

# Dying for Freedom

*Female agency and suicide in late nineteenth-century American literature*

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# Abstract

This thesis explores the issue of female suicide and agency in three novels, namely Lillie Devereux Blake's *Fettered for Life; or, Lord and Master. A Story of Today* (1874), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). The purpose of this thesis is to argue that female suicide in literature should be linked to free will and agency rather than female victimhood. Common readings of nineteenth-century literature suggest that female characters who do not comply with patriarchal norms have had to die. This thesis disagrees with this claim and instead argues that their suicide is a choice, rather than being their only option. Instead of interpreting the fate of transgressive female protagonists as deterministic and inevitable, my analysis will show how their suicides can be interpreted as a deliberate choice, granting the female characters agency.



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# Introduction

*During the 1850s, American women had reached a point where they were handed everything a woman could dream of possessing ...*

Fred Lewis Pattee qtd. In Harris

*There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why – when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation.*

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

*Sometimes I too feel like joining the cry that has gone up from so many women and uttering the useless wish that I were a man.*

Lillie Devereux Blake, *Fettered for Life*

*What a miserable thing to be a woman*

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

## Thesis Structure and Outline

The purpose of this introduction is to present the premises on which I base my thesis arguments on. I argue that female suicide in literature should be interpreted from the woman's perspective instead of the male observer's. By taking into account the female's condition in society, one will better understand why the female character commits suicide. By applying second-wave feminist theory I explore how nineteenth-century society in America eluded women from the public discourse, and how this led to women having to make sense of a world created by men. The conventional patriarchal reading of female suicides conveyed naturalistic notions in interpreting female deaths, suggesting that female characters had to die because they were unable to escape their inevitable fate. My thesis disagrees with this idea. I argue that a patriarchal reading of suicide only contributes to victimizing women, and depriving them of agency. Throughout my thesis I will argue that their deaths are not deterministic but due to their own choice. This introduction consists of two parts. In the first part I wish to give a

historic account of how society has been following patriarchal designs and what consequences this has had for women's subjectivity. The second part focuses on the paradigm of suicide, and explains how this paradigm has shifted throughout the years.

## **Reality: construct and critique**

Beginning this introduction with the words of Fred Lewis Pattee, I wish to draw attention to his statement that women in the nineteenth century were "handed everything they could dream of possessing" (qtd. in Harris 3). His assumption is an example of phallogentrism, which occurs when the two sexes are represented by one singular model. Historically this has been the masculine model, perpetuating patriarchal ideas (Gunew 60). Beneath his statement, I have contradicted his argument with passages from novels written by women in the late nineteenth century. These novels portray a society in which women are utterly unhappy with their lives and the lack of possibilities available to them. These women's perceptions of reality indicate that patriarchal paradigms are not universal. To illustrate that women's perception of reality differed from the male institutionalized knowledge, I intend to explore and analyze the lives and social conditions of the female protagonists in Lillie Devereaux Blake's *Fettered for Life; or, Lord and Master. A Story of Today* (1874), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). These novels illustrate women's hardships and disempowerment in a society where male-made social norms dictated appropriate behavior for women. In all three novels, women are expected to be content with the restrictions imposed on them by society. I find it interesting to observe how men have allowed themselves to define women's realities based solely on their own experiences, and I wish to see how this has affected women's self-image and subjectivity in these novels. In all three novels marriage is presented as the highest ideal and duty for a respectable young woman. However, to the female protagonists, marriage seems like a barrier for individual fulfillment and happiness. Unwilling to accept the restrictions imposed on them, and unable to escape the social sanctions that follow their defiance to conform, the heroines in all three novels commit suicide or attempt to do so.

I have noticed repeatedly that in works written by male authors, female characters who transgress patriarchal norms have to die. It seems like there is no room for women to challenge the patriarchal consciousness, and if a woman shows sign of discontent the only solution is to kill her. In this thesis, I want to see why suicide seems to be the only option for

female character who show signs of self-assertion. I will examine the condition of the female protagonists in order to understand what forces in society lead them to commit suicide. While many critics have analyzed the fate of female protagonists as deterministic and inevitable, I wish to argue that their deaths should be interpreted as a choice, rather than social victimization. I therefore argue that female suicide in literature should be linked to free will and agency, rather than female victimhood.

I wish to begin my introduction by giving a brief account of women's position in nineteenth-century society and point out how socially constructed power structures have always worked to women's disadvantage. This is relevant for my thesis, because in all three novels the female protagonists attempt to be self-reliant and independent, while society is structured to prevent them from achieving independency. After this, I will explain how the paradigm of suicide has shifted from being viewed as a masculine act of bravery to being perceived as the involuntary act of a weak mind. This shift in paradigm is in my opinion due to patriarchal structures, which I will explore more in detail. Lastly, I will suggest an alternative reading of the female characters' suicides— one which grants them agency.

My thesis consists of three main chapters, one dedicated to each novel. In Chapter One, I will analyze *Fettered for Life*. Lillie Devereux Blake was a women's rights reformer, suffragist and one of many women writers in the nineteenth century who understood the ability and power that fiction had to "change the way people think and thus its power to help bring about social reform" (Stevenson 106). *Fettered for Life* contributes to revealing women's realities and struggles in nineteenth-century America. The novel suggests that women, just like men, should have equal rights to independence and to a professional career. In her novel, Blake includes discussions of temperance, the condition of working women, women's suffrage, legal powerlessness, domestic violence, incommensurate employment, and gender identity. Her novel displays a set of characters who represent a cross-section of New York society and she uses stock characters to get her points across. Blake exposes the disadvantages women face, such as discrimination, abuse, seduction, abduction, and rape (Thompson 166). Throughout the novel, we witness several women die as a direct result of oppression.

Although different in style from the other two novels, with its flat characters, didactic purpose and sentimental notions, I have nevertheless chosen to analyze the female condition in *Fettered for Life*, as it does a good job in reflecting the issues of its day. I wish to examine the self-inflicted death of the female characters in this novel from a feminist perspective.

While I do agree that society restricts and oppresses them, I disagree with the naturalistic notion of pre-determination. I will particularly focus on Flora Livingston's attempted suicide and Rhoda Dayton's actual suicide, as I argue that they choose to take their life because death it is preferable to life and not because there is no other option for them but death.

In Chapter Two, I will analyze *The Awakening*. Kate Chopin was a regional short story writer, who attracted a lot of attention after the publication of *The Awakening*. Her novel deals with the question of whether the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, can find individual happiness in her marriage or not. While marriage and motherhood is idolized in the society Edna is a part of, she makes it very clear that she does not find fulfillment in her role as wife and mother. The novel generated mainly negative reviews, because of its depiction of women's sexuality and Edna's negligence of her perceived duties as wife and mother (Thompson 203). The reader follows Edna's awakening to self-assertion, as she decides that the life she is living is not the life she desires. She is able to break with patriarchal demands and spends her time exploring her sexuality by taking on lovers. Although Edna seems to have freed herself from the chains of patriarchy and achieved independence, she nevertheless commits suicide by drowning herself. Once again, many critics have claimed that Edna is a victim who is doomed to die. Some critics argue that the heroine seems to capitulate to social pressure, while other believe that she seems to die from unrequited love (Thompson 204). However, I will argue that no textual evidence is available to make the reader believe that Edna has no other choice but to die.

In Chapter Three, I will analyze *The House of Mirth*. The novel follows protagonist Lily Bart, who is in need of securing a husband. Edith Wharton's novel offers satire of the upper classes and portrays psychological entrapment, as her heroine is locked into a tightly closed social and economic system with no means of surviving unless she finds a rich husband of high social standing who can provide for her (Thompson 216). Although Lily's beauty and charm can make any man fall in love with her, she keeps spoiling her chances of marrying rich men. She seems to be repelled by the vulgarity and dishonesty of her mission to marry for money (Thompson 222). Unlike the other two novels, Wharton's heroine makes no attempt to oppose social conventions.

In my conclusion I will discuss the heroines suicides, and analyze why death seemed a better option to them than life. Before I precede any further, I want to stress the fact that throughout my thesis I am only speaking of women's conditions based on textual evidence from my novels. I am in no way claiming that all women in the nineteenth century where

dissatisfied with their lives. I am aware that literature is a form of art, and it may not faithfully describe women's position in society. It can, however, reflect historical events, as well as influence the time in which it is written. All literature has been written by an author who is influenced by the beliefs and events of the time (Gorsky 4).

The novels I have chosen to analyze in this thesis portray a different reality of women's lives than the one described by Fred Lewis Pattee in the epigram. Being written by women, these novels were better equipped to reveal women's predicaments and they suggest—contrary to Pattee's perception—that women in nineteenth-century society were in fact dissatisfied with their position. The reason why I draw so much attention to Pattee's statement, is because I want to point out the gender hierarchy that has prevailed all through history. Despite his oblivious claim about women's realities, his statement is an excellent example of how, throughout history, male knowledge has been established as universal truth and no one has seemed to express doubts concerning the veracity of their opinions. This is because men have been in the privileged position of creating meaning in terms of public discourse, and therefore they have been able to turn their experiences into theory and truth. Said differently, the notion of “objectively true knowledge” is nothing but the effect of prevailing power structures (Miller 118) and the relationship between power and knowledge makes public discourse prone to bias. A literary scholar must therefore, in my opinion, keep in mind historical conditions when reading literature, in order to see what interests the discourse serves, and what relations of power it upholds.

To explain what I mean by discourse, I wish to use Roger Fowler's definition, where he focuses on the context in which a story is exchanged. He believes that “Discourse is the property of language which mediates the interpersonal relationships which must be carried by any act of communication. In fiction, the linguistics of discourse applies most naturally to point of view, the author's rhetorical stance towards his narrator, towards his character . . . [and] toward his assumed readers” (qtd. in Gunew 18-19). To Fowler, discourse has to do with point of view and relates to the interactional dimension of a text. He believes that the way language is used in interactions always signals one's membership in a social group. He further asserts that narrative discourse is “created out of the interaction of the culture's convention” (18-19). This means that how something is spoken about reveals a lot about the operations of power relations (Gunew 19). It is therefore important to understand the context in which a text has been produced, so that one can understand the conventions and societal structures. By doing this, one will be able to identify the prohibitions which regulates the

discourse that determines who may speak and who may not. In other words, one will be aware of who is defining reality and who is being left out (Gunew 19).

Throughout history, it has been men who have created language and discourse. This has given them the power to turn knowledge into theory. Male-defined models of knowledge have since then been camouflaged as universal and objective truths, and women have been taught to make sense of a world created by men where female experience has been neglected. For most parts of history, women have been excluded from the public sphere and their ideas, experiences, interests, and ways of knowing the world has not been represented. Women, then, must interpret their own subjectivity with tools created by their oppressors. Simone de Beauvoir writes that “humanity is male and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being. . . . she is nothing other than what man decides . . . She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (26). This passage explains how Pattee, as a man, was able to assert that women had everything they could dream of. Without being a woman himself, he is nevertheless defining her reality with no qualifications for doing so. He does so with the confidence granted to him by patriarchal structures, which state that he is the subject while a woman is an object. Society has granted him the power to define women’s realities according to his own experience, and thus he creates a reality that many women cannot relate to. While his knowledge about the world is institutionalized, hers is non-existent.

One question that comes to mind is why women have not contested male sovereignty; surely no one would voluntarily agree to be put in a subordinate position. De Beauvoir attempts to answer this question. She observes that women’s patterns of behavior differ from other oppressed groups. While most oppressed groups have been minorities, women make up half of the population. Why is it, then, that women have failed to fight back against the discrimination they have faced? One explanation is their inability to form opposition. It is very often the case that oppressed/minority groups form communities in order to create a sense of identity. When people stand together in a common cause, it becomes easier to instigate change. Women’s actions, however, have never been more than symbolic agitation. De Beauvoir claims that “They have won only what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received” (28).

This is due to the peculiar situation women find themselves in: unlike other minority groups who have at some point in history been deprived their freedom and sovereignty,

women have as far back as history can be traced, always been subordinate to men. They have been taught that this is a natural structure. According to the male-created truth, women are permanently and universally “other” (Gunew 25) Hence, they have been taught that their position in society is a “natural,” rather than a social construct, and this has been the only social formation familiar to them. Whereas other oppressed groups, such as Jews or blacks, would detest the discrimination and attempt to demonstrate against their oppressors, Beauvoir argues that “a woman could not even dream of exterminating males. The ties that bind her to her oppressors is unlike any other. The division of sexes is a biological given, not a moment in human history” (28-29). Since in the past all discourse have been constructed by men, the world belongs to them. Women have been indoctrinated to believe that man is superior and that refusing complicity with him will lead to disadvantages. Audre Lorde explains that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support” (111).

This was, however, the case with most nineteenth-century women. The nineteenth century was a time in which gender roles became more sharply defined than what they had been before, and the ideas of separate spheres became a reality for the sexes. Middle- and upper-class women were confined to the domestic sphere and were limited to their homes, which became their only realm of jurisdiction. Angela Davis explains that women’s place had indeed been in the home, even before the nineteenth century, however, their function in the home used to be of more importance to the economics of the household. During the pre-industrial era, the economics of a household were “centered in the home and its surrounding farmland” (Davis 23). Women contributed as manufacturers, producing fabric, soap, candles, and other practical necessities. Women’s work was needed and respected and held a certain market value (23).

During the industrial revolution, however, the manufacturing moved out of the home and into the factories. Men who occupied the public sphere were expected to work, while “the ideology of womanhood began to raise the wife and mother as ideals” for women (Davis 23). The separation between home and business meant that the control of economic resources shifted from shared work in the home to employed males in the marketplace. This left “women and children who did not have income-producing jobs, in more subordinate and dependent positions” (Coultrap-McQuin 9). Women were now more than ever dependent on

men to provide for them. There were, of course, women who did not wish to rely on men, and who sought work and independence on their own. Showalter explains that “the New Woman criticized society’s insistence on marriage as a woman’s only option for a fulfilling life” (*Sexual Anarchy* 38). Because women seeking self-development outside of marriage were a disruption to the binary system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles, male-made theories in fields of science and medicine claimed that ambition among women would lead to sickness, freakishness, and sterility (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 39). Values of American Victorianism were derived primarily from the values of white males, and they insisted that “true women” were naturally domestic, submissive, and morally pure (Coultrap-McQuin 10). Being a wife and mother thus became the only respectable vocation available for women in middle-and upper-classes, which confined women to the domestic sphere.

### **The Paradigm of Women’s Suicide**

Suicide in literature is not a new phenomenon; on the contrary, it has appeared in literature for centuries. Victorian culture in particular has been known for its fixation on death and female suicide. In “The Philosophy of Composition” (1864), Edgar Allen Poe states that the proper subject of poetry is beauty and the tone of good poetry is melancholy. Combine the two and the result becomes, according to Poe, the best subject for poetry. He concludes that “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetic topic in the world” (qtd. in Gentry 1). Many male artists of the time would agree with him, as they too engaged with this idea and implied through their work that there is something inherently beautiful about a woman’s demise. To the patriarchal subject, a woman dying was a woman complying with feminine ideals; she was passive and voiceless, serving only as an object of admiration.

The act of taking one’s own life was for a long time perceived as heroic, and symbolized the assertion of free will. Suicide, then, was seen as a masculine act, serving as a remedy to a social or political problem (Gentry 2). In the eighteenth century, however, suicide became identified with weakness and mental instability. While classical instances of female suicide were perceived as masculine, this perception changed in the age of Reason, as science dissipated the notion of suicide as an intentional act (Higonnet, “Speaking Silences” 70). Deborah Gentry explains that “Under this view, suicide [was] no longer conceived of as a heroic act of free will but an involuntary act of a weak mind” (2). Once suicide became associated with weakness and the lack of free will, it received the status as a feminized act. To medicalize suicide meant to feminize it and by the nineteenth century suicide was associated

with female malady (Higonnet, “Speaking Silences” 70). Higonnet argues, that since women have been defined by men as the male other, “the link between her genetic defect and suicidal illness was readily made” (70). In short, the paradigm of suicide shifted from the masculine and heroic to the feminine and abnormal.

As the act of suicide became more and more depoliticized, it instead became coupled with romantic notions of transcendental love. Higonnet asserts that the “reorientation of suicide toward love, passive self-surrender, and illness seems particularly evident in the literary depiction of women; their self-destruction is most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as loss of self, but as surrender to an illness; *le mal d’amour*” (“Speaking Silences” 71). In other words, the act of self-destruction, when committed by a woman, become a sign of a weak mind, love melancholy, and social victimization, rather than heroic self-sacrifice.

The death of women has thus become one of the most common of literary symbols. Nineteenth-century culture was particularly full of images of women made more beautiful by death (Kvisdal 75). Gentry criticizes the romanticization of female death, stating that “this symbolism has been principally developed in the hands of men for primarily masculine appreciation” (1). Women are fetishized in their death and described as beautiful and pure, suggesting that a dead woman is the ideal woman. Andrea Dworkin explains that there is an understanding that “for a woman to be good, she must be dead, or as close to it as possible” (43). Although her theories are applied to the research of women’s role in fairy tales, she makes some viable observation of how women are to be perceived in order to be “good,” according to patriarchal ideals. She points out that the reason why princes fall in love with princesses is due to the latter’s “passivity, beauty, innocence, and victimization. [Princesses] are archetypal good women—victims by definition” (43). The notion of being under a sleeping spell which imitates death or being held captive against their will, manifests their helplessness, and turns them into objects of romantic adoration (43).

The nineteenth century adoration and admiration of the dead woman is reflected in Thomas Hood’s poem “The Bridge of Sighs” (1844), as he admires the corpse of a woman who has jumped off a bridge to her death:

Look at her garments/Clinging like cerements/Whilst the wave constantly/Drips from  
her clothing;/Take her up instantly,/Loving, not loathing./ Touch her not  
scornfully;/Think of her mournfully,/Gently and humanly;/ Not of the stains of her,  
All that remains if her/Now is pure womanly. (9-20)

Only when the woman is no longer alive, does she become “pure womanly,” indicating that a woman is never perfect unless she completely submits to passivity and submission. This way of depicting women reduces them to objects of desire and portrays them as passive victims without giving an account of the female experience and their societal conditions. Female death and its aestheticized portrayal has been deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, where the annihilation of the female in the realm of art can place the male spectator in a “survivor-position” and hence confirming ideas of male superiority. Objectification of women essentially “kills” her into an art object, depriving her of subjectivity. Elizabeth Dill and Sheri Weinstein argue that to portray a woman as dead is to kill her twice (38).

To associate femininity with weakness, helplessness and victimhood is a patriarchal construction. The patriarchal framework has always already perpetuated idea of women as inherently different from and inferior to men. Susan R. Gorsky explains that these values originated in the Bible, as there are many passages there that establish the inferiority of women, and thus contribute to the demeaning of them. As an example, the depiction of Eve being tricked into eating the forbidden fruit has been used as an attempt to explain that women are weaker and less rational than men, and that they need to be protected in order to keep themselves and others from destruction (3). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain that men have invented extreme images of the “angel” and the “monster” as eternal types for women. This patriarchal script encourages submission, selflessness and passivity. A woman who submits to patriarchal ideas of womanhood is then seen as an angel, while women who transgress and show signs of self-assertion are categorized as a monster (17). The monster is then associated with sexuality, madness and unnatural acts (Gentry 3). These categories have been paralyzing to the psychological maturity of women, as she is denied autonomy and subjectivity. In other words, women have been deprived of the right to define their own femininity, but have been given the choice between the subversive feminine symbol (the monster) or the feminine symbol of transcendence (the angel), which both are identities created by men.

Because man defines woman, she is always defined to her disadvantage. She becomes the embodiments of two extremes, never fully a developed being. Beth Ann Bassein argues that the woman is always “less than human, less than capable, less than male, less than reasonable, less than a citizen” (4). She is never able to explore her subjectivity, and therefore never becomes herself, but only what man has defined her to be. De Beauvoir observes that the relationship between the “two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man

represents both the positive and neutral, as indicated by the common use of man to designate human being in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” (qtd. in Bassein 5). The fact that men have defined what femininity is, means that these ideals have been constructed by those who have no qualifications in knowing what a female feels, wants, or needs. These prevailing masculine values have led to many false and mythic visions of femininity.

In nineteenth-century literature, if a woman rejected the values set by patriarchy, her behavior was perceived as a sign of mental illness by masculine society (Gentry 4). Society’s tendency was to label insane any behavior that it did not condone. This was a way of silencing and denying legitimacy to the women who did not agree with the norms that had been imposed on them. The consequence of female transgression was often a physical or a psychological death. Said differently, it has been a part of the patriarchal script that women who break with norms ought to die. Women’s silence and absence have been a part of a cultural norm created by men and any instance of women speaking for themselves has been seen as an interruption or a disruption of prevailing patriarchal definitions. Gilbert and Gubar conclude that the story of the female protagonist often seems to end in doom, as the reconciliation with the angel image is impossible for her to obtain. Therefore “her only deed . . . can be the deed of death, her only action the pernicious action of self-destruction” (42).

While projections of death onto female characters allow male writers to romanticize and objectify the experience of death, Gentry asks what women’s voluntary deaths mean in works written by women and what it means when a women writer has chosen to perpetuate masculine motifs on her protagonist (1). I find these questions very interesting and they provide a starting point for my thesis.

As already mentioned, patriarchal interpretations of female suicide suggest that women who rebel against male-made social structures have to die. From a patriarchal point of view a successful woman is a selfless woman who is willing to surrender to patriarchal norms. When reading novels written about female death from a patriarchal point of view, I believe that one will inevitably fail to see the female condition from a female perspective. Instead, males’ perception of females are reflected in the work, and women are depicted as victims deprived of agency. However, when a woman writer chooses to kill her character, she is able to narrate a story about female suicide from the position of the subject, and by doing so, she grants her agency over the action. Erika Kvisdal argues that when women write about female death, they portray the dying woman not as an aestheticized or objectified other, but instead

their writing approaches death from the position of the subject (76). This assertion of subjectivity breaks with patriarchal framework and the female protagonist no longer becomes a victim who has to die, but instead becomes the person who chose death over life.

Higonnet argues that “to take one’s own life is to force others to read one’s death” (“Representations of the Feminine” 103). Thus, when choosing to kill off their characters, the author is forcing society to reflect over this death, and over their character’s choice. Higonnet also argues that the act of self-destruction turns a person into both the subject and object of the action (“Frames of Female Suicide” 230). Said differently, one should not think of a woman (or a man) who commits suicide as a mere object and victim. To commit any act requires an agent, and the person committing suicide hence becomes just as much a subject/agent of the action. Yet, when we read about women’s self-destruction, she has often been deprived of agency, and remains only a victim. Often her suicide is believed to have something to do with her failure to adapt and conform to societal norms, and she dies because she is weak and cannot survive, or because she has transgressed and become a “fallen woman.” Suicide in literature is gendered. Women’s subjectivity is never recognized and she is deprived of agency over the action. The woman is portrayed as a helpless victim of society. This is, in other words, just the way patriarchy wants us to see women who transgress their rules. As Higonnet says, one is not just the victim, but also an agent.

I therefore argue that to perpetuate the concepts of victimhood which the shift in paradigm suggests, and to read suicide as an act of passive self-surrender, is a futile interpretation of the act of self-destruction. In this thesis, I intend to argue that once we step out of the patriarchal framework, female suicide in literature can be interpreted as a political act of defiance. By taking their lives, women inscribe on their bodies the cultural conventions that has restrained and undermined them.

# 1 *Fettered for Life*

## 1.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter will explore the female condition in Lillie Devereux Blake's novel *Fettered for Life* (1874). The title's deliberate analogy to enslavement reflects Blake's view of nineteenth-century American society. She especially criticizes the institution of marriage as a subjugating arrangement for women. Through her novel, she attempts to illustrate the violent and oppressive parts of conjugal unions. The laws of the nineteenth century stated that once a woman was married, she became the property of her husband, and they legally allowed him to treat her as such. Blake also attempts to criticize the social customs of the time, which denied women meaningful work, leading to the degrading necessity of marrying for support (Farrell, "Afterword" 399).

Throughout this chapter, I will focus on how patriarchal structures and social conventions have prevented the female characters from achieving dignified lives. I attempt to show that patriarchal designs work to undermined women's experience of reality. The institutionalization of knowledge has historically benefited men. The word "knowledge," as I intend to use it in this thesis, will mean "information acquired through experience." The reason why I focus on knowledge is because power and knowledge are interrelated, as "power is reproduced in discursive networks at every point where someone who 'knows' is instructing someone who doesn't know" (Gunew 22). I wish to examine the relationship between "experiential knowledge," which is associated with women, and "authorized knowledge," which has been granted to men in this novel. By pointing to the discrimination between the two, I wish to illustrate that the undermining of women's realities leads to the self-destruction of three of the female characters. I am particularly interested in Flora Livingston's attempted suicide, Rhoda Dayton's self-sacrifice, and Frank Heywood's choice of killing and burying his real identity.

*Fettered for Life* was published at a time when literature was moving away from sentimental forms into realism and naturalism (Farrell, "Afterword" 409). Yet it differs in style from Chopin's and Wharton's novels, whose works are products of naturalism. Blake looks backwards to the sentimental novel with its emphasis on plot. Her novel is plot driven, and she uses flat characters to exaggerate her points and encourage reform. At the same time, she uses notions of naturalism in her portrayal of the industrialized world's class struggle.

Although written nearly three decades before *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*, and despite the difference in style, I believe Blake does a groundbreaking job in portraying women's condition in the nineteenth century.

Lillie Devereux Blake lived during a time when women had no platform to voice their political opinions. By writing about women's condition in society, and campaigning for women's rights, she became an important contributor to the American Feminist movement. By putting pen to paper, she attempted to illustrate the injustice that was inflicted on women by society. Blake's novel thus expressed the dread of the many women who were deprived of a voice of their own. The female characters in her novel create a feminist oppositional community, where they have to work together in order to protect each other from male violence, oppression and harassment. Grace Farrell explains that, "Inspired by her work in the woman's rights movement, [Blake] wanted [her novel] to portray 'forcibly and powerfully' the suffering endured by her sex" (Lillie Devereux Blake 131). Blake particularly criticizes the institution of marriage, and, as her title suggests, argues that marriage fetters women, and deprives them of their subjectivity and individuality. Blake illustrated how marriage turned women into victims of social and economic discrimination (Cruea 187), as they no longer had any rights.

Blake was a firm believer that women should have the same rights to independence as men did. She was of the opinion that men and women had a common nature, but that they were "trained" in gender roles. Writing during a time when "concepts of womanhood or manhood were understood as biologically determined and unchanging" (Kerber et al. 4), Blake insisted that gender was a social construct. By writing *Fettered for Life*, she wanted to endorse the idea that women had the same abilities and were just as capable of doing the same jobs as men, if they were given the opportunity. The women who were able to work as shop girls, or factory workers, were believed to be unwomanly and "unnatural" (Cruea 187). Blake portrays the unhealthy working condition and the sexual harassment women met with in the workplace. Evidently, these conditions made marriage an attractive survival strategy, and women were forced for various reasons to be dependent on their husband for financial support (Cruea 187). By alternating between different characters from all tiers of white society, Blake is able to create a panorama of possibilities—or the lack thereof—for her female characters.

Blake's style of writing is very simple and straightforward, and she uses flat characters that have been constructed around a single or a limited number of traits. One might be tempted to criticize her work for its one-sidedness, as it leaves no room for character

development. However, as her novel serves a didactic purpose, elements of stereotyping seems to fit her purpose of provoking the reader to see the need for reform that could secure women's rights. Blake attempts to expose the gender hierarchies that have been systemically created over time and benefited men rather than women in the areas of economics, law and politics (Kerber et al 5). Her novel opens with a courtroom scene, where Laura Stanley, an intelligent young girl of twenty-one is being interrogated. The police officer who has brought her in explains that, "I found her on Sixth Avenue, about eleven o'clock last night. She said she had nowhere to go, and I brought her here" (Blake 9). The reason why Laura has been out by herself late is because her train was delayed. Once she reached the city, she tried to take herself into a hotel, but was refused accommodation because she was unchaperoned. After being refused lodging, the clerk follows Laura and offers her a nights lodging in his room (35). The unspoken assumption by the clerk, as well as the men in the courtroom, is that women who appear in the streets after dark are fallen women with questionable morals (Thompson 167). Thus, the very first chapter prefigures the gender hierarchy and suggests that men can define women's realities by claiming to have authorized knowledge.

## **1.2 A Man's Right to Rule**

From the very first chapter of her novel, Blake makes sure to point out the power-structured relationships that allow men as a group to control women. She describes the prevailing gender hierarchy as the "Old, old story, old as the days when 'the sons of God, saw the daughters of men that they were fair' and thus took them wives of all 'which they chose'. All that they chose, not such as chose them" (8). In this passage, she is quoting the Book of Genesis, which asserts that men were divine creatures with the right to choose the women that they desired. This biblical passage from thousands of years ago is applicable to the society that she depicts in her novel, and this is used to foreshadow the events that will follow.

The workings of patriarchal structures are the reason why Laura initially moved to the city. The reader learns that Laura, her siblings and her mother have been under the rule of a misogynist and oppressive father, whom Laura can "remember nothing from . . . but hard words and blows" (33). Mr. Stanley's sternness towards Laura is due to her disobedience towards him. In a conversation with Mrs. D'Arcy, the reader learns that Laura was bequeathed a sum of money from a wealthy aunt, and the money was allocated towards her education. However, her father was of the impression that there is "no use to teach girls anything but how to take care of children," since "it is all that they are good for" (34). By

going away to college against his will, Laura defied his authority and undermined the established rules of his household. For a girl to be provided with more opportunities than a man, and to attend college in the nineteenth century was rather unusual. Women's higher education was viewed as a disruption of patriarchal structures. Women were instead encouraged to be "shrinking and modest, avoiding the public gaze" (Blake 251). Virginia Woolf explains that the masculine opinion endorsed the idea that "nothing could be expected of women's intellectual"(55), and that the "essentials of a woman's being . . . [is] that they are supported by and they minister to, men" (55). Therefore, the fact that the money is allocated towards Laura's education instead of her brother's, enrages her father. Mr. Stanley rules like a tyrant and expects his family to bow to his demands. His character represents the patriarchal consciousness, and his home becomes a microcosm of society.

Laura, who does not believe that men, based on their sex, are granted a divine right to rule, decides to run away to New York City in an attempt to find work and make her own living. This conduct was unusual for a girl from a middle-class home. Society dictated that a woman's job was to prepare herself for marriage by "keeping herself chaste for her future husband and learning the skills necessary to manage a household and to rear children. Motherhood was valued as the most fulfilling and essential of all women's duties" (Cruea 189). Laura, having witnessed her parent's marriage, has seen how malicious men can be, and how marriage deprives women of rights and dignity. The reader learns that as a single woman, Mrs. Stanley used to be very affluent, and that Laura's father, although in love with someone else, married her because of her money. Once married, Mrs. Stanley lost all her property to her husband. Such was the law of the United States for a long time: women as well as slaves, were discriminated against and did not have full rights of citizenships (Gorsky 2). Once married, a woman became under the "cover of her husband's legal status" (Hoff 42). The law of coverture "prevented married women from acting as their own agents at law or to have independent property rights" (Hoff 42).

In order to escape the same fate as her mother, Laura has decided to pursue a career, rather than getting married. She explains to Mrs. D'Arcy that she has come to the city "like a little girl in a fairy tale, to seek [her] fortune" (Blake 35). Nina Baym refers to this kind of story as "women's fiction," which she describes as fiction that is written by women, addressed to women, and that tell one particular story about a girl who is trying to win her own way in the world (qtd. in Thompson 159). The purpose of these novels, according to Baym, is to subvert the established conventions of patriarchy. The fact that Laura allows

herself to be the heroine of the “fairy tale” signals that she challenges the patriarchal script that forcibly molds women into fitting the male ideals of femininity. By transgressing this male script, Laura is able to see herself as an active subject, rather than a passive object, who is only acted upon by others. Farrell argues that Laura is able to reverse the protagonist’s sex in what would be an archetypical fairy tale (“Afterword” 381).

It is perhaps not unpremeditated that Blake has chosen the word “fairy tale” to describe Laura’s quest for independence: Fairy tales are stories which often include a moral lesson on how to succeed in life. Courage, determination and kindness, are all traits that are intrinsic to the heroes of these stories. Although fairy tales are meant to entertain and teach how to be courageous and good, one cannot fail to notice that all fairy tales follow the patriarchal script to some extent: the princesses are always in distress, vulnerable, weak, and lack the ability to be the agent of their own life. The princes, on the other hand, are the heroes who have to go on quests in order to overcome dangers and save the helpless damsel in distress. Women in fairy tales never “think, act, initiate, confront, resist, challenge, feel, care, or question” (Dworkin 43), which according to the men in *Fettered for Life*, are characteristics for good and pious women. Laura, by constructing her own story, transgresses the script designed for her. Her behavior and ideas of independence contradict the conservative ideas of True Womanhood that were held as ideals for women.

### **1.3 Ideas of True Womanhood**

Many nineteenth-century novels have been written with the moral message that the city is a dangerous place for women if they transgress the narrow boundaries of home, and enter the public space (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* 127). Women were told that, as long as they stayed in their “proper sphere,” they would be safe from the dangers of the city. These patriarchal structures would keep women from interfering in the public sphere. Laura’s friend from college, Flora Livingston, has been brought up in a family that has internalized these patriarchal ideas. Her family belongs to the upper class, and Flora is a debutante in New York high society (Stevenson 110). Her parents are trying to persuade her to marry Mr. Ferdinand Le Roy, one of New York’s richest men, as his wealth will secure a good life for her.

However, Flora’s definition of a good life differs from her parents. To her, personal freedom is more valuable than the materialistic security that marriage can provide. Flora is pulled in different directions as to what she desires. On the one hand, she is amenable to the idea of marriage, because that is what society expects of her. Barbara Welter explains that

“the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbours and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152). Women were told that by acquiring these virtues, they would have a life filled with happiness and power. Flora, by definition, is the embodiment of a true woman. However, she has no desire to marry only based on economic motives. She tells Laura that “I have often thought of that dreadful inevitable future, I had rather die than be like some women that I have seen” (Blake 43).

In college, Flora proved to be a talented writer. However, after coming home for winter vacation, she was not allowed to go back to Essex in order to continue her education. She explains to Laura that “Pa let me enter college because I teased so, but you remember that aunt of mine, who came to see me while I was there. . . . she brought back some terrible reports about the place. . . Pa got quite frightened and would not let me go back” (41). Flora’s aunt had been telling her father that the training was “masculine,” and that “the girls there all wanted to vote” (41). In order to prevent such ideas from influencing his daughter, Flora was kept from pursuing her talents and fulfilling her intellectual potential. Flora explains that she was very angry, but “it is never any use to try to do anything Pa does not approve of” (41). Stevenson argues that Flora is the primary example of the woman-slave analogy suggested in the novel’s title. In a conversation with Laura, Flora says “in the morning there is a stupid time when I don’t have anything to do; I get tired of reading novels and embroidering, and then I have often wished I had some regular occupation” (Blake 42). Flora is here expressing a need to have something meaningful to do with her time. Laura asks why Flora does not turn her power to achieve success for herself in studying or in literature, to which Flora replies “They won’t let me . . . [i]t is of no use to contend against fate; no other success but ball-room success is open to me” (73).

Laura’s encouragement helps Flora muster the courage to ask her father if he can teach her law, so that she can help out in his office. Laura’s father replies by saying “You have very good sense, Flora . . . enough sense, I should have thought, not to make such an absurd preposition. . . . I have endeavoured to have your education so conducted, as to make you what a refined gentlewoman should be” (100). Flora asserts that she has no prospects in the future, to which her father replies that her prospect is to be “a good wife to some suitable man. Your ambition should be for his success . . . A true woman is willing to lose her own identity in her husband’s” (101). Later that evening, when Mr. Livingston tells Mrs. Livingston about Flora’s inquiry, she becomes worried.

Like her husband, Mrs. Livingston does not allow Flora to entertain such ideas either. The reader, however, learns that Mrs. Livingston once had ambitions herself, but that she now “only cares for society [and] her whole object in life is to get [her] girls well married” (44). The narrator states that “Mrs. Livingston had at one period of her life protested against her destiny as bitterly as did ever any revolted slave; but having for years past been contented with her chains, she could endure no thought of revolt in others” (102-103). The fact that Mrs. Livingston has been silenced into submission, shows the workings of patriarchy within the family. Kate Millet argues that patriarchy’s chief institution is the family, as “It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; [it is] a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (33). Mrs. Livingston, who once protested against her own marriage, now becomes annoyed with Flora and insists that she suppress her objections to marriage. Heidi Jacobs explains that “Blake recasts the practice of parents marrying their daughters to men they do not love” (67). This practice turns young women into commodities. Girls become items on the marriage market, and will be sold when the right man comes along. This conduct bears resemblance to slave-trading, as women unwillingly have to marry, and thus become someone’s property. This shows how women were destroyed by their domestic lives, as society did not allow them a definition of self beyond wife and mother.

While Flora is tired of the routine life of the upper classes, Blake portrays the various kinds of confinement that women in the lower classes faced. Rhoda Dayton and Maggie Bertram are working class women who came to the city in hope of finding work as seamstresses. What met them was discrimination; the wages offered were low, because they were women. In order to survive, the girls needed more than one job. Rhoda explains to Laura that, “I could only earn about three dollars a week. I was starved; I slept in a garret; I had no fire in winter, no warm clothes” (Blake 57). Rhoda and Maggie were not able to make it on three dollars a week, so in order to survive, they were forced to work nights in a concert-saloon. Rhoda tries to explain to Laura what that means “it’s a place in a cellar where men get things to drink, where there is music, and girls wait on the men” (57). Necessity forces these girls to make money by commodifying their bodies and pleasing the male costumers. Rhoda explains that her boss required the girls to wear low-neck dresses even during winter. When one of the girls became terribly sick, she asked the boss if she could wear a little scarf around her neck. He told her “them shoulders of your’n are worth a dollar a night to me . . . you can’t come covered up like an old woman” (58). This shows how women from the working classes

were offered low wages, and the only workplaces that payed enough for them to survive, were places where women were turned into commodities so that men could make a profit on them.

#### 1.4 Female Exploitation and Double Standards

Maggie and Rhoda's class deprives them of the privilege to be respected as pure and pious women, and their lack of connections to high society makes them easy victims of assault, as men can do to them whatever they want without high society finding out. Through the description of Rhoda, Blake makes explicit the link between economic and sexual exploitation "Patiently, devotedly, did this girl whom the world would call lost, endure the trials and the hardships of her lot; always gentle to her friend, hard-working, self-denying, but holding in her heart to a burning revolt against the position to which misfortune and man's social law had condemned her" (Blake 116-117). Here, Blake uses the language of True Womanhood: Rhoda is patient, devoted, gentle, hardworking, and self-denying, yet she is exempted from the category of True Womanhood because of her economic misfortune, that has forced her to work as a saloon girl (Jacobs 70).

Welter explains that purity was as essential as piety to a young woman. If a woman lost her purity, she was perceived as a "fallen woman." True Women were urged to maintain their virtue, "although men, being by nature more sensual than they, would try to assault it" (154). Welter gives an example of Thomas Branagan's *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated*, where he admits that his sex "would sin and sin again," as they could not help it. It was the woman's job not to give in and let man "take liberties incompatible with her delicacy." Branagan continues by saying that if a woman was to give in, she would "be left in silent sadness to bewail [her] credulity, imbecility, duplicity, and premature prostitution" (qtd. in Welter 155). Although Blake never uses the word "fallen" about Rhoda or Maggie, she still insinuates that that is how society perceives them.

For instance, when Rhoda applies for a job in a store, she is refused on the grounds that the boss "couldn't have any girls that weren't virtuous" (Blake 118). Rhoda in despair explains that "the man himself keeps a girl on Twenty-Second Street, and he took a fellow in my place that I have seen in the saloon, and—well, he's not so virtuous as I am, yet he could have the place at fifteen dollars a week because he is a man. It's a cruel, bitter shame . . . this damnation that waits for women, if they make one misstep. Because I have stumbled, I am a thousand times worse than the men who roll in the dust" (118). Through Rhoda's character, Blake illustrates the injustice women would face with regard to the sexual double standard:

If [Rhoda] had been a man, her early errors would have been forgotten or unheeded, and with the resolution and industry she had, a dozen remunerative occupations would have been open to her; as a woman there was no hope, the curse must follow her wherever she went, and the only means of sustaining life was to toil all day at such work she could get from shops where no questions were asked, and in the evening to be at the beck and call of frequenters of a concert saloon. (120)

Rhoda is paying the price of being a woman in a patriarchal script. Throughout the novel, it becomes evident that Rhoda is acquainted with Judge Swinton. The reader then learns that when she first came to New York City, she was kidnapped and raped by the judge, who abandoned her afterwards. Because of his actions, she is paying the price of not being seen as a virtuous woman, while he is a high-profile politician, who later gets elected to Congress. Rhoda points out how unfair life is in a conversation with Maggie “Why see how it is! That man who would stoop to do dirty acts that I would scorn, who has been dissipated and vile since he was a boy is received anywhere with honor, while I—the men who are proud to claim his acquaintance would turn their eyes away from me!—and so with you, my poor lamb, no one will help you, while the one who ought to be taking care of you, has money and friends and all that he wants” (95).

Rhoda is here talking about Ferdinand Le Roy, who seduced and abandoned Maggie once she came to New York. Now she lies sick and dying of consumption, while he is planning his upper-class wedding to Flora. Jacobs argues that because Maggie and Rhoda are economically more vulnerable, they are more likely to fall victim to sexual exploitation (69). Their characters are made as foils to Laura and Flora and show how, while the middle and upper classes need food for their minds, the lower classes are struggling to secure adequate food for their bodies. Jacobs argues that Maggie and Rhoda show the double-edged exploitation emerging from the intersections of class and gender (69). While both of them came to New York City hoping, like Laura, to find gainful employment, their social class has forced them to take on jobs that ruin their reputation as virtuous women. The inferred meaning here is that because Laura possesses middle-class privilege, she is better able to free herself from men’s design upon her (Jacobs 69).

This turns out to be true, as Judge Swinton’s two attempts to kidnap Laura fail because she has people who care for and look after her. The reader learns that the judge has made it a business to abduct young women who come to the city. After having detained Laura at the courthouse, he suggests that she stay with the Bludgetts for a couple days, until she can find some permanent place to stay. Laura agrees to this, oblivious to the fact that Mr. Bludgett is

procuring her for the judge. Frank Heywood, a young journalist who happened to be in the courtroom when this deal was made, is able to get her out of Bludgett's house before anything bad happens to her.

Later in the novel, the judge learns that Rhoda and Laura have become acquainted. He seeks out Rhoda and tries to bribe her into keeping their past a secret. Rhoda, although in need of the money he is offering, rejects his offer "Do you think I have forgotten the coward blow that has disfigured me for life? . . . do you think I have forgotten the vile drugs and the lying plot you used, to ruin me? No, they are burnt into my memory like fire! I would not touch your money, if it would save me from death by torture, or from such a life as I lead, which is worse" (Blake 125). Rhoda is not willing to let the judge leave Laura's life in ruins as he did hers. Jacobs observes that, "When Maggie, Rhoda and Mrs. Bludgett tip off Laura's middle-class friends about Swinton's attempts to abduct and seduce Laura, they rush to protect her. These same friends, however, passively pity Maggie, Rhoda and Mrs. Bludgett, but they do little to actively protect them" (71). Blake intends to show that working class women were in need of laws to protect them, as they did not have the same resources as the middle-and upper-class women.

Although Laura is more privileged than Rhoda and has a network of friends that can protect her, Blake nevertheless points out the dangers of not complying with societal customs. Laura's rejection of conventional norms such as marriage and submission elicits a negative response from the men in the novel. To them, women like Laura who speaks her mind and shows signs of rebellion, were seen as trespassers in a domain reserved for men. Laura soon finds out that men have the power to punish her for her independence. When applying for work, she is several times turned down because she is a woman. After several attempts of being met with sexual harassment and humiliation, she finds a job advertisement in the newspaper for a drawing teacher for Mr. Glitter's school. Mrs. D'Arcy goes to speak to him about how Laura would be a great candidate for the job. She explains that "[Laura] is herself quite an artist, and has the best testimonials from Essex College" (75). Mr. Glitter responds by exclaiming "Ah, a lady! . . . I have preferred male instructors in all departments . . . as I have wished to give my pupils the very best tuition" (75). This postulation that women are inferior to men has been institutionalized for such a long time that it has been accepted as a mere truth, leading to the belief that men and women are born essentially different. Men have been granted the principle that they are born with inherent rationality and competitiveness, which will make them naturally suitable for business, politics and public purpose. Women, on the

contrary, have been assigned the intrinsic value of sentimentality, which makes them more emotional and less rational. For that reason, women have been seen as natural domestic beings, suitable for nurturing children and taking care of the household, and not as career-oriented, self-reliant beings (Coultrap-McQuin 8).

Although Laura is more than qualified for the job, Mr. Glitter wants to keep her from having it, as his character represents the conservative nineteenth-century belief that women, especially those who belong to the middle- and upper classes, were not welcome to work. Mr. Glitter states that “I regret . . . that the young lady is a graduate of Essex College. I have always felt that the teachings there are hardly such as to develop true refinement, or, I may say, true womanliness” (Blake 75). Because women were expected to stay at home, they were taught that wanting to be out in the public sphere was not acceptable behavior for a woman. Laura, however, fails to understand why “a daughter should hang on her father for support any more than a son” (40), and believes that she has been educated so that she should be able to make her own living, instead of being dependent on her father or a husband.

Mr. Glitter finally agrees to have Laura work for him, but he refuses to pay her the same amount as he did his last teacher. Mrs. D'Arcy asks if he will raise her wage if she proves to be a great teacher, to which he responds that there are many other girls that would like to be hired to work for him, and that he constantly receives applications for work from young women (76). Laura, when hearing this, states that “it seems to me that women get less pay than men, as a rule, even when there is very little competition” (77). Kate Millett argues that “sex is a status category with political implications” (24). She further explains that what goes unexamined and unacknowledged is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. (25). Laura is forced to comply with this, and she realizes that the patriarchal oppression that she wanted to get away from by leaving her home, is manifested in society as a whole, not just in her father’s household. Blake tried to foreshadow this through the courtroom scene at the very beginning of the novel. What we see is that the environments that should be safe, such as a courtroom or a home, in fact are not safe at all. Instead they become microcosms of society. Laura’s detention is an indicator of society as a whole, that seek to control women (Farrell, Lillie Devereux Blake 134).

Blake also shows the discrimination that working-class women had to face. Rhoda tells Laura a story of how the saloon is raided every now and then “one night the police ‘pulled’ the place, that’s what we call it; came in and arrested all the girls. . . . they never touched any of the men who came there, night after night, and supported the place with their

money” (Blake 57). Laura asks why the saloon is still open if the staff were arrested, to which Rhoda replies “Well, just to make a fuss, and pretend the police were what they call efficient” (59). The incarceration of the women working in the saloon illustrates the double standards in society. The girls are taken to the courthouse to be judged by Swinton, who is a customer himself. He is also the reason why Rhoda has to work in the saloon and not being able to get other more respectable jobs. Blake points to the double standards that ruin women, but men get away with.

## **1.5 Matrimonial Cruelty**

So far we have seen how patriarchal structures have been hazardous to single women in society. I will now focus on how the conditions were for married women. Blake’s critique of marriage as an institution is a strong one. Lynn M. Alexander observes that “Husbands repeatedly assert social and legal rights to treat their wives as they please, and Blake insist that all women should be allowed an occupation in order to ensure that economic dependency does not trap a woman into accepting a potentially damaging marriage” (598-599). Millet points out that “[w]e are not accustomed to associate patriarchy with force. So perfect is its system of socialization, so complete the general assent to its value, so long and so universally has it prevailed in human society, that it scarcely seems to require violent implementation” (43). Blake depicts many incidents of violence, both physical and psychological, that are inflicted on women. I will start by looking at the most violent marriage in the novel, which is the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bludgett.

Mrs. Bludgett is one of the women who are trapped in a life-threatening marriage and has been abused into submission by her husband (Petty 52). She represents the married working-class woman and is described by Farrell as a “battered housewife” (135), who has to attend to boarders whom her husband brings home and procures for his boss, Judge Swinton, so that he can pursue and harass them in private. Laura is brought to Mr. Bludgett’s house after being released from the courthouse. What meets her there is “a small, thin creature, about thirty years old” (Blake 14), who is demanded downstairs by her husband to come and take care of their new boarder. Mrs. Bludgett’s first reaction is “[w]hat, another woman?” Laura notices that she looks pale, and has dark circles beneath her eyes and “a look of perpetual fear” (14).

Laura, who does not want to bother Mrs. Bludgett, tells her that “if it will put you to any inconvenience to receive me, I will go away” (14). Before Mrs. Bludgett is able to reply,

Mr. Bludgett tells her that “Tain’t no inconvenience, only women is contrary sometimes, and my wife ain’t very spry, ever” (14). Mr. Bludgett then walks to his wife’s side and “[utters] a few words [in] an in a fierce whisper” (15). Mrs. Bludgett looks at him “with a dumb beseeching terror in her eyes,” before she turns to Laura and says “Yes, Miss, do stay here a while, I’m very lonesome these days” (15). The reader later learns that the terror in Mrs. Bludgett’s eyes is because she knows that her husband is procuring Laura for the judge.

Later that day, Laura finds Mrs. Bludgett reading a “showily-illustrated paper” (16). Mrs. Bludgett explains that she is reading the *New York Weekly Typhoon*, because she likes the stories in it. She explains that she is very fond of reading; however, she can only read in secret when her husband is out, as he does not approve of her reading. One can argue that Mr. Bludgett, by denying his wife to read, is indirectly denying her a voice, as reading and writing was a means of having a voice of one’s own (Thompson 168).

It becomes evident to Laura that Mrs. Bludgett is imprisoned in her own home, and paralyzed by the fear of her husband. Laura asks if Mrs. Bludgett has many friends, but the poor lady replies that Mr. Bludgett does not like for her to go out much (Blake 18). Laura asks her why she is not allowed outside the house and suggests that Mrs. Bludgett should ask her husband for a reason. Mrs. Bludgett replies that “He don’t like for me to ask questions” (18). Laura is infuriated by Mrs. Bludgett’s treatments and says to her “Have you ever thought of it, Mrs. Bludgett, what good reason is there why you should not have the same rights to ask him questions, that he has to ask you?” (18). Mrs. Bludgett answers that, “But he is a man, you know” (18), and by doing so proves how indoctrinated women could be in the gender hierarchy. Mrs. Bludgett has been taught that it is her duty to obey, and that she does not dare to go against his will, because he is “dreadful, when he’s mad” (17).

It becomes very obvious that Mrs. Bludgett is very lonely and defenseless against her violent husband. She explains to Laura that before she married, she used to have a job in “a real nice store, quite first class” (19), and that she sometimes thinks about how she would like things to be a little more like they used to. Mrs. Bludgett, like most of the other women in the novel, is confined by the patriarchal script that has been designed to tell women what they can and cannot do. Laura’s character serves as an independent spirit, who urges women to stand up for themselves and break with confinement. Mrs. Bludgett becomes fond of Laura, and during their conversation she asks repeatedly if Laura has any friends that might come to see her the same evening as it “might be lonesome” (21). The reader is told that Mrs. Bludgett

looked troubled, and it seemed like she was about to tell Laura something, however she does not. Instead, she says “I wish you had friends here, I do now” (21).

Since the reader does not know about Judge Swinton’s plans for Laura, not much attention is given to Mrs. Bludgett’s assertion. It is not until Frank Heywood, a young journalist who was at the courthouse to witness Laura’s detention, shows up, that we understand what is really going on. Once Mrs. Bludgett realizes that Frank has come to warn Laura from staying with the Bludgetts, her facial expression changes to a look of relief. Frank tells Laura that she is not safe where she is. Laura who has no reason to believe Frank, looks to Mrs. Bludgett. Mrs. Bludgett asserts that the man is telling the truth “If Bludgett should kill me for it, I must tell you. Go away with him as soon as you can” (22). Laura’s kindness towards Mrs. Bludgett has created a transformation in her, and she dared to disobey her husband’s wish of keeping Laura inside their house. As Frank and Laura are about to leave, Mr. Bludgett appears and is furious at the fact that his wife allowed them to go. He tries to block their way and tells Laura to “go back into the house or I’ll drag you in” (23). Frank is able to plant a “quick blow directly under the big man’s right ear” (24). As they hurry from the house, Frank and Laura hear “a woman’s scream, prolonged and anguish-stricken” (24). When some days later Laura visits Mrs. Bludgett to pick up a book she left behind, she finds Mrs. Bludgett paler than when she had last seen her, and this time with a patch of plaster on her temple, and she can see that “blood had settled in black circles under her eyes” (55). Although not yet explicitly expressed, one can assume that these signs indicate that Mr. Bludgett has violently beaten his wife for having let Laura leave their house. Mrs. Bludgett, scared of another round of beatings, blames her bruises on a fall (Blake 56).

When Mr. Bludgett comes home that same evening, it is evident that he has been drinking heavily. He demands to know who has been visiting his wife earlier that day. And when Mrs. Bludgett omits Laura from the list of visitors, he drags her out of her chair and tells her that he saw Laura leave their house, as he was close by. Mrs. Bludgett tremblingly tries to explain to him that it is not her fault that Laura came to visit her. Mr. Bludgett, who is plotting to kidnap Laura, wants his wife to tell him where Laura is staying. However, Mrs. Bludgett swears to him that she does not know, and Blake graphically describes the violence that is inflicted on Mrs. Bludgett after she fails to provide him the information he demands:

Tell me, you hag! Tell me!” he shouted “or I’ll break every bone in your body!” As he spoke he raised one hand and seized her by the hair, then lifting the other hand, his eyes glowing red with passion, he dealt her a heavy blow across the face. She would have fallen with the force of the shock, had not his hand cruel grasp upheld her; as it

was she swayed away with a low cry, the blood flowing from a gash in her cheek. The rest of her countenance ghastly white with fear. . . . at first the poor creature replied with wiled appeals for mercy, but these died away presently, and there was no sound as he flung her from him to the floor. She fell and lay without motion, but even yet, the man's fury was not spent. He kicked the prostrate form more than once, his heavy boot making the strokes almost murderous. (Blake 62)

When Mrs. Bludgett comes to, she finds her husband asleep on the couch. Out of anxiety and fear of being violently abused again, she brings him a blanket and makes him comfortable. Even after being brutally beaten, she is still attending to her husband. This is arguably an attempt to show the consequences and the dangers women faced, if they transgressed against patriarchal norms. Mr. Bludgett's behavior is a product of patriarchal traditions of men's right to control their wives. Michael P. Johnson argues that this a form of terroristic control that "involves the systematic use of not only violence, but economic, subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics" (284).

Yet another woman who suffers from the confinement of marriage is Mrs. Moulder. Unlike the physically abused Mrs. Bludgett, the middle-class wife Agnes Molder is subject to emotional abuse by her husband. Mrs. Moulder is described as a "lovely woman . . . well educated, refined, very superior in these respects to her husband" (Blake 78). Married at the age of seventeen in romantic folly, Mrs. Moulder is now twenty-nine and trapped in her supposedly idyllic middle-class setting. From the outside, it may look like Mrs. Moulder is living a comfortable life, and it is only when Laura becomes a boarder in the Moulders' home, that the reader is able to see the kind of mental oppression her husband inflicts on her by granting her no agency, intellectual engagement and worse of all, no companionship (Jacobs 72). Mrs. Moulder becomes a "disenchanted arbiter of the 'cult of true womanhood,' a nineteenth-century cultural ideology that promoted the sanctity of women's activity in the home while attempting to limit their activity to this domain" (Stevenson 112). The cult of true womanhood was defined by virtues of femininity such as piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Mrs. Moulder attempts to live up to these standards in order to please her overbearing husband, who not only emotionally abuses her, but also constantly criticizes her for not having all the housework done by the time he comes home from work; "I should think when you women are at home all day doing nothing, you might have things ready" (Blake 82). However, Mrs. Moulder is doing her best to take care of their three children, doing general housework, attending to her boarders, and in the evenings working on her "endless sewing that with her was never done" (84). Mr. Moulder believes that it is his right to behave as he pleases, while it is his wife's duty to be patient and submissive, and never questioning

his actions. Mrs. Moulder tells Laura that her husband has “strict ideas as to wifely duty and submission” (105), which in the nineteenth century were the common ideas that society held towards women and their behavior.

A conventional ending to a nineteenth-century novel would be to sanction the glory of marriage, and leave out the parts that reflect badly upon patriarchy:

Once the pair has persuaded reluctant parents to approve the marriage, once the future husband has found a suitable job or disproved the nasty rumors about himself, once the woman has outgrown her misguided desire to attend college or fulfilled her honorable desire to care for her aged parents, then all is well: husband and wife settle happily ever after into a comfortable patriarchal domesticity, and the door closes on their lives. (Gorsky 18)

However, *Fettered for Life* does not follow the conventional plot, and Laura’s character constantly challenges the cultural assumptions that restrict women. For instance, Laura does not believe that being a devoted mother necessarily means that a woman is happy. In a conversation with Mrs. Moulder, Laura wants to know if she feels content with her lot, and if she agrees with the ideas of her husband. To that Mrs. Moulder admits that she for a while used to be rebellious, as she believed that she had “the capacity for something else beyond domestic drudgeries” (Blake 105). She continues by saying that she has done her best to silence these ideas and “endeavored to become reconciled to whatever might seem hard in [her] lot in life” (105). Mrs. Moulder becomes the embodiment of the American women in the nineteenth century, who, although they had the intelligence and capacity to take upon them professions, still were denied work because of certain ideas created by patriarchy. In Mrs. Moulder’s case, her silence about her discontent is taken as a tacit consent by her husband to keep treating her in a bad manner.

Blake’s choice of the surname “Moulder” is well-chosen, as it is pronounced the same way as the word “mold” which can mean “to shape” but also “to decompose” and rot. Both these meanings seem to fit the Moulders’ family situation, as Mrs. Moulder has been “molded” to behave in a certain passive and submissive way. Laura notices that patriarchal structures are passed down to Mrs. Moulder’s children as well. Although tormented by their brother, the girls are taught to accept his behavior, and act in a way that does not upset him. It is Mr. Moulder who encourages his son to rule like a tyrant, and Mrs. Moulder cannot do anything about the situation. Mr. and Mrs. Moulder seem to molder, as they both are discontent; Mr. Moulder by how little it seems that his wife gets done of housework, while

Mrs. Moulder's unhappiness is due to her feeling enslaved and not being considered as an equal. Mr. Moulder's lack of consideration towards his wife, results in Mrs. Moulder miscarrying their unborn son. The death of their unborn child can suggest that oppression comes with a price. Although Mrs. Moulder has conformed to her husband's desire, his actions will not be without consequences.

Bringing on the miscarriage is Mr. Moulder's pursuit and assassination of Cherry, Mrs. Moulder's pet bird. Cherry can arguably be seen as a foil for Mrs. Moulder, as all her life she has been caged-in, and her only purpose has been to entertain the family with her singing. Cherry is just an ornament meant to please others. On his return home one day, Mr. Moulder finds that dinner is being a little late because his wife is trying to catch the bird to put it back in the cage. Mr. Moulder in his rashness grabs on to a heavy towel and rushes after the bird. Mrs. Moulder pleads him to not be so rough, however, Mr. Moulder, enraged by the bird's escape, strikes at it over and over again until the bird dies and falls to the floor. This act of enagement towards the escapee has little to do with the bird, and is rather a metaphor for what happens if women escape or transgress the rules that entrap them in. Like Cherry, Mrs. Moulder is caged in, and has just witnessed what happens if she ever tries to break free. Cherry is the smallest death in the novel, nevertheless, the death of an innocent and vulnerable creature is symbolic. The caged bird becomes a powerful symbol of freedom and oppression, and on a basic level, Cherry is "analogous to Mrs. Moulder who is 'caged' in her house and middle-class marriage" (Jacobs 73).

The last unhappy marriage depicted in the novel is that between Flora and Mr. Le Roy. As stated earlier, Flora has no desire to marry this man. However, Mr. Le Roy, like Flora's parents, is determined to make her his wife, and Flora unwillingly becomes the object of his attention. One of the most intense interactions between them is at Mrs. Duncan's ball:

The night went on; but Flora even while surrounded by other admirers, was conscious, always, that this man was watching her, with a gaze which never relented. She was gay with her gay companions, she laughed with the rest; but there was with her all the time, a feeling of oppression, a sense that she was not one moment free from that cold, yet devouring regard. Wherever she went, whoever was with her, she could see those steel blue eyes, compelling her again and again to meet their look; and when at last he approached to claim her for a dance which she had promised him, it seemed to her as if there were slowly overwhelming her a stern power which she detested, and yet which she was helpless to resist. (Blake 128)

That same evening, Mr. Le Roy asks Flora to "give herself" to him and become his wife (Blake 128). According to Laura, the only privilege that men have left women is the privilege

of refusing them (192) and Flora asserts this power by rejecting his proposal. Mr. Le Roy, however, is used to taking what is not given to him. When Flora declines his marriage proposal, he forcefully kisses her and says: “you are fairly mine, Flora; you won’t give me a promise? Nay, then, I must take a pledge” (128). This incident is a turning point in Flora’s life, as she feels compromised after being kissed. To Flora “a kiss was the symbol of surrender, so compromising that marriage must follow as an inevitable consequence” (147). Being brought up in a society that taught young girls that women were expected to be pious, virtuous and submissive, Flora is not able to see how she can maintain a good reputation without marrying Le Roy. She thinks to herself that she has “passed under the yolk . . . I am a slave” (129).

After her engagement to Mr. Le Roy, Laura is told by Guy Bradford that Flora “was dressed in white, with a great many blue ribbons, and round her neck there was a splendid gold chain . . . and I don’t know why, but I constantly thought of some pretty white dove prepared for sacrifice” (150). One day before Flora’s wedding, Laura later receives a letter from her, where she is asked to meet her. Flora tells Laura that, “I am going to run away. . . . I would rather do anything, submit to anything, than be his wife!” (235). Flora further asserts that it will be an escape “like that from a dungeon; like that from death” (236). Flora seems to understand that once she marries, she will become Le Roy’s property and that he has the right to assert power over her. She explains to Laura that “he is a born tyrant! I must submit to his wishes with unquestioning obedience. I must dress and act, as it suits him; I must endure his caresses as it pleases him to have me . . . I should be a slave bound hand and foot, if I married him, and I cannot! I cannot!” (236). However, Flora’s attempt to run away fails, when Mr. Le Roy forcefully hunts her down and brings her home, and their wedding precedes as he had planned.

Sometime after the wedding, Laura visits her friends again. Flora cries that she is “lost to happiness, ruined in self-respect [and] bankrupt in hope” (264). Laura encourages Flora to find new interests and pursue her hobbies, but Flora explains that “Mr. Le Roy does not wish for me to sew; does not care to have me draw. . . . he thinks he has right to dictate all my actions” (264-265). Laura tells Flora that she cannot succumb to all his demands, and suggest that Flora takes up writing again, as that is something she is good at.

## **1.6 Female Disobedience**

Laura's encouragement motivates Flora to start writing poems again. Flora tells Laura that she hopes her poems will be published by a magazine so that she will get paid. Laura replies by saying "but my dear girl, what can you want with money"? (307). Although married to one of the richest men in New York, Flora says, "I need money as much as the poorest woman in the city; I have not a penny that I can call my own. . . . I have nothing of my own, I am only a steward of his money" (Blake 308). The reader learns that Mr. Le Roy has requested Flora to make a memorandum of what she spends. Flora, who is indifferent to his wishes, tells him "I was never brought up to it, and I cannot begin it now . . . not even at your commands . . . to be all day long putting down expenses in that book, is a slavery that I will not endure. Keep the accounts yourself if you want to know how the money goes" (305). Mr. Le Roy asserts his power over Flora by telling her that she no longer will have access to his money. He tells her that "you will come to me yourself, every time you want five dollars to buy flowers" (305). Flora thinks to herself that, "I would kill myself, if I had not one hope. I can earn money perhaps, and have my flower in spite of him" (305). This is the reason why Flora needs money on her own. With the help of Laura and Frank, Flora is able to publish her poetry and earn a little money herself.

This infuriates Mr. Le Roy when he finds out, but Flora claims that "women need an occupation and an object in life, as much as men" (Blake 328). Mr. Le Roy commands her to stop. She is allowed to write poems, but as his wife she has no business publishing them or having her name appear in the papers. Flora asserts that she cannot see anything wrong with it, and reminds Mr. Le Roy that he himself does not withhold his name from public meetings or movements that he is interested in (332). Mr. Le Roy explains that there is a difference, he is a man. Flora does not see why there should be a difference. She believes that she has as much right to her individuality as he does (332). Mr. Le Roy tries to silence Flora's notions of rebellion and tells her that he absolutely forbids her to ever again publish anything (332). Flora stands up for herself and replies that "you do not give me any money, I will earn some for myself; you do not make my life happy, I will at least try to make it not an aimless one; and I decline to dispute with you further on this point" (333). Flora is showing signs of self-assertion and refuses to be oppressed by her husband. Le Roy reassert his power by saying "I will be obeyed; I am master here and you shall know it" (333). He reminds Flora of her wedding vows. Flora does an analysis of her wedding vows and tells him "I do not believe that under any circumstances you have the right to thwart my aspirations, to stifle my soul, to destroy my life. You swore 'to love and to cherish' me . . . for the kindness, the tenderness,

the gentleness I had a right to expect, I have looked in vain. My vows, so far as I uttered them, were reluctant ones, as you know. In spite of that, I have done a wife's duty to you thus far; but I absolutely refuse to yield my hopes and object in life" (333).

Flora has throughout the novel expressed that she would die rather than to lose her individuality. Although she is able to talk back to Mr. Le Roy, she is his property, and he has the right to deny her to stop pursuing her writing. Flora thinks to herself "Go back to life. . . endure what I must endure! Be his obedient slave! Crush out every noble aspiration, sink down into a mere creature of his caprices! No, no! Better an endless rest!" (346). Thus, she decides to run away. Blake vividly describes Flora's experience:

in the great arch of the heavens the stars swung and flamed, beckoning her to join in their mystic dance. Around her the rocks lay black, monstrous, cold, sliding under her feet, warning her away. Beneath her, the sea stretched; vast spectral, reaching away to the confines of the world, while the waves came leaping toward her, one over the other, hurrying, hurrying, always. Crowding and tearing in a mad struggle, till they flung themselves on the cold stones with an angry roar, and stretched up their white foam-tipped fingers, trying to seize her; calling to her, calling to her, with their hollow voice. (384)

The waves that are "crowding and tearing in mad struggle" reflect Flora's inner struggle, and just like the waves "flung themselves on the old stones with an angry roar, Flora stretches her arms upwards and with a wild cry jumps into the sea (348). However, Flora is dragged out of the water by an acquaintance who happened to witness her attempted suicide. To Flora's despair, she survives, and learns that her husband is angry with her because of her improper behavior of letting a stranger rescue her (349). Flora falls sick and tells her mother that she will be glad to die. She refuses to see her husband and implores her mother to not "let any of the other girls marry men they don't love. . . . You thought I should be happy in my marriage, but it has killed me." Before Flora dies of complications, she tells her mother that, "I want you to remember this. . . that women as well as men need an occupation for their energies, and that marriage without love, is worse than death" (351). Flora's death is not the only instance where female characters fail to save each other from confinement. By the end of the novel, Rhoda, Maggie and Mrs. Bludgett are also dead. Leslie suggests that the only characters who survive are those who are deeply engaged in political activism, such as Laura, Mrs. D'Arcy and Frank Heywood.

## 1.7 Other Options Than Marriage

Frank, although a peripheral character, nevertheless serves an important function in the novel. The reader observes how he always helps and rescues women. He was the one who warned Laura about Mr. Bludgett and brought her to Mrs. D'Arcy, later he saves Laura from Judge Swinton's attempted kidnapping, and accompanies Maggie and Laura to Virginia, so that the girls can travel safely. When the ship is wrecked, tries to save Rhoda, however unsuccessfully. Every time a female character is in danger, Frank seem to be there as a protector. Laura is very fond of Frank, and every time she speaks warmly of him, Mrs. D'Arcy assert that he will be an excellent friend for Laura—with an emphasis on the word “friend.” At first, one does not pay much attention to this, but towards the end of the novel it is revealed that Frank is a woman cross-dresser. This all makes sense, as he is one of the few male characters who advocates women's rights and Laura feels at ease with him, and looks on him as a brother. Towards the end of the novel, Frank asks Laura “have you never guessed my secret?. . . you have told me more than once that I was like a brother to you, if you had said a sister, it would have been nearer the truth” (Blake 364). After a moment of astonishment, Laura cries “You are a woman! That is glorious. . . I thought you were entirely different from any man I ever knew; so gentle, so refined, seeming to understand my feelings completely” (364-365). Laura who herself is an embodiment of the New Woman ideology is happy to see how Frank has been able to pursue a career outside of the domestic life. She tells him that “It's grand. . . Perfectly grand! To think of you being one of the editors of ‘the Trumpeter!’ And going all over town as you please! And knowing Bludgett down! And rescuing me from Judge Swinton! And voting, I dare say. . . Oh, it's delicious” (365).

Frank tells Laura her entire story; she came to the city, like so many girls before her, looking for a job. Because she was a young, single girl, she met the same hostility which Laura, Rhoda and Maggie had encountered as well. “I was insulted, refused work, unless I would comply with the disgraceful propositions of my employers; in short I had the experience which so many young women have in the great city; poverty, temptation, cruelty. I was resolved not to sink where so many had fallen” (366). When realizing that she will not succeed as long as she is perceived a woman, Frank decides to kill her real identity in order to achieve her ambitions. By surrendering her female identity to live as a man, Frank escapes the dangers that girls were exposed to. In her crossdressing, Frank proves that women can do the work of men and succeed at it. Arguably Frank is the only character who has embarked on an independent lifestyle that is fulfilling (Leslie 61). For while Laura is the embodiment of the

New Woman ideology, she is still restricted by the male made norms that deprive her of the same rights that Frank possesses. However, in order to be completely independent, Frank has sacrificed his real identity, and killed himself metaphorically.

By creating a cross-dressing character, Blake has given women a voice in a male-dominated culture. Frank uses his power and his position as a journalist to help other women. For instance, the reader learns through Rhoda, that the night when the saloon was “pulled,” the women were supposed to spend the night at the cold courtroom. “We was huddled up together, shivering, when this young gentleman came in to make up the case for the papers, and he was so kind!” (58). Frank had talked to the policeman and told him that, if they do not make it warm and comfortable, he would put an item in the paper about it (58). Frank also omitted the girls’ names in the paper, so their families and friends would not find out that they worked nights at a saloon.

When Rhoda and Frank are in a shipwreck together, Rhoda decides to sacrifice her own life in order to save Frank’s. She tells him that, “This plank is hardly large enough for two. . . . My life is a wreck and a ruin, and may as well end thus any way” (276). Frank tries to keep her afloat and tells her that he hopes some passing boat will pick them up soon. Rhoda, however, knows she is a burden to him, as she cannot swim. She tells him “Frank. . . I know your secret. . . . your life is better worth saving than mine. Good-bye—good-bye” (267). Rhoda has lost everything – her reputation, her dignity and Maggie – to patriarchal exploitation. She therefore sacrifices her own life by drowning, so that Frank can live and continue to fight for women’s rights.

## **1.8 The Killing of the Self**

So far, I have looked at how Blake portrays women’s conditions in the society. Finally, I wish to analyze how these conditions can be linked to the suicide of Flora, Rhoda and the symbolic suicide of Frank. The examples that I have presented in this chapter, all have in common that the female characters are prevented from having the same opportunities as the men in the novel. The male characters are condescending toward any notion that suggests equality between the sexes. Blake’s novel is a great example of how women have only been granted “experiential knowledge,” which means that their experience is less worth than man’s. Laura is a great painter and has gone to college and studied art. Yet she is not wanted as an art teacher, because the school’s headmaster believes that women are unable to do a good job because they are women. Men have reasoned that women are utterly incapable of logical and

critical thinking, and that they only base their experiences on feelings. When a woman claims something, she claims it because she is a woman—not because her claim holds truth. Due to this patriarchal discourse, women’s experiences have been devalued for a very long time.

Men have been in charge of shaping and defining women’s realities and experiences. Blake illustrates this through Judge Swinton’s character, who is supposed to protect the innocent, but instead he preys on them. The opening chapter of the novel, when Laura is detained in the courtroom, might seem like a trivial scene. However, Blake is attempting to illustrate the restrictions and implications it would have for a woman to stay out late. The detention of Laura is nothing compared to what real women went through. Farrell explains that a young working-class woman was arrested in New York on a charge of disorderly conduct. “She had, according to her own account, been looking for the house of her aunt and had stopped to ask directions of two men. This behavior – as well as the fact that an unaccompanied woman was out at night – was presumptively evidence that she was soliciting prostitution” (Farrell, *Lillie Devereux Blake* 133). Farrell explains that the Judge required a doctor’s examination to see if she was speaking the truth about being a “good girl” (133). The courtroom scene thus serves to illustrate how men frequently intruded on women’s personal lives and enforced social control over them. This control is also evident in Flora’s life. Mr. Le Roy keeps close watch on Flora’s activities. Flora dares to talk back to Mr. Le Roy and demands that he live up to his wedding vows to her, since he expects her to do the same. After this incident, Mr. Le Roy cuts back on Flora’s allowance. This is his way of punishing her disobedience. According to Sneja Gunew, “any instance of women speaking for themselves, or being recorded as speaking for themselves, is an interruption or a disruption of prevailing patriarchal definitions” (41). Rhoda becomes a vivid example of how women speaking for themselves disrupts patriarchal designs. When she refuses the bribe from Judge Swinton to keep quiet about his past, she interrupts his plans for seducing Laura. By speaking up, she is able to save Laura from the dire fate she had to endure.

What eventually leads to the women’s deaths is the demeaning of their subjectivity. They have been taught not to have ideas, experiences, and interests of their own. Thus their way of knowing the world has not been represented. Instead, they have been forced to comply with rules made by men, and therefore forced to make sense of a world that has been designed to their disadvantage (Letherby 30). Flora becomes a victim of confinement. She feels enslaved to a man who deprives her of the opportunity for self-growth and individuality. Higonet argues that female literary suicide can be read as a symbolic gesture, as women

“inscribe on their own bodies cultural reflections and projections, affirmation and negation” (“Representations of the Feminine” 103). This is the case with Flora; by attempting suicide and failing, she forced her family and husband to analyze her actions and motivations.

Rhoda is the victim of exploitation. Nineteenth-century gender ideology dictated that a woman who had lost her purity was a “fallen woman.” In fiction, the only logical redemption for her misbehavior would be death. However, the reader learns that Rhoda possesses all the qualities of a True Woman. Rhoda’s economic misfortune has forced her to take on jobs which allow men to exploit her. Yet Rhoda’s death is not due to her victimhood. Instead, I believe that there is a political aspect to her death. She lets go, so that Frank will have a better chance of staying afloat and surviving. To Rhoda, Frank represents the promise of a better future for women. Rhoda nor Flora romanticize death as a solution to a problem. Both of them know that death is the termination of life. Yet it seems to them like a better option than living lives without dignity with oppression and exploitation

The last character that I argue has committed suicide is Frank. Frank has sacrificed his real identity in order to get the rights he has been deprived of due to his sex. By surrendering his real identity, he will forever be confined to his costume, yet he is able to attain the freedom that all the other women in the novel are deprived of. Frank is able to be both within and without society. Blake suggests that Frank is the most successful of the women, as he has truly freed himself from the shackles of patriarchy. This suggests that killing oneself is a way to achieve freedom. The self-destruction of these characters forces the reader to read not only their deaths, but also to analyze their lives to see what factors lead to these acts of self-annihilation. By killing themselves, they are claiming ownership over their life and communicating that the annihilation of self is a better option than staying alive in a society that deprives you of subjectivity and autonomy.

## 2 *The Awakening*

### 2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter will focus on the female condition, as represented by the married woman in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. I wish to explore Edna Pontellier's struggle to comply with society's expectations, before I analyze the motivations behind her suicide. Helen V. Emmitt explains that "Edna stands apart from the novel's other characters, trapped in the disparity between what society demands and what she wants" (321). In making this comment, Emmitt underlines Edna's need for individuality, which nevertheless is incompatible with society's demands of her. A patriarchal reading of Edna's suicide suggests that "it is impossible for a woman to be freed from being determined within the frontiers of male tradition" (Saministrado 134). According to this statement women have no agency over their lives.

Although I agree with the critics who argue that patriarchal structures have perpetuated the confinement of women, I disagree with those who believe that women's fates are predetermined and inevitable due to the patriarchal structures. Critics who assert that women have no influence over their own life deprive women of agency, and perpetuate the female paradigm of suicide, which I argue victimizes and denies women subjectivity. Yet when it comes to Edna's character, many critics insist that her suicide is inevitable. P. Abassi, being one of them, claims that "[b]y portraying Edna's death, Chopin has shown that woman as a social construct is not free to change her situation and stand before the male law" (39). He further asserts that "[Edna] is neither able to remove herself from her former life nor powerful [enough] to win over the society. This signifies that any attempt in making a female logic is doomed to failure . . . Edna is so weak that [she] is not able . . . to do such a heroic action as making a critical return" (40).

I believe Abassi is mistaken and I will provide textual evidence to show that Edna shows signs of agency consistently throughout the novel. While the patriarchal reading of suicide may suggest that suicide is the only form of redemption for female transgressions, I do not believe that Edna's transgressions have anything to do with her self-destruction. Instead, I argue that it is her awakening to self-assertion that eventually makes her choose to end her life. Gentry argues that "to make sense of the book, the reader must understand the complex motivations behind Edna's suicide and how the actions of the novel lead inexorably to that conclusion" (21). Edna realizes that no matter how much she tries to free herself from the

circumstances that tie her down, she will never obtain the degree of freedom that she desires. Her suicide is thus due to her choice of not wanting to conform to society's expectations, rather than her inability to "remove herself from her former life" or "win over the society", as Abassi claims. I argue that Edna, like all the other women in the novel has the choice to adapt to society's conventions, but chooses death over conformity.

When Kate Chopin's novel was published in 1899, it shocked and upset its audience and was met with hostile criticism. Critics considered Chopin, along with her heroine, to have violated Victorian codes of moral propriety by challenging and defying social norms. The heroine's behavior was thought disruptive of Victorian ideals of true womanhood. The *Awakening* was published during the *fin de siècle*, a period of "sexual anarchy", when fears that emancipated women would bear children outside of marriage in a free union became a public moral concern (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* 3). The 1880s and 1890s was a time when laws that governed sexual identity and behavior seemed to be breaking down, and Chopin was able to capture the turbulent differences in political interests of men and women in her novel (*Sexual Anarchy*, 7). Chopin's treatment of female independence and sexuality in the novel, at a time when married women had no legal rights over their bodies, stirred reactions among her readers (Heilmann 88). As a result, she was refused membership to the St. Louis Fine Arts Club and her novel was out of print for more than fifty years (Gentry 19).

It has been said that the public reception of her novel was so upsetting to her, that she stopped writing entirely. However, according to her manuscript collection, she continued to write a total of six stories after the publishing of *The Awakening* (Gentry 20). Chopin also published an ironic comment regarding her heroine, Edna Pontellier, in response to the critical attacks:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (qtd. in Gentry 20)

Chopin insinuates that she did not have a clear vision of how her novel would end. However, close reading will suggest that all the incidents and characters have been carefully thought through and put in the story for a reason. They all contribute to Edna's awakening, which I argue is an awakening to the true circumstance of her existence. In the next sub-sections I will explore the married woman's condition in society, to see what patriarchal structures that prevents her individuality and leads to her choice of committing suicide.

## 2.2 Edna and Society

Edna Pontellier is the heroine of Chopin's novel. From the very beginning of the novel, Chopin attempts to foreshadow Edna's predicament and her search for awakening. Edna is presented as someone who feels lonely among her peers, isolated on an island surrounded by water and unable to swim (Thompson 205). The first chapter of the novel begins with the singing of a caged parrot. The bird keeps repeating the words "*Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!*" (Chopin 3). This is translated in the footnote as "Go away! Go away! For God's sake!" In a different cage, there is a mockingbird, who is "whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence" (3). Simultaneously, in the background, music is being played from an opera that includes a lover's death at sea (Chopin 3). This scene contains many noisy and distracting elements, and Thompson argues that it is a reflection of Edna's inner feelings "the parrot echoes Edna's frustrated desire to be left alone, the mocking bird's song echoes her illusory hope for something more beautiful and romantic; and the "maddening persistence" of "his fluting notes" mock her caged desires" (205). The opera, however, is giving away the ending of the novel, and the caged bird-metaphor also becomes a powerful symbol of oppression and lack of freedom. If one thinks of the parrot as a symbol of Edna's soul, the fact that it speaks a language which no one understands symbolizes the society's lack of understanding of Edna's need for individuality and self-assertion.

Edna is Married to Léonce Pontellier, a wealthy and well-liked man in the Creole community. The reader learns that Edna is unhappy with her life. Her marriage to Léonce was, according to herself, "purely an accident" (18). He fell in love with her, while she wanted to defy her father's violent opposition to her marrying a Catholic (18). Edna has grown fond of Léonce since then, however, she has never been in love with him. She used to be flattered by his "absolute devotion" and for a while she "fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken" (18). Edna's decision to marry someone just to defy her father, asserts and foreshadows her disdain towards male authority and the construct of patriarchy. Her character differs from the nineteenth-century archetypal True Woman, as represented by Flora in chapter one. Edna, unlike Flora, is not a compliant daughter who obeys her father. Nor is she a submissive wife or a nurturing mother. In a time when "most saw marriage as the center of a woman's life. . . [and] marriage was the most desirable goal of virtually every woman's life" (Gorsky 19), Edna's attitude towards this institution deviates from the other women in the novel. She distains the institution of marriage

to the point that she refuses to attend her own sister's marriage. Hence, Edna's character breaks with the nineteenth-century idealization of marriage and family life.

When the novel opens, Edna and her family are at Grand Isle, a vacation resort owned by Madame LeBrun. The reader is told that "There were only Creoles that summer at LeBrun's" (Chopin 10). Although married to a Creole, Edna is not accustomed to the Creoles' "outward and spoken expression of affection" (17). In her opinion "a characteristic which distinguished them. . . was their entire absence of prudery" (10). Edna therefore feels uneasy and prudish in their company. Very early in the novel, the reader is told that Edna is not a typical "mother-woman." These women "seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle" (9). They idolized their children and worshiped their husbands (9). Edna, on the other hand, is described as someone who is "fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them . . . Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself" (19). Edna's two children, Raoul and Etienne are to her "like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (108). Edna's children symbolize the perpetuation of patriarchy, and they remind her that she will never be entirely free from the demands of patriarchal society. Her children become a vivid image of her entrapment in society.

In heated conversation with Adèle, Edna says that "she would never sacrifice herself for her children or for any one" (46). She explains that she would give up the unessential things in life for her children "I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (46). Adèle does not seem to understand what Edna means by this, and asserts that "a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that" (46). Edna is trying to explain that there is a part of her identity which she believes is "essential" and which belongs only to herself. She is not willing to give this up for anyone, not even her children. Adèle, however, being the embodiment of the patriarchal True Woman, fails to understand how the children are not a part of Edna's "essential" identity. This essential part of Edna is arguably her subjectivity, which she is slowly becoming more aware of. The reader learns that even as a child, "she had lived her own small life all within herself . . . she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (14). This shows that her whole life she has been questioning the world inwardly, while conforming to its norms outwardly. However, through the course of her

stay at Grand Isle, she starts to question why she allows herself to live the life expected of her by society when she does not enjoy it.

Edna stands in stark contrast to the other women in the novel, and clearly fails at upholding patriarchal ideals of how a True Woman should behave. She rejects the rigidity of patriarchal demands and Chopin portrays her as a woman in need of expressing her identity, rather than performing the identity that is expected of her by society. Unlike the other women, Edna's identity is not connected to her children or husband, and she does not want to be defined in relation to either. In de Beauvoir's terms, Edna wants to be the Subject—the Absolute, instead of the Other (26). While in chapter one, Frank Heywood had to put on a costume in order to escape the confinements of society, Edna decides to do the opposite: she is “becoming herself by casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before society” (55). Gorsky explains that by “shedding this costume of the false self that society had dressed her in” (35) she asserts individuality and self-assertion.

### 2.3 Patriarchal Structure

Chopin's novel suggests that the society is “traditionally a man's world” (Saministrado 139). The men in the novel seem to believe in a gender hierarchy, and “inherent” qualities based on gender. Although Léonce is a lenient husband, his marriage to Edna is nevertheless founded on the hegemonic structures of patriarchy. In contrast to Blake in chapter one, Chopin is able to nuance the degree of patriarchal oppression, and illustrates that not all men are abusive and not all women feel entrapped. Edna's father, Dr. Mandelet and Léonce Pontellier are some of the male characters she uses to illustrate the different types of patriarchal traditions. To start with the latter, Dorothy Dix asserts that “[f]or one thing, [Edna's] husband expects her to assume all authority and management of the home and family. He doesn't want to be bothered about it. When he makes the money, he feels he has done his whole duty, and he leaves the rest to her. When he comes home, tired out, after a day's work, he wants to rest, to read his paper, to think out some scheme in which he is interested (“The American wife” 146). However, unlike in *Fettered for Life*, where husbands treat their wives as their property and assert overt power over them, Léonce does not assert such coercive power over Edna.

Thompson explains that “[s]ome feminist interpretations of the novel see Léonce Pontellier as an iconic representation of insensitive, imprisoning patriarchy. But there are many instances of his love, devotion, and concern” (208). The reader learns that Léonce worships his wife and claims that Edna is “the sole object of his existence” (Chopin 7, 19 ).

Léonce's way of showing his affection is by providing for his family, and acting in accordance with society's demand of a husband. For the nineteenth-century man, work was valued as a virtue and "by the traditional male role, the husband had to ensure his family's comfort" (Gorsky 26). Léonce has therefore been brought up to believe that his affection must be shown in materialistic ways. He, unlike Edna is able to accept society's expectations of him and act according to these expectations. Even when Léonce is away from Grand Isle, he is able to fulfill his duty as a husband by sending boxes with treats to Edna and the children to show that he is thinking about them. All the women who are present when Edna receives the box declares that "Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world" and Edna feels "forced to admit that she knew of none better" (Chopin 9).

However, although loving and devoted, Léonce believes in a division of labor and has strict ideas as to Edna's wifely duties. He frequently shows signs of concern for Edna's indifference towards him and the children. The reader learns that the children do not rely on Edna for motherly support "If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up wipe the water out of his eyes and they sand out of his mouth, and go on playing" (9). Léonce shows signs of annoyance with Edna for her inattention towards the children "[i]f it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (7). He wants his wife to attend more to her family, and be more involved in the management of their home. It is hard to disagree with Léonce on the fact that a mother should be attending to her children, however, a point that needs to be emphasized is that Edna does not wish to be a mother. As Chopin stresses in the novel, there are plenty of mother-women in society, but Edna is not one of them. Yet, society expects her to not only take care of the child rearing, but also to find fulfillment in this work. Edna is forced to perform an identity given to her by society, and is provided with no alternatives to a career other than that of the domestic housewife.

It is interesting that Léonce is discontent with Edna's lack of devotion to her family when his own behavior towards her resembles her uneven and impulsive affection. Chopin juxtaposes two scenes in the novel that help illustrate Léonce's hypocrisy. The first scene is during day time when Edna has come back from the beach and is laughing about something that has happened. Léonce wants to know what she finds so funny, and upon his request Edna tries to explain it to him. Yet instead of showing interest in his wife's story, he is disinterested, and thinks to himself that "it was some utter nonsense" (Chopin 4). He yawns and decides to go to Klein's hotel instead, to play a game of billiards (5). Later that night

upon his return to the cottage, Léonce finds that both Edna and the children have gone to bed. He is, however, in a good humor and wants to tell Edna all about his evening. Edna who is half asleep is not paying full attention to him, which evidently seems to upset him “[h]e thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him and valued so little the conversation” (7). Léonce is here judging Edna on the same behavior that he asserted towards her earlier that morning.

In order to get her attention, he wakes her up, claims that their son has a fever, and asks Edna to attend to him. Edna assures him that their son was perfectly well when he went to bed, but Léonce is “too well acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken” (7). Because child rearing was a mother’s duty, Edna is forced to get out of bed to go look after her son. As Edna expected, their son is well, and does not have a fever. When she comes back to her room, she finds Léonce asleep while she herself is fully awake. She starts to cry and blows out the candles that her husband has left burning. Then she walks out on the porch and listens to the sound of the sea that “broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night” (7). The sea can be read as a metaphor for Edna’s unconscious feeling of oppression and the turmoil that is stirring in her a need to break out of patriarchal demands. Léonce claims that Edna is “the sole object of his existence,” while in reality he demands that he be the sole object of hers. The juxtaposition of these two scenes illustrate the double standard that prevailed and could lead to the psychological oppression of women.

Although Léonce only means well in his behavior towards Edna, it is very evident that he does not make an attempt to understand her need for individuality and freedom. Chopin writes that “It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier’s mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself” (55). This passage is highly ironic, as it insists that Léonce knows his wife so well that he can sense when something is wrong with her. However, Chopin explains that “that is, he could not see that she was becoming herself” (55). In his attempt to find out why Edna acts the way she does, he seeks Dr. Mandelet. The doctor who represents the more radical nineteenth-century man, tells Léonce that he must consider that “women are not all alike” (Chopin 63). The doctor nevertheless reveals his share of male chauvinism when he asks if Edna has been associating with the “circle of pseudo-intellectual women”(63). Léonce asserts that “trouble is that she’s not associating with anyone. . . [She] goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark. . . . I feel a little worried over it.” (63). The doctor advises Léonce to leave Edna alone, and grant her some alone time, as that is the wisest thing to do.

He condescendingly asserts that “It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with [women]. . . when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. Most women are moody and whimsical” (64). Although the doctor advises Léonce to give Edna the space she needs, he too is perpetuating patriarchal ideas of inherent gender differences. The reason why Léonce believes Edna’s behavior is deviating from her normal self, is because she has stopped behaving according to his expectations and demands. Léonce wants his wife to act according to societal customs, so that she does not tarnish his good name and reputation. He explains to the doctor that “She lets the housekeeping go to the dickens” (63), and does not act like her usual self “Her whole attitude—toward me and everybody and everything—has changed” (63). He says to the doctor that he does not want to be rude to his wife, but that she is making it “devilishly uncomfortable” for him “She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (63). Chopin is here illustrating Léonce’s patriarchal consciousness. He believes that in order to be on good terms with society, one has to comply with its demands. One can argue that he too, although to a lesser degree than Edna, is bound by the same societal restrictions. Thompson observes that this is the only chapter in the novel that shifts the novelistic point of view from Edna to Léonce (209), and the chapter allows the reader to see how patriarchal structures also affected men, as for the first time in the novel Léonce is portrayed in vulnerable position.

Being a well-liked business man, it is important to Léonce to keep up appearances. When he learns that Edna has been out of the house instead of receiving callers on her reception day, he exclaims “Why, my dear, I should think you’d understand by this time that people don’t do such things; we’ve got to observe *les convenances* if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession” (Chopin 49). Edna, however, does not seem to care that her transgressions reflect badly upon him. When he is away on a long business trip, she writes to him and lets him know that she will be moving out of his house. He utterly disapproves of this decision, but not because he wants to control her “He was not dreaming of scandal when he uttered this warning; that was a thing which could never have entered into his mind to consider in connection with his wife’s name or his own” (89). Léonce’s concern is with his financial integrity. He is afraid that people will think that “the Pontelliers had met with reverses, and were forced to conduct their *Ménage* on a humbler scale” (89). To save appearance he handles the situation “with his usual promptness. . . and well-known business tact and cleverness” (89). Léonce, puts a notice in the papers. that states that their residence

“is undergoing sumptuous alterations” and that they will not be able to stay there meanwhile. (89). While he is able to save face, he is worried about Edna’s newfound behavior. Thompson points out that both Léonce and the doctor “appear to be genuinely caring, though both are tragically limited in their perceptiveness by patriarchal tradition” (208). Yet none of them represent the arch-patriarch, who is presented through the character of Edna’s father, the Colonel, who Thompson describes as “a relic of the Civil War” (208). Chopin explains that Edna’s father “had been a colonel in the Confederate army and still maintained, with the title, the military bearing which had always accompanied it” (Chopin 65), Edna is not “very warmly or deeply attached to him” (65) and although they get along well enough, his visit ends up with an “almost violent dispute upon the subject of her refusal to attend her sister’s wedding” (68). When Léonce attends the wedding alone, the Colonel expresses his disapproval. He tells Léonce that he is too lenient with Edna. The Colonel believes that “Authority, coercion are what is needed” and tells Léonce to “Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife” (68). Right after this assertion, the narrator sarcastically comments that “The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into the grave” (68). Through the characters of the Colonel, Dr. Mandalet and Léonce, the reader is presented with three different degrees of patriarchal consciousness. Although individually none of the men seem to affect Edna in a negative way, their ideas and ways of seeing the world represents society as a whole, and this society is constructed to women’s disadvantage.

## **2.4 Edna’s Awakening**

Chopin also presents two more male characters: Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin. Robert is the son of the resort owner, and Edna seems to enjoy his company and devotion. Robert has made a habit of entertaining the women at Grand Isle while their husbands are away for work, and therefore spends a great amount of time with Edna and Adèle. Adèle, being a Creole, is accustomed to Creole men’s society and is not misled by Robert’s coquetry. However, noticing how perplexed Edna becomes around Robert, she asks him to leave Edna alone “[s]he is not one of us, she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously” (20). Edna and Robert, nevertheless spend a lot of time together that summer, and many critics argue that her sexual awakening happens after her daylong boat trip with Robert. Cynthia Griffin Wolff argues that “there is almost a fairy-tale quality to the whole experience; the rules of time seems suspended, and the *mélange* of brilliant sensory

experience. . . melts into a dreamlike pattern. . . . It is almost as if Edna's fantasy world had come into being" (231). However, this fairy tale fantasy world comes to an end, when Robert suddenly leaves for Mexico. Unwilling to further his relationship with Edna because she is married, he needs to distance himself from her. Emmitt explains that:

Robert LeBrun gives Edna the materials for a world of enchantment, even comparing her to fairy-tale heroines. For instance, after she falls asleep during their day together he tells her, "You have slept precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers". . . While Robert sees her as Sleeping Beauty, her own actions—waking "very hungry" and finding a table laid for one at which she eats—resemble those of Goldilocks. Robert puts her in a passive role and thus in the wrong fairy tale; he guards her slumbers rather than sleeping with her, ignoring her very real appetite. (322)

Although Robert is in love with Edna, he only sees her in relation to Léonce. To him she is someone's wife. To Robert it is more important to be perceived by society as a respectable man, than to instigate a relationship with Edna. This suggests that Robert is more traditional than the reader might think. Because of Robert, Edna has been awakened to her bodily desires. After he leaves, Edna makes the acquaintance of Alcée Arobin who is "well-known as a seducer of married women" (Thompson 208), and a foil to Robert. Arobin attempts to seduce Edna, and finally succeeds. In Chapter XXIII, after having observed Edna's behavior, Dr. Mandelet figures that there must be another man involved, but hopes to heaven that it is not Arobin (Chopin 68). The first time Arobin is mentioned in the novel is ironically by Robert, who asserts that he is nothing like him. Gentry explains that "Robert introduces [Arobin] to make the point that he is not like [him]; he is not a victimizer of women." (32). While Robert, in fear of his reputation has left Edna, Arobin shows her that he does not care about what society thinks of him. It is arguably this trait which intrigues Edna and when she is with Arobin she does not feel tied down by patriarchal conventions.

As Arobin's freedom appeals to Edna, she allows him to seduce her "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire. . . . a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality" (80). The reader is told that among the "conflicting sensations. . . there was neither shame nor remorse. . . there was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had held this cup of life to her lips" (80). The characters of Robert and Arobin serve as a catalyst for Edna's awakening to her own bodily desires. While Robert awakens her sense of sexuality, Arobin shows her that

the female body is able to feel pleasure the same way men's do. Edna comes to realize that her body is more than just a reproductive system that entraps her—it is also a system of pleasure.

Grand Isle is in many ways a feminine space, where women stay over the summer, while their husbands work in the city and are gone most of the day. Yet there is not one single chapter of the novel where the women are entirely alone. In all chapters, there is either the mention of or the physical appearance of one or more of the male characters. In Chapter IX, Mademoiselle Reisz plays a piece on the piano, which stirs up a lot of emotions in Edna. Even in this sincere moment, when she is connecting with the music and her innermost feelings, she is still distracted by the image of a man “[w]hen she heard it there came before her the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him” (Chopin 25-26). This is again a foreshadowing of what is going to happen to Edna. What she is imagining is her own solitude; however, she does not allow herself to be the subject of her imagination. She is describing her own feelings without allowing herself to be inserted into in the man's position.

Edna's inability to see herself as a subject is because her identity is fragmented. In society's eyes, she is Léonce's wife and the children's mother. In the opening chapters, when the reader is introduced to the Pontelliers, Edna is only described through Léonce. Much of the focus is on Edna's external appearance and the reader learns that she is a “valuable piece of personal property” (Chopin 4). From chapter I through chapter IV, Edna is only known as “Mrs. Pontellier,” which puts her in relation to her husband. While Edna's appearance is described in detail, her Christian name remains unknown until Chapter V. Although the reader does not have insight into Edna's mind throughout the first chapters, careful reading will reveal intimations of Edna's married life. There is clearly a gender hierarchy and Edna is not valued as an equal to her husband. By delaying Edna's personal entrance into the novel, Chopin recreates the “normal external focus of society that sees the wife as an adjunct to her husband, receiving her identity through him” (Gentry 24-25). By doing this, the author is presenting Edna the way society would see her; through her external appearance.

Gentry observes that, when in Chapter VI readers gain insight into Edna's personal thoughts, they realize that she is struggling being pulled in different directions, without yet realizing the turmoil developing within her mental and emotional landscape (27). In Chapter VI, Edna has “two contradictory impulses which impelled her” (Chopin 14). According to

Gentry, Chopin is providing two layers of meaning here “Literally, [she] is referring in this chapter to the choice Edna must make to go swimming or not to go swimming with Robert. But symbolically and ultimately, she is referring to Hamlet’s existential choice to be or not to be” (27). As the novel progresses, one will notice that Edna is unable to reconcile her inner desires with society’s demands of her.

Throughout the summer at Grand Isle, Edna has been learning how to swim, and during the summer she is finally able to. This accomplishment initiates yet another “awakening” in her, as she realizes her ability to be independent “some power of significant import had been given her soul” (Chopin 27). After this incident, Edna starts to pay attention to her inner turmoil and becomes aware of her desires for independence and self-expression. From this point in the novel, Edna tries to break with the conventions that tie her down and prevent her from achieving happiness. In order for Edna to achieve the life she desires she must have freedom in the form of independence, romance and sexuality. While she is able to enfold herself romantically and sexually during the course of the novel, she nevertheless realizes that she can never be fully independent because of the way society is designed on a masculine model, perpetuating patriarchal ideas. It is therefore highly ironic that, when Edna finds the time to be alone, she spends it in reading Emerson (70). Emerson’s encouragement of individuality and non-conformity might resonate with Edna, however, it has not been intended to apply to her because she is a woman.

## **2.5 Signs of Agency**

Even before her awakening, Edna shows signs of defiance towards patriarchal society. She explains to Adèle that as a child she would run away from her father and his Presbyterian service (17). Throughout the novel, Edna seem to reject and defy everything that is church-related. We already know that she refuses to go to her sister’s wedding, her reason being that “a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (63). Sometime later in the novel, she again leaves a service and explains to Robert that, “a feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame [her] during the service” (34). One can argue that the church is the ultimate symbol of patriarchy, as it worships God and his son. It seems like Edna deliberately defies institutions that contribute to female servitude.

Instead she is determined to empower herself, by devoting her time to her own interests. She spends a large amount of time in her atelier developing her painting skills. She

begins to disregard her duties at home and is met with Léonce's concern. He tells her that, "It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (55). Edna explains to him that at the moment she feels like painting and reassures him that, "Perhaps I shan't always feel like it" (55). Léonce is not trying to prevent his wife from painting, but he is asking her to spend time on her homely duties as well. He tells her "in God's name paint! But don't let the family go to the devil" (55). Edna replies that it is not on account of painting that she let things go (55); however, Léonce is not able to understand that Edna is in need of self-fulfillment. He is so firmly established with the idea that women are creatures of the domestic sphere, that he cannot imagine his wife wanting freedom from her chores. Léonce believes that he has been a "rather courteous husband" (55), however, the reader is told that this is only true as long as he is being met with "a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife" (55). However, Edna has decided "never to take a step backward" (55).

Edna's conduct towards Léonce changes and she no longer allows his opinions to influence her. One evening, he finds her asleep in a hammock outside their house. He wants to know if she is coming inside to sleep in the bedroom, but she tells him that she wants to stay where she is. The narrator explains that "another time she would have gone in at his request. She would through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkably, as we walk, move, sit, stand go through the daily treadmill of the life that has been portioned to us" (30). He commands her to go inside the house, to which she replies "Léonce, go to bed . . . I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you" (31). Edna is asserting female autonomy and claiming self-ownership. When Léonce leaves for a business trip, old Madame Pontellier picks up the children so they can stay with her, as she is worried that they will be neglected during Léonce's absence. The reader is told that "a radiant piece settled upon [Edna]" when she finally was alone and she "breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief" (69).

Edna decides to move out of Léonce's house, "two steps away. . . in a little four-room house around the corner" (76). She explains to Mademoiselle Reisz that, "it never seemed like mine, anyway – like home . . . The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine" (76). Edna does not want to feel like she is owned by Léonce, and wishes to have material freedom, just like men in society. She resolves never again to belong to anyone but herself (76). Edna is

determined that she can live in the little house “for little or nothing” with the money from her mother’s estate that her father sends her in small installments. The irony of this, is of course, that the money she is depending on is in her father’s possession and, as mentioned earlier, her father does not tolerate female transgressions. It is just a matter of time before he finds out from Léonce or someone else where the money he sends is going.

Before moving out of her house, Edna decides to host a grand dinner party. The party is held on her twenty-ninth birthday. On the morning of her birthday, Edna has received a present from Léonce, a hair clip that has a cluster of diamonds attached to it (83). Thompson points out the irony of this situation “Edna continues to take money from the husband she’s in the process of leaving” (211). Thompson further explains that “As though in a fairy tale, Edna presents herself as a princess presiding over her subjects” (211). Some critics have interpreted this scene as symbolic for her “triumphant, queenly independence. . . . [Edna] sees herself as independent, ruling her life. But her revolt is manifestly incomplete. She is exploiting the very trappings of money and high society provided by her confining marriage” (211). Léonce’s gift to Edna becomes her queenly crown “a magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled, that almost sputtered, in Edna’s hair, just over the center of her forehead” (Chopin 83).

It is also ironic that Edna uses jewelry sent from her husband while she is having affairs with other men. The fact that Edna does not feel regret towards Léonce shows that she has become the type of woman who caters more to her natural self through individual expression. She seems determined to effect change in society’s expectation of gender roles and relations and she resists confinement within patriarchal traditions (Saministrado 136-37).

## **2.6 Alternative Selves**

Margaret Kathleen Lant observes that the female characters presented in the novel represent alternative selves from which Edna can choose:

Edna’s predicament is not uniquely feminine. What she experiences is a universal human longing to divest the authentic self of the false selves that stifle it. None of the selves available to Edna is enough; each involves a renunciation of another part of Edna vital to her existence. Edna’s greatest freedom comes in her ability to give these false selves up, to desist from her characteristically feminine way of coping with them – by means of hiding the real and revealing the false selves – and to live, if necessary, in solitude. (qtd. in Gentry 31)

Two of the characters that are represented as alternative selves for Edna are Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna appears to be on a continuum between the two. Her physical life is similar to Adèle; they are both married women with children. However, Edna, unlike Adèle, is unable to find fulfillment in her role of wife and mother, because it deprives her of individuality. Edna's inner life appeals to Mademoiselle Reisz, who is talented pianist, and lives her life in spinsterhood. Mademoiselle Reisz's life of independency appeals to Edna, however, she has no real talent that she can make a living out of. I will now analyze these two female characters in order to see the alternatives open to Edna.

As a character foil to Edna, Chopin has created Adèle to represent the patriarchal image of a wife and mother. She is described as a woman "possessing the more feminine and matronly figure" (Chopin 15). She is the ultimate "mother-woman" (9) and serves as the ideal nineteenth-century True Woman. Her devotion is represented through the idolization of her children and her adoration for her husband. While in chapter one, Blake wanted to illustrate that hardly ever did a "husband and wife settle happily ever after into a comfortable patriarchal domesticity" (Gorsky 18), Chopin in her novel portrays the marriage of Adèle and Mr. Ratignolle as the perfect conjugal union. When Adèle watches Edna's children one evening, she tells him upon her return that she will not remain with Edna because her husband is home alone and "he detested above all things to be left alone" (39). Chopin describes Mr. Ratignolle as "the salt of the earth. His cheerfulness was unbounded, and it was matched by his goodness of heart, his broad charity and common sense" (54). Mr. and Mrs. Ratignolle's marriage is in Edna's eyes the opposite of her own "The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human being into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union" (54). To contrast Adèle's marriage to Edna's, Chopin juxtaposes the happy scene from Adèle's home to the scene in the chapter before, where Edna and Léonce argue over dinner. To settle the argument Léonce decides to go to the club and have dinner there instead. Edna finishes her dinner alone and goes to her room:

she turned back into the room and began to walk to and fro down its whole length, without stopping, without resting. . . . Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet. In a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to her. (Chopin 50-51)

While the Ratignolles are described as a couple who understand each other perfectly, Léonce and Edna barely try to understand each other. They hardly spend time with each other, and both prefer doing things on their own. Adèle expresses that she thinks it is a pity that Mr. Pontellier does not stay home in the evenings. She tells Edna that “I think you would be more—well, if you don’t mind me saying it—more united, if he did” (66). The thought of this is a horror to Edna. She exclaims “Oh! dear no! . . . What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn’t have anything to say to each other” (66). In contrast, when Mr. Ratignolle talks, “his wife was keenly interested in everything he had said, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth” (54). While Edna wants the happiness that Adèle possesses, she, unlike her friends, is unable to find joy and happiness in her children and husband. Adèle serves as a safeguard for Edna, trying to advise her to make good choices and protect her reputation. Adèle’s character upholds the hegemonic structures that decide how a wife ought to act and behave.

One might, however, question Adèle’s happiness. I argue that she has internalized the hegemonic structures of patriarchy, that demand women be content with their role as wives and mothers. There are a couple of instances, when Mr. Ratignolle tells his wife to tell Edna not to spend time with Arobin alone. Being an obedient wife, Adèle complies. Adèle tells Edna that “some one was talking of Alcée Arobin visiting you. Of course, it wouldn’t matter if Mr. Arobin had not such a dreadful reputation. Monsieur Ratignolle was telling me that his attentions alone are considered enough to ruin a woman’s name” (91). Adèle is making Edna aware of the risk she is taking by being seen alone with Arobin. Spending time alone with single men was not proper behavior for women and, according to etiquette, a woman had to be chaperoned by another female friend if she were to meet with a man without her husband present (Chopin 125).

Adèle, compliant with patriarchal demands, try to keep Edna out of “danger” and reminds her of her wifely duties, which are to be pure and maternal. Adèle tells Edna that she “seem[s] to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life” (Chopin 91). She continues by saying “[t]hat is the reason I want to say you mustn’t mind if I advise you to be a little careful while you are living here alone. Why don’t you have some one come and stay with you?” (Chopin 91). Although Adèle is compliant with patriarchal ideals and acts in accordance with what is expected of her by society, I want to argue that her character should be granted agency, as she does not come across as a submissive and oppressed housewife. It rather seems that she, out of cleverness, has chosen willingly to adapt to the

male script. When she tells Edna that she acts without certain amount of reflection, she adds “which is necessary in this life” (Chopin 9). This indicates that Adèle understands the demands of society. Seeing what kind of privileges and comforts a husband can provide, she willingly blends with the system for her own comfort and to her own advantage (Saministrado 145). It might be that she tries to make Edna realize that conforming doesn’t mean that you have to lose yourself. To Adèle, it seems worth it to live with the privileges she is offered by fulfilling the motherly and wifely roles delegated to her. Adèle also shows signs of independence, when she changes her mind about the instructions she has received by her husband. She thus takes back her advice after seeing Edna happy and content: “don’t mind what I said about Arobin, or having some one stay with you” (Chopin 91). Her character serves as an alternative for Edna. However, in order to live a blissful life in luxury, Adèle illustrates that one has to conform with society’s expectation, if not that will stir up family life.

While Adèle may represent the True Woman, who willingly surrenders herself to her husband, Mademoiselle Reisz represents the Odd Woman of society. The “odd woman” was the women who did not marry and who undermined the binary system of Victorian sexuality and binary roles (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 19). Mademoiselle Reisz is described as a “disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (Chopin 25). She has dared to live a life outside of society’s expectation, and Edna longs to be able to do the same. The reader does not know why Mademoiselle Reisz has chosen to remain single. However, one can argue that in order to pursue her talents and become an artist, she has had to break with patriarchal demands, much like Laura in chapter one. If this is the case, Reisz, like Edna, is rejecting marriage as an institution that subordinates women.

Mademoiselle Reisz lives the life Edna is striving for; however, Edna lacks something crucial that Mademoiselle Reisz possesses: real talent. While Mademoiselle Reisz is able to make a living for herself by being a talented pianist, Edna has no talent that can provide an independent living. Edna nevertheless seeks confidence and support in Mademoiselle Reisz, who tells her that “the artist must possess the courageous soul” (61). These words are encouraging to Edna and she will think of them right before she dies.

The introduction of Mademoiselle Reisz shows that it is possible for women to exist and still be acknowledged for their individualism (Saministrado 147). Reisz becomes an

extreme version of Edna. Chopin thus portrays three types of women: the non-traditional married woman represented by Edna, the traditional married woman represented by Adèle, and the radical unmarried woman represented by Reisz. All three women have to adhere to patriarchal structures, and while two of them seem to have found a way to manage life within the restrictions of patriarchy, Edna is struggling to find a balance between her conjugal entrapment and her desire to be fully free. Although both Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz represent different alternatives for Edna, she is nevertheless unable to find contentment in only one of them. What Edna needs is Adèle Ratignolle's excitement about domestic chores combined with the independence and artistic genius of Mademoiselle Reisz. Gentry argues that "what is uniquely feminine . . . is the restrictive either/or choices that are available to women" (31). Edna cannot be both and choosing one "is to forever close the doors on others" (31). These unrealistic and unsatisfying alternatives, Gentry argues and I concur, are dictated by society (31).

## 2.7 Edna's Suicide

Critics argue that Edna's awakening is fated to end with death. A conventional reading of the novel's ending is that Edna commits suicide by drowning herself after being rejected by Robert. In the nineteenth century, self-destruction among women was most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as loss of self, but as surrender to an illness (Higonnet, *The Female Body* 71).

I argue that it is not Robert's rejection of Edna that initiates her suicide, but rather the revealing of his patriarchal consciousness. After returning from Mexico Robert confesses his love for Edna and tells her that he has dreamed that she would become his wife. This, in my opinion, becomes the turning point of the novel, as Edna realizes that there is no escape from patriarchal designs. The reason why Edna has been in love with Robert is because she has felt free and independent around him. Up until this point she has been his equal, however by wanting to marry her, Robert is asserting ideas of her subjugation. Edna realizes that he is just as influenced by patriarchal ideas as the rest of society. She bluntly tells him that "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting [his] 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 your,' I should laugh at you both" (Chopin 102). Edna is explicitly telling

Robert that she will not marry him, and that the love that she requires is one where both of them are equal.

Edna has to leave Robert that night upon receiving a message that Adèle is in labor and has sent for her. Edna tells Robert that he has to wait for her no matter how late she returns. However, upon her return Robert is gone. He has left a note that says “I love you. Good-by—because I love you” (Chopin 106). This is the point when Edna realizes that society’s conventions are more important to Robert than his feelings for Edna. Once Robert realizes that he will not possess Edna, he decides that it is best to let her go.

That night Edna does not sleep. The next day she goes back to Grand Isle. Once there, she decides to go for a swim before dinner. On her way to the beach, her “children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them” (Chopin 108). She finds herself alone by the sea, gets undressed and slowly walks out in the water naked under the open sky (109). Here Edna is standing alone by the sea, just like in her vision mentioned earlier in this chapter. She has become the solitary person that she was imagining. As she goes further into the water, she recalls the words of Mademoiselle Reisz, who said “the artist must possess the courageous souls that dares and defies” (Chopin 109). Edna feels exhaustion pressing upon her and over-powering her as she keeps swimming.

Many critics are confused by the ending of the novel. The reader does not explicitly know whether Edna’s death is an accident or a voluntary act, but textual evidence leans towards the latter. There is also confusion as to why Edna willingly kills herself. Many critics argue that Edna’s suicide is due to her sexual awakening. Therefore, Edna’s death is often interpreted in that light, and critics believe she commits suicide after her final rejection by Robert (Gentry 15).

Samministrado believes that there is a difference between the married woman and the unmarried woman, when it comes to their search for self-fulfillment. The unmarried woman links her self-fulfillment to economic sanctuary and social acceptance, as illustrated by Laura in chapter one. However, Samministrado also claims that when it comes to the married woman, one can link her self-fulfillment to her romantic ideals and passion (100). I disagree with her last claim, as I believe she makes the mistake of interpreting Edna from a patriarchal point of view. A patriarchal reading of the novel suggests that all Edna needs is intimacy with the right man in order to live happily ever after (Gentry 22). While it is true that a central point of interest in the book is Edna’s relationships with men, Chopin’s focus is not primarily on Edna

as a sexually unfulfilled person. Gentry argues that “sex is not at the center of Edna’s quest” and that her quest is “the need for the individual ego to assert itself without restraint” (23). Reading this novel from a feminist perspective, one will see that there is insufficient justification for Edna’s ‘romantic’ suicide, as her situation is far from hopeless. Although Robert has left her, he has confessed his love for her, so their affair has not really ended (Arnavon 185).

The novel might seem like a failure, if it is analyzed using the standard literary paradigm of a woman defeated by love (Gentry 14). The notion that women commit suicide for love complements the familiar assumption that women live for love, while men live for themselves (Higonnet, “Speaking Silences” 73). Edna does not want love if it means being possessed by a man. Somehow, she has thought that Robert would love her regardless of her notions of women’s rights and independence. However, Robert, like all the other men in the novel, has a need to possess the woman he loves. When finding out that Edna would never marry him, he leaves her. Therefore, critics believe that Edna’s suicide has to do with abandonment, and that a woman who loses her man is perceived to lose herself.

However, a close reading of the novel clearly shows that Edna does not lose herself because of a romance “gone wrong”. Edna realizes that no matter how much she tries to free herself from the circumstances that tie her down, she will never obtain the degree of freedom that she desires. Gentry explains that, “Edna awakes to her situation as a woman in her quest for identity through a life of significant action, she must paradoxically choose suicide as the only means available to her to achieve her goal” (45). Edna is unable to live a domestic life, like Adèle, and lacks the skills to live an independent life like Mademoiselle Reisz. Robert, who might have made her happy, reveals his patriarchal consciousness, which repels Edna. To Edna, death is the only way of escaping the restrictions that have already killed her happiness. Her suicide thus becomes a choice of not wanting to conform to society’s expectations. She has the choice to adapt to society’s conventions, but chooses death over conformity. Right before her fatal swim, she says to herself “To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me. It doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier – but Raoul and Etienne” (108). Edna starts to think about her children “They were part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (109). Edna here makes clear that the only one who is allowed to possess her is herself. She therefore stays true to her resolution of never again belonging to anyone but herself (76).

# 3 *The House of Mirth*

## 3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter will focus on the female condition, as represented by the unmarried woman in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. I will analyze how the heroine of the novel, Lily Bart, has internalized patriarchal conventions. From a young age, Lily has been taught that her beauty is a virtue, and that she must use it to entice rich men to marry her. Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes that "Wharton gives evidence that Lily's special skill in the representation of herself lies in an uncanny ability to experience herself as other must see her" (34). She has learned so thoroughly to experience herself as a commodity—an object—that "her sense of self is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others" (Wolff 34). From the beginning of the novel, we understand that Lily is looking for a husband that can support her. However, as the novel progresses, she keeps ruining all her chances of marriage. Since she has no means to support herself, she descends to the lower tiers of society, and eventually takes her own life.

Many critics argue that Lily's suicide is due to her victimhood, as she is trapped in a society where she is being forced to either marry and give up her individuality, or remain single and without means to support herself. In this chapter, I will explore the options available for Lily other than marriage and poverty. I disagree with the critics who interpret her character as a victim of society, as I argue that Lily is well aware of the societal structures and that she is calculating and smart, always using the system to her advantage. Therefore, I want to suggest that Lily's demise has to do with the fact that she ultimately disproves of all the things she is supposed to be aiming for. Yet she is too afraid to distance herself from high society, as she has no sense of core. Without her friends' validation, she loses her sense of identity and worth.

Because she is afraid of being neglected and alone, she partakes in their activities and becomes a construct of society and gives in to what it demands of her. However, as the novel advances, she becomes torn between her morality and her desire to maintain her place in high society. Lily starts to vacillate between complying with the social norms, and giving in to her deepest impulses. She loses her friends one by one, and descends to the lower tiers of society and eventually overdoses on sleeping pills. Lily's suicide, I argue, is due to her unwillingness to partake in the morally decadent society that she has been bred up to be a part of. Lily has plenty of opportunities to maintain her position in high society, but she is unwilling to corrupt

herself for the joys of materialistic things. The title of the novel is from the Old Testament and refers to the book of Ecclesiastes, which states that the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but “The heart of fools is in the house of mirth” (7:4; Thompson 222). The themes in Wharton’s novel reflect this verse, as it portrays the frivolous lifestyle of the upper echelons of society. Thompson explains that this verse “tells us that the value of a good name or reputation is more important than material things. . . . and it is better to hear the wise criticize illusion than to believe the fools whose trivial folly and superficial mirth consume and destroy them” (222). During the course of the novel, Lily comes to realize just this, and decides that a life in the house of mourning is better than a life in the house of mirth.

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) published *The House of Mirth* in 1905, a year after Kate Chopin’s death and five years after *The Awakening* had been published. Wharton was a satirist, and her attack was leveled against the New York high society, which she herself was a part of (Gentry 9). In her novel, Wharton uses the plight of the protagonist Lily Bart to articulate her anger over the artificial and social determinism of women’s lives. Lily is twenty-nine, a “well-preserved veteran of eleven years in the New York marriage market” (Showalter, “Death of the Lady Novelist” 133), and has been brought up to believe that in order to lead a happy life one must avoid “dinginess” and marry rich. Showalter observes that “[b]y the end of the novel, she is past thirty and dead of an overdose of chloral” (“Death of the Lady Novelist” 133). This brings to mind Edna Pontellier, who like Lily died before she turned thirty.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, and as seen throughout this thesis, death seems to be the only option for women in so many nineteenth-century narratives. Showalter explains that fiction written in the *fin de siècle* period “is characterized by unhappy endings, as novelists struggled with the problem of going beyond the allowable limits and breaking through the available histories and stories for women” (“Death of the Lady Novelist” 135). As mentioned in chapter one, the accepted and conventional nineteenth-century ending for a novel would be one where “husband and wife [would] settle happily ever after into a comfortable patriarchal domesticity, and the door close[d] on their lives” (Gorsky 18).

In this thesis, I am analyzing novels that are able to reveal to the reader what life looked like if one did not follow the conventional script designed by patriarchy. All three novels follow the stories of young women who have deviated from the marriage script and, sure enough, they all face death either physically or symbolic. Frank Heywood, the crossdresser from chapter one, had to “kill” his real identity in order to fit into society without

being assaulted. Flora Livingston was forced into submission by her husband and attempted suicide. Rhoda, sacrificed her life to save Frank, because her economic status had left her with no future to live for. Edna Pontellier, like Rhoda, Frank and Flora, found herself not fitting in with the conventional norms set for her by society. As she started to deviate from the norm, the reader was misled to think that she would succeed in claiming her autonomy and freedom, only to witness her death through drowning. Moving to this last chapter, I want to look at Lily's case as the unmarried woman who, nevertheless, finds herself restricted by the expectations of society, and, just like the female characters before her, she commits suicide by the end of the novel.

Just like in *Fettered for Life*, Wharton's *The House of Mirth* reflects the plot that according to Baym characterizes "woman's fiction." However, one can argue that Wharton takes the plot and seriously deforms it. Thompson explains that at first Wharton sticks to the fairy tale plot: Lily is "[a]n orphaned young woman from a once well- to-do family [who] leaves her rural home and goes to the big city to live as the "poor relation" with her moderately wealthy aunt" (222). However, unlike Laura Stanley in chapter one, who sought independence and a chance to make it on her own, the object of Lily's quest is a "rich husband of a high social standing" (Thompson 222). Thompson further asserts that "repelled by the vulgarity and dishonesty of her mission [Lily] mistakes or mistimes her marriage opportunities, alienates the man she really loves, loses what marginal social status she gains, sinks into poverty, and half-intentionally commits suicide" (222-223). Wharton explains Lily's behavior as someone who "had a fatalistic sense of being drawn from one wrong turning to another, without ever perceiving the right road till it was too late to take it" (101). The reader is never sure whether Lily ruins all her chances by mistake or if she does so deliberately, therefore, when she dies of an overdose of sleeping pills, the reader cannot know whether the overdose was intentional or not. Her death remains ambiguous. I will argue that her death is a deliberate choice.

While many critics agree that Lily's death is deliberate, most of them also argue that Lily's suicide is determined and inevitable. Joan Lidoff writes that "Lily has to die because she cannot live" (538). According to Lidoff, Lily's need for independence and society's refusal to grant her autonomy turns her into a damaged individual. Lidoff concludes that "Lily's destruction is determined" (537). Judith Fetterley suggests that Lily's death is due to the fact that "she cannot project herself as a wife, she cannot imagine life after the plunge

because she cannot finally face the price she would have to pay for it: acceptance of the system which makes of her an object and treats her as an possession” (qtd. in Restuccia 299).

While I do agree that the prevalence of female death in literature is connected to the societal institutionalization of patriarchy, I do not agree that the female fate is entirely depend on patriarchal conditions. Nor do I agree that their fate is in any way pre-determined. In my opinion, critics who argue along these lines deprive women of agency all together and prove that they too have internalized the patriarchal consciousness. In my opinion, the literary suicide of a woman can be read as an act of agency. Women in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century had no legal rights. The only thing they could fully govern was their physical bodies. By taking their own lives, they would force others to read their deaths. Higonnet explains that making sense of suicide is hard, as the primary evidence has been destroyed, and the hermeneutic task becomes particularly elusive (“Representations of the Feminine” 103). In addition, women's voluntary deaths are even more difficult to read than men's, “because women's autonomy is always in question and their intentions are opaque” (“Representations of the Feminine” 103). While male representations of female suicide were often presented as an act motivated by love, mental illness and passive self-surrender (Gentry 2), I argue that when women chose to take the lives of their own heroine, they moved away from the aesthetic aspect of female death, and instead attempted to provoke a revolution in thought. As I will illustrate below, Lily is not a passive victim of patriarchy, but an active critic of the society in which she lives. Her resistance to conformity signifies that she indeed acquires free will and agency. Even though society confines and breaks her, she does not give in to the dishonorable and decadent lifestyle of her peers, though she envies their luxurious lives. I will now focus on Lily's choices and agency and her search for self-fulfillment in a society that is designed to her disadvantage.

### **3.2 Society and Upbringing**

In order to understand what leads Lily to eventually commit suicide, one has to understand the society in which she has been raised. Wharton's novel is set in the early twentieth century, and the characters in the novel reflect the Victorian values and gender roles that were prevalent at the time. They have all internalized a patriarchal consciousness, where “male economic dominance is pervasive and female commodification a recurring phenomenon” (Saministrado 75). Lily has been brought up by her mother to believe that a young lady's best

chances of leading a happy and successful life is by marrying rich. The operations of patriarchy in Lily's life therefore start in her upbringing, when she is young.

She starts off her early years as rich and confident about her future prospects. However, her education within the family structure has made her believe that a woman has to look to men to provide the economic requirements she needs. This is reflected in her parents' marriage also, which is described as a loveless affair, and bears resemblance to a business deal. For instance, Lily cannot remember her father much, as he was always at work during the day. She can recall that her mother would take her to Europe during the summers, while her father stayed at home, working to provide for his family (Wharton 26). Lily has always thought of her mother as a wonderful manager of the family money. However, although Mrs. Bart was able to create an illusion of her family's affluence, the truth is that their finances were dwindling and she was shielding Lily from the real situation of their household finances (Saministrado 76).

Wharton describes Mrs. Bart as a woman who "was famous for the unlimited effect she produced on limited means" (26). High society women, as represented by Lily and her mother, reinforce the focus on conspicuous consumption and materialism. Appearances were everything and what was underneath had no value, because it was hidden or not projected in society. As an example, Wharton writes that Mrs. Bart "did not care how the luncheon-table looked when there was no one present at it but the family" (Wharton 27). This insinuates that people put up false facades to give an impression of a perfectly happy life, while this illusion had no root in reality. The society in which they live forces people to act according to what is expected of them, and the characters in the novel are concerned with keeping up appearances, despite their actual circumstances.

Mrs. Bart's skill in distributing money comes to an end when Mr. Bart declares that he is ruined (Wharton 28). He cannot keep up with and earn enough money to provide for his family's lifestyle. When Mr. Bart fails in doing so, Mrs. Bart is enraged and embarrassed. Wharton writes that when he was no longer able to provide for his family, he "no longer counted [to Mrs. Bart]: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfill his purpose" (28).

Mrs. Bart's negligence towards her husband illustrates that patriarchal conventions victimized men as well as women. If men failed to fulfill their assigned role as providers, they would be shunned by their family and society. Mr. Bart, hence, falls victim to patriarchal demands, as he is not able to uphold his part of "the deal", which is to provide for his wife, who married him for his money. To Mrs. Bart being poor was "such a confession of failure

that it amounted to disgrace” (Wharton 29). Wharton depicts family life and matrimony as a business deal, where both parts have to keep up their end of the bargain. Hence, Mrs. Bart feels no sympathy or pity for her dying husband, as he has failed to support her financially.

When Lily pities her dying father, her mother tells her “[y]ou are sorry for him now – but you will feel differently when you see what he has done to us” (Wharton 29). Mr. Bart’s struggle to sustain the lifestyle of his wife and daughter in his role as breadwinner, exemplifies his attempt at living up to society’s expectations. For Mrs. Bart, it feels like a betrayal that her husband no longer can fulfill his role as the provider. After Mr. Bart’s death, Lily’s mother strains to maintain appearances in the absence of funds, an attitude which is picked up by Lily in her adult years (Saministrado 76).

Wharton scrutinizes the capitalistic system that values money over human relations. The fact that people in society chose money over human relations is one of the factors that ultimately drives Lily to her death. Lily’s society is one where money is power, and conspicuous consumption is the symbol of a happy life. Lily, who is single and does not have an income of her own, is therefore pressed for time, and needs to find a rich man to marry in order to secure herself a happy future. As we have seen in both chapter one and two, Flora and Edna, who were both married to wealthy men, did not feel happy nor successful, but confined and discontented with their situations. Both felt a sense of self-fulfillment and freedom only when devoting their time to their passions, such as writing poetry or painting. This shows that Lily’s mother is wrong when she believes that acquiring enough money is the key to happiness.

Yet Lily’s situation differs slightly from that of Flora and Edna, because she is an unmarried woman. Whereas the married women felt enslaved, they were nevertheless financially secure and did not have to work out a way to maintain their position in society. Lily is free in the sense that she is not someone’s property, but because she has no husband—and thus no income—she is dependent on the hospitality of her friends. Diana Trilling points out that Lily “has become the perennial guest of wealth, moving from one great country house to another, dutifully smoothing her way with small services to her busy hostesses” (118). The reader learns that Lily usually “recognize[s] the obligation[s]” of being a guest at people’s homes (Wharton 33); however, she dislikes the sense of servitude, as it reminds her that she is dependent on other people’s hospitality and admiration to keep her place among people in high society (33-34). For the unmarried woman, then, it seems like the sense of self-

fulfillment is linked to economic sanctuary and social acceptance (Saministrado 100). Throughout the novel, Lily works hard to attain both.

Lily's dilemma, however, is due to her moral integrity, which prevents her from marrying only for money. Having been taught all her life that marriage is her only way to wealth and happiness, she is unable to see the choices available to her other than marriage. Lily's flaw lies in her inability to be rational enough to do what is best for her. Instead of being realistic about her situation, she lets chances of marriage pass her by, because she always hopes for something better to come along. Unable to settle for the alternatives that can satisfy her need for luxury, she keeps waiting for better alternatives to come her way.

### **3.3 Commodification of Social Intercourse**

Trilling observes that *The House of Mirth* "is always and passionately a money story" (122), and it's hard to argue differently. While the men in the novel compete in bringing the most money home to their families, the women compete in enhancing their social currency. People are reduced to commodities with an exchange value, and friendships are maintained based on what people can offer each other. No real human connections seem to exist. Just like people marry in order to improve their financial position, their friendships are chosen with care to improve their social positions. As Lily exclaims "my best friends – well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me" (Wharton 10). Lily has been on the fringe of society ever since her parents died. She was taken in by her well-off aunt, Mrs. Peniston, who provides for Lily's essential needs. However, for Lily to be able to live a life in abundance and keep up with her social set, she is in need of a lot more money than her aunt provides. Lily is indeed grateful for "the refuge" her aunt has offered her, yet she shows distain towards the "dinginess" that was "latent in the expensive routine of her aunt's life" (Wharton 31). While still alive, Mrs. Bart always counted on Lily's beauty as a ticket back into high society "[s]he thought it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt" (Wharton 29). Mrs. Bart is a manifestation of the patriarchal consciousness. She has internalized the notion that women are pretty objects that men can collect and take care of, and she sees her daughter as a commodity that she can "sell" on the marriage market. Lily having grown up in a society and a household that enforce patriarchal ideas, naturally assumes that marrying rich will let her "soar into that empyrean of security where creditors

cannot penetrate . . . [and] be free forever from the shifts, the expedients, the humiliations of the relatively poor” (Wharton 41).

The social structure in Lily’s class promotes female commodification. Lily knows that in order to find herself a husband, she must “sell” herself on the marriage market and turn herself into a decorative object. In other words, she understands that she has to merchandise herself in the marketplace where she numbers among the commodities for sale. The subtle operations of patriarchal structures are thus reflected in Lily’s sense of self-definition, as she sees herself as a work of art whose job is to please the male subject and entice him into wanting to marry her. If she fails to serve as a decorative ornament, she will not be able to attract a potential husband. Lily explains that “[t]he clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don’t make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop – and if we can’t keep it up alone, we must go into partnership” (Wharton 12). In other words, Lily is brought up to look nice, no matter the cost in order to attract a husband. She has been taught to carry herself as an “artistic creation worthy of representation” (Wolff 21) and her sense of self and self-worth is entirely dependent on her appearance and how her peers perceive her.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff explains that a woman’s capacity to be decorative was believed to be her chief asset. Women were considered fragile objects whose use were to adorn the household (19). Women’s sense of self-worth, then, was tied to people’s opinion and reception of them. Lily has internalized the notion that she is an object of art for others to admire. The notions of visual art and artistic expression are prevalent in Wharton’s novel. Wolff explains that people in Lily’s set of society would travel to Europe to buy “old masters” – not for their beauty, but for “the evidence they gave of culture and limitless success” (17). Just like people would buy and collect paintings as a symbol of money and status, Wolff argues that Lily’s beauty and “even more, her general aesthetic aura – is not only her fortune in this newly capitalistic society; it is the only thing about her that makes her interesting or valuable to others. The man who marries her will select her as the final prize in his collection” (23).

Lily, who at one point wants to be someone’s “prize”, deliberately uses her good looks and wit as a currency for the purpose of maintaining her place amongst the members of high society. While some critics argue that Lily is a victim of objectification, I think she willingly objectifies herself. Lily makes deliberate choices of using her body as a commodity, because she is aware of its exchange value. Her body becomes a tool, which grants her access to the

arenas of the members of high society. To Lily, the important thing in life is to be associated with affluent upper-class society and to marry rich, so that her needs are provided for in the future. In order to reach her objective, she becomes “self-acknowledged ‘human merchandise,’” and stays busy marketing herself throughout most of the novel “worried only about the price she [will] fetch” (Gentry 10).

Lily uses her body as a currency by being available and at disposal to the people she wants to be associated with, such as the Trenors and the Dorsets. They in exchange invite her to their country houses, parties and trips abroad and use her to their own benefit—the men by admiring her looks and enjoying her company, and the women by using her presence to entertain the other guests. Lily understands that her body is being used as a means to entertain others, but the way she sees it, it is a mutual transaction, as she preserves her position in high society and gains access to potentially suitable mates.

### **3.4 Patriarchal Structures**

From the very first page of *The House of Mirth*, the reader is made aware of Lily’s physical attributes through the “male gaze,” as Lawrence Selden observes her at Grand Central Station. The reader is told that “his eyes had been refreshed by the sight of [her]”, although there was “nothing new about [her]” and the “girlish smoothness, the purity of tint . . . was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing” (Wharton 5-6). Nevertheless, he continues to surveil her, and shifts between admiring and judging her appearance and beauty. According to Laura Mulvey’s theory on visual pleasure from her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Lily is placed in the “traditional exhibitionist role” (236), where women are both looked at and displayed. Mulvey uses the term “to-be-looked-at-ness” (236) to explain how the male gaze is positioned on the woman, who only serves as an image. Women become objects of men’s visual pleasure, which is what Lily seems to be to Selden in the opening of the novel. She is on display; her body serving as a passive image, that Selden, as the “bearer of the look”, can surveil and enjoy. From a feminist perspective, the “male gaze” serves as a phenomenon created by men for men. By indicating that women serve as passive “images” made to be looked at by men for their pleasure, they assigned themselves the right to be the “doer”—that is to say the right to take the subject-position and be the person surveilling rather than the person being surveilled.

This privileged position contributes to perpetuating patriarchal ideas of female submission and male domination. Hence, feminist critics argue that women have internalized

the notion that they “exist only to be acted on by men” (Gentry 3). Lily is well aware that she is the object of people’s gaze, in fact, she is dependent on her good looks and the ability to attract their gaze, as she has been taught that her looks will help her find and attract a potential husband. Gentry explains that in the anguish of losing possible suitors, women will attempt to turn themselves into works of art; always being on display and ready to be admired. Lily, therefore, has no problem with “killing herself into a ‘perfect’ image” (Gentry 3) and serving as a living picture—a *tableau vivant*—in order to gain people’s attention. Gentry further argues that “a woman’s identity more so than a man is bound up in her physical body” (4). This statement serves as a truth to Lily, as she seems to think that identity and body are two sides of the same coin. She has been raised in a society that promotes ideas that women’s physical attributes can be exchanged into currency. She explains to Selden that “your coat is shabby—but who cares? It doesn’t keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself” (Wharton 12, emphasis added).

The notion of always being on display has been discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. His theory of “panopticism” explains the concept of self-policing and repression, and can help explain how patriarchal control has been exercised and how power relations are constituted through the machinery of surveillance. Foucault explains that power must be “visible and unverifiable,” the “prisoner” (this can be anybody, and his theory can be applied to all levels of society, not only prisons) will at all times see the central tower from which he is spied upon, however he will never know if the guard is actually watching (498). Just like Foucault’s imagined prisoner, Lily becomes a prisoner of society who cannot act the way she desires, because she knows there are people she needs to impress and a possibility that someone is watching her at all times. This forces her to always present a “perfect image” of herself, and always act according to this image she has created, which people believe to be the real her. This shows how patriarchy as a social system serves as a panopticon and creates a homogenous effect of power, as it is able to create a real subjection from a fictitious relation (Foucault 498). This subjection is very evident in Lily’s life, and examples of how Lily has to police herself at all times are found in chapters one and two: In chapter one, Selden offers Lily cigarettes, which she eagerly accepts. However, in chapter two, on the train from New York to Bellomont, Bertha Dorset asks if Lily has a smoke, and she has to pretend that she does not smoke. This is due to the fact that Mr. Percy Gryce, who Lily wants to impress, is present. Therefore, upon Bertha’s request Lily exclaims “What an absurd question, Bertha”

(Wharton 22), to which Bertha replies “Why, don’t you smoke? Since when have you given it up? What—you never . . . Ah of course—how stupid of me” (22). In fear of what Mr. Gryce might think of her and the possibility that he might not approve of her smoking, Lily has to hide the fact that she enjoys smoking, so that Mr. Gryce will not see a wicked and imperfect side of her. Lily, therefore, insists that Bertha is mistaken, so that she can live up to the impression Mr. Gryce has of her as a ‘perfect image.’ Lily compromises her real self in order to live up to the false image she has created.

Lily struggles to uphold her position in high society, as she is less affluent than most of her peers. She feels “very poor – and very expensive. [She] must have a great deal of money” (Wharton 10). The high society lifestyle that Lily wants to attain requires expensive clothes, trips abroad and other “extravagant indulgences” (Saministrado 77). Without financial support, she will slowly lose her social status, which to her is the worst possible thing that can happen. More than ever before, her body becomes a currency, as she has to exchange her looks, wits, and charm for a “membership” in high society while she is looking for a husband. Lily understands that in order to find a man rich enough to make it possible for her to live the life she wants as a consumer, she must first present herself as an item on the marriage market. In other words, she must make herself intriguing, so that someone would want to ‘consume’ her. When she is married and has someone who will provide for her, she can become a consumer of materialistic goods herself.

### **3.5 Marriage**

Lily seems to have an inner conflict when it comes to marriage. She knows that in order to live the life she was trained for and desires, she must marry rich, regardless of love. In the early part of the novel, she gives the impression that her objective is to make Mr. Gryce fall in love with her. However, when he does become interested in her, and it is time for Lily to actually commit, she acts in self-destructive ways. The reader learns that Lily has had many men who have been interested in marrying her, yet she has ruined her chances with all of them. Even as a teenager, Lily almost married an Italian prince, but “just at the critical moment a good-looking step-son turned up, and Lily was silly enough to flirt with him while her marriage-settlements with the step-father were being drawn up” (Wharton 147). Mr. Gryce is a shy, dull man, who is bad at keeping an interesting conversation going. He is a collector of artifacts associated with the culture and history of America, and most people do

not care to talk to him about his Americana. Lily, however, knows that he takes pride in his collection, and therefore decides to make an impression on him by asking him about his collection. Although she is not really interested in Mr. Gryce's talk about his Americana, she is very much interested in his passion and inclination to spend money on his collection. Lily is "determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it" (Wharton 41).

Lily's plans to entice Mr. Gryce into marriage seems to be working. However, when she senses that he might consider marrying her, she ruins her chances with him by neglecting her commitments to him and instead spending time with Selden. The fact that Lily purposely seems to ruin her chances of marriage is odd, considering the way she "works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic" (Wharton 148). While marriage will present Lily with financial security, she feels an opposition toward a life of routine, and finds ways of sabotaging her social encounters with eligible bachelors, such as Mr. Gryce. Harris argues that to female protagonists of the nineteenth century, marriage was an antithetical to self-realization (206). Lily wants to be with someone who can see her as a spiritual and intellectual being, instead of simply as an ornament that they can possess. Lily believes that the only person who seems to truly see her for who she is Selden. I will argue later that she is wrong.

In other words, Lily's delaying attitude to marriage can hint at an inner resistance to purely materialistic considerations. Saministrado observes that Lily's "requirements for marriage go beyond mere economic survival in high society" (83). Lily's society dictates that marriage is the only vocation for a woman of her class. Selden asks "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're brought up for?" (Wharton 10). Lily answers "I supposed so. What else is there?" (Wharton 10). Her answer suggests that female possibilities or alternatives have restrictions, and a woman has no option of a privileged life except through marriage. Thus the motivation of marriage differs between the sexes and Lily is aware of the distinction "Ah there's the difference—a girl must, a man may if he chooses" (Wharton 12). Man does not have to marry, he chooses to, which implies that his power extends beyond his choice of a partner. This shows the imbalances between sexes, and Lily's decline has much to do with her gender. Like all the other novels presented in this thesis, this is a story of a woman who is trying to assert herself in a world that is designed to her disadvantage.

Lily's discontent over her lot in life is expressed when she is having tea with Selden at his flat. After seeing his place, she laments "[h]ow delicious to have a place like this all to oneself! What a miserable thing is it to be a woman" (Wharton 8). In wishing that she too could have her own apartment, Lily voices her desire to have the same freedom as men do.

Selden suggests that there are alternatives available for women and that "[e]ven women . . . have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat" (Wharton 8). Selden is referring to his cousin, Gerty Farish. Lily thinks of Gerty as an unmarriageable woman, who lives in a "horrid little place" with "no maid, and such queer things to eat" (Wharton 8). To Lily, the biggest difference between herself and Gerty is that she herself is marriageable and ladylike and fully able to attract a husband.

Gerty, on the other hand, is at the fringes of society, and her only ties to high society are through Selden and Lily. Gerty in many ways represents the *fin de siècle* New Woman, who resist society's norms and lives independently and freely. The reason she becomes an oddity is because of society's perception of single women. Medicine and science at that time warned against women with ambitions who sought opportunities for self-development. The general consensus was therefore that unmarried women were something unnatural and would lead to "sickness, freakishness, sterility and racial degeneration" (Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* 39). Lily, unlike Gerty, has been brought up to think that a happy life is only possible if one marries rich and maintain one's place in society. Living on her own and falling out of her social circle is not an option. She stresses to Selden that there is a difference between herself and Gerty "she like being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not" (Wharton 8). What Lily ultimately means by this is that Gerty has given up her chance of a membership in high society and chosen personal freedom instead. Lily herself has no desire to descend to the lower rungs of the social ladder and therefore has to commit to the norms and act according to the expectations of how a marriageable girl ought to act. She believes that personal freedom will come to her later, when she has married and has unlimited means. Selden realizes that Lily is unable to free herself from the constraints of society and is "struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin. . . [Lily] was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (Wharton 8). Lily's bracelet, here, becomes a symbol both for her femininity, but also of her subjugation by societal norms.

Although Lily believes that she belongs to high society, and that a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption is the ultimate symbol of success and freedom, she forgets that she

too is on the fringe of society, and dependent on her friends. Lily has been raised to count on her beauty and charm and has never learned any marketable skills other than entertaining and pleasing her high society friends, so that they have an interest in keeping her around. Some of Lily's disdain towards Gerty can be because Gerty serves as a vivid reminder of how she herself might end up if she fails to live up to her friends' expectations. She is aware that they are growing tired of her and exclaims that "I've been about too long – people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry" (Wharton 10). Throughout Book I, Lily is constantly struggling to keep her footing in high society, Although she gives the impression of wanting to marry, her actions point to the fact that she has no desire to be wed. Lily seems to be in denial of her decreasing social status, but thoughts about her next social move are always present in her mind. She believes that Mr. Gryce will forgive her for neglecting him, and that he will marry her nevertheless. When she receives the news about his engagement to Evie, her plans fall asunder, as she realizes that she has ruined all her chances of marriage. She now starts to realize that the comfortable life she sought in marriage might not happen. She becomes even more dependent on her friends for social sanction. Lily seems caught between two polarized ideas of what true happiness really is. She witnesses the luxurious life of her friends and acquaintances, who have all their materialistic needs covered. By being invited and staying with her friends she too gets a taste of the sweet life that money can buy, at the same time she dislikes the society where people's connections are based on what they can do for each other. As mentioned earlier, Lily knows that the reason her friends keep providing for her is because she is at their disposal and helps them out with "tiresome things" (Wharton 33). If she stops catering to them, she knows they will no longer have her, and she will fall out of her circle.

In order to please her hosts, Lily is expected to partake in activities that contribute to the entertainments at parties. One of the activities at Bellomont is playing bridge for money, which for Lily who has no income is a dangerous game to play. She loses a great deal of money, but has no income of her own, nor a husband who can pay off her debts. For a single lady to be playing cards for money was unusual conduct. The reader learns that Bertha Dorset becomes irritated at Lily for taking Selden away from her, and that it is she who tells Mr. Gryce that Lily has a gambling addiction, which scares him off and eventually makes him marry Evie. Lily is devastated, as she is in need of his money more than Evie. "Why should Percy Gryce's millions be joined with another great fortune, why should this clumsy girl be put in possession of powers she would never know how to use?" (Wharton 72). Lily starts

having “fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself. But what manner of life would it be? She had barely enough money to pay her dress-makers’ bill and her gambling debts” (Wharton 33).

Lily seems tired of living according to the rules of high society, where appearance and money are valued above anything. Her self-destructive habits with men might have to do with the fact that she finds the lifestyle she is trying for little rewarding. Lily wants someone who can challenge her. She explains that “there are men enough to say pleasant things to me . . . what I want is a friend who won’t be afraid to say disagreeable [things]” (Wharton 9). The only disagreeable friend she finds is Selden, who she believes sees her for who she really is. Selden, however, has a vocation that can support his independence, while Lily doesn’t. Yet she feels that they share an equal bond and that only he is able to understand her antipathy towards a life of routine.

### **3.6 Selden and the “Republic of Spirit”**

Lawrence Selden is a young lawyer and one of the few characters in the novel who is able to move within the elite social circles and yet view them with the detached scrutiny of an outsider. Not wealthy himself, Selden has a distant relationship to money, believing love and happiness to be found instead of purchased. Selden’s character has been described by some critics as “cowardly and parasitic, a kind of Dracula sucking the life from Lily” (Coulombe 3), resulting in her decline and death. Other critics claim that he is the most sympathetic of all the characters in the novel, since he instead of encouraging Lily to keep trying to access a materialistic and reductive society, offers her the solution to escape from it. Selden offers Lily a “republic of spirit” and explains that his idea of success is personal freedom. What he means by this is freedom from “everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents . . . that’s what I call success” (Wharton 55). Lily points out that, “the conditions of citizenship [to the republic of spirit] is not to think too much about money, and the only way not to think about money is to have a great deal of it” (Wharton 56).

Selden invalidates Lily’s observation and claims that she “might as well say that the only way not to think about air is to have enough to breath. That is true enough in a sense; but your lungs are thinking about the air, if you are not. And so it is with your rich people – they may not be thinking of money, but they’re breathing it all the while; take them into another element and see how they squirm and gasp!” (Wharton 56). Selden sees himself differently and apart from the society which Lily is striving to be a part of. To Selden, money represents

false happiness. As long as Lily's only ambition is to marry for the sake of money, he cannot see himself with her. Lily asks "[t]hen the best you can say for me is, that after struggling to get them [the money] I probably shan't like them?" (Wharton 57). Selden never gives her an answer, but asks her if she has given this question any thought. Lily exclaims that she has "often and often," but that it "looks so much darker when [he] show[s] it to [her]" (Wharton 57). Lily admires Selden's detachment from high society, and she knows that he is right; the lifestyle she is trying for will limit her to a restricted gender role and maintaining the social hierarchy. Temporarily, Lily chooses the republic by accepting a less expensive lifestyle, stating "I shall look hideous in dowdy clothes; but I can trim my own hats" (59). While ironically foreshadowing her future, her statement also clearly indicates a rejection of wealth and society and an acceptance of Selden's point of view.

After this conversation with Selden, Lily faces a conflict of heart and mind; she longs for freedom and would love to join Selden in his "republic of spirit," yet she is "[d]etermined to survive where her parents had perished . . . she must make the marriage for which she has been groomed and for which she is so well qualified by her beauty and charm" (Trilling 118). Tyson observes that Lily has no time to lose in "acquiring the rich husband she needs in order to put a permanent end to her financial problems" (3). Yet she cannot seem to bring herself to marry the eligible bachelors who are interested in her and have the money she needs in order to keep her footing in society. This implies that Lily finds herself vacillating between two opposing moral worlds: the superficial, commodified world, which she has been brought up to be a part of, and the rarified, spiritual world that she associates with Selden (Tyson 3).

Although the reader might think that Selden is the perfect man for Lily, I want to argue that he is self-deceived and unable to see that he perpetuates the patriarchal notions that women have to carry themselves like art to please the male subject. Selden is a dangerous character for Lily to be around, because he offers her intelligent conversations and makes her feel guilty for wanting a luxurious life. He thinks that he would be able to love her, if she were to give up the superficial life that only money can buy. To him Lily can seem genuinely above material concerns only if she ignores or rejects whatever wealth she might obtain. Yet, his attraction to her is due to the fact that she is able to present herself as a piece of art. If she were to ignore the uses of money, her capacity for the very decorative display that Selden admires will diminish (Wolff 27). In other words, Selden himself enjoys the beauty that money can create, yet he judges and disdains Lily's obsession with it.

There is an even more seriously destructive element in Selden's system applied to Lily: Selden is aware that Lily all through her life has been an object of decorative pleasure, and that she has allowed the reactions of others to be the only mirror in which she can see her "real" self. Wolff argues that "Lily's every mood, motion, public attitude (except for those few impulses for which she pays so dearly) is a deliberate piece of acting" (34). Lily knows that she is always being observed and she automatically plays to her audience. She has internalized so thoroughly experiencing herself as an object that is being observed by others, that her sense of self is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others (Wolff 34). Lily's sense of self-worth is so conditional and depends entirely on other people's opinion of her. Wharton gives evidence that Lily's special skill in the representation of herself lies in an uncanny ability to "experience herself as other must see her" (Wolff 34). Since Lily has decided that Selden's perceptions of her are the only "mirror" in which her "real" self can be reflected, her perception of that self increasingly becomes one of disgust and self-loathing (Wolff 36).

For Selden to believe that he is the guardian of a genuinely liberating moral system shows his inability to acknowledge his own incoherency. Had his motives been truly noble, he would have rejected this process of dehumanization; however, Selden's moral system merely perpetuates it. Wolff writes that "[h]e is willing to judge [Lily] worthy if and only if she can become a flawless, absolutely constant embodiment of virtue. When Lily accepts these unattainable ideals as her 'realities,' accepts Selden's rarefied distillation of femininity as the definition of the self that she must reaffirm in all her daily actions, she is merely continuing on a somewhat loftier plane the lifelong habit of seeing herself as an object to be judged by others" (36). Lily, who does not know how to live up to Selden's hypocritical ideals, exclaims "why do you do this to me . . . why do you make the things I have chosen seem so hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?" (Wharton 58). Whereas Lily is able to see the world through Selden's eyes and to identify with his values and his artistic standards, his capacity for understanding and his tolerance for imperfection are so slight that he is incapable of understanding her situation. She wants to meet him on some common emotional ground, "[y]et if she is to meet him at all, it must be on his terms, for his values are settled" (Wolff 29).

Wharton offers satire through Selden's character and in his illogical self-deception of his narrowly virtuous position. Like Percy Gryce and all the other men in the novel, Selden will accept Lily only if she can identify herself with his "vanity." Whereas Gryce's vanity is

that he collects Americana and would like to add Lily to his collection, Selden's vanity is more complex. Wolff observes that he luxuriates in her decorative quality, yet would have her absolutely reject the material world that sustains it. In addition, he wants her to do this without sympathetic support from him (30).

### **3.7 Alternatives to Marriage**

Lily's decision to avoid marriage paradoxically leads to a life in enslavement, because she is always already in servitude to her friend Judy Trenor, who is the hostess of the Bellomont party where the social activities in the novel begin. Whereas marriage can present Lily with financial security, it will mean that she marries someone for their money, not for love. She will then forever be a domestic housewife like her friends, stuck in a loveless relationship. Mired in indecisiveness Lily keeps living off her friends, and is forced to partake in activities such as smoking, gambling and spending time in company with married men. Lily is judged for her behavior by her respectable family, but sees no other way to stay part of high society without any money of her own.

Lily knows that rules are different for her because she is a single woman. The double moral standard of society has created one rule book for married woman and one for the unmarried. The novel presents Carrie Fisher as an alternative for Lily. Carrie is a two times divorcee, who devotes her time mentoring newly rich families to help them earn acceptance in society. She keeps her place in high society by living off their hospitality. The similarity between Carrie's lifestyle and Lily's is striking, and Carrie's character serves as a reminder that women were able to live on their own. However, where Lily dislikes living off her friends and trading her servitude for their hospitality, Carrie has made this her job. Carrie, unlike most of the other characters, has figured out the system and knows how to play the social games. Her character differs from all other women characters, as she is a part of the gilded cage, yet she is able to see her society from an outsider's perspective. There is no self-deceit in the way she goes about things, and she understands that she lives in a society where people are projects that can profit one another. Her self-awareness enables her to see the faults of high society, yet she shares with Lily the love of luxury. This makes her one of the most interesting characters in the novel with some very clever lines. In a conversation with Lily, she says: "There's Louisa, and I must be off – oh we're on the best of terms externally; we're lunching together; but at heart it's me she's lunching on" (Wharton 156). Carrie knows how

favors are traded and has made it her “job” to help the socially less fortunate families up society's ladder, while in living off their wealth in exchange.

Carrie is calculated and pragmatic and lives an independent life, which she seems to enjoy. However, because she breaks with the patriarchal script on how a true woman ought to act, there is a certain disdain towards her from the other characters in the novel. Judy tells Lily that the Wetheralls disapprove of Carrie, because she is a divorcee:

It was foolish of her to get the second divorce – Carrie always overdoes this – but she said the only way to get a penny out of Fisher was to divorce him and make him pay alimony . . . It's absurd of Alice Wetherall to make such a fuss about meeting her, when one thinks of what society is coming to. Some one said the other day that there was divorce and a case of appendicitis in every family one knows. Besides, Carrie is the only person who can keep Gus in a good humour when we have bores in the house. Have you noticed that all the husbands like her? . . . it's rather clever of her to have made a specialty of devoting herself to dull people – the field is such a large one, and she has it practically to herself. She finds compensations, no doubt – I know she borrows money from Gus – but then I'd pay her to keep him in good humour, so I can't complain, after all.” (Wharton 35)

This passage shows that women who were not married could live just as luxurious lives as the ones married to rich husbands. However, nothing comes free, and one has to choose either to be content with marrying someone one does not love, or do as Carrie and be of service to people who can help you keep your position. Lily seems unable to do either. She stands between the two extremes, but cannot find herself coming to terms with either.

In order to understand Lily's self-destructive behavior, one has to understand the societal structures of the time. While the self-made man was an ideal and the idea of being able to create a new and better identity for yourself through persistent work and patience was the credo of society, it only applied to men. Harrison-Kahan states that “[t]he fashioning of a new identity may have been mythologized and heroized in men, but it was deemed dangerous in women because it signaled an active role in the formation of subjectivity, a role that the cult of true womanhood had tried to suppress” (37). What this means is that, while self-realization and class mobility was possible (and almost promised) to men, upward mobility for women was achieved only through marriage. This can be one reason as for why Lily does not wish to live as either Gerty or Carrie—for although she would have more freedom, she would be shunned by society. Carrie is perceived as somewhat undignified, while Gerty having chosen to remain unmarried, makes her an oddity and her self-reliance takes away from her femininity, since it is a trait associated with maleness. Lily wishes neither for

herself, and her disapproval of Gerty is very evident in the novel. Gerty's character is described as

mediocre and the ineffectual. If there were compensating qualities in her wide frank glance and the freshness of her smile, these were qualities which only the sympathetic observer would perceive before noticing that her eyes were of a workaday grey and her lips without haunting curves. Lily's own view of her wavered between pity for her limitations and impatience at her cheerful acceptance of them. (Wharton 70).

Lily has been brought up by her mother to believe that "dinginess was evidence of stupidity" and that girls like Gerty are "plain and inferior from choice" (Wharton 70). Gerty devotes her time to philanthropy and Lily finds herself irritated by Gerty "in her assumption that existence yielded no higher pleasures, and that one might get as much interest and excitement out of life in a cramped flat as in the splendours of the Van Osbourgh establishment" (Wharton 71).

Vacillating between pitying Gerty and being annoyed by her, Lily nevertheless associates her with the "workaday" lower class. Lily appears to fault Gerty not for her poverty, but for her failure to resist her current lifestyle. Although Lily and high society has a condescending attitude towards Gerty, the descriptions of her often seem to be disguised as backhanded compliments. The reader understands that, although not accepted as part of high society, Gerty is "a trump, and worth all the rest of [high society] put together" (Wharton 181). She serves as a model of compassion and generosity, and the only character who truly cares about Lily when she goes through misfortunes later in the novel. Gerty thus stands in stark contrast to the rest of the characters in the novel, who all act with self-interest in mind. Carrie and Gerty, although from different social tiers, have in common that they stay true to themselves and care nothing about what society thinks of them. Wharton uses these characters as foils for Lily, each presenting a more realistic alternative to Lily as a way of life. However, Lily has her mind set on the path she has been raised to follow. These two characters offer Lily a sisterhood which she rejects and they both represent the feminist counterpart to the self-made man.

Thus far we have seen Lily struggling with financial issues and she will eventually have to give up her lifestyle of conspicuous spending, as she runs out of money. Wharton presents her with one last alternative through the character of Simon Rosedale. Rosedale is a newly rich, "small glossy-looking man" of "the blond Jewish type" (Wharton 13). His character is disliked by most of the members of high society, and some critics argue that there are shades of antisemitism in Wharton's text. However true that may be, I will disregard the

issue of race, and focus on him as the male hero who represents the better solution for Lily who is in distress. Rosedale is the patriarchal answer to all of Lily's problems, however obnoxious he might be. He is described as a person who "made it his business to know everything about everyone, whose idea of showing himself to be at home in society was to display an inconvenient familiarity with the habits of those with whom he wished to be thought intimate" (Wharton 16). Rosedale is a parvenu, who makes tentative attempts to be accepted as part of the Old New York society. However, his lack of sophistication and upper-class manners contribute to the rejection of him by most of the other characters, and even Judy Trenor, whose "taste for variety had led her into some hazardous experiments," is not interested in giving him a chance. To her, "he was the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within her memory" (Wharton 16).

Rosedale is repeatedly ignored and stigmatized, yet he is determined to get what he wants. Lahoucine Ouzgane observes that the "right" wife could help him in establishing himself as an equal in the old New York society (6), and Lily thus becomes of great interest to him as "it was becoming more and more clear to him that Miss Bart herself possessed precisely the complementary qualities needed to round off his social personality" (Wharton 96). For Lily, who is so preoccupied with the thought of having enough money to spend, marrying Rosedale would be the solution that would give her the life she wants. Rosedale offers Lily a trade deal, where she helps maintain his place in the high society, while he can provide for her so much money that she can "take the earth for granted if she want[s] to" (Wharton 140).

Rosedale comes across as a cynical and calculated character, who is determined to find a way to be accepted in high society. In many ways, Rosedale is a male counterpart and a foil to Lily. Whereas she has been born into the high society but lacks the money to maintain her position there, Rosedale has the money but lacks the superior cultivation and refinement of a true gentleman. Both are in a position where they lack something crucial to uphold the lifestyle they are striving for. Although Lily dislikes Rosedale, she "understood his motives, for her own course was guided by as nice calculations" (Wharton 16). Towards the end of Book I, Lily is indebted to Gus Trenor, her reputation tarnished, and she is descending into poverty. Unable to marry Mr. Gryce and unwilling to become a "Gerty Farish," her last chance of asserting herself in high society is by marrying Rosedale. Lindoff argues that, "Structurally, Wharton suggests that Rosedale would be a proper mate for Lily" (532). She points out that Rosedale and Selden are repeatedly juxtaposed in scenes which should make

Rosedale's virtues apparent, but instead highlight Selden's appeal. Every time Lily is in need of Selden's support, he deserts her, and Rosedale appears instead. Where Selden passes harsh moral judgements on Lily, Rosedale "understands her plainly and accepts her simply. He is the only man who is genuinely kind to Lily and the one to tell her he loves her" (533).

Book I ends as Lily realizes she has run out of money and is in distress in regards to how she will manage to stay part of high society. More than ever, she is in need of Selden's support, however Selden having seen her with Gus late at night, jumps to the conclusion that she is having an affair with him and therefore he deserts her. Rosedale, who knows when to strike, knows that Lily has been borrowing money from Gus and she is in a vulnerable position and in need of money. He proposes to her a business arrangement "You're not fond of me—yet—but you're fond of luxury, and style, and amusement, and for not having to worry about cash. You like to have a good time, and not to have to settle for it; and what I propose to do is to provide for the good time and do the settling." He reminds her that "as a girl gets older, and keeps moving along . . . before she know it, the things she wants are liable to move past her and not coming back" (Wharton 140). Rosedale has the ability to be realistic about the situation that he and Lily both find themselves in. Rosedale points out that Lily has missed out on all her chances of getting married, and that he is her only option to marry rich. Lily, whose motives are just as calculated as Rosedale's, is not yet aware that Selden has deserted her. She pragmatically declines Rosedale's offer, because she believes that Selden will provide her with more happiness. Lily thus rejects all the alternatives that Wharton presents to her. What Lily really wants is to claim the privileges of marriage without having to comply with its obligations and necessary compromises.

### **3.8 Lily's Descent**

Throughout Book I, Lily has tarnished her own reputation by gambling, borrowing money, flirting with Selden instead of keeping her appointments with Mr. Gryce, and being seen at Gus Trenor's house late at night. Bertha Dorset has turned the high society against Lily. Gerty advises Lily to clear herself by telling everyone the truth about her economic status and why she had to borrow money from Gus Trenor. Lily, who is accustomed to how things work in her circle of friends exclaims "The whole truth? . . . what is truth? Whereas a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's

convenient to be on good terms with her” (Wharton 176). This passage illustrates the fake connections between people in society. Lily’s so-called friends are more concerned about being liked by Bertha, who has money and power, than wanting to believe the truth from Lily who has nothing to offer them.

Lily starts to realize that Rosedale has been right about being her only chance of marrying rich. She decides to take him up on his proposal. However, now that Lily has lost her position in the high society, she is of no value to Rosedale. To him, Lily was only a “good deal” as long as she was on good terms with high society. He tells Lily that “I’m more in love with you than I was this time last year, but I’ve got to face the fact that the situation is changed” (Wharton 199). By this, he insinuates that Lily has descended into the lower classes, and can no longer be of any help to him. He then continues by saying “I won’t go into what’s happened. I don’t believe the stories about you . . . but they’re there, and my not believing them ain’t going to alter the situation. . . . the quickest way to queer yourself with the right people is to be seen with the wrong ones. . . . If I married you now I’d queer myself for good and all, and everything I’ve worked for all these years would be wasted” (199-200). As Lily turns to leave, Rosedale proposes a new solution to her. Rosedale knows that Lily is in possession of love letters that Bertha has sent to Selden. In the beginning of the novel when Lily visits Selden’s flat, she is seen by a charwoman. The charwoman mistakes Lily for Bertha, and threatens to show people the letters unless Lily pays her. Lily, concerned about Selden’s reputation, buys these letters and hides them so no one will find out about his and Bertha’s affair. Rosedale suggests that Lily use those letters to blackmail Bertha to accept her back into society. Lily, however, rejects his proposal yet again, as she knows that by bringing Bertha down she will have to sacrifice Selden’s reputation as well.

Upon being rejected again, Rosedale exclaims “Now what on earth does that mean? I thought we understood each other! . . . I supposed it’s because the letters are to him, then? Well, I’ll be damned if I see what thanks you’ve got from him” (203).

This is the point when Lily realizes the decadence of the society that she has been trying for. She decides to follow her own morals and not take part of the frivolous and self-centered society she once thought would bring her happiness. However, with no domestic space of her own, and no sense of self and no safe place to go, Lily realizes that she will always be passing through spaces and temporary homes. Seeing no other way for a worthy life for herself, she overdoses on sleeping medicine.

This chapter has attempted to show the female condition as represented by the unmarried woman. Lily has been a victim of patriarchal conventions that have deprived her of a sense of self. She has spent all her life striving for ideals that are pushed on her by society, and which are not her own desires. Because she is unable to compromise her moral values to regain position in society she decides to take her own life. Lily is however presented with many options to a decent and comfortable life, through the characters of Gerty, Carry and Rosedale. Death is not the only option for Lily. She chooses death over a life that she cannot approve of. Lily is therefore not a passive victim of society but an active critic. Her suicide is an inscription of society's conventions upon her body.

## 4 Conclusion

I began this thesis by explaining that women's silence and absence have been a part of a cultural norm created by men. And any instance of women speaking for themselves has been seen as a disruption of prevailing patriarchal definitions. In nineteenth-century fiction, the only logical redemption for female disruption seemed to be through death. The conventional patriarchal reading of female suicides in turn, has conveyed naturalistic notions in interpreting female deaths, suggesting that female characters had to die because they were unable to escape their inevitable fate. The intention of this thesis has been to propose an alternative interpretation of female suicide in works of late nineteenth-century American literature. In my definition of suicide I also include the symbolic self-destruction as represented by the character of Frank Heywood in *Fettered for Life*.

In response to the novels presented in my thesis, critics have argued that women who reject the norms set by patriarchy have no other alternatives than death. Their suicide, then, becomes the only redemption for their "misbehavior." This interpretation indicates that transgressive women find redemption only through death. Because death brings redemption, these ideas suggest that a dead woman is the ideal woman. Dworkin is therefore right when she states that "for a woman to be good, she must be dead, or as close to it as possible" (43). This indicates that by patriarchal standards a woman is never perfect unless she completely submits to passivity and submission. The female characters in the novels presented in this thesis do not comply with the patriarchal expectations of female behavior. When they commit suicide, critics who have internalized the patriarchal consciousness, argue that it is because of their lack of ability to adapt to society. They are portrayed as passive victims deprived of agency. My thesis has disagreed with this interpretation, and shown that the female characters do have alternatives.

To start with Chapter One, Flora is given the option to stop publishing her poetry. Mr. Le Roy is not bothered by the fact that Flora writes poems. He is, however, enraged over the fact that she attracts the public gaze. If Flora wanted a comfortable life, she could have it by complying with her husband's wishes. However, she refuses to obey. There are also incidents in Rhoda's life, where she is offered opportunities that could improve her life. Judge Swinton offers her a lot of money in order for her to keep silent about common their past. However, Rhoda refuses and explicitly tells the judge that "I would not touch your money, if it would save me from death by torture, or from such a life as I lead, which is worse" (Blake 125). In

Chapter Two Edna is the options of staying with Léonce and her children, and living a comfortable life, like her friend Adèle. She can also break with society and pursue a career within painting, or she can marrying Robert. Her resistance towards marriage make her reject both Léonce and Robert. Gentry explains that, “Edna awakes to her situation as a woman in her quest for identity through a life of significant action, she must paradoxically choose suicide as the only means available to her to achieve her goal” (45). Edna rejects the domestic life, and is therefore unable to live the life presented to her by Adèle’s character. She also lacks the skills to live an independent life like Mademoiselle Reisz. Robert, who might have made her happy, reveals his patriarchal consciousness, which repels Edna. Her suicide thus becomes a choice of not wanting to conform to society’s expectations.

The novel that provides most choices for its heroine, is discussed in Chapter Three. Lily has the option of marriage, however, when she senses that a man might consider marrying her, she ruins her chances with him on purpose. Lily “works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic” (Wharton 148). Lily can either try to live a life like the spinster Gerty Farish in the genteel poverty, or she can maintain her place in the upper echelons by living like Carry Fisher, entertaining other women’s husbands and mentoring ascending families who need guidance. Even in the most despairing moment in the novel, she is offered the option of marrying Rosedale. However, not wanting to give up her integrity and moral values, she rejects his offer. All the female protagonists are given the choice to adapt to society’s conventions, yet they refuse.

Because they have alternatives, death by suicide must be a choice. Therefore, the female protagonists are not passive victims deprived of free will; they are active agents making a choice. The natural question, then, becomes why do they choose self-destruction when this is a pyrrhic victory at best? By focusing on the female condition in the novels, I found the most plausible answer to be the designs of patriarchal society. Patriarchal designs have deprived women of their subjectivity, and denied them individuality. The female protagonists in these novels are presented with one option for securing a good life, and that is marriage. The heroines in these novels have in common that they are longing for a different alternative to marriage. The alternatives available to them, however, are created by men, ensuring that they will never obtain the same rights and independence as the “stronger sex”. Audre Lorde is hence right when she asserts that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (111).

By choosing to take their lives, the female characters are asserting their adamant opposition to society's designs on them. Their act of self-destruction illustrates even more that they are active critics of society. There is yet another level to their suicide: all three novels have been written by women, and when a woman writer chooses to kill her female protagonist, she is able to narrate a story about female suicide from the woman's point of view. The death of a woman by her own hand, then, is portrayed from the position of the subject. This turns the suicide plot into a political message to the reader. It shows that the female characters may choose to actively reject society's rigid structures.

Death to these women seems like a better option than living lives without dignity and with oppression and exploitation. The self-destruction of these characters forces the reader to read not only their deaths, but also to analyze their lives to see what factors lead to these acts of self-annihilation. By killing themselves, they are claiming ownership over their life and communicating that the annihilation of self is a better option than staying alive in a society that deprives you of subjectivity and autonomy. These narratives are able to define what is real to women. By committing literary suicide, the female character is not "running away from life but running to it" (Gentry 22). By choosing death over a life in confinement, they assert their cultural critique and force others to interpret their deaths.

### **Suggestions for further research:**

Recently I discovered a critical approach to literature called "affect theory." While research on affect has been a longstanding discipline in psychology and political theory, the interest in affect as an interpretive paradigm is fairly new in literary studies. When speaking of affect theory in literature, one is interested to see what role emotion plays in the motivation of fictional characters or the response of the reader (Ahern 1-2). It could be interesting to do research on how the novels in this thesis have engaged with the politics of emotion. George Elliot, being a nineteenth-century woman writer wrote that "If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally ... the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is, that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures" (qtd. in McDonald 121). I think that if I were to write a longer thesis, I would have been interested in the politics of emotion and how it affects the reader.

It is also possible to analyze these novels, using more recent feminist theory. Post-

feminism has a branch called “choice feminism” that I think could be applied to these novels. Rachel Thwaites explains that “Choice feminism is often associated with authors. . . who understand every decision a woman makes as potentially feminist, if given thought and made with a political consciousness” (55). This could be a starting point for further research where one can analyze the female characters and discuss to what extent the choices they make are their own.

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