. For example, Simon Rosedale, a new money Jew, perceives Lily primarily as social capital necessary for his acceptance into Fifth Avenue: "it was becoming more and more clear to him that Miss Bart herself possessed precisely the complementary qualities needed to round off his social personality" (195). He proposes marriage to her in terms of a business deal fully aware of the fact that she finds him personally repulsive and socially suspect. Lily, however, cannot at this point compromise her moral self by marrying for money. Ironically, when the time comes when she is willing to sacrifice her personal ethics for the security of Rosedale's partnership, her exchange value as capital has so diminished that Rosedale cannot compromise himself in order to save her.

Similarly, Lily mismanages her business relationship with Gus Trenor, a wealthy and married member of established society. Lily acts out the role of helpless female for Trenor and, in effect, sells her social favors for money. Lily, however, denies the sexual aspects once into the bargain but only rejects Trenor's money after discovering its actual wage nature--when Trenor exacts immediate payment. Lily manages to escape with her social and moral selves intact, if slightly besmirched; the experience, nevertheless, awakens her consciousness of

society's immorality:

> She was realizing for the first time that a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attitude should be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it. (273)

Her relationship with George Dorset is equally unsatisfying, and her dependence on his adulterous wife, Bertha, is patently destructive. Early in the story, Lily comes into possession of Bertha's love letters to Lawrence Selden. Despite this proof that Bertha is morally corrupt, Lily maintains her friendship with Bertha for the sake of social security. In return, Lily's value for Bertha is that of a shield for her illicit activities; beyond that public arrangement, no private emotion or sense of loyalty is involved, for, as Judith Fetterley points out, "relationships between 'beautiful objects' are hostile and competitive rather than supportive...."[20] Again, when scandal rears its head, it is Lily who is compromised. George tacitly offers himself to her if Lily offers in turn proof of Bertha's infidelity. Lily cannot as that act stands against her womanhood ideals. Bertha--socially secure and a married woman--can then attack Lily's precarious public self by implicitly accusing her of her own crime, adultery. Appearances triumph over reality, the social collective over the individual, leaving Lily "poised on the brink of a chasm with one graceful foot advanced to assert her unconsciousness that the ground was failing

her" (309). Finally, Lily cannot justify blackmailing Bertha--despite the social degradation forced on her by Bertha--even though this act would directly result in Lily's marriage to Rosedale and consequent social and financial security. Again Lily cannot sanction immoral acts; however, neither can she steer clear of them, since she must live within society.

Most perplexing and ultimately destructive is Lily's relationship with Lawrence Selden, the one man she supposedly truly loves. Lily is attracted to him because he sees through her social presentation of self and appeals to her hidden real self:

> How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom. It was Selden's distinction that he had never forgotten the way out. (86-87)

Like the free animal in Chopin's "Emancipation," Selden seems above Lily's sordid social world and, in addition, professes a personal code of ethics that complements Lily's own morals and desires for release from social and personal alienation:

> 'My idea of success,' he said, 'is personal freedom.'...'From everything--from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit--that's what I call success.' (108)

What Lily does not perceive is that Selden can afford to

pose as social critic and rebel because he is, despite his financial situation, firmly entrenched within that society. The only difference between Selden and Lily's other men is that Selden's instinct for possession is coupled with romantic ideals. This is more than evident when one dissects Selden's private sentiments about Lily versus his social attitude, the former vacuous--as his republic of the spirit is a social void--and the latter characterized by utter irresponsibility justified by his limited social consciousness which is that of the collective.

Selden initially relates only to Lily's social self, Lily as beautiful object. This attitude effectively absolves him of responsibility toward her; he can counsel her on the necessity of using her social art despite her moral ethics--"'Ah, well, there must be plenty of capital on the look-out for such an investment!'" (18)--while making clear that he cannot materially fit the bill. However, when Lily openly uses her social arts or is manipulated as capital, Selden can then turn about-face, criticize and abandon her, for she has compromised their moral pact. In addition, she cannot enter into his republic of the spirit--both because she and it are false--nor will he assist her in the realization of their moral ideal; as Selden says, "'it's a country one has to find the way to one's self'" (108). Selden, in effect, wants Lily to

fulfill the concepts of true womanhood ideology most complementary to himself; he expects Lily, despite her precarious social and financial situation, to prove herself a worthy mirror of his idealism: "His craving was for the companionship of one whose point of view should justify his own, who should confirm, by deliberate observation, the truth to which his intuitions had leaped" (247). Lily thus has a value for Selden too, and it is one that, like the others, cannot be fulfilled without compromises on her part. In The House of Mirth, the beautiful object always pays.

At the end of the book, Lily's awakened social consciousness questions her society and its ethics. In a bleak vision, Lily comprehends that her humanity was of little value in an inhumane world and that her moral conscience proved of little use to her against the alienating experience of life in an impersonal, immoral society wherein the "I" becomes only a "one":

> 'I have tried hard--but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back to it, or be thrown out into the rubbish heap....' (498)

Lily cannot live in a morally corrupt and corrupting society nor can she live outside of society--for example, in Selden's republic--since that is a negation of reality.

Neither can she find a place in another social class; her conditioning makes her helpless outside her specified boundaries. Lily can, ultimately, question and reject the limited social consciousness she has disclosed, but she cannot find a positive alternative to it:

> That was the feeling which possessed her now--the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. (515-516)

Lily does have one brief encounter with a potentially humane and humanistic community when she visits Nellie Struthers and her child. However, this one glimpse into what the reader sees as an admittedly pastoral working-class world cannot sustain Lily in her final fall into complete alienation. Nellie's world is yet again one into which Lily cannot enter: it is as socially unreal to her as was Selden's republic. Instead, she floats into the only world in which her self-will and desire can be fulfilled, a dream state into which she wanders, clutching her last ideals--spiritual and maternal love. In the end, the tragedy of her death is as easily rationalized as the tragedy of her life by those left behind.

Wharton herein bitterly indicts society for its willful destruction of its members and, thus, itself,

censuring individuals--including Lily--for upholding, however passively, a degenerate and hypocritical social and moral code. Wharton shows that it is a step toward a revitalized consciousness to question social imperatives but one must be able to ask the right questions in time and put the answers toward realization of a positive alternative collective. Lily's awakened social consciousness is forced upon her by the circumstances of her life. She was, at the outset of the novel, near social death, but her final physical demise was not inevitably predetermined. Her death is directly caused by the clash of consciousnesses within her; her ability to transform her critical knowledge into pragmatic action is non-existent. More important, however, than the depicted life of Lily is the fact that The House of Mirth stands as Wharton's first serious analysis of society seen as a sterile world of vicious fools. The tragedy is not that Lily dies but that society goes on living untouched by the rise and fall of one of its daughters.

## III. Individual Revolt and Social Compromise

Wharton's pre-1910 works were clearly moving toward a rejection of 19th century social consciousness and its conventional morality. If the ideology of true womanhood could be proven to be stultifying and ultimately destructive for both men and women, it was only a

further step in social analysis to see that the society which fostered the ideology could not be a morally sound or secure collective. Wharton's first response to her own awakened social consciousness was, in many ways, as fatalistic as that of Lily Bart or Edna Pontellier. Her novels of individual revolt--Ethan Frome, Summer, and The Reef--are tragedies of social and moral desolation and isolation, all physically removed from Wharton's society but morally speaking about and to that same world.

Ethan Frome (1911) is a visionary tale of unconventional love which, similar to Lily Bart's story, details moral, emotional, and actual poverty. It is a particularly despairing vision of a society based on individual sacrifice and compromise and of the survival of that society's social and sexual imperatives despite the mental and moral disintegration of its individuals.

Ethan Frome takes place in Starkfield--an obviously weighted name--and the even more isolated farm of Frome. Life in Starkfield is described by the narrator as social negation in which, as in Old New York, the appearance of collectivity disguises actual individual alienation: "All the dwellers in Starkfield, as in more notable communities, had had troubles enough of their own to make them comparatively indifferent to those of their neighbours...."[21] Frome had, early in life, compromised himself to fulfill social expectations, giving up a

possible career outside of Starkfield in order to support his physically and mentally ill parents. After their death and instead of escaping, he marries his cousin Zenobia, who quickly becomes yet another burden, and spends the rest of his life eking out a meager existence on a land far removed from modern life. Mattie Silver enters his world as servant to Zeena, and Mattie--symbolically representative of light and life--acts as the catalyst for his revolt against the strictures imposed on him by his social group.

Early on in his affair, Frome believes his desired self--lover of Mattie--can compatibly exist alongside his social self--husband of Zeena, citizen of Starkfield. Like Lily Bart, Frome sees revolutionary ideals, embodied in Mattie as Selden did for Lily, as a means of transcending actual existence and, indeed, as seen in Frome's thoughts on his family's graveyard, a means of rationalizing morbidity and social imprisonment:

> 'We never got away--how should you?' seemed to be written on every headstone; and whenever he went in or out of his gate he thought with a shiver: 'I shall just go on living here till I join them.' But now all desire for change had vanished, and the sight of the little enclosure gave him a warm sense of continuance and stability. (50)

However, Frome does not comprehend the innate power of the collective over him (again, the clashing consciousnesses of the private and social selves) nor society's necessary maintenance, however feeble that might be, of

its traditional code of ethics for its own self-perpetuation. While Zeena is far from being a beautiful object, she is still Frome's wife and therefore the socially sanctioned object of his physical and monetary attentions. In the eyes of Starkfield society, it is Mattie who is expendable, and thus also Ethan's self-will and desire; this attitude remains firm throughout and deceptively sympathetic, or, as Mrs. Hale says, "'if [Mattie had] died, Ethan might ha' lived..." (181).

When Ethan is forced to choose between realization of his individuality and obeisance to the collectivity, he echoes Lily Bart's inability to perceive her fate as anything other than pre-determined: "The inexorable facts closed in on him like prison-warders handcuffing a convict. There was no way out--none. He was a prisoner for life..." (134). His one decision, that of following Mattie's plan of freedom gained through suicide, is as idealistically naive as Lily's initial response to Selden's republic of the spirit. As is seen in the conclusion of both books, the total negation of self-responsibility coupled with limited social consciousness leads only to the false freedom of self-annihilation which, in turn, is an ineffectual revolt against the collective will. Ethan's "epilogue in hell,"[22] as Marius Bewley calls it, is not moral retribution for immoral acts but only a Beckettian hellish half-light existence both reflecting Ethan's

life from the outset of the tale and resulting from compromise of the awakened individual to his limited social consciousness. Wharton thus implicitly calls for the missing factor which would preclude nihilistic tragedy: a reintegration of the awakened individual with the collective, an analysis of individual and collective experience, a new collective world view.

Summer (1917), privately known to Wharton and her friends as "'the Hot Ethan,'"[23] pushes the oppositions seen in Wharton's early works--individual versus society, reality versus appearance--one step further and offers a tentative, if ambiguous, solution to alienation and social disintegration. Again, Summer is a story of unconventional love, this time actively consummated, but in this case a love ultimately accepted by and assimilated into a mildly reintegrated society. The importance of Summer in the development of Wharton's analysis of society, reflected both in her style and content, lies in the fact that herein Wharton focussed on a complete social outcast: Charity Royall. There are no cushioning mediations between society and the individual as were present between Lily or Frome and their worlds. We are here presented with an individual openly born into and brought up in societies of alienation. Thus, Summer is necessarily Wharton's strongest statement concerning the realization of individuality and the search of the individual for security in a positive community.

Charity is the child of a convicted murderer and a "half human"[24] woman from the Mountain, a kind of actualized, corrupted republic of the spirit based on lawlessness, poverty, amorality, and social irresponsibility. As an act of charity, she was brought down from the Mountain and brought up by the Royalls in North Dormer, "an empty place" (9). As a young girl she almost escaped North Dormer by moving to a boarding school in Starkfield--an indication that Summer's world is twice removed from real life--but instead stayed with lawyer Royall after the death of his wife. Charity and Royall have a relationship analogous to that of Ethan and Zenobia, though one that is not physically consummated despite Royall's attempts nor legally binding. Unlike Ethan, however, Charity, aware as Frome was of a larger world beyond her immediate confines, makes concerted and realistic efforts to finance her escape.

At the opening of the novel, Charity is in control of her world, the Royall household, though not a willing part of it. Her mental and moral self-reliance, as well as her near financial independence, is compromised through an affair she has with Lucius Harney, a New Yorker who finally abandons her for his fiancée, and her consequent pregnancy. Charity first attempts to set up an abortion, but as this would be a negation of her love and life, she cannot go through with it. She then, in her search for a

secure community in which to raise her love-child, escapes to the Mountain, ostensibly her real home, and discovers it to be a perverse world of complete human alienation. Finally, she is again brought down from the Mountain by Royall, marries him, and returns to life in North Dormer with "a sense of peace and security" (273). At this point she seemingly carries within herself the dual consciousnesses of realized individual and secure member of of society. However, while the ending appears to be the best of both worlds for Charity, a close reading exposes it to be a compromise of the individual resulting from unassimilated consciousnesses.

Before her affair with Lucius, Charity's sense of identity is based on an idealization of her own outcast status and her social independence. Her personal refuge lies precisely in her sense of self-worthlessness: she believes she has little to offer society, and she knows that society, so far, has given her nothing. She feels no sense of responsibility toward others and has only a dim notion of what it means to be a rebel. Such limited perceptions of selfhood and social security help her maintain her naive concept of possible escape and a miraculously transformed future life in the face of her actual penury and realistic social expectations. The experience with Lucius shatters her romanticized and limited self-identity; after their first meeting, her

sense of selfhood is immediately predicated upon her sense of self as woman to man, "what she was worth" (62) to him. Thus, Charity replaces a negative social consciousness with that of the 19th century ideological one of woman as mirror to man:

> ...she could imagine no reason for doing or not doing anything except the fact that Harney wished or did not wish it. All her tossing contradictory impulses were merged in a fatalistic acceptance of his will. (175)

Their summer of passion in a deserted house seems to be Selden's republic lived out; however, it too is proven to be "some bottomless abyss" (211) when perceived in its relation to the society around it. Charity sees late in the affair that she has been a partner to only one facet of Lucius' life--his sexuality--and that in her role as lover and reflector of passion she is alienated from the social Lucius and his world:

> Behind the frail screen of her lover's caresses was the whole inscrutable mystery of his life: his relations with other people--with other women--his opinions, his prejudices, his principles, the net of influences and interests and ambitions in which every man's life is entangled. (197)

She understands then the limitations of her new social consciousness--social in that she relates to another even if only as "other"--but, in tune with ideological strictures, sacrifices her lover for his sake. While her escape to the Mountain appears to be a revolt against this limited social consciousness, it is that same new

collective identification which thwarts her reunion with the alienated beings there. Finally, her marriage to Royall is a reintegration of her social self within his collective, but this is at the cost of her real self--in part awakened through her particular sensual experience, recalling Chopin's rebel women--and her admittedly naive ideals. As Margaret B. McDowell writes, "Charity's love affair has thus cost her her independence as a human being. She has, in effect, spent her life in one summer."[25]

Charity's final sacrifice of self to collective, her re-establishment in society for the sake of future generations, is possibly a positive one; Wharton's ending does not speak to this effect. Wharton suggests, however, that through individual kindness--that of Royall, for example--the social rebel might find a haven in which one could rationalize the aftereffects of personal revolt--in this case, Charity and Royall raising Lucius' and Charity's child as their own. Nevertheless, it is clear that society as yet has no place for actual individual experience while it is happening, that the social dichotomies are still effective, and that scandal and revolt are recognized only by collective cooptation and then, after the fact.

The Reef (1912) brings Wharton's explorations of unconventional love to New York society, here transported

to France and further isolated in one tomblike chateau. The locale is equally important thematically as was Charity's social status; both are symbolic indications that Wharton is here dealing with stagnant societies in which its members do not desire or effect change. This time Wharton offers implicit social criticism through her portrayal of individual relationships predicated upon the ideological double standard--an implicit concern in Summer--and doubts concerning bourgeois morality.

The novel, Wharton's most determinedly Jamesian or psychological work, dissects the consciousnesses of two characters: George Darrow and Anna Leath. Both had grown up in the same New York circle and had loved one another. However, Anna, in a naive thrust against convention, married Leath; he had appeared to be a social rebel totally unlike the genteel Darrow. Her marriage proves to be loveless and conventional in its unconventionality; Leath, like Selden, advocated social revolt only because he was firmly and willfully entrenched in society and because such an attitude is an alluring pose. Leath dies leaving Anna with a young daughter, an adult step-son, and a chilly chateau. At the outset of the novel, George has been summoned to Anna's chateau; their first love is now to be consummated in marriage. George, put off without reason by Anna, has an affair with Sophie Viner. Months later George proposes to

Anna who accepts, but their marriage plans are shattered when Anna discovers George's affair with Sophie, who is now governess to her child. The novel's set piece is the psychological portrayals of George and Anna at this climactic point of moral conflict.

Wharton constructs George's character as an emphatic embodiment of the patriarchal world view. He perceives women as falling into two categories, lady and whore, each having a straightforward value "to the more complex masculine nature...."[26] George, at the time of his reunion with Anna, has wearied of his genteel roué role; he sees his future marriage to Anna as a means of establishing himself in the social collective and continuity: "He was a little tired of experimenting on life; he wanted to 'take a line,' to follow things up, to centralize and concentrate, and produce results" (127). After he is first rejected by Anna, he rationalizes his businesslike affair with Sophie as a reaction against Anna's life-negating womanhood:

> What were all her reticences and evasions but the result of the deadening process of forming a 'lady'? The freshness he had marvelled at was like the unnatural whiteness of flowers forced in the dark....She was still afraid of life, of its ruthlessness, its danger and mystery. She was still the petted little girl who cannot be left alone in the dark.... (28)

However, after his reconciliation with her, he sees these same repressive qualities as positive assets, primarily

because she is his property: "She was like a picture so hung that it can be seen only at a certain angle: an angle known to no one but its possessor. The thought flattered his sense of possessorship" (129). George, unlike Selden, privately admits to the fatuousness of his views, but he also revels in them. His attitudes and critical awareness of the same prove him to be in tune with his society. He is a man actively seeking individual compromise for the sake of supposed social stability. His arrogance, duplicity, and moral vacuousness--characteristics which are inherently irresponsible and unresponsive yet which are also socially acceptable--remain constant throughout the book.

Wharton initially introduces Anna's character as a female counterpart to George's male chauvinism. Anna's life before Darrow had been one based solely on appearances consciously separated from "the actual business of living..." (94). However, despite her mentally sterile marriage to Leath, Anna is still partial to the illusion that love, that between husband and wife, "would one day release her from this spell of unreality" (86). Her nascent consciousness, then, is to be awakened through identification with a man in a socially sanctioned relationship. After she accepts George's proposal, Anna's private emotional response resounds with true womanhood rhetoric:

> She felt like testing him by the most fantastic exactions, and at the same moment she longed to humble herself before him, to make herself the shadow and echo of his mood. She wanted to linger with him in a world of fancy and yet to walk at his side in the world of fact. She wanted him to feel her power and yet to love her for her ignorance and humility. She felt like a slave, and a goddess, and a girl in her teens.... (124)

This is a potentially perfect genteel marriage, indeed, each member fulfilling socially-conditioned roles, save for Sophie Viner, the one too real reminder of actuality.

Sophie destroys Anna's womanhood world by offering an alternative to it. Sophie's philosophy is pure individualism, in large part so because she is, like Mattie and Charity, outside of proper society. Her love for George, as she tells Anna, needs no moral justification or social valorization: "'I wanted it--I chose it. He was good to me--no one was ever so good!'" (287) While Sophie is not, as some critics would have it, a "new woman"--she is too near a cipher for such a full-blooded concept--her radical consciousness is arguably superior to Anna's, an indication that Anna too is a personal cipher, a willing stereotype. Sophie is both socially responsible--she does not use scandal against Anna's clan--and personally self-sufficient--she requires no partner in whom her identity is permanently subsumed. Anna's consciousness, on the other hand, entails social duty only to her isolated society of three, perhaps destructively so, and personal dependence on George.

Anna's realization of the existence of true and positive alternative world views or consciousnesses necessarily exposes her world--that of Leath and Darrow, her womanhood self and the like--as repressive, immoral, and individually alienating. Again, Wharton conjures up a vision of chaos and indeterminacy as Anna tries to reconcile a rejected consciousness with a new and frightening one: "She felt like a traveller on a giddy path between a cliff and a precipice: there was nothing but to go on" (339-340). Wharton offers no resolution; the synthesis of clashing consciousnesses, a predominantly genteel one incorporating womanhood ideology assimilated within the modern, liberal world view, is seemingly impossible within the boundaries of this text. For all three characters, their experiences are, in different ways, tragedies culminating in isolation and desolation.

A brief look at one of Wharton's later short stories offers an important clarification of her attitude about individual rebellion. In "The Long Run" (1916), Wharton shows the consequences of <u>not</u> revolting against social strictures and prescriptions: in the long run, one would come to despise "the rage of conformity"[27] and to despair of having missed the actual business of living. In each individual case, then, rebellion if it be done in search of selfhood is a potentially positive and necessary act. It is only inaction or complacency that leads

to private tragedy. Furthermore, Wharton intimates in all these texts that what holds true for the individual does so as well for the collective. It is her world which is at fault if the end result of experience be incomprehensible despair or silence. If a society cannot assimilate the experiences of a Sophie Viner or Anna Leath or comprehend the self-desire of a Charity Royall or Ethan Frome, then it is as perverse a state of being as Charity's Mountain or Selden's republic.

## IV. Woman as Entrepreneur

Wharton's The Custom of the Country (1913) studies Lily Bart's world a decade later and the massive social transformations effectuated by the incursion and assimilation of new money society into the genteel. This social analysis is implicitly presented in her account of Undine Spragg's meteoric rise from Apex City through the New York 400 and the French Faubourg Saint Germain to a commanding position in modern New York society. Wharton continually counterposes several social milieus but not, as one would expect, opposing world views. Again she focusses on the prevalent and unvaried ideology, that of the cult of true womanhood, fundamental to all the groups depicted. Wharton here dissects a further manifestation of ideological types in her portrayal of Undine Spragg: the woman as social and financial entrepreneur, the

beautiful object revealed as rapacious consumer. Like Sophie Viner who was an emotional entrepreneur, Undine is not the complete new woman despite her seemingly independent actions. Instead, she is a brilliant and determined individual reacting against the moral limitations but not the social advantages of patriarchal, genteel prescriptions.

Undine, as a character says, is "a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph!"[28] She is the consummate beautiful object who realizes both the value and the self-aggrandizing use of her social capital and is, therefore, a personification of her society's materialism. However, despite Undine's highly developed sense of the possible uses of capital--both social and economic--she is ignorant of the forces of production behind it. In accordance with the custom of the country, Undine willfully divorces herself from real business, that of Wall Street, and concerns herself solely with social business, that of Fifth Avenue. Undine sees this separation of appearance and reality as a positive given as, for example, when she defines business: "That was man's province; and what did men go 'down town' for but to bring back the spoils to their women?" (44) It is clear, then, that Undine's social consciousness reflects the genteel ideological limitations concerning social realities and non-realities. It is only her individual

twist on the ideology--"To have things had always seemed to her the first essential of existence..." (73)--that is, at times, in variance with the tradition of genteel appearances. Undine as entrepreneur is too openly "the perfectly commercial item,"[29] as Cynthia Wolff writes, and the insatiable consumer. In terms of Wharton's social critique, Undine's social consciousness reflects the actual if disguised social irresponsibility of the genteel collective. If Undine is only the ultimately perverse social citizen who desires assimilation into society because that world is the best buy on the market, then society is seen as inherently corrupt in its willingness to compromises ethics for the sake of money. The presentation of Undine's character, in essence, is Wharton's indictment against a world based on fluctuating values and relative morality, concepts which Undine capitalizes upon in her business, and one in which the only undisputed convention is not to sell oneself short. Society here is a killer's market.

Undine's business, of course, necessitates partnership with men. Her first marriage is an unmitigated disaster in terms of a socially and financially profitable match. Her father, an astute businessman, calculates the immediate gains for Undine, finds them non-existent, and annuls the contract. Undine then moves to New York's Stentorian Hotel and, for a foothold in New York's 400, marries Ralph Marvell.

Marvell's gentility is mingled with a sometimes perspicacious awareness of social actualities. He likens his class to "aborigines" (73) clinging to limited and limiting conventions, incapable of revitalizing social innovations that would assure social survival. On the other hand, Marvell sees the new money class as "monstrous and factitious" (73) and as caught up in the game of appearances versus reality as is genteel New York. However, this social awareness translates in pragmatic terms into an unmitigatedly pessimistic world view:

> The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange. (78)

Ralph is thus twice divorced from reality by virtue of his class and negative consciousness. His attitude toward marriage to Undine is equally problematic in that his union is for him a fulfillment of patriarchal ideals and not, as the reader sees, a transcendence of self-alienation or an actualization of awakened consciousness:

> ...he seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careening up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse--just Pegasus turned Rosinante for the nonce--to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue.... (84)

Undine also marries naively, in her case for the satisfaction of her ideals of "amusement and respectability" (354). The difference between the two partners lies

in their ability to comprehend the reality of their misalliance and cut their losses; Ralph never fully surrenders his romantic view of Undine, but Undine pragmatically gives up Marvell, revealed to her as having only the appearance of wealth and status, for continued pursuit of the Big Deal.

Her next two paramours, while less idealistically romantic than Ralph, prove equally unsatisfying. Peter van Degen, an embodiment of the vulgar rich but socially secure class, is a fair match for Undine's entrepreneurial self. Their affair is openly negotiated on "the installment plan" (231), van Degen paying Undine's bills for future sexual favors, what van Degen calls "accumulated interest" (231). However, Undine is revealed as too ruthless a businesswoman even for him. Undine chooses to pay off her interest while Ralph lies near death, for Undine a "bold move...as carefully calculated as the happiest Wall Street 'stroke'" (364). For van Degen, it is too pointedly an indication of his relative value to her and possible future treatment at her hands. He leaves her. Undine's actions have shattered his ideal of a morally, or immorally, compatible mate.

Undine, aware of "her diminished trading capacity" (361) after the van Degen affair, latches onto Marquis Raymond de Chelles and marries him. This act is a social and financial disaster parallel to the Marvell escapade.

As with Ralph, Undine discovers her new marriage offers none of the expected social benefits--Undine as mistress of a palatial hôtel in Paris and centerpiece of society--but only the limitations--Undine as isolated chatelaine in a chilly country chateau and mute wife to a faithless husband.

Undine's last marriage brings her full circle in that she reunites with her first husband, Elmer Moffatt, now the "billionaire Railroad King" (585). Wharton makes clear throughout the book that these two entrepreneurs are the only characters who truly understand and accept one another; they are seemingly equals in the worlds of social and financial business. However, even this marriage is not mutually satisfying. Moffatt, the "greatest American collector" (530), is content in having finally acquired "the best" (538): Undine. Yet, despite a new Parisian hôtel complete with de Chelles' ancestral tapestries and a Fifth Avenue mansion which is "an exact copy of the Pitti Palace, Florence" (586), Undine is unconvinced that she has not sold herself short again:

> She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them. And there had been moments lately when she had had to confess to herself that Moffatt did not fit into the picture. (591)

By the conclusion, this speculation becomes reality, and the saga of Undine Spragg's search for self-realization

through conscious objectification is left unresolved. This is only to be expected; as Wharton has postulated, Undine's world view is based on veracious materialism and a degenerate variation of 19th century womanhood ideology. Undine's experiences prove alienating because her limited consciousness advocates the separation of appearance from reality, the social picture given precedence over self-delineation and desires. Those who share Undine's world view remain disunited as there are no clear social or moral horizons by which any one may maintain a foothold in reality. This alternative variant of limited social consciousness is, then, not the answer to social stagnation and individual alienation.

Wharton's two short stories of social entrepreneurship support this view. "The Introducers" (1906) is mildly ironic but finally romantic fiction in which two social climbers who plan to marry each other's wealthy charge fall in love instead. It is noteworthy that in this tale both characters reject their materialistic life-styles at the disclosure of their mutual affection. "Les Metteurs en scène" (1908) is a darker re-telling of the same plot. Here, the female entrepreneur, Blanche Lambart, eventually inherits a cool million from a new money girl Blanche introduced into society. However, the male entrepreneur Jean Le Fanois whom Blanche loves must reject her offer of marriage and final social and financial

security; he has already affianced himself to the rich girl's dowdy mother. Society is, as Marvell conjectured and Blanche learns, a killer's market in which the house always beats the player. In Wharton's world, monetary and social success is fleeting; more importantly, and even in these texts about ultimate social bounders, self-realization is impossible because the boundaries of social and self fulfillment remain ever limited.

## V. Romance and Reality in the "Age of Innocence"

The works discussed thus far, including those by Chopin, offered analyses of progressive stages of social consciousness at a time of social and economic transition. These variational consciousnesses--whether individual or class, quiescent or awakened--were seen to be ultimately limited and alienating in that they reflected either estranging ideologies or moral inanition. None of these works presented explicitly an alternative consciousness radical enough to counteract alienation and to promote positive social and sexual reform. However, these works were literally stories and novels of social change, seen in both Chopin's and Wharton's content and analytical style; it is to be expected that realist writers would focus upon the social lacks and limits rather than socialist or radical ideals. Wharton's The Age of Innocence (1920) rounds out her social chronicle

in that it presents Old New York in its heyday and a brief glimpse at the modern society of the late 1910s. Further, this most famous of her works supports the social criticism of her earlier novels and, finally, offers a realistic re-evaluation of her own genteel culture and a tentatively optimistic view of a new American society and modern world.

The Age of Innocence is, simply, the story of a conventional man torn between his love for a social rebel and his relationship with his ideological mate. Wharton had previously utilized this love-triangle plot device in her chronicle, The Valley of Decision (1902), and her social reform novel, The Fruit of the Tree (1907). In each case, unconventional love--Odo's for Fulvia, Amherst's for Justine--was compromised by the man's inability to surrender fully his traditional world view. Similarly, in The Age of Innocence, Newland can never fulfill his love for Ellen because he finally cannot pull himself out of "the rage of conformity." In all these novels, compromise arises--for both men and women--from conscious acceptance but not full comprehension of traditional patriarchal ideology and power.

Old New York is here portrayed as steeped in convention; genteel manners are still supreme despite the dim but visible Invaders on the social horizon. The ruling traditions appear to be private and public honesty,

bourgeois morals and taste, and collective cohesion. In reality, genteel manners are a mask disguising hypocrisy, immorality, gross materialism, and collective tyranny. It is again a society already advocating appearance over reality: "...stylishness was what New York most valued."[30] Further, it is a world in which actuality is mentally denied in order to save appearances: "In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs..." (45); indeed, Newland's society is based on the symbolic sacrifice of too real individuals--the "taking life 'without effusion of blood'" (335)--if this be necessary for collective show and survival. The class motto of New York is succinctly put by Newland's mother: "...if we don't all stand together, there'll be no such thing as Society left" (51).

Newland Archer, at the outset, is a socially secure "dilettante" (4) and as fatuous a male ideologue as were George Darrow and Robert Lebrun. He is engaged to May Welland who is, for her time, a perfect "product of the system" (8). Newland's attitude toward her is equally perfect in its ideological purity; he sees her as his future possession ideally constructed of "abysmal purity" (7), "whiteness, radiance, goodness" (24), "truth...reality...the life that belonged to him" (141), "peace, stability, comradeship and the steadying sense

of an unescapable duty" (207). This, of course, before the Fall; after meeting Ellen Olenska, a social outcast of good family lineage, these positive values become, for Newland, negative and sterile.

Newland does not then come to despise May herself but only the collective conspiracy, which she embodies, rooted in the genteel ideology exacting specific roles and relations. More importantly, Newland is repulsed by May precisely because she reflects his own blindness and his particular "truth" and "reality," "the life that belonged to him..." (141). Newland first faults May for being part of a matriarchal plot against male self-will:

> And he felt himself oppressed by this creature of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow. (46)

Newland sees male power, then, as merely a female gift to men; his self-image is thus tainted by association with female will. Newland, of course, denies any personal responsibility for the state of affairs, even though he had earlier spouted liberation rhetoric; his sympathies lie only with himself and the male world as he does battle with what he perceives as the primitive feminine world embodied in May:

> It would presently be his task to take the bandage from this young woman's eyes, and bid her look forth on the world. But how many

> generations of the women who had gone to her making had descended bandaged to the family vault? He shivered a little, remembering some of the new ideas in his scientific books, and the much-cited instance of the Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them. What if when he had bidden May Welland to open hers, they could only look out blankly at blankness? (83)

Thus, Newland believes in the separate worlds of women and men, a false construct in his case since both worlds are inscribed in the same circle. Indeed, as is quickly made clear, Newland is less afraid of May's emptiness than his own two-dimensional "character" which his relationship with her brings to light. In short, he is terrorized by the realization that their worlds are one from which there is seemingly no escape. In answer to her praise of his individualist stance, Newland exposes what it is in May and himself which is irremediable: "'Original! We're all as like each other as those dolls cut out of the same folded paper. We're like patterns stencilled on a wall'" (83).

Perversely, Newland marries May, this despite the knowledge that their union is predicated on "a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (144-145). May then becomes the scapegoat of his disillusionment. It comes as no surprise that Newland experiences his marriage as "the same black abyss yawned before him, and he felt himself sinking into it, deeper

and deeper..." (186). His complicity with patriarchal society and ideology makes of his life an "endless emptiness" (227). Newland, however, does not realize this fully until the end of his life; he only intuits in his youth that his way of being has made of him a walking corpse. As he tells May early on in their marriage: "'I <u>am</u> dead--I've been dead for months and months'" (295).

On the other hand, Ellen provokes his social self and finally revitalizes his individual self, if only for a short time. At first he responds to her as would any other genteel, chivalrous man. He is drawn into association with her by his relationship with May and at the outset of their friendship, counsels Ellen to fit herself, as he has done, to society or be outcast again:

> 'one can't make over society....The individual, in such cases, is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest; people cling to any convention that keeps the family together....' (112)

Newland is not then totally aware of how firmly set he is within the larger family, society, nor is he conscious of the structures of power surrounding Ellen, those which she fully comprehends. With her, he does not come to understand the true separation of female and male worlds nor her attempt to co-exist peacefully in both. Instead, he soon sees her simply as a helpless female who needs a knight such as he: "she stood before him as an exposed and pitiful figure, to be saved at all costs from farther

wounding herself in her mad plunges against fate" (96). And so he places her on the pedestal of his affections, the one from which he has dethroned May, and begins a descent into passion. He plays out the role of romantic lover to the hilt, supposedly ceding to her his power and will, that which May stole from him, while in actuality he does battle against her defenses.

At their first major love scene, Newland is spurned and envisions himself as most despairing and desperate lovers do--on the edge of nothingness:

> He felt as though he had been struggling for hours up the face of a steep precipice, and now, just as he had fought his way to the top, his hold had given way and he was pitching down headlong into darkness. (174)

Even though Ellen has taught him "the need of thinking himself into conditions incredibly different from any that he knew..." (104), Newland cannot even with her accept responsibility for his own acts nor see beyond his romantic delusions and his patriarchal, limited consciousness. In a later assault on her sense of self and responsibility and in a curious inversion of his criticism of May, he faults Ellen for destroying his secure world while denying him hers. He tells her, "'You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, and at the same moment you asked me to go on with a sham one. It's beyond human enduring--that's all'" (242).

In essence, Ellen awakens his dormant sense of

selfhood and alternative reality beyond the confines of New York. Indeed, in her home, dress, manners, presentation of self--again, all matters of appearance--she comes to embody for him potential self-fulfillment through "the actual business of living":

> ...for the first time Archer found himself face to face with the dread argument of the individual case. Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man: their situation, therefore, resembled no one else's, and they were answerable to no tribunal but that of their own judgment. (306)

After his marriage, Ellen is enshrined in Newland's particular republic of the spirit: "he had built up within himself a kind of sanctuary in which she throned among his secret thoughts and longings" (262). However, it is clear by the end that Newland has not loved Ellen Olenska but merely another objectified ideal, for he can never truly comprehend that which is "like nothing that he was accustomed to look at (and therefore able to see)..." (71). Newland is self-deceived on all accounts, and his inability to relinquish repressive idealism and romanticism for pragmatic action is made evident to the resisting reader primarily through Wharton's straightforward yet complex presentation of Newland's two women. Their realities and experience first complement and then counteract Newland's oppressive ideology and world.

Ellen, while admittedly in love with Newland, seeks only social security and not another chance at social revolt. She understands that the world of women, seen for

example in the sphere of Catherine Mingott, is still necessarily aligned with the world of men so that it might survive. She is not, however, a totally passive object: she strives throughout the story to maintain her personal sense of integrity and self while simultaneously making over society in small ways so that she can in turn become a comfortable part of that world. To these effects, she is perfectly willing to sacrifice her desire--as she tells Newland, "'I can't love you unless I give you up'" (173), a statement of foresight and not evasion as was Robert Lebrun's--and does so, first by continuously reminding him of his reality, May and society, and ultimately by abdicating her personal love and social security, returning to an outcast's life. Ellen both understands self-desire and responsibility to self and others whereas Newland only feels desire and a longing for self. She counters Newland's idealism with pragmatism and logic--"'we'll look, not at visions, but at realities'" (289)--and in responding to his romantic view of an illicit affair, finally lays the illusive republic of the spirit to rest:

> [Newland says,] 'I want--I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that--categories like that--won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter.'
>
> She drew a deep sigh that ended in another laugh. 'Oh, my dear--where is that country?' (290)

Ellen knows that utopian or romantic dreams are socially futile since they cannot be actualized. She has been "beyond" (291) Newland's world, and she realizes that one must live within one's society or be alienated, observe the amenities even if they be inanities or be without a modus vivendi.[31]

Similarly, May was clearly not the helpless innocent Newland believed her to be, nor is she at all passive in her fulfillment of ideological prescription. At Ellen's casting-out farewell dinner given by May, Newland realizes that May has understood him all along and had actively but not maliciously conspired against Ellen and him in order to protect her immediate and extended family--society. So too does Newland learn after May's death that she had comprehended his affections for both her and Ellen and that she, like Ellen, had only done what was right: they had all forced themselves to live good lives. Each woman, as well as Newland, then, had fulfilled ideological roles: martyr, moral superior, beloved object, the ideal woman. They had all been complicit in maintaining the patriarchal world view, and each had suffered accordingly. However, Ellen also comprehended and opposed strict ideological adherence, at the same time refusing to fall a victim to the alienating experience of passion. Instead, what was first shown to us as her self-eccentricity is in the end revealed as a hopeful self-realization effected

by a willful woman secure in a new land.

It is at the end, a generation later and after the Lily Barts and Undine Spraggs, that Newland, and one surmises Wharton, assimilates and evaluates his life experiences. After Ellen, Newland had lived a good life with May and unlike the majority of Wharton's characters had worked toward social reform. His genteel world had given way to the new money society and the world of new women. His final philosophy of social evolution is that "there was good in the old ways" (347) but "good in the new order too" (349). More importantly, however, is his realization that strict fulfillment of social duties had only served to establish him firmly in "a deep rut" (351), the rage of conformity of his time. His complicity with patriarchal ideology cost Newland self-fulfillment, resulting in "an inarticulate lifetime" (356), Wharton's clearest warning to men of the cost of their realized power. As Newland comes to understand: "Something he knew he had missed: the flower of life" (347). Yet Newland's, as well as May's and Ellen's, struggle with consciousness and social compromise is not without fruition; in the nurturing of a less repressive and more dynamic social order (in Newland's own work and in his son's upbringing), there is the potential realization of a humanistic, socially responsive conscipusness that would obliterate individual alienation and effect the full

articulation of both male and female experience.

Wharton does not offer Newland absolution for his complicity; she does, however, show that life is a continuum, a dynamic web of action and reaction, potentially a revolutionary process of transcendence. And even though Newland cannot climb up to Ellen's level at the end, both in reality and in terms of consciousness, Wharton gives the reader a glimpse of a new structure of feeling in a possible and positive world in which woman's will and desire are central and no longer marginal, in which one can indeed dare and defy and yet live. Thus does Wharton, by calling into question both the conventional and the disobedient, struggle with her form--her particular arbitrary signs, the novel of manners--and content--the full articulation of experience and human relations. In this her pivotal work, she, like Chopin, transgressed literary and ideological boundaries, revealed in sharp detail the human condition, and finally cut a path for quiet revolution. Chopin's The Awakening and Wharton's The Age of Innocence, paragons of female discourse, give voice and expression at last to that which had been unspeakable.

## ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

[1] Janet Flanner (Genêt), "Edith Wharton (1862-1937)," in Paris Was Yesterday (1925-1939), edited by Irving Drutman (New York: Popular Library, 1972), p. 171.

[2] Jean Turner, "The Ideology of Women in the Fiction of Edith Wharton 1899-1920" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975), p. 57.

[3] Jean Turner, "Ideology," p. 85.

[4] Lloyd Morris, Postscript to Yesterday: American Life and Thought, 1896-1946 (New York: Harper & Row, 1947 and 1965), p. 9.

[5] Judith H. Montgomery, "The American Galatea," College English, XXXII (May 1971), 891-892.

[6] Olga Avendaño de Valdivia, "Edith Wharton. Mrs. Wharton's Philosophy of Life -- Her Conception of Morality. Minor Moral Problems," Andean Quarterly (Winter 1944), 57.

[7] Jean Turner, "Ideology," p. 123.

[8] Edith Wharton, "The Fullness of Life" in The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton, edited by R.W.B. Lewis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), Volume I, p. 14.

[9] Edith Wharton, "The Lamp of Psyche," Collected Short Stories, I, p. 57.

[10] Edith Wharton, "Friends," Collected Short Stories, I, p. 214.

[11] Edith Wharton, Sanctuary (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Gregg Press Literature House, 1970), pp. 22-23. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[12] Edith Wharton, "A Cup of Cold Water," Collected Short Stories, I, pp. 157-158.

[13] Edith Wharton, "The Muse's Tragedy," Collected Short Stories, I, p. 78.

[14] Edith Wharton, "The Bunner Sisters" in Xingu and Other Stories (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. 330. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[15] Edith Wharton, "The Other Two," Collected Short Stories, I, p. 393. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[16] Louis Auchincloss, "Afterword" to The House of Mirth (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 346.

[17] Louis Kronenberger, "Edith Wharton: The Age of Innocence and The House of Mirth" in The Polished Surface: Essays in the Literature of Worldliness (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 255-256.

[18] Marie Bristol, "Life Among the Ungentle Genteel: Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth Revisited," Western Humanities Review, 16 (Autumn 1962), 373.

[19] Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), pp. 486-487. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[20] Judith Fetterley, "'The Temptation to be a Beautiful Object': Double Standard and Double Bind in The House of Mirth," Studies in American Fiction, V, no. 2 (Autumn 1977), 203.

[21] Edith Wharton, Ethan Frome (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 11. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[22] Marius Bewley, "Mrs. Wharton's Mask" in Masks & Mirrors: Essays in Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 151.

[23] R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 396.

[24] Edith Wharton, Summer (Toronto: George J. McLeod, Limited, 1917), p. 73. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[25] Margaret McDowell, Edith Wharton (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 71.

[26] Edith Wharton, The Reef (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 25. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[27] Edith Wharton, "The Long Run" in Xingu and Other Stories (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. 231.

[28] Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 208. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[29] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 249.

[30] Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 61. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[31] Wharton presented an identical argument between lovers in her early short story, "Souls Belated." The ending to that is a similar compromise of individual desire to social convention.

## CODA

Edith Wharton wrote in her private diary: "'Life is always either a tight-rope or a feather bed. Give me the tight-rope!'"[1] It is implicit in her and Chopin's works that they challenged individuals--men and women--to make the same choice and that they stood opposed to social groups, theories, or practices which denied self-fulfillment. Nor did they themselves ever settle into the social bed of conformity and complicity.

After completing The Awakening and especially after its publication, Chopin did not surrender her individual voice to the vox populi. Like Wharton, she continued to examine and portray social conditions and conditioning while simultaneously constructing a radical vision of what she termed "the living spirit." Her last stories were not, however, as successful a synthesis of social critique and literature as Wharton's 1920 masterpiece, yet one stands out as remarkable.

In "The Storm," written 19 July 1898 and never published in Chopin's lifetime, an explicitly sexual awakening occurs: an act of adultery fulfills the rekindled desires and self-desire of two ex-lovers whom Chopin had portrayed in the earlier "At the 'Cadian Ball."

Although the tale recounts an intensely sensual encounter, Chopin here does not compromise her characters by endowing them with blind passion, nor does she lessen their shared experience by giving them at the end negative self-consciousness. Indeed, the lovers part, then reunite by word or deed with their families, and all live happily ever after. Alcée and Calixta are shown as equals in desire and self-desire; their union is both self-revelation and perfect duality. In "The Storm," Chopin makes an astounding leap of faith from that seen in her earlier presentations of desire and self-fulfillment: in this story the search for selfhood is a possible and positive process, despite what the social and moral commandments say. The "abyss of solitude" is no longer even a remote part of the new world born of Calixta and Alcée and carried forth to others.

"The Storm" is, thus, Chopin's most radical vision and also her last piece which truly dares and defies. She seemed to have foreseen the approaching critical debacle. Even so, and despite the fact that she would write an apology for <u>The Awakening</u>, one couched in womanhood terms and gently mocking, insincere words, Chopin's unpublished poem, "The Haunted Chamber," written February 1899 just before the novel's publication in April, honestly and painfully reveals her own consciousness and self-will:

Of course 'twas an excellent story to tell
Of a fair, frail, passionate woman who fell.
It may have been false, it may have been true.
That was nothing to me--it was less to you.
But with bottle between us, and clouds of smoke
From your last cigar, 'twas more of a joke
Than a matter of sin or a matter of shame
That a woman had fallen, and nothing to blame,
So far as you or I could discover,
But her beauty, her blood and an ardent lover.
But when you were gone and the lights were low
And the breeze came in with the moon's pale glow,
The far, faint voice of a woman, I heard,
'Twas but a wail, and it spoke no word.
It rose from the depths of some infinite gloom
And its tremulous anguish filled the room.
Yet the woman was dead and could not deny,
But women forever will whine and cry.
So now I must listen the whole night through
To the torment with which I had nothing to do--
But women forever will whine and cry
And men forever must listen--and sigh--[2]

Finally, she did not kill her art after 1899, as so many critics would have it; she thereafter merely muted her voice in order that she be heard beyond her own four walls.

Wharton, on the other hand, produced for almost another twenty years and in some ways seemed more openly drawn to experimentation with content than before her major success with The Age of Innocence. Her post-1920 work focusses on spheres of existence only suggested in her early work: the worlds of mothers and daughters, the realm and responsibility of the artist, the circle of unconventional yet uncompromised love. All these are built on the foundations set in the pre-1920 social fiction, and it is beyond the scope of this immediate

work to trace new developmental lines in her representations of male and female experience. Suffice it to say that her novels on the homosocial world of women and the alienation therein hold special interest for feminist critics as does her unfinished The Buccaneers which had the makings of another storm.

Further study on the above, as well as complementary analyses of other writers of female discourse such as Ellen Glasgow, Jane Bowles, Katherine Anne Porter, Anne Tyler is what must follow. I will not now argue for Chopin's and Wharton's canonization or make glowing statements about the worth of these authors to resisting readers. It should be clear that this critic finds absolutely necessary the re-evaluation of the existing canon and, more importantly, development of a new literary criticism which will pay heed to and assist in the articulation of women's experience as a central part of the human condition. Radical visions bespeak radical criticism and spirit, and it is time to take up Chopin's challenge to dare and defy as well as Wharton's dare of walking the literary and social tight-rope above the safe net of traditional beliefs. We must hear these works and then do more than just sigh. Like radical writers before us, we must speak the unspeakable to each other and thus transform the abysses of solitude into an uprising of individual response and collective responsibility.

## ENDNOTES TO CODA

[1] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 344.

[2] Kate Chopin, "The Haunted Chamber," The Complete Works of Kate Chopin, edited by Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), II, pp. 733-734.

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