Marriage, Motherhood, and Reception in the Fiction of Chopin and Wharton

by

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For every courageous man and woman

who strives to make a difference.

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Abstract

The protagonists of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913) are quite unusual representations of women in the period of the novels' publications. Contemporary critics described the characters as selfish, unrealistic, monstrous, and amoral. Their behavior is indeed curious: both protagonists resist the traditional roles of wife and mother in favor of more personally fulfilling pursuits. Interestingly, they act in very different ways to accomplish a similar sense of defiance. Edna Pontellier from *The Awakening* remains technically married throughout the novel but engages in emotional and sexual affairs with men, leading to a strong desire for independence and individuality—characteristics she has never known. Undine Spragg from *The Custom of the Country*, on the other hand, is an extreme version of the type of woman created by the pressures of the leisure-class marriage system. She skillfully manipulates men through acting as "feminine" as possible and treating marriage as a business contract rather than an opportunity for love or respect, which causes her to go through three separate divorces—an abnormal number for the time. These behaviors raise a few key questions: why were these women so averse to marriage and motherhood; what does this aversion signify; and how did the authors attempt to counteract what they perceived to be the prescribed gender roles for women?

These questions will be answered through examining the beliefs and expectations of the period as well as determining the ways in which the authors either respected or rejected these norms in their novels. The first chapter of this thesis discusses Chopin's biography and analyzes her novel in order to argue that, in *The Awakening*, Chopin attempts to distract the reader from the highly sexual themes by using a "double-edged discourse," allowing her to include topics like pregnancy while using muted language and other methods to dampen their effect. This was not very effective. Her other overt topics such as infidelity and women's sexuality were so visible that they overpowered any attempt to absorb the shock of reading accounts of these normally private topics. Chopin's manner of writing about rejecting social norms is in itself is a rejection of social norms, which contributed to the negative reviews of her novel.

The second chapter discusses Wharton's biography and analyzes *The Custom of the Country* to demonstrate that the novel exhibits complicity with social norms. Rather than describing taboo situations in detail, Wharton hinted slightly at them and quickly moved on. Though she made very valid and strong claims in her novel, she avoided the appearance of impropriety, understanding the risks that accompanied bold writing. Her claims were based on substantial problems within the leisure class, but her methods were not quite as daring as her arguments.

The third and final chapter contrasts the receptions of the novels in order to study how Chopin's and Wharton's methods differed and how these methods contributed to dissimilar critical reactions. In essence, this chapter argues that neither author was adequately understood by critics and readers and that the authors' feminist voices were either rejected (in Chopin's case) or regarded as insignificant (in Wharton's). This conclusion is related to the larger goals of this thesis, which are to describe and explain the reasons behind the authors' choices and to provide a framework through which we can consider society's impact on women writers and their topics—and the ways in which women writers can reciprocate by impacting society.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913) were written within fourteen years of each other. Their authors led very different lives, held different attitudes about marriage and motherhood, and approached their writing in dissimilar ways. Despite these differences, the main components of the stories are quite similar: both novels focus on the issue of women's independence and individual happiness. Their protagonists are both leisure-class women who are displeased with their marriages and eventually gain the courage to act radically in order to change their lives. The contrasting receptions of these novels among readers and critics highlight the differences between them and reflect the fact that Wharton and Chopin wrote in different styles with dissimilar methods of demonstrating their points. As we shall see, *The Awakening* disappeared for decades after receiving many negative reviews based on its impropriety, whereas *The Custom of the Country* received neutral to slightly positive reviews and was largely considered to be a harmless and relatively unimportant story of an unrealistically self-absorbed woman. A substantial exploration of the cultural and historical period surrounding these texts, along with a closer look at the ways in which their authors structured their main arguments and a discussion of the reception of the novels, will illustrate the contrasts between these two narratives. Our goal will be to determine the answer to four main questions: why were the characters of these novels so averse to marriage and motherhood; what does this aversion signify; how did the authors attempt to counteract what they perceived to be the prescribed gender roles for women; and how did the receiving societies respond to these arguments?

Culturally, Chopin and Wharton wrote in a time characterized by many restrictions for women, including the expectation that women become wives and mothers while relegating their

personal desires to the background. The first wave of feminism emerged during this period, and it characterizes many of the themes and images in both novels. Many women actively sought changes that would allow them to experience life as men's equals rather than as their subordinates. Many obstacles blocked the path to independence, however. Women's suffrage had not been signed into place, which in itself halted the development of further legislation in women's favor by denying women the ability to vote for their own rights; though divorce was legal, it was frowned upon in many circles and, more importantly, was financially impractical or even impossible for most women; and contraceptive measures were not yet legal, transforming women and wives into mothers, sometimes before their personal wishes would have allowed such a change.[1] Gender roles were rigidly defined, and women who resisted them were often ignored, shunned, or criticized with little recourse. As a result of these and many other limiting factors, women, especially wives, were significantly dependent on men.

In order to understand and explain the emergence of feminist actions and texts in this period in spite of the possibility of serious repercussions, we will explore the attitudes about and constraints on women during this time. Since leisure-class women were often unable to provide for themselves, the prospect of living as a single woman with an unlivable inheritance and almost no aid from society was unpromising at best. Even the most independently minded woman would take notice of the fact that she would experience great difficulties if she were to reject the expectations of marriage and motherhood. Of course, the fictional Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening* and Undine Spragg of *The Custom of the Country* did reject these norms despite the hardships they were certain to encounter as a result, and their authors employed very careful and

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the historical data mentioned in this section is adapted from *Women Writers in the United States* by Cynthia Davis and Kathryn West.

calculated—yet vastly different—movements and strategies within their writing, yielding extremely different outcomes in terms of tone and reception.

Though more options were becoming available to women, divorce remained an almost unthinkable and often unreachable opportunity to escape unhappy marriages. Few options were available for women who had completed marriage vows: divorce and remarriage laws became stricter around the year 1900, making it more difficult for women to file for divorce (Strow 239). Furthermore, Strow describes the statistics of working women in a way that allows us to understand the possible impact of divorce on women:

> In 1900, 43.5 percent of single women worked, while only 4.6 percent of married women worked. Overall, 75 percent of all working women were unmarried. At the turn of the century, culture dictated that married women be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. The few married women who tried to take on careers often found the balance of domestic duties and work to be precarious at best. "Marriage bars" existing from the end of the 19th century through the beginning of the 20th century kept many married women out of the labor force and caused numerous women to quit working at the time of marriage. (245)

The vast majority of women who became divorcées, then, had been out of the work force for the duration of their marriages. Many ex-wives had little money saved and still fewer prospects for earning a livable wage. The expectation for women to be "pious, pure, submissive, and domestic" and the acts of women in observance of this expectation may have contributed to a lack of marketable skills in women, especially after a period of dependence on their husbands during marriage. Divorce was therefore not a particularly attractive option, nor was it a widespread practice due to many considerations including religion, reputation, and the difficulty

of sustaining a leisure-class lifestyle without the ability to rely on a husband's income or inheritance. Undine Spragg successfully divorces three separate times in *The Custom of the Country*, but she cannot survive on her own: her father continues to give her money, and she continually enters into new marriages to keep up with her leisure-class habits and to improve her reputation. This suggests that being a second-, third-, or even fourth-time wife seems better than being a divorced woman. Undine's case is an exaggerated and uncommon one within this period since many women would not have a father's financial help to fall back on. Most leisure-class families were opposed to divorce and would not have supported a daughter whose decision resulted in familial disgrace. As a result of these attitudes and institutions, and in spite of a growing feminist movement, many women still found themselves bound to their partners for life for better or worse.

In terms of marriage, men still held the reins. Conservative male authority figures, for instance, promoted systems that would create easier and more pleasurable lives for men while producing the side-effect of emotional difficulties for women. John Sholto Douglas, a British marquis, wrote an address targeting women.[2] His main argument is that the present state of marriage—that is, the laws set up to protect monogamy and punish infidelity—inherently creates the need for prostitution. He denounces polygamy primarily for its permission for men to live with multiple wives, but he believes that men may be sexually attracted to women other than their wives and that they should be allowed to act on these desires even if they love, esteem, and respect their wives. In short, he is attempting to convince women that they should be more open to the possibility of allowing their husbands to have a plurality of sexual partners, which, he

[2] Since the women's movements of America and Britain were very similar, it is useful to consider the opinions and sources of both countries in order to understand the different types of attitudes women encountered during this period. Douglas served in the House of Lords, which illustrates his power and influence over society as well as his very privileged social standing.

believes, will greatly decrease the need for prostitution and thereby lower the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. He also argues that a wife's acceptance of her husband's multiple sexual partners would allow the husband to be more honest about his sexual needs and experiences, making him a more honorable individual. But where do women factor into this equation? Douglas' overarching claim is that the acceptance of such a system, through a combination of the aforementioned effects, would promote "the greater happiness of the human race" (3). This is not entirely believable since his aims naturally ignore and even upset the feelings of half of the human race, but this claim does succeed in conveying that having multiple sexual partners would create an easier and more pleasurable situation for men. He writes that "it is not the natural and rational law of mankind that a man's marital relations can be in all cases confined to one woman (his wife) during the whole of his life" (1). He claims this is a widely recognized fact about men and that men are forced into having secret, dishonest affairs since women are unable to understand their husbands' greater sexual needs and thus refuse to be persuaded to allow their husbands to seek extramarital relations (6). This claim makes no effort to consider what women may desire in a similar situation or how men would react if the situation were reversed.

Douglas provides evidence for his argument in the form of incorrect biological and sociological reasoning. He barely acknowledges that women can desire sex or that they may wish to engage in a similar plurality of sexual relationships—or even that they may be discontent with the thought of being intimate with only their husbands for the duration of their lives, unlike men who, as Douglas asserts, have more reasonable oppositions to monogamy. He writes, "No woman could [desire] such a thing. I will not discuss it, nor waste time, nor insult you over such obscene notions as no animal would entertain" (13). What he means, he explains, is that women

could want only one sexual partner; but this is clearly false. Many women have a strong sense of sexuality, and some act on their sexual impulses. As we shall see in *The Awakening,* Edna Pontellier finally discovers her sexuality after marrying her husband, Léonce, and she eventually has an affair with one man and strong flirtations with another in order to pursue her newly developed feelings. In Douglas' view, however, a woman must prefer monogamy because a woman can be certain she is the mother of her children simply by the act of being pregnant and giving birth, whereas having multiple sexual partners would cast doubt as to the true identity of the father and thus upset and worry the woman in question. But Douglas fails to discuss the consequences for men who impregnate women other than their wives. Moreover, Douglas states that women can easily divorce their husbands if they wish to do so, noting that the opposite situation of a man divorcing his wife would be irresponsible and cruel because it would effectively leave the woman with nothing. He seems to forget that women who filed for divorce against their husbands would be left with just as little, if not less. Throughout his speech, Douglas casually dismisses the price to be paid by women; but by passively accepting men's infidelity as he suggests, women are forced to share their husbands with other women and experience the jealousy and pain associated with doing so. Rather than encouraging men to resist their sexual impulses, Douglas argues that women should become more accepting of the notion that men will or should act on their sexual weaknesses. In his speech, Douglas shamelessly performs the work of silencing women.

Although Douglas' account may present a fairly extreme opinion, it begins the work of explaining why Chopin and Wharton felt the need to push so strongly against the traditional ideas present in the marriage system. By stating that sexual plurality would benefit humanity, Douglas attempts to conceal the fact that it simply makes life easier for men while creating more

difficulties for women. Rather than considering a more balanced viewpoint, Douglas promotes marriage reform as a means of accommodating men's desires at the expense of women's emotions. Men, who held most of the power and influence to change or maintain laws and societal expectations, could easily assert that culture would be most improved by improving the quality of life for men while neglecting the duty of simplifying and improving women's lives as well. Women like Chopin and Wharton who argued for more equal considerations were fighting against a strong—and often unyielding—system of beliefs.

Even male professionals like doctors ignored and criticized the inescapable aspects of women's experiences, such as those related to pregnancy and childbirth. Many early-twentieth-century manuals dealing with pregnancy and motherhood were written by men and describe these situations as experiences that should form only the highest honor and joy for a woman. Many of these books either ignore or divert attention from the certainty of pain and the very real possibility of maternal death due to any number of complications. But bearing a child is one of the instances in which it is difficult to deny that women exhibit a power or ability that men lack, which, in the minds of some authors of the time, should give rise to the strongest feelings of pride and happiness. On the topic of pregnancy at the turn of the century, Lyman Sperry, a medical doctor and lecturer, writes:

> In many cases the *mental symptoms* are quite as marked as the physical. The pregnant woman is more impressible, apprehensive and anxious, and also usually more irritable, than she is when pregnancy does not exist….The condition *ought* to make a normal woman more interesting and companionable than before; contentment and even cheerfulness should characterize her emotions. (175)

This quote concisely describes the overriding male opinion of the time. Educated and informed men like Sperry never experienced the hormonal fluctuations and pain that accompany pregnancy and childbirth, but they still recognized and understood that women go through biological changes that affect their moods during pregnancy. But rather than attempting to create a system in which women are given support during pregnancy, Sperry chooses to present a case against these inevitable fluctuations and in favor of a more tranquil, relaxed situation for those in the vicinity of pregnant women. A more realistic exploration of pregnancy would consider that women of the time could attest not only to the fact that they experienced great discomfort during pregnancy and labor, but also that they had valid concerns regarding the matter of maternal death during childbirth. These concerns alone were enough for some women to feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and short-tempered; but these form only the surface matter of the life-changing experience of pregnancy. One of many concerns beneath the surface is that women were encouraged to be abstinent and relatively unsocial for the duration of their pregnancies, thus decreasing their possibilities for support and increasing the possibility that their husbands would be unfaithful. *The Custom of the Country*'s Undine Spragg, for example, becomes extremely upset when she realizes she is pregnant, understanding that she will gain weight, become less attractive, and be advised to rest extensively, preventing her from engaging in socializing to the degree to which she is accustomed. For Undine, pregnancy is a certain ticket to alienation from the world she has struggled to enter.

Many men, even those who were educated, held unfeasible ideas about women's bodies and experiences despite having access to explanatory works written by women who had gone through pregnancy and childbirth. By the time Sperry and Douglas were writing, there were a number of published essays, speeches, and other forms of literature about pregnancy and

childbirth by women. Though adequate sources of reliable knowledge about the feelings and fears that accompany pregnancy were available, many people still clung to notions that were ideal in theory yet proven false in reality. The female voice was present, yet many of the men in the foreground—those with the greatest ability to invoke change—often ignored it.

One available source of women's knowledge was a comprehensive guide to marriage and parenthood published in 1901. Though it could have greatly informed many men and women about these topics, it seems to have had little influence in shifting the common opinions of the time. This book, entitled *Ideal Married Life: A Book for All Husbands and Wives*, was written by Mary Wood-Allen, a physician who had written many publications on similar topics in the past. In this book, she provides an extensive exploration of the roles of husbands and wives within ideal marriages, and she emphasizes that young women are often unaware of their future duties as wives. She states:

> Many young women, if questioned as to their idea of marriage, would doubtless reply—if they answered truthfully—that it is a state of independence, where the girl…is her own mistress…wherein an abiding lover will pay her continual court and…the trials and anxieties of life will have been eliminated. Too few young women realize that marriage means greater responsibilities, bigger burdens, more anxious cares… (17)

Clearly, women of this period suffered from a lack of education of married life. This passage suggests that they thought of marriage as the end goal after which their lives would improve greatly, unacquainted with the hardships and struggles they would encounter following their vows.

Apart from issues of marriage, Wood-Allen includes a broad array of topics regarding expectations for married couples, including pregnancy and raising children. She goes into great detail when describing the reproductive system and the technical details of conception, and she points out common fallacies and takes action to correct them. For example, in her discussion of whether the ovum or sperm is capable of determining more qualities of the future child, she states that "both theories have, by the microscope, been proven to be erroneous; and it is now known that both furnish and equal amount and are of identical value, both parents contributing equally to the new being. This settles all controversy as to whether father or mother is superior" (121). This is characteristic of her writing throughout the book: when discussing physical matters, she takes care to prove her points with research and logic, which is somewhat unlike the other writers of manuals during this period.

Wood-Allen argues that educating young women about marriage, sex, and pregnancy will sway them toward rather than away from motherhood. She cites her experiences talking to young men and women as evidence, and she asserts that many women fear becoming mothers because of their very sparse knowledge of what motherhood actually entails. Unlike the male authors we've examined thus far, Wood-Allen emphasizes what she believes to be the husband's role in married life:

> Every young wife should be permitted to choose the time when she will take upon herself the office and burden of motherhood. She should have time to prepare mentally for this responsibility and time also to prepare physically. This involves many serious considerations. Perhaps it implies an entire revolution in the mind of the husband concerning the marital relation. It certainly does involve self-control

> and the placing of self-gratification as of no consequence compared with the happiness of the wife and the welfare of the unborn child. (104-5)

Though Wood-Allen does not describe the specifics of pregnancy at this point, she makes it very clear that husbands should understand the sensitivity of the situation and plan accordingly. A focus on communication and mutual respect is suggested here, which is not the norm in these writings nor, it would seem, within many marriages of the time. In both *The Awakening* and *The Custom of the Country,* married couples consistently fail to communicate effectively. Wood-Allen's book therefore gives readers—both men and women—many topics to consider and discuss. She presents a very balanced conversation about marriage and parenthood, which was largely absent during this period. Her strong emphasis on the importance of respect throughout the book suggests that women were often disrespected in their marriages and given less than equal input in matters that directly impacted them, and her aim is very different from Douglas': she calls for men to exercise "self-control" and to give into a "revolution," allowing them to respect their wives' wishes. Her statement that wives "should be *permitted*" (emphasis added) to decide when they will become pregnant suggests that women were discouraged from making decisions for themselves, and her use of the passive voices implies that women are objects rather than subjects in this matter. This feeling of disrespect and submission can be a very strong reason for characters like Edna and Undine to resist marriage.

Wood-Allen's book is only one of many publications that stress the deficiency in women's education and in men's willingness to listen to and respect their wives. A number of other books and manuals by women show a general concern for women's health and safety due to the lack of education women received about their bodies and future relationships with men. Due to this lack of education, many women did not know how to defend themselves or their

desired positions and roles to their husbands, and they were also unaware of how to stay healthy, adding to the pressures, discomforts, and dangers of pregnancy. Blaming men for this issue is not sufficient: women also played a significant role in limiting the knowledge available to younger women.

In one publication in particular, author Beatrice Tina is especially adept at describing the ways in which women cooperate with established gender norms even in the physical absence of men, showing that oppression is a societal rather than a solely gendered phenomenon. In *Woman's Worst Enemy: Woman*, she writes: "This book is written for the pleasure of denouncing the sort of female whose modesty howls for silence on such matters as sex and maternity.…Truly, [women] may not go [into marriage and motherhood] quietly if they knew what was before them" (2). In this passage, Tina not only criticizes how women interact with their peers, but she also presents the case that mothers fail to explain to their daughters the truth about sex and childbirth even though they have the means to do so. Tina argues that women have a duty to pass on this knowledge to younger, less experienced women. Since many women failed to educate their peers or family members about these topics, younger women were often unaware as to what would occur from their wedding nights onward. Furthermore, as we've seen, many of their duties as wives were prescribed by their husbands, giving them little influence in their own lives and homes after marriage. This lack of knowledge presented a problem for many women since divorce was not an easy solution; therefore, women were sometimes forced to remain in unhappy marriages despite having received little to no warning as to what married life and motherhood would offer. This seems to be the case in *The Awakening*: once Edna becomes personally enlightened and begins to understand her position as an independent human being, she

realizes the confinement she faces by being a married woman and a mother, and it is too late to change her situation in any constructive way.

Tina's argument blurs the line between target and agent status for women: she makes it clear that women are still under the influence of men, but she also argues that women should take more control when possible and show stronger support for other women in order to change social attitudes. This shows that women are capable of oppressing other women by failing to share their stories and experiences, and it calls for an expansion of education and awareness in order to form methods through which women can unite to change the established norms. Tina argues that, by ignoring or rejecting the prescribed modesty, women can openly share their personal knowledge and experience to inform other women and to offer them the visibility to recognize more options in their lives. Tina presents strong, clear arguments, but some women would disagree with her claims. Wood-Allen, for example, specifically states her belief that women have an innate maternal instinct and that education would lead to an increased desire to become mothers, but she admits that being married adds a layer of complication to motherhood in that husbands are sometimes incapable of understanding their wives and thus place unfair demands on them (102-3). It is therefore unclear as to whether the majority of women would knowingly enter into marriage if they were to have learned of the possible subjugation that would later occur. Regardless of the outcomes of practical education for women, many people believed that greater access to education would greatly benefit young women. Tina's book is an attempt to warn and inform young women of the dangers that await them in marriage, but, because of its emphasis on rejecting social norms, it was probably not taken very seriously and seems to have been ignored by many of the male authors of the time.

This brief overview does some work toward describing the immense pressures and restrictions faced by women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and thus begins to explain why Chopin and Wharton chose topics involving the question of women and independence. This context also explains why their novels may have been subject to scrutiny by the public. Many people were not prepared to read accounts of women's sexuality and independence or to view these accounts as realistic portrayals of women's lives. We have yet to analyze and discuss the major differences in the authors' methods and to determine the reasons behind the discrepancy in the reception of their novels. An exploration of the authors' lives and works will further inform this matter.

CHAPTER 1: *THE AWAKENING*

Kate Chopin's personal life greatly influenced the themes of *The Awakening*. At present, she is most widely known for her controversial portrayal of women's sexuality in this novel, which she published in 1899 to overwhelmingly poor reception. Many critics considered the novel an inappropriate and crude portrait of a woman's sexual endeavors and improper wishes to be independent and free in a time in which women's rights were fewer and women were expected to demonstrate a certain level of subservience to men, especially their husbands. Chopin experienced life as a wife and mother, and she has demonstrated her keen knowledge of the restrictions that these roles demanded of her. One of the main aims of the novel is to demonstrate the ways in which these restrictions can cause a woman to desire removal from societal pressures, sometimes at the expense of her own life. Chopin's personal and psychological manner of telling the story was perhaps just as taboo as the theme of an individual's rejection of social norms. The novel relegates marriage and motherhood to the background of Edna Pontellier's life, allowing the formation of a strong foreground of desire, sexuality, and the personal freedom for women to pursue activities that will grant them happiness.

Chopin's daring themes seem to stem from her personal experiences. She was raised in a household with mainly feminine influence and control: her father died when she was five years old, so she lived with her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and brothers.[1] Her grandmother inspired her to think independently and to form a vivid imagination and a strong ability to tell stories. Furthermore, since she was rarely under the care or control of an older male authority figure and her female role models were strong, open-minded women, it was probably

[1] Unless otherwise noted, the biographical information in this section is adapted from *Unveiling Kate Chopin* by Emily Toth.

difficult for her to accept the oppression of women during her time and easier for her to imagine a world in which women were respected within households and shared the power and influence in society. Many critics cite this fact about Chopin's upbringing to explain the origin of the prominent themes of her work, including women's personal independence of thought and action. Her most prominent and controversial character, Edna Pontellier, is an unconventional woman who rejects the influence and control of men and instead attempts to pursue her newly discovered passions and desires.

Chopin and Mrs. Pontellier share many traits. Chopin wrote as a teenager, but her creative spirit seemed to be stifled when she married Oscar Chopin: she did not publish anything while she was married, and there is no evidence that she wrote during this time. By age twenty-eight—the age of Edna Pontellier during *The Awakening*—Chopin had already given birth to six children and cared for them while her husband managed plantations and a general store. By the time she was thirty-two, her husband had passed away, leaving her in significant debt. As a result, Chopin had little time to herself. After her husband's death, she retained the task of caring for her children and gained the responsibility of providing for them financially. In short, her personal freedoms were few. A short time after Oscar's death, Chopin became involved in a romantic relationship with another man, and she returned to writing four years after that. Some believe that Chopin returned to writing after Oscar's death as a means of coping with her depression, but it has also been suggested that she had not felt the independence or ability to write while he lived. Some evidence suggests that her passion for the arts—in this case, writing—emerged alongside her sexuality. This is mirrored by Edna Pontellier's hobby of painting, which begins after her affair in *The Awakening*. Regardless of the reason that Chopin returned to writing, clear parallels exist between Chopin's life and that of her fictional Edna.

The Awakening contains strongly feminist ideology in its treatment of sexuality and independence. Chopin presents these ideas both explicitly and covertly, which has in part led to the various ways in which the novel has been read and received. The book begins in the late 1890s and opens with the Pontelliers on vacation in Grand Isle, a resort town near New Orleans. Over the course of the summer, Edna Pontellier, a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two boys, meets and befriends a number of women and develops a slight obsession with the sea and learning to swim. The sea eventually becomes a maternal figure for her, teaching her about her strengths, granting her the room to improve herself, and finally enveloping her in its waves. As the summer unfolds, Edna becomes more aware of herself and, through self-discovery, realizes the many limitations of being a wife and mother. She begins to feel a sense of containment and entrapment, and she soon wishes for more independence and a life of her own in which she can do as she pleases. She engages in a flirtation with a man named Robert Lebrun and quickly develops a strong attraction to him, which pushes her previously personal and internal awakening into dangerously external territory. When Robert realizes this, he moves to Mexico so as not to weaken his (and Edna's) reputation. Shortly thereafter, the Pontelliers return to New Orleans, and Edna begins to shirk her feminine duties, eventually rejecting her prescribed lifestyle altogether and moving into a small house of her own. She has an affair with a man named Arobin and, since she never has true romantic feeling for him, doesn't feel that she is giving up her freedom by engaging in a sexual relationship with him. Her feeling of independence remains until Robert returns, declaring his love for Edna while cautioning her that he cannot be in a relationship with a married woman. Eventually, Edna realizes that no one can provide her with the feelings she desires. She knows she cannot be readily accepted into society as an independent woman, and she decides that her true, newly awakened personality will never fit into the mold

she has been forcing herself to observe for so long. With nowhere to go, she returns to Grand Isle and drowns herself in the sea.

As Chopin suggests through this plot, the societal politics of marriage and motherhood during the time created further oppression and restrictions for women rather than offering them any kind of adulthood or independence, which many women were striving for during first-wave feminism and the fight for more rights. Gail Lippincott describes an offshoot of this notion when she writes that "[Chopin's] muted discourse resists and subverts those cultural conventions that silence any mention of the expected outcome of a woman's role as wife—pregnancy—in order to fulfill the sacred role of motherhood" (56). Lippincott's description of Chopin's discourse as "muted" is reasonable, but Chopin's method was not as successful as Lippincott suggests. The point of this passage is still quite important, however: Chopin's methods suggest that, while the expectation for women to marry and have children is relatively acceptable, refusing to allow women to discuss the events leading to motherhood is unfairly restrictive and somewhat imprisoning. This argument was not a welcome one at the time of the novel's publication, and many critics were offended and disgusted by the thought of women sharing stories of their sexuality, especially in relation to infidelity, as we shall see in a later chapter.

Chopin's style and form in this novel are complex in that they contain multiple levels of meaning leading to many possible interpretations. The following analysis will use the key themes, including marriage, motherhood, oppression, sexuality, and independence, to describe and explore the ways in which Chopin has crafted a narrative that emphasizes and applauds female empowerment while criticizing women's oppression, including the restriction on women's language when it comes to topics like pregnancy. This will involve a detailed analysis of her writing style and methods of relaying information to the reader, which is essential in

understanding her aims in writing *The Awakening* as well as in defining the notion that Chopin's writing is a form of rejection of social norms in itself. In other words, Chopin's novel contributes to the work of first-wave feminists in a very concrete way.

One of the strongest and most vivid theories explaining the idea of covert pregnancy is that of a "double-edged discourse," which Gail Lippincott presents in "Thirty-Nine Weeks: Pregnancy and Birth Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." In her essay, Lippincott argues that Chopin uses frequent pregnancy metaphors and imagery as a means of creating a double-edged discourse to both covertly and overtly discuss maternity (55). She is correct in asserting that Chopin "captures the moods and materiality of a literal pregnancy" while being able to hide "Edna's metaphoric pregnancy [of her own individual self]," but she gives Chopin's method too much credit since, as we shall see, it was not as effective as Chopin may have hoped: critics saw through Chopin's covert suggestions. Lippincott goes on to note the importance of being discreet enough as to create the appearance of being at least somewhat modest (56). This façade of modesty must have been a significant yet necessary challenge for Chopin, whose novel is clearly more explicit than the times would allow but not as explicit as it may have been if she had refused to censor her language or lightly conceal some of her themes.

Recalling Beatrice Tina's book can help us to understand that the oppression of women caused them some difficulty in expressing their ideas about their personal lives. Those who accepted the risk of writing in a manner that might appear crude, including women like Tina, were often criticized and disregarded. Chopin's novel discusses very personal matters, but she attempted to be more strategic in her presentation of these matters. She wrote using a double-edged discourse in an effort to conceal the sexuality implicit in the novel while still emphasizing these topics. The most prominent use of double-edged discourse in *The Awakening* is visible in

Chopin's treatment of pregnancy, which we will examine after a discussion of Chopin's more conventional techniques. Considering the other techniques will provide a background for thinking about the more powerful kind of work performed by the double-edged discourse.

Aside from her use of a double-edged discourse, Chopin attempted to manipulate readers by using descriptive language for less taboo images while being somewhat terse in regard to more sensitive matters. During one of Edna's visits to Madame Ratignolle, Chopin describes the latter as such: "Madame Ratignolle looked more beautiful than ever there at home, in a negligé which left her arms almost wholly bare and exposed the rich, melting curves of her white throat" (256). This is a sensual presentation of a woman's body, taking into account the "bare" arms and "melting curves" that would have been concealed in more usual clothing. This shows the reader that Edna's awakening is more than merely sexual; it is an opening of her mind to all the beauty and feeling that surrounds her, including something as simple as the beauty of a woman's body. Since she is becoming more aware of her own physical body and the effects other people have on her bodily responses, she is also in tune with other physical presences. She is not physically attracted to Madame Ratignolle in a sexual way, but she can appreciate her friend's pleasant appearance for the effect it elicits from her heightened senses.

This contrasts greatly with a scene more indicative of sexual desire. Before Edna's affair with Arobin, Arobin gently kisses her hand. After he leaves, Edna reflects on how "the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her," after which she falls asleep (292). The language of this passage is clearly more muted than that of the previous quotation. Rather than showing Edna's excitement about the kiss, Chopin describes its effect as a more relaxingly "narcotic" one. Even though we are made slightly aware of Edna's enjoyment of that kiss—Chopin writes that Edna "felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed

into an act of infidelity, and realizes the significance of the act without being wholly awakened from its glamour," implying that she is at least somewhat desirous of Arobin—Chopin purposely uses language that fails to show Edna's desire and excitement (291). In this and other passages, Chopin affords the reader some insight into intimate moments without using forceful language to describe Edna's desire. Her use of muted language is an attempt to avoid alienating readers who dislike the thought of a woman having a sexual affair. The contrast between the feelings present in these scenes suggests that Chopin was attempting to conceal the underlying sexuality of the latter scene by making it appear less sensually overwhelming than the images present in the more innocuous scenes.

Interestingly, the scenes that more openly incorporate sexuality introduce a sense of monogamy to the work, though not monogamy between man and wife. Throughout the novel, there is no reason to believe that Edna is continuing a sexual relationship with her husband, nor has she ever been in love with him. Her strong attraction to Robert becomes her first glimpse into full romantic feeling. This emotional connection forms a bond between Robert and her—one that she and her husband lack—which becomes the connection to which she feels the most allegiance. Using the scene above as a reference point, after Arobin kisses Edna's hand, Edna wonders "what [*he* would] think" (emphasis added), and Chopin clarifies that "[Edna] did not mean her husband; she was thinking of Robert Lebrun. Her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse" (292). Edna's concern for Robert's feelings about her growing relationship with Arobin is indicative of her respect for monogamy when it comes to a man she truly loves—Robert, who is physically absent at this point after moving to Mexico—rather than someone toward whom she has never felt passionate—her husband, Léonce. We are not provided with any information as to why Edna married Léonce,

but, given his large income, we can assume he is a member of the upper class. This suggests that her marriage was a match based on position and wealth rather than on attraction or love, and, from the passing mention of Edna's having married Léonce six years prior to the novel's opening, we know that she was only twenty-two when she married him (248). Chopin seems to be positing a critique of marriage by showing in this passage that marriages based on convenience or financial advantage—which formed a significant portion of the marriages of higher classes during this time—seem insignificant once someone encounters stronger feelings for a person other than her spouse. These stronger feelings are an "excuse" for a connection, unlike a somewhat arbitrary marriage to a person simply because he is a good financial match. Love is more personal and more capable of reminding someone to be faithful, as we can see in this passage. Though Edna eventually consummates her affair with Arobin, she does so with reluctance and the assurance that she has no romantic feeling for him. One might correctly believe that Chopin is arguing for monogamy, but not the type based on loveless or passionless marriages.

Chopin's argument against marriage strengthens when Robert returns from Mexico and finally declares his love for Edna. She reciprocates with tender kisses to show him how she feels. Despite this, when Robert confesses that he has been dreaming of her being allowed to leave Léonce in order to marry him, she says:

> '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. If he were to say, "Here, Robert, take her and be happy, she is yours," I should laugh at you both.' (339)

Even though Edna wants to have a relationship with Robert in which they "shall love each other…[and] be everything to each other" (340)—which are the usual components of a loving marriage—she refuses to be anyone's wife. In her mind, being a wife is synonymous with being someone's property, a "possession" whose life is never truly autonomous. The concept of being married to anyone, even to a man she truly loves, has become undesirable to her. In her newly independent state, she is willing to love and be loved by man, but she refuses to give in to the pressures that shape many women's lives. She has made the choice to live freely, which means that she refuses to surrender to others' desires.

Edna's desire to live freely also has a large impact on her role as a mother. We know that she has never been very close to her children, as is described early in the novel:

> Feeling secure regarding [her children's] happiness and welfare [while they stayed with their grandmother the summer before], she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (198)

While Edna clearly feels "responsibility" for her children, as is made obvious by the notion that she feels "secure" knowing they are in good hands, she is also denying her true feeling of relative apathy for her children. She realizes she is supposed to be a good mother, hence her "blind assumption" of that role, but her heart is not in motherhood. As time passes, she ceases to deny her true feelings and begins to realize that she cannot allow her concern for her children to trump her independence of thought and feeling. This is described particularly vividly when Edna considers that "she had been all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves….Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never

sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one" (244). Madame Ratignolle is understandably confused and upset by this statement. As a woman in a happy marriage who embodies wifeliness and motherly grace, she believes that her husband and children are extremely important parts of her life for whom she would make great sacrifices. Edna tries to explain her position by saying that she would "give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (244). Within this declaration, Edna is explaining that her feelings and thoughts are more important than a "life" without the ability to express herself. To her, a life without the means to explore her newly discovered emotions is not a real life, but rather a mindless existence of subservience and of "[harboring] thoughts and emotions," which would be a regression for her at this point.

A large part of the reason Edna is so free to act on the feelings illuminated by her awakening is that, for the majority of the narrative, her children are with their paternal grandmother in Iberville, and her husband is in New York on business. The distance from her family permits her to live freely as an individual, and, now that she has recognized the attractions of freedom, she would rather "give up her life" than return to her old one. This is exactly what she does when, realizing she has nowhere to go but backward, she drowns herself in the sea.

Despite the fact that Chopin knowingly overstepped many societal boundaries in writing her novel as a means of demonstrating certain principles underlying women's oppression, she did not wish to be shunned by readers and critics.[2] Her self-censorship extends into one of the major undertones of the novel: pregnancy. Lippincott provides a surprising reading of the novel based on the notion that Chopin wrote the novel in thirty-nine chapters in order to represent thirty-nine

[2] This is evidenced by the fact that Chopin did not try to publish any major pieces of writing after the widespread rejection of *The Awakening* as well as the point that she was left with debt after Oscar's death and wrote, in part, to make money. Without a significant readership, her income would be very scarce.

weeks of pregnancy, which leads to a rather positive reading of the ending as a rebirth rather than a more negative suicide. This conforms to the novel's time span of nine months. Lippincott also notes the changes in mood and attitude as the novel progresses through "trimesters," representing and reflecting the emotional changes that accompany pregnancy (57). This is a very compelling argument that suggests a positive reading of the novel's conclusion: at the end of the thirty-nine "weeks," Edna "re-births" herself by entering the sea, which, in Lippincott's view, is representative of new life rather than solely death by suicide (64).

Partially because of this suicide, the sea is a key symbol in *The Awakening*, and it inspires many interpretations. The strongest interpretation comes from the narrator at points in the novel, many of which are similar to an early mention of the sea: "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (190). This passage represents the sea as a maternal being that provides comfort and acceptance. At this early point, Edna does not know how to swim; as the novel progresses, she gradually becomes more comfortable with the thought of entering the sea as a result of Robert Lebrun's assistance and her increasing self-awareness and self-trust. By the end of the novel, she has opened herself to the possibility of the sea's liberating effects. Her willingness to enter the sea in the final pages, then, is a largely positive act—she has learned to trust herself and is ultimately "re-birthed" from a maternal sea that grants her the acceptance she has long desired. Using these definitions, the argument that the ending is symbolic of rebirth is quite clear and valid. This is representative of the modern feminist reading of *The Awakening*, which attempts to celebrate the novel as a courageous text that encourages women to release their subservient reliance on society and propel themselves beyond the restrictions placed on them. To ignore the fact that Edna is actually

committing suicide would be an error, however, and we will revisit the novel's conclusion to further understand Chopin's motives for including such an unpromising ending.

For a woman to separate herself from society and become independent is no easy task, especially in the late nineteenth century. Edna's desire for independence, along with the tensions of a woman holding such a desire, is present from an early point in *The Awakening*:

> 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. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (190)

This quotation holds two meanings that correspond to the double-edged discourse in the novel, one of independence and the other of maternity. Upon reading this passage, we can immediately recognize that Edna's yearning for independence is growing and that the notion of her being unworthy of independence is so ingrained within her (as a result of its being apparent and forceful in society) as to incur a "weight" upon her soul. Chopin is clearly pushing for her readers to understand the gravity associated with a woman's realization that she is a human being rather than simply or completely a wife or mother. Edna's acceptance of independence gives her more agency and power both personally and socially. In terms of maternity, Chopin's use of the term "the world within" is a possible reference to pregnancy in that a new life or "world" is forming within Edna's body. Lippincott points to a similar quote toward the beginning of the same chapter—"A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her" (189)—as another reference to pregnancy. This is not a definite reference, but, since similar moments appear at many points throughout the novel, it is not unlikely that Chopin meant for these frequent

suggestions of pregnancy to be indicative of a larger matter. As we've discovered, Chopin understood the importance of monitoring her language and symbolism. This is a prime example of a moment in which she uses a double-edged discourse to refer to pregnancy without explicitly mentioning it.

Further indications of the difference between Edna's external and internal lives create an additional level of meaning to the idea of inner and outer worlds in the novel. Chopin describes Edna as having a "dual life," which contains "the outward existence which conforms [and] the inward life which questions" (190). One of these types of life is clearly favored over the other in terms of personal fulfillment—one can "exist" at the basic level of being a living organism, but this is not equivalent to having a "life," which suggests a more important form and attitude of being. This quote suggests that Chopin recognizes the need for women to display the façade of subservience despite secretly opposing the existing gender norms. This point is a major one within this thesis. Women could and did "exist," but many were fighting for rights in order to "live." This distinction forms a significant basis for women, including Chopin's fictional character, to knowingly risk their positions in society: they fought for the chance to experience real lives in which their roles as wives and mothers did not completely define their personalities and actions. Although Edna is fictional, her early desires mirror those of many women of the time whose "dual lives" allowed them to fit neatly into the pockets created for them in society while dreaming of a different way of life that would allow their passions and desires to take the reins.

Shirley Foster offers the argument that many women, including Chopin herself, lived this sort of dual life. She states that Chopin "[uses her] work to articulate [her] sense of destructiveness of conventions which condemn women to a single function" (155). This "single

function" is, of course, the role of being a wife, which contains the pressure to become a mother. Foster makes the case that the number of expectations placed on women after marriage became stifling to the point at which they could carry out only the requirements of wifedom and motherhood without the opportunity to grow as individuals. Another critic, Ivy Schweitzer, makes a similar claim that "motherhood and individuality seem mutually exclusive" (162). Schweitzer's argument begins to conform to Lippincott's when she begins her discussion of the various types of maternity present in the novel. Like Lippincott, she presents us with two modes of motherhood: Edna's literal motherhood of two boys, and the "self-birth" in the "maternal" sea (164). The former is described as something that may hold Edna back from living her own life; the latter provides a suggestion for the way in which she will become free. Schweitzer goes one step further and points out the ways in which Edna rejects her oppressions, eventually leading her to feelings and desires she could not have anticipated. Edna moves out of her family's home and into a smaller house by herself; she sells her paintings, which is an unacceptable practice for a woman of her relatively high position in society; and, most notably, she has an affair, which eventually and indirectly leads to her suicide. Schweitzer argues that Edna's sexual awakening causes her to become more aware of her physical nature, which in turn allows her to recall her other physical feelings and responsibilities, such as her natural physical role of being a mother (183). This is a role she cannot escape regardless of the actions she takes. The narrator confirms this on the final page of the novel while Edna has begun her fatal movement into the sea: "She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (351). Edna recognizes that she cannot break free from her relationships to her husband and children, yet she believes that she must take action against their domination over her individual life in order to be content. As a result of this

inability to shake off the demands and expectations of being a wife and mother, only one escape is available to her: suicide. By taking her own life, she releases herself from the oppression to which she has been subjected. She finally becomes free from every restraint that once held her back. As the maternal sea engulfs her, she releases her roles as wife and mother and is reborn as a "new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (Chopin 350).

Schweitzer's analysis adds a sense of hopelessness to Edna's story that Lippincott fails to address in her essay. This suggests that Chopin could not realistically depict a woman's independence without demonstrating the impossibility of being a truly free woman. A relatively unhappy ending was therefore necessary in this work. It would not have made sense for Edna, who has become a strong and independently minded woman, to go back to her life as the "angel in the house" who does as her husband pleases and takes care of her children at the expense of her own wishes. Likewise, it would be impossible for Edna to be accepted into upper-class society as both a mother and an independent woman. Her role as a mother necessarily precludes her attainment of independence, which leaves her with very few options if she wishes to truly cast aside her responsibilities.

Though Edna commits suicide, Chopin is careful to represent this death in a positive light akin to rebirth. The final paragraph of the novel expresses this very clearly:

> She heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. (351)

At this point, we can only assume that Edna has reached her final moment. Although at this point she is well into the sea and will soon drown, we do not encounter the smell, feel, taste, or sound of the sea. Instead, we are given an image of family and springtime. “The hum of bees” and “musky odor of pinks” is clearly indicative of the beginnings of new life. Of course, we can never truly cast aside the fact that Edna actually commits suicide, regardless of the scene’s framing. To do so would cause us to understate one of the most compelling points of the novel. Therefore, we must examine why she drowns herself. In this case, suicide represents an untamable conflict between motherhood and selfhood. Since Edna cannot be both a mother and the true version of herself, she is violating contemporary gender roles in a very serious way by attempting to be a mother as well as an independent woman who pursues her desires and shares her innermost thoughts and feelings. Suicide is the visible manifestation of her frustration at failing to happily fit into her prescribed gender role.

As a realistic novel, *The Awakening* could not have pretended to contain the all-encompassing answer for women looking to become independent. Chopin could not give Edna a happy ending with the knowledge that it was difficult and even dangerous for women to resist their prescribed roles; but by including Edna’s suicide or, as she likely intended it, her rebirth as an independent being, she also wrote with the promise of something better to come. She could not have known what the future would bring, nor was she prepared to deal with the devastation of the negative reception of her novel. Her work incorporated strongly feminist aims, but her contemporary audience was not equipped to understand those aims and thus disagreed strongly with her thoughts, ideas, and methods. Her double-edged discourse, it seems, was not a sufficient method to conceal her weighty opinions.

CHAPTER 2: *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

Throughout her career, Edith Wharton was a lauded writer whose novels focused on some of the major issues emerging in New York's leisure class, a society she knew well as a result of her privileged upbringing. Despite her personal transgressions beyond the accepted norms for a woman of her time—including an extramarital affair and an eventual divorce—she continued to hold a respectable place within literary circles. In 1920 she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, and many of her novels were popularly read. Since one may correctly observe that Wharton's writing focused on themes similar to those of Chopin, Wharton's success creates a curious contrast to Chopin's relative failure as a writer. The following section will provide a discussion of Wharton's life alongside an analysis of her 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country* in order to explain and develop a description of Wharton's methods along with her treatment of marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood in the novel. This will culminate in an eventual comparison to Chopin's similar themes and quite different methods through an examination of critical reception in the final chapter.

Wharton and her two brothers were raised within a privileged upper-class family, which heavily influenced her abilities as a writer and the themes of many of her stories. This upbringing allowed her to become an expert on matters of life, both positive and negative, within the leisure class. Her writing often criticizes and reflects on the way marriage worked within this class. Wharton's novels include exaggerated characters who elicit negative reception in some cases, but she skillfully uses them to demonstrate and magnify the very real problems that existed within the leisure class. Their exaggerated characteristics grant her the ability to avoid treatment of them as extremely realistic people, which allows her to gloss over many personal events that

authors like Chopin emphasized. In so doing, she is able to posit a critique on a social class rather than on specific characters.

Much like Undine Spragg, the main character of *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton kept secrets that, if divulged, would have seriously threatened her place in society. Her marriage with Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton was a respectable pairing, but she was not satisfied with her choice of husband, notably admitting that this marriage was her "greatest mistake" (Auchincloss 50). Her more satisfying romantic affair with Morton Fullerton began in 1908 and is well documented in her diaries and letters. Due to a fear of negative publicity leading to social alienation, Wharton repeatedly asked Fullerton to return or burn her letters, which he failed to do. One letter from early April of 1908 states, "I beg instant cremation for this," demonstrating that secrecy in these matters was of utmost importance to Wharton (*Letters* 139). Though the physical evidence was hidden for a time, the emotional traces of this affair and of Wharton's 1913 divorce were quite obvious: many scholars agree that her affair marked the beginning of a sexual awakening that became apparent in her writing (Erlich 75). Furthermore, we can see that divorce was in Wharton's thoughts when she wrote *The Custom of the Country*, which was published the same year as her divorce. A clear parallel exists between Wharton's marriage and affair and those of Undine: Wharton's husband fell ill and requested that she stay with him through his illness, causing her to leave France (and Fullerton) to care for her husband; Undine, on the other hand, is married to Ralph Marvell, who is in America, but engaged in an affair with Peter Van Degen in France when Ralph's sister tells Undine that Ralph is very sick and begs her to return home, which Undine refuses to do. Wharton's fictional characters may be more daring and self-serving than she was, but we should note that both Wharton and Undine filed for divorce shortly following their affairs.

Wharton seems to have struggled with the idea of divorce (Wright 61). Although she was more financially independent than her husband, she did not wish to be ridiculed for leaving him. Most evidence suggests that she was unhappy in her marriage for almost its entire duration of twenty-eight years, but divorce was not a respectable option for a woman of her social class. Unlike her brash character Undine, she avoided filing for divorce for quite some time. Her eventual relocation to Europe left Teddy behind in America with deteriorating mental health and many unpleasant habits and purchases—including a house of his own where he often received a mistress—that were paid for using Wharton's inheritance. When Wharton finally filed for divorce, she did so in France to avoid negative attention. In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton allows Undine to use divorce as a way to get out of marriages three separate times, but, notably, she never allows her character to find happiness. This suggests that the novel actively criticizes divorce as being an easy way out rather than a true solution to one's problems. We can imagine that Wharton understood the occasional need for divorce, but she still looked upon it with a critical eye in part because it did not create a beneficial situation for women.

The disadvantages of divorce in relation to women are very clearly articulated in *The Custom of the Country* when Undine meets Ralph's family and discusses the possibility of divorcing a man if he cannot provide everything the wife desires. Mrs. Marvell remarks, "I believe in certain parts of the country such—unfortunate arrangements—are beginning to be tolerated. But in New York, in spite of our growing indifference, a divorced woman is still—thank heaven!—at a decided disadvantage" (61). When Undine expresses confusion at this, Mrs. Marvell explains that divorced women may be received only by the less respected members of society and that a divorced woman should not expect to have access to the same privileges she enjoyed when she was married. Mrs. Marvell's opinion of divorce is similar to the popular

leisure-class opinion of the time, and it helps to explain Wharton's own hesitance in this matter. Many people of higher classes were generally opposed to divorce, possibly because it threatened to remove a significant portion of their property or inheritances and thus produced a decline in their social position. Ideas like Mrs. Marvell's are sprinkled throughout the novel, reminding the reader that Undine's thought process and decisions are unusual and imprudent.

Marriage and divorce within the leisure class heavily drive the plot of and are the most pronounced themes in *The Custom of the Country*. The story opens with Undine Spragg and her parents living in a fashionable New York hotel. Undine is an extremely beautiful young woman who gains the attention of many men, and her family has moved to New York from Apex, Kansas in order to give Undine a better chance of leading a successful life. In this time and place, a successful life for a woman of Undine's background would involve marrying a man with enough money to sustain her lavish lifestyle. After a couple years in New York, however, Undine has not been inducted into upper-class society. This is a problem for her family since they do not have the funds to keep up with her ever-growing demands, and so she finds that she must do whatever it takes to quickly charm her way to the top. She eventually meets and hurriedly becomes engaged to Ralph Marvell, a man from a respectable leisure-class family. Beginning around the time of her engagement, she occasionally encounters a less reputable man named Elmer Moffatt, but, for a time, we understand only that he knew Undine in Apex and is keeping a secret about the two of them. As the novel unfolds, we learn that Undine and Elmer were secretly married in Apex and that Undine is willing to go to great lengths to ensure that their marriage (and, presumably, their subsequent divorce) will remain a secret. We are to assume that the public knowledge of her marriage to a man who is not of the leisure class and, worse, of her being a divorced woman will cause great difficulties in convincing any leisure-

class man to marry her. We are to recognize that the discovery of her secret will force her to spend her life as an impoverished divorcée.

Ralph courts and marries Undine without being confronted by Elmer or detecting Undine's previous marriage, and Undine fares successfully for a short period of time: she has married a man of position within society, which has been, to this point, her loftiest goal. She soon realizes that Ralph does not have the funds necessary to sustain her lavish desires; but, since she becomes pregnant with his child, she retains few options other than to unhappily remain his wife, at least for a while. Pregnancy, in Undine's opinion, is a dreadful and undesired experience that will remove her from society for at least nine months, and she has very little interest in becoming a mother. Undine's hatred of her own pregnancy—which, as we shall see, is skillfully broached and lightly discussed by Wharton—can be relatively easily explained by her displeasure of the inability to go into society as frequently or freely as usual along with a potential fear of the pain and bodily changes incurred during pregnancy, including the possibility of death during childbirth. As of 1910, the rate of maternal deaths due to childbirth was approximately one in every 727 births, which is a lower number than in the past but still significant enough to inspire fear in expectant mothers (Chesser 91). Undine's aversion to motherhood is more interesting and complicated than can be explained by these few facts, however, and will be discussed later in this section.

After becoming a mother and settling into debt and disappointment in her marriage, Undine lashes out in a way that allows Wharton to openly share her critique of divorce. Undine begins an affair with the very wealthy Peter Van Degen, who is married to Ralph's cousin Clare. Undine divorces Ralph with the aim of marrying Peter, but she has been too careless and hasty with this decision: after noticing Undine's lack of attention to Ralph during his illness, Peter

hesitates and ultimately decides against being with Undine. He does not leave his wife, fearing that Undine would treat him poorly if he were to commit to her. As a newly divorced woman with no marriage prospects, Undine is held in low esteem by the leisure-class families she used to know and travels alone until moving to France and gaining the attention of Raymond de Chelles, a French aristocrat. Though he has developed feelings for Undine, his Catholic faith will not allow him to marry a divorced woman.

We can see in these moments that Wharton was providing a clear critique of the consequences of divorce and of women who file for divorce without adequate reason. To some extent, divorced women were not respected regardless of the circumstances causing their divorces. Wharton would clearly disagree with this treatment since she was a divorcée herself. By pointing out the sometimes unfairly poor treatment of divorced women, she likely had the aim of defending divorce to a certain degree. According to the way she handles Undine's divorces, however, she probably believed that some women treated divorce too lightly and sought separations when they lacked valid reasons to do so. As of 1912, New York divorce law—which was stricter than that of most states at the time—stated that an "absolute divorce may be granted only for adultery" but that a "limited divorce may be granted for cruel treatment…or for the husband's neglect to provide for the wife" (Wilson 237).[1] Wharton never overtly states Undine's official reason for filing for divorce, though Undine's father believes "desertion is the usual plea in such cases" (208), implying that women may be able to stretch the truth in order to be granted a divorce. Undine's location while filing for divorce is also fairly unclear, but it seems likely that Undine filed in France due to their less strict divorce laws, as we understand from briefly studying Wharton's own divorce. In any case, Wharton's treatment of

[1] A limited divorce is a legal separation that prohibits either party from remarrying.

Ralph's and Mr. Spragg's feelings in this instance—that is, her portrayal of the men in disbelief, sadness, and anger—tells the reader that Undine's decision is selfish and problematic.

Wharton shows one of the gravest consequences of Undine's rushed decision to divorce Ralph through her demonstration of the enormously negative effects of divorce between couples with children. In a scheme to raise enough money to bribe the Pope to annul Undine's previous marriage and thus allow her to marry Raymond de Chelles, Undine threatens Ralph by telling him that she will fight to gain rights of their son, Paul, if he does not produce a large sum of money. Undine thinks of marriage and motherhood as businesses that can be negotiated rather than as opportunities for love and happiness. This arrangement also demonstrates the ways in which Undine is constantly in the position of relying on men for aid of various types. Unfortunately, Ralph fails to make enough money on time, and he becomes distraught with the knowledge that he will have to give up Paul. As a result, he commits suicide. Since Undine's marriage has now been naturally dissolved, she can marry Chelles. After a fairly brief period of marriage she realizes that, despite his social position and family heirlooms, Chelles does not have enough actual money to sustain her lifestyle. For the second time in a short while, Undine has allowed her idealized vision of upper-class life to trick her into believing that marrying an upper-class man will grant her the life she has always desired.

Another problem with her marriage to Chelles is that she dislikes living in his country estate and longs to be in the city where people can see and envy her. During this period, Elmer Moffatt makes a trip to Chelles' estate to buy some of Chelles' tapestries for his art collection, unaware of Undine's new marriage. At this point, Undine realizes how wealthy Moffatt has become and, of course, becomes attracted to him. Shortly thereafter, Undine and Chelles divorce, and Undine marries Moffatt once more. As we reach the end of the novel, even Moffatt's great

wealth and ability to provide for Undine cannot arrest her insatiable desire for everything she doesn't currently possess. This time, she wants Moffatt to become an ambassador, which would afford her more privileges and prestige. Moffatt explains to her that this would be impossible since he is married to a divorcée, and divorced women cannot be ambassadresses. The novel ends with Undine in a state of longing for something that money cannot buy. Despite her ambition and business sense, she will never achieve all that she desires.

An examination of this plot makes it clear that Wharton is criticizing certain modes of divorce and also pointing out the ways in which the leisure-class marriage system creates a space for women to correctly think of marriage as a business venture. As we have already seen, this analysis is fairly accurate, but it does not fully explain Undine's motivations. The idea of marriage as business is a fairly recent argument which emerged during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and is perhaps best articulated by Elizabeth Ammons, who states:

> [Wharton] uses Undine to reveal her criticism of the cultural attitudes implicit in leisure-class marriage, an institution which encourages the husband to assert his autonomous identity as an international playboy like Peter Van Degen or as a manager in the business world…while the wife, expected to be supportive and dependent, must channel her desires for self-assertive individuality into the role of conspicuous consumer for him. Her life, in contrast to her husband's, is by definition parasitic and vicarious. (328)

This system of marriage is obviously one that prevented women from being independent, which was a major concern during first-wave feminism and thus relates well to this novel and to Wharton's motivations for writing a story with these themes. In order to describe Undine's character, many critics borrow a phrase coined by Wharton herself by arguing that Wharton has

imagined the "'monstrously perfect result' of a system of 'contemptuous indulgence' of women" (M.L.F. 557). Undine has evolved to understand the ways in which marriage forces women to become dependent, and she has used this to her advantage by seeking out the man (or men) upon whom she can most comfortably depend. Her selfishness, therefore, is more of a business strategy than a character flaw. According to Wharton, however, marriage as a business is itself a significant flaw within leisure-class society. Though Undine is largely considered to be a grossly exaggerated characterization, Wharton designed her to show the leisure class the extremes of what their institutions could do to women who desired more freedom than was reasonably attainable given the available options. Undine exhibits the selfishness and motivation to thrive in the situation, and thrive she does.

Along with Undine's selfishness, another quite striking component of *The Custom of the Country* lies in the fact that Undine seems to dislike the need to be dependent on men, yet she uses her good looks and her façade of subservience to remain in the good graces of men throughout her life. Although she has a limited range of options, she uses the few tools society has given her in order to gain what she desires. A subset of this principle is explained by Narumi Yoshino, who says that Undine acts in a childish manner in order to achieve "eternal daughterhood" (39). Yoshino's argument is effective in convincing the reader that Undine does indeed act in a "childish" manner throughout the novel by marrying men who can take care of her both emotionally and financially. Yoshino denies the possibility that Undine acts this way because it is one of the very limited methods she can use to receive the attention, adoration, and material objects she longs for. Though Yoshino presents an interesting and quite unique analysis, she does so at the expense of discovering the more textually supported meaning: Undine remains in a state of childlike dependence not because she wishes to do so, but rather because the rules of

leisure-class society will not allow her to live independently. In other words, Undine will feign childishness in order to achieve some sense of control in her life. Upon close inspection we come to realize that Undine's life is one of great control and calculation. She may appear to be an indecisive woman who is ever dependent on men, but she knows how to manipulate the system to get what she wants. She is in fact very successful in attaining her goals. Wharton makes her character successful yet enormously unlikable to demonstrate that the leisure-class marriage market creates this undesirable type of woman, which is clearly a negative outcome of the status quo. In short, Wharton uses Undine to illustrate an enormous critique of marriage within the leisure class.

Yoshino's analysis is not without merit, however, since it broaches the topic of Undine's reliance on men. Yoshino observes that, throughout many of Undine's marriages, Abner Spragg steps in to save his daughter from the low incomes of her husbands. After her first marriage to Elmer Moffatt he breaks up the match, and during her marriage to Ralph he continually provides funds when Ralph's income is not meeting his daughter's demands. When Undine is single, Abner never ceases to help her financially by giving her everything she wants, and he often does so with a smile on his face. Finally, when Undine is married to Chelles, Elmer Moffatt—rather than Abner—comes to her aid and buys her affection, as Abner did in the past. After her second marriage to Elmer, there is no suggestion that Undine is still reliant on her father, and we can assume that she is entirely dependent on Elmer's more-than-adequate income. Elmer has therefore become a paternal figure to Undine, providing for her and considering her a type of possession along with his other expensive items (Yoshino 47).

While this is all valid, Yoshino does not examine why this father-daughter relationship is attractive to Undine or why Wharton might write the kind of narrative that involves this

particular relationship pattern, which are crucial points of interest in this thesis. The simple answer is that Undine acts in such a way in order to fit into the mold available to women, which we have already discussed; and the more complex answer involves Wharton's resistance of a society that she viewed as patriarchal. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "patriarchy" is defined as "a form of social organization in which the father or oldest male is the head of the family, and descent and relationship are reckoned through the male line" ("patriarchy," *OED*). Undine's string of marriages along with her dependence on her father fit neatly into this definition. Wharton has created a character who marries in such a manner and, because of her actions, is considered a ridiculous exaggeration by much of her readership in order to demonstrate the shortcomings of a patriarchal system. This is a type of structure in which women are expected and encouraged to rely on men. By showing that Undine is more or less incapable of doing otherwise, and by making Undine appear to be the extreme of the type of woman this form of society creates, Wharton demonstrates the negative effects of patriarchy. If women are criticized for being self-reliant, she seems to say, then some women will learn to manipulate the system by seeking men who can provide them with the items and situations they should have been able to attain by themselves. Wharton, a recently divorced woman who would never remarry, was surely familiar with this idea.

Although Wharton touches on many of the themes Chopin included in *The Awakening*, she does so in a more subtle manner that draws significantly less attention to sexuality. In terms of women's personal issues in the novel, Wharton forms only suggestions of situations and thus avoids the appearance of impropriety. For example, if Undine had not become pregnant, we would have had no evidence that she and Ralph had consummated their marriage. Even when

Wharton notifies us of Undine's pregnancy, she makes no explicit mention of pregnancy or childbirth:

> Her fatigue of the previous evening came back to him—a puzzled hunted look in her eyes; and with the memory a vague wonder revived. He had fancied himself fairly disencumbered of the stock formulas about the hallowing effects of motherhood, and there were many reasons for not welcoming the news he suspected she had to give; but the woman a man loves is always a special case, and everything was different that befell Undine. (115)

This scene is crucial in that it provides a glimpse into how Ralph perceives Undine's fears as well as what he believes about pregnancy. His perception of pregnancy is a negative one as described by the "stock formulas" he has encountered of the stereotypes of pregnant women. The "many reasons for not welcoming" pregnancy probably refer to the possibility of Undine's death during childbirth and are almost certainly related to the ideas presented in Lyman Sperry's aforementioned book: Wharton's description of pregnancy as "the approach of illness, anxiety, and expense, and of the general unnecessary disorganization of their lives" (116) mirrors Sperry's description of pregnant women becoming "more impressible, apprehensive and anxious, and also usually more irritable, than [they are] when pregnancy does not exist" (175).

Beyond giving us an idea of how men usually reacted to their wives' pregnancies, this passage contains a prime example of Wharton's use of euphemisms to discuss sensitive topics. Wharton mentions the "hallowing effects of motherhood," though she does not mean the role of being a mother. Instead, she is referring to the less desirable effects of pregnancy. Using the term "motherhood" rather than "pregnancy" keeps Wharton in the good graces of her readers, most of whom likely applauded motherhood while avoiding most discussion of the actual pregnancy that

preceded it. In the following chapter, after absolutely no mention of Undine in her physically pregnant state, we are notified that "little Paul Marvell, from his beautiful pink cradle, was already interfering with his mother's plans," which tells us in fairly plain terms that Undine has had a child (125). By supplying the suggestion of pregnancy, Wharton is able to convey the important points while concealing the details that might have been construed as improper. We still recognize Undine's and Ralph's feelings about pregnancy, and we still understand that Undine would rather not enter into motherhood. We can comprehend that Undine cannot engage in her usual practices while pregnant, and this knowledge allows us to gather the important points of Undine's unhappy pregnancy. Wharton's method in writing this section is similar to the way that society would have seen (or not seen) a pregnancy in real life. Acquaintances and friends may have realized that a woman was pregnant, but they probably did not see or hear explicit details of the pregnancy until the birth of the child, at which point the woman could be thought of and respected as a mother rather than appearing as simply a sexually active woman. Likewise, Wharton has concealed the sexuality inherent in being physically pregnant and has instead given us only the necessary details to allow us to imply the rest until she mentions the resulting son.

This son does not bring Undine happiness, which is quite unusual in terms of the prevailing opinion of motherhood during this time. Although some wives found opportunities to work outside the home, many people still believed that a woman's place was in the home and that her priorities should lie with her children and husband rather than with her personal fulfillment. Elizabeth Chesser, a doctor and feminist, writes in 1913 that "unless [a woman] manifests the true mother spirit in the rearing of her children she is unfit for motherhood" and that "a woman's first duty is to those in her own home" (3). As a woman who bores easily when

forced to stay within the confines of her home, Undine would reject the latter idea and thus be very hesitant to become a mother. The former quote seems to be true on some level: as we see in many instances within the novel, Undine lacks the drive and desire to be a good mother, which is perhaps the primary factor in her failure in this role. On one significant occasion, she forgets about her son's birthday party and instead goes on a more desirable drive around the city with Peter Van Degen. When she realizes she has forgotten about the party, she makes no effort to correct the situation and instead lies to Ralph about her whereabouts when he questions her (138). This scene demonstrates that her reluctance to give up her life as a flirtatious young woman considerably hampers her ability as a mother. She often thinks of Paul as an inconvenience and an irritation, and we almost never see her being affectionate with him.

In what may be the most visibly affectionate scene between mother and son, Undine carries Paul as she walks to hail a cab. She encounters Elmer, who offers to carry Paul for her. At this point, the narrator states that "Undine was glad to be relieved of her burden, for she was unused to the child's weight, and disliked to feel that her skirt was dragging on the pavement" (168). Although Undine is exhibiting motherly behavior, she is "unused" to it since it is not a behavior in which she regularly engages, and she thinks of her son as a rather negative "burden." Furthermore, she is more concerned with *appearing* motherly than with actually caring for her son. On the previous page, while hugging Paul, Undine reflects that "she must present a not unpleasing image of young motherhood" (167). Rather than feeling loving or maternal toward Paul in that moment, she is considering how she objectively appears. By this point, it has become clear that Undine would rather deny her motherhood than allow her life to become one of domestic duty. She seems to prefer the ability to go into the public sphere as she pleases, and

having a child is usually detrimental to this type of behavior—unless, in certain moments, Paul can afford her a more pleasing appearance.

Being a mother also prevents Undine from retaining her childish nature, which we previously discussed. Rather than longing to remain in a psychologically child-like state, however, I would posit that Undine simply wants to retain her physically youthful appearance in order to remain the symbol of status and beauty she has become. Becoming a mother is part of growing up and changing one's priorities along with certain attributes of one's appearance, which is not highly appealing to Undine. Since most of her friends are childless women, Undine's strongest tie to motherhood is the one between herself and Mrs. Spragg, who is almost never described positively. The first time we encounter Mrs. Spragg is in the very first sentence of the novel. In this moment, Mrs. Spragg is "wailing" and "[raising] a prematurely wrinkled hand," which tells the reader that she is both irritating and at least somewhat unattractive in her older age (3). Later, we gain a more complete physical picture of Mrs. Spragg, which creates an even more unfavorable image of her appearance: "Her attire was fashionable enough…and her pale soft-cheeked face, with puffy eyelids and drooping mouth, suggested a partially-melted wax figure which had run to double chin" (4). As the novel progresses, we see that she has very little knowledge of the world outside her hotel room, and she is also quite detached from her own life. She lives for Undine's happiness and asks her husband for favors only when they will benefit their daughter—even when she is aware that they lack the funds necessary to give Undine what she desires.

From Undine's standpoint, this model of motherhood is nearly the polar opposite of what she considers to be an enjoyable life. If she turned out to be the type of mother she knows, she would not only be unable to live for herself and act on her own whims at all times, but she would

also deteriorate physically and socially into an unattractive and quite boring woman with few friends and even fewer hobbies and dreams. When Undine actually does become a mother, she does not allow for much change in her attitudes and behavior. At first, she leaves Paul with Ralph; after Ralph's suicide, she leaves Paul's care to schoolmasters and household employees. She rarely interacts with her son, and she continues to meet and capture the affections of men even after she has become a mother. This is not the typical situation for women of the time. Normally, women made it their priority to provide for their children as much as possible; but Undine's selfishness, along with her denial of responsibilities and longing to be a desirable woman, makes the prospect and practice of motherhood unpleasant.

Based on this account, it seems that Mrs. Spragg did not often share details of her own marriage and pregnancies with Undine. While Undine seems to act beyond her own experience when it comes to matters of flirtation and attracting men, she is utterly clueless when it comes to being a respectful wife and a good mother. In Undine's own reflections, this idea is broached:

> There were moments after Undine's return to New York when she was tempted to class her marriage with the hateful early mistakes from the memories of which she had hoped it would free her. Since it was never her habit to accuse herself of such mistakes it was inevitable that she should gradually come to lay the blame on Ralph. She found a poignant pleasure, at this stage of her career, in the question: "What does a young girl know of life?" (121)

Undine may be less innocent than she usually appears, but this sentiment rings true. Recalling Mary Wood-Allen's and Beatrice Tina's books, we can understand that a woman in this time would not have been prepared for the situations that come with marriage and motherhood since she would not have been taught about these matters beforehand. Interestingly, despite Wharton's

forward-looking ideas about a woman's place in society, she is involved in keeping this information private through her very light detail and avoidance of particularly "taboo" topics. According to Allison Berg, "while Wharton expressed doubts about the feminist and suffrage movements, she nonetheless saw the position of women in American society as the crucial issue of the new century" (76). However important this cause may have been to Wharton, in failing to discuss many ideas in detail, she is allowing the status quo—relative silence—to prevail.

Wharton's ideas and representations of motherhood in her novels may stem from the fact that she was never a mother herself, and her representations of her own mother within her autobiography are telling of a fairly distant relationship between the two: "The autobiographer tells her mother-daughter story the way she has always told it since childhood, and it has several variations: the insensitive mother of the sensitive daughter; the indifferent mother of the eager daughter; the prosaic mother of the lyrical daughter" (Goodman 127). The natural differences between mother and daughter are quite apparent, and this theme occurs in many of Wharton's novels. As Goodman points out, "Wharton was never able to achieve peace with her mother, except the peace established by distance, yet her work can be read as a record of her efforts to negotiate an equitable truce" (130). Motherhood was not something to which Wharton could personally relate, and so her representations of mothers throughout the history of her writing can serve as a kind of experiment in which the mothers become slightly different each time until she has come to terms with and accepted her mother—or, perhaps, come to terms with the lack of motherhood in her own life.

Wharton's skillful broaching of topics, along with her method of exaggerated characterization, allows her to successfully demonstrate the negative aspects of marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood on a societal rather than personal scale. Her reasons for doing so

have been partially explained, but a brief summary may be worthwhile. Due to her familial upbringing as well as the events she witnessed within her social class, Wharton believed that the options available to women were limited and restricted the lives of many. By creating a character who finds a way to excel in this type of environment in spite of the many barriers holding her back, Wharton shows her audience that the prevailing customs will serve to either push women into restrictive marriages or create selfish, uncaring women who have crafted themselves to better find viable alternatives. Wharton's choice to exaggerate Undine's character to such an extent allows her to treat Undine as more of a societal symbol than a realistic person. This creates the opportunity for Wharton to write about the problems within the leisure class rather than the problems of one seemingly selfish woman. Wharton's main intention is for readers to understand that the restrictive leisure-class marriage system will eventually breed people—both men and women—who will use their personal desires to get ahead by any means necessary. Though her work is not as overtly provocative as Chopin's novel, her viewpoint is nevertheless anchored in feminist ideology. Her writing and the events of her own life demonstrate that she strives for consideration, possibilities, and eventual change for women.

CHAPTER 3: RECEPTION

Chopin and Wharton lived as contemporaries and experienced similar cultural difficulties and triumphs throughout their lives. Their novels both reflect a feminist sentiment and the themes to accompany such an aim, but through analyzing *The Awakening* and *The Custom of the Country* many differences have become apparent. These novels are written in very different styles with varied levels of directness in description and complicity with social norms. While Chopin dares to stretch the limits of socially acceptable language and imagery, Wharton conveys her ideas with more adherence to decency and propriety. Due to this difference (among others), the novels were received quite dissimilarly upon publication. *The Awakening* was subject to a great deal of scrutiny, which affected Chopin so deeply as to cause her to stop writing altogether. *The Custom of the Country*, on the other hand, was received with little praise but also little opposition, and Wharton remained a prolific and often celebrated author until her death in 1937. This section will draw out the comparison between the receptions of these two novels in order to examine the ways in which these differences contribute to more complete readings of the books. Chopin's and Wharton's methods and themes will be contrasted throughout this section to allow us to better understand the customs and attitudes of the societies that received the novels. This will present us with a clearer understanding of the underlying ideas about women's sexuality, marriage, and motherhood during the time, especially those outside the authors' personal vantage points.

Kate Chopin's life as a writer was short—she published stories only between the years of 1893 and 1902—and became quite unpredictable, leading, of course, to her eventual critical rejection. In the present moment, Chopin is best known for her portrayal of women's psychology and sexuality in *The Awakening*. Before she wrote this novel, however, she was a "local color"

artist, writing popular short stories and sketches of southern Creole life that many people commended for their realism. The boldness of *The Awakening* was therefore a huge shock to those who were familiar with her earlier work. Though *The Awakening* is now generally considered to be one of the great classics of feminist literature, it was once a highly chastised book. Upon publication, many critics considered the novel an inappropriate and crude portrait of a woman's sexual endeavors and improper wishes to be independent and free in a time in which women's rights were fewer, wives were expected to fulfill a particularly passive role, and speaking openly about passion and sex in relation to women was almost expressly forbidden. Chopin uses *The Awakening* to not only challenge these conventions and to ultimately demonstrate that many silenced women desired more privileges and options than they were allowed at the time, but also to defy these conventions within the novel itself through her language and overt themes. Her novel, which is about a woman's attempt to defy the system, defies the system in its very existence.

Since its publication, *The Awakening* has been criticized, analyzed, and interpreted in many ways, often depending on the period during which the criticism was written. After the second wave of feminism of the 1960s had gotten underway, critics were finally able to read the ending with the meanings that Chopin seems to have intended. The themes and images Chopin presents are quite ahead of their time in terms of their focus on women's sexual independence. The novel was out of print in English from 1904 until 1969. It came back into print during a point at which the modern feminist movement was a strong force in the United States and there was more of an audience for this type of literature than there had been in the past.

This is not to say that every modern critic agrees that the novel has feminist aims, however. In 1988, one critic strayed quite far from the common opinion of the novel at the time,

arguing that it "begins as a critique of female domestication [and] closes with an emotion that is unmistakably restorationist" (Delbanco 92); that it is "about a woman passing for a man" (104); and that it is meant to be a "cautionary tale" for women who try to escape oppression (106). This critique diminishes the novel's relevance and importance within the women's rights movement by suggesting that Chopin wrote with the aim of chiding women whose unhappiness in marriage caused them to enter into extramarital affairs. It also implies that she consciously included the claim that women who seek personal gratification and independence will be doomed to failure and self-destruction. Furthermore, the term "restorationist" in this context implies that Chopin demonstrated a rejection of domesticity in the beginning of the novel in order to later show that such a rejection is dangerous and, moreover, that she wrote in favor of a system in which male-centered ideologies will (and perhaps should) prevail. It is worthwhile to note that this reading of the novel is extremely different from many of the modern feminist interpretations of the novel as well as the bulk of criticism from Chopin's contemporaries, as we shall see. If Chopin's contemporaries had read the novel in a fashion similar to Delbanco's, they would not have had as much reason to reject it since it would have fit neatly into the expectations of the time. Delbanco's reading is thus quite unique, which makes it interesting to consider; but it does not seem to present a convincing argument about the book.

Delbanco's argument is incomplete in that it excludes any mention of the male characters' roles in *The Awakening* and thus avoids the subject of women's unhappiness, which is quite present in the novel. This goes back to Wood-Allen's point about the need for mutual respect in marriages. We understand that Edna feels more like one of Léonce's possessions than an important partner in his life, which is surely a major reason for her marital displeasure. Since Chopin purposely included this detail, it should be taken into consideration; and when it is, we

can clearly see that she was writing about a woman caught in an unfortunate circumstance rather than a woman who singlehandedly creates her own downfall. We can therefore say that the moral of *The Awakening* is far from being restorationist.

Most recent critics are overwhelmingly in praise of the novel—which they mainly view as an extended commentary on pregnancy and motherhood—and seek to understand the reasons governing Chopin's bold decision to focus on such a taboo subject. In accordance with modern criticism, Chopin does seem to be telling a story of Edna's rebirth, and many theories, such as Lippincott's analysis, attempt to explain how Chopin successfully incorporates the feeling of pregnancy into Edna's story without explicitly mentioning pregnancy in relation to Edna. This attempted concealment of improper ideas did not entirely succeed, as we will notice through an examination of the opinions of some of the novel's earliest reviewers.

Contemporary criticism of *The Awakening* is surprising in that many early critics praised Chopin's style of writing and her talent as an author, yet their opinions of *The Awakening* were quite harsh and unforgiving. A fairly representative reviewer from the Chicago *Times-Herald* writes:

> The many admirers whom [Chopin] has won through her earlier work will be surprised—perhaps disagreeably—by the latest venture.…That Miss Chopin has a keen knowledge of certain phases of feminine character will not be denied. But it was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the overworked field of sex fiction. (qtd. in Beer: 58)

Although the reviewer can clearly see Chopin's worth as an author, he reduces *The Awakening* to "sex fiction," which, as we can now recognize, is a poor label for the novel. As consumers and reviewers of literature, however, we often fixate on the most unusual or unacceptable idea of a

work in order to classify it in simpler terms and thus provide a clear warning to other potential readers. In this case, female sexuality was such an idea. Indeed, sexuality is a shockingly present force within *The Awakening*, and the contemporary reviewers were sure to pick up on it and use it as an unsophisticated definition for a work whose claims are much more meaningful than such a reduction suggests, as we can now understand. While sex is present in the work, it is not the point of the novel, nor is it the overarching theme. Chopin wrote about sexual situations as a means of conveying and implying more powerful themes and messages about the self-repression of women's desire, the confines of marriage, and the definition imposed on someone who has given birth as simply a mother rather than a woman or an individual. Sexuality allows Edna's character to be more than a wife and mother: it allows her to be a human being with weaknesses and desires. It is important to recognize, however, that this reviewer is not uncommonly shortsighted in his analysis of the novel by defining it as "sex fiction"; he is simply reporting the popular opinion of the time—that is, the opinion natural to someone whose views are shaped mainly by what the larger society has accepted in terms of propriety and taste in that period—in a way to which many readers could relate.

We can confidently identify this quite dismayed review as the most common opinion of Chopin's novel by examining other contemporary reviews, many of which report similar findings using slightly different terminology. A reviewer from the *Providence Sunday Journal* admits that Chopin is a "clever woman" but that "she has put her cleverness to a very bad use in writing 'The Awakening'" (qtd. in Beer: 58). This mirrors the above review, but it also places more blame on Chopin by insinuating that she is almost devious in her supposed misuse of her gift of cleverness. Similarly, Willa Cather reports in the Pittsburgh *Leader* that the novel is a Creole version of *Madame Bovary* and thus, having already been written, serves very little

purpose. She goes on to say that the heroines of both novels "demand more romance out of life than God put into it," suggesting that Edna's character is unnaturally selfish and perhaps also unusually sexual; and she ends by saying that she "[hopes] that Miss Chopin will devote that flexible iridescent style of hers to a better cause" (Cather). Again, this demonstrates that, while many reviewers respected Chopin's style and talent, they were greatly offended by her choice of topic and the means through which she discusses that topic. Cather, a novelist herself, is known for her stories that represent everyday people in a way that is realistic and somewhat predictable. Her critique of Chopin's writing—namely, that Edna's demanding nature is uncommon—suggests a lack of realism in Chopin's writing, insinuating that Chopin's character is not representative of the normal or average woman. This review in particular makes the case that Chopin fails to represent an everyday person and that she instead represents an unusual life that is, of course, far from admirable. We should note that the accusation that Chopin does not accurately represent life is an uncommon one. Most other contemporary reviewers admit, in spite of their disapproval of her topic, that Chopin is very skilled at representing a woman's psychology, even when it comes to matters of sex.

Even so, the reviewers seem incapable of forgiving Chopin's topic and especially her openness when it comes to desire and sexuality. One of the most positive reviews, which mentions the "mastery" with which Chopin writes as well as the idea that "all [opinions] must concede [the novel's] flawless art," follows the trend in its admission that the nature of the novel is distasteful:

> 'The Awakening' is not for the young person; not because the young person would be harmed by reading it, but because the young person wouldn't understand it, and…the young person's understanding should be scrupulously

> respected…For such there is much that is very improper in it, not to say positively unseemly….It is sad and mad and bad, but it is all consummate art. (Deyo)

In the context of this review in particular, this acknowledgement is quite necessary. Such a favorable review of a recognizably objectionable book would have received negative attention had Deyo avoided the mention of such a major theme of the novel—a theme that would have indeed influenced readers, especially young ones. Placing this warning within the review is the most minimal way to alert readers that there may be risks involved in reading such a novel. It is actually quite likely that "young people" would have been very affected by this book given the notion that many young women were guarded from knowledge about their bodies and their eventual roles and wives and mothers. In Deyo's view, "respecting" a young person's understanding means assuring that she remain unaware of the facts and principles she will someday face. This supports the common opinion of the time that women should be shielded from the mention of undesirable phenomena, which is the very opinion acknowledged by such authors as John Sholto Douglas and rejected by others like Beatrice Tina. Apart from this short acknowledgement of the novel's dangers, however, Deyo attempts to garner sympathy and even "compassion" for Edna's character, a consideration we almost completely fail to see in other contemporary reviews. This argument suggests that Deyo believes *The Awakening* may not be suitable for young audiences but that it can be acceptably read by adults who are already aware of oppression and desire and whose understanding of the world would be left more or less unchanged after reading it. In short, despite the warning present in this criticism, this reviewer's account of the novel is a very positive one that recognizes the dangers in the narrative but understands that it may not be very hazardous to people of a certain age or maturity.

When we jump ahead fourteen years to the time of Wharton's publication of *The Custom of the Country*, a different, more varied picture emerges. While many critics agree with Wharton's diagnosis of the inner workings of society and applaud her insight into a system that created such distinctions between men and women, the most negative reviews come from authors who also believe Wharton's characters are too caricaturized and that her tone is too satirical to be respected or taken seriously. One of the most negative reviews comes from the *New York Sun*. It provides an accurate portrayal of Undine's character and then describes the ways in which this type of character was misused by its author. He says that Undine is an "ideal monster" who is "ignorant" and "unmoral" and who makes the constant discovery "that what she really wants is something she has not got yet" (L.M.F., 557). These observations are common and sensible. The term "ideal monster" is taken directly from *The Custom of the Country* in reference to Undine, and we can be fairly sure that Wharton meant for Undine to seem "unmoral" and to continuously pursue the best situation for herself regardless of the cost to those around her, as we saw earlier. The reviewer goes on to say that "to make a creature such as she is win her way in society calls for some dexterity, which Mrs. Wharton disdains to use….In this case there is a distinct loss of art, whatever effect her warning may have" (L.M.F., 557). This "loss of art" forms a significant contrast between the writing styles of Wharton and Chopin. While many critics could not help but admit that Chopin's writing was artistic, quite a few mention that Wharton lacks such a gift. Her writing style may be considered less elaborate in that it does not often appear flowery or overly descriptive in relation to her characters, but her descriptions of setting are often vivid. Wharton's plainer style with less psychological exploration may seem more masculine than Chopin's poetic and more psychologically oriented manner of writing, which, as we shall see, is more stereotypically feminine. On the other hand, this review also points out a similarity

between Chopin's and Wharton's novels: both may be viewed as unrealistic by some readers. By stating that Wharton's story calls for "more dexterity," the reviewer implies that the story requires an artfulness in order to achieve plausibility, which is a fairly uncommon critique of Wharton's writing.

The criticism for *The Custom of the Country* is well-rounded with a few more positive than negative reviews, implying slightly positive reception overall. The authors of the positive reviews agree that Undine is a greedy, selfish, and abhorrent woman, as the economic and societal conditions of the time have favored through a cultural variation of survival of the fittest; but even though many view Undine as extreme in her characterization, they describe Wharton as a talented writer of realistic fiction who is able to illuminate the moral implications of the societal creation of this type of woman rather than directly dictate what we should think. A reviewer in England's *Bookman* states that "no moral is drawn [in the novel]. The story is left to tell its own warning" (*Bookman* 330). This statement describes Wharton's artistic restraint and therefore applauds her writing, unlike the negative reviews. The acclaim present in this review gains strength when we consider that most readers were able to identify the morals of the story, apparently without having been explicitly told what those morals are. Of course, Wharton hinted strongly at the take-away points of the novel through her use of exaggerations and an almost comical look at marriage, divorce, and motherhood as forms of currency, but it is true that she does not overtly tell the reader to believe anything in particular. It is possible for someone to read every word of the novel without recognizing its ironies, but we should note that every reviewer is able to identify Wharton's main point. It is therefore quite likely that this reviewer exaggerated his claim.

The same reviewer writes, “Mrs. Wharton uses the scenes and situations in order to bring out the character of her heroine, and the characterisation is subtle, clever, and convincing….[The novel displays] such unity and penetration [in an] incisive study of the modern American woman of fashion” (*Bookman* 330). Clearly, the reviewer believes Wharton’s story is one of realism and great insight and that she relays her ideas in an “incisive” manner which leaves a distinguishable mark on the reader, perhaps causing readers to consider the expectations of leisure-class society in a different way. It may be important to note that this review was written in England and not in the country where the novel mainly occurs. This may be considered an advantage since the reviewer has a more objective view of American society, but it also means that he is likely unfamiliar with some of the more nuanced features of American life and may base his opinions on stereotypes of the “American woman of fashion.” Nonetheless, his opinion that the book displays a high level of realism does not stand alone.

Apart from issues of realism, Wharton was often critiqued for her reliance on a satirical structure and tone. Henry Boynton shows an understanding of the importance of Wharton’s story but claims that her growing satirical tone over time—and culminating in *The Custom of the Country*—is “a dubious sign in a writer who has passed a certain age” and thus contributes to a decline in Wharton’s respectability as an author (Boynton 405). As we can see, this response to Wharton’s work is almost the opposite of the common response Chopin sustained. Though Wharton’s themes and critiques are agreeable to this reviewer, he finds that her strength as a writer is not matched to the importance of her subject matter. The topics of Wharton’s novel are clearly different from Chopin’s more openly sexual foci, but they still represent a feminist standpoint unlikely to be the commonly accepted opinion of the time, and both novels include a

negative portrayal of marriage and motherhood. The question remains: why did contemporary critics respond so differently to these two somewhat similar novels?

Boynton's review provides some insight into this question. Some of his descriptions of Wharton's style are quite surprising in their departure from other reviewers' opinions of her writing ability. In his analysis of her strengths as a writer he states, "A…zest was given to the enjoyment of her style by the sense that it was gentlemanlike. That sense was misleading, of course, for she has always been strongly feminine; but it is possible for a voice a trifle deeper than common, a gesture somewhat more frank, to enhance the charm of femininity by its hint of contradiction" (Boynton 404). This "gentlemanlike" quality points to an interesting claim about Wharton's writing in comparison to Chopin's. Not only is Wharton apparently more adept at writing in a style that is more "frank," as we can apparently attribute to a more masculine style, but she is also more "gentlemanly," meaning that she takes care to be proper and refined in her style, themes, and descriptions. This is quite a contrast from Chopin's writing, which, at its best, is described as containing "poetic grace," implying a more feminine characteristic.

But perhaps the contrast is not as pronounced as it may appear: the reviewer points out that Wharton's "gentlemanly" quality actually "[enhances] the charm of femininity" in her writing. This means that both authors write in a "feminine" manner, but their styles contain different types of femininity and are classified through the recognition of dissimilar qualities. Wharton's writing may appear feminine because of its attention to detail when it comes to home interiors, its focus on a female character, and its womanly sentence structure.[1] This type of

[1] A "womanly sentence structure" is difficult to define outright, but it is an idea borrowed from Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" in which she states that "a man's sentence…was unsuited for a woman's use. Charlotte Brontë…stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands….Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use" (ch. 4).

structure has no true formula, but it is characteristic of many novels written by women since the time of Jane Austen. According to Virginia Woolf in "A Room of One's Own," written in 1928, the difference between sentences written by men as opposed to those written by women is that the "weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind" are quite dissimilar from the way women think and process information—and thus the way they write (ch. 4). Wharton may use a feminine style to convey her ideas, but Chopin's brand of femininity in writing includes more of a flowery, poetic nature than Wharton's, perhaps appearing even more feminine to an audience of mainly male critics who tend to think in less "graceful" terms.

Though both novels include infidelity and the rejection of normative gender roles, Wharton's manner of relating information is less personal and intimate than Chopin's. While both novels suggest that their home societies have caused a negative impact on women in some way, Wharton's novel does so in a way that is less threatening to the social fabric. As I described earlier, Wharton's mentions of taboo topics are mere suggestions of events rather than descriptive accounts. This is not a threat to young people as Chopin's novel might have been; in fact, it actually reinforces the aims of a society that neglects women's education of adult matters. While people may have had legitimate concerns about younger women reading *The Awakening* and discovering information about sexuality that they were normally discouraged from learning, *The Custom of the Country* incurred no such distress. The insights it provides into the lives of women are societal rather than internal, behavioral, or sexual, and so it should not be as shocking to its readers who have probably considered the conditions of life around them to some extent. The reviews support this claim in that they do not express great concern or surprise when it comes to the subject matter of *The Custom of the Country*.

By studying the reception and criticism of these novels, we can see which aspects were most heavily considered upon publication and how the focus has shifted over time. As modern consumers of literature, our opinions and analyses are very different from those of the past, and we may neglect the important work of contextualizing the novels within their own period. Chopin and Wharton both wrote with somewhat urgent messages for their receiving audiences. Understanding the contemporary reception of their novels is therefore crucial in determining whether their voices were heard. In the cases of *The Awakening* and *The Custom of the Country*, it seems that the narratives were met with less acclaim and attention than many current readers believe they deserved. Recent analyses of these novels involve a more liberal stance than many readers held in the past, and our cultural lens is significantly altered. Women now hold a more important place in society, and we are more willing and able to consider issues of sexuality, divorce, and independence. While novels with these foci may not have been particularly acclaimed, they contributed important ideas to a growing feminist sentiment and paved the way for women to speak, act, and write differently in the future.

CONCLUSION

Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton are only two of many women writers whose perceptions of women's struggles are developed and explored through stories. As we have seen, Chopin's concerns were different from Wharton's, but both women wrote with generally feminist aims and the desire for the attitudes and institutions of the time to someday be altered. As a result, both women hold a lasting place in the history of women's rights in America. Their various methods of demonstrating their rejection of social norms and constructs have helped to define this particular period within the women's movement, and we can see how much we have progressed by reading their words and attempting to understand their struggles within their historical and cultural contexts. This thesis is strongly focused on understanding late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century life in order to justify the authors' feminist aims and arguments as well as the reviewers' opinions of these works.

As we have discovered, women in this period had reason to feel isolated from their own minds and bodies. Starting from an early age, they were denied access to education about themselves and their future roles as wives and mothers. After marriage, they may have felt a sense of uncertainty as to who they were and how they were expected to change in order to fit into fairly strict cultural ideals. Edna Pontellier represents the type of woman who blindly goes through this transition before coming to the unfortunate realization that her desires cannot be contained in the roles society has prescribed for her. Her flirtatious nature and eventual affair may seem radical for the time; but Chopin, a writer of realistic fiction, never grants her character a divorce, knowing that it was not a reasonable option for an upper-class woman. Chopin crafted a realistic world around the possibly common circumstance of a woman marrying a man only to realize, through falling in love with another man and finally becoming acquainted with herself,

that she had never truly felt or loved before. Aware of the restrictions placed on women, Chopin recognized the need for such an unfortunate sequence of events if she was to create a plausible story based on this circumstance. Edna's story demonstrates that even a daring character within a work of fiction had limited options for freedom during this period.

Due to strongly male-focused laws and customs, women experienced great difficulty in resisting the normative gender roles imposed on them. They were therefore encouraged—either directly or indirectly—to conform to these expectations or learn to manipulate the system. Undine Spragg is a prime example of a woman who chooses the latter option. She may be objectively seen as a model of feminine dependency, yet she knows how to market herself to men in order to fulfill her selfish desires. Wharton's critique of the leisure-class marriage system emerges from this exaggerated characterization. Her novel warns members of the leisure class that their restrictions on women's behaviors and circumstances will breed women who excel at playing the part of worthy, dependable marriage prospects rather than encouraging women to actually exhibit perfection as potential wives and mothers.

While Chopin and Wharton clearly wrote with the intention of garnering support for women, their efforts were sometimes unappreciated or criticized for being unrealistic or inappropriate. Many readers and critics were unprepared to consider women in independent and sexual roles, and the authors met with varied responses to their methods and approaches to the topics at hand. Chopin's attempt to slightly distract the reader from the more sexual passages through the use of muted language was fairly unsuccessful, as was her implementation of a double-edged discourse as a means to relay the ideas of pregnancy and maternity. Neither method shielded readers from thoughts of impropriety and infidelity, characteristics unbefitting an upper-class female writer whose words had the potential to negatively impact and wrongly

educate younger women. By studying *The Awakening*, readers and reviewers may have felt as though they were acting as accomplices to Chopin's resistance of social norms. This feeling of defiance may have contributed to the general disapproval of Chopin's novel.

Conversely, Wharton's manner of writing observes cultural expectations by avoiding the discussion of improper subjects and using euphemisms to describe the few taboo situations that arise. Wharton seldom discusses Undine's private thoughts or feelings, which allows *The Custom of the Country* to seem like a story about society rather than a more personal one about a woman's devious transgressions. For example, Wharton never makes it clear as to whether Undine has actually been intimate with Peter Van Degen during her supposed affair. We know only that she stays with him for a period of time and that she leaves Ralph to begin a relationship with him. Given this and other similar situations throughout the novel, it is not unreasonable to assume that someone could read this book and remain unaware of many of Undine's implied instances of misconduct. Undine's unwillingness to become a caring wife and mother forms a compelling and important circumstance in the novel, but not one that constitutes Wharton's main point about the shortcomings of the leisure class. Wharton uses Undine's aversion to wifedom and motherhood mainly as a way to examine other facets of leisure-class life. By deemphasizing the main character through exaggeration and a lack of psychological explanation or examination, Wharton places society and its ideals in the foreground. Through this method, she successfully avoids the need to discuss personal moments, which contributed fairly heavily to the novel's reasonably positive reception upon publication.

The Awakening and *The Custom of the Country* have inspired many critical works whose main points of examination are either the cultural history of the periods surrounding these novels or the characters' motivations within these works. Both aspects are necessary in order to gain a

more complete understanding of the circumstances that led Chopin and Wharton to write with the women's movement in mind and to appreciate their methods of characterization and cultural critique. When first reading these novels, one's primary impression and point of interest might be the notion that women writers of this period created characters whose very dispositions resisted the roles of wife and mother. In order to fully examine that impression, a substantial amount of research and analysis is necessary. While I have begun that work in this thesis, many publications remain to be seen and considered, and the authors I have chosen to study are only two of many who sought to create better lives for women during this period.

Escaping gender norms is difficult and often impossible due to the pervasive and repressive nature of cultural expectations, but many (if not most) societies include people who desire change. Chopin and Wharton created their protagonists to represent the many people who attempt to break out of their prescribed roles and live more freely, following their personal wishes rather than the forces of an institution they cannot control. Some may describe such adventurers as selfish or amoral, but these terms do not adequately define those who risk their lives to find personal contentment. Edna's and Undine's fictional battles demonstrate that an impersonal and unfulfilling existence served out only for the benefit of others may be worse than no life at all. Chopin and Wharton have developed stories that defend those who work against the status quo. In their time, their novels were daring and important efforts in the fight for more privileges; and in ours, we can appreciate and applaud their courageous dreams that have become realities and believe in the possibility of better things to come.

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