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A Revisionist Herstory: Self-Determination in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith  
Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

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## Introduction

Female characters in novels have often been scrutinized for their behavior, their lifestyles, and their choices, while the women themselves become less important than the stereotypes of neglectful mothers or seductive femmes fatales with which the readers may equate the characters. While scrutinizing these women, though, it is important to recognize their situations. People do not exist within a vacuum; the choices characters make are directly related to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Two canonical novels, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905), both offer examples of female characters who are heavily influenced by the situations they find themselves trapped in, as women and also as members of middle-class or high society. *The Awakening* and *House of Mirth* are feminist novels of selfhood, telling stories about women struggling to retain some sense of their individuality rather than conform to the rigid norms forced upon them. The societies of Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart create extremely strict rules for its members, specifically its female members, which in time begin to suffocate them and, as a result, cause them both to rebel and eventually commit suicide. Both novels employ themes of resistance to oppression and empowerment through that resistance, which were common ideologies of the New Woman. These ideologies found host in both heroines—either overtly or subconsciously—which was the driving force behind their desire for selfhood.

While similarities certainly exist between these two novels, Edna and Lily are different in their forms of aggression against patriarchal rules and their understanding of the New Woman ideology. Numerous critics have made arguments about the importance of each woman's particular kind of oppression. John R. May and Nancy Walker argue that Edna in *The Awakening* is heavily affected by her Creole environment because of the level of sensuality which it allows

and the close-knit community it enforces upon its members, but they miss an important factor—that Edna’s behavior is influenced by much more than just her immediate society, as she displays through her rebellions; she is also influenced by the New Woman movement, which was prevalent from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century. Edna’s choice to leave her husband and children show that she is essentially unconcerned with what her immediate society thinks about her. In fact, her thoughts seem to disregard much of the old-fashioned views of the woman’s role, and instead reflect many of the ideas which were popular amongst New Women. In her book *The Rise of the New Woman*, Jean V. Matthews explains the main ideas behind this early branch of feminism as “believ[ing] that women must become self-supporting,” and “believ[ing] in paid work,” and goes on to further explain the most important ideals of the new woman: “above all they believed that liberation demanded an inner revolution in women’s psyches, a willingness to take risks, to flout conventions, to assert equality in the state, on the job, and in their personal relationships” (104). Edna does many of these things during her awakening: she sells her artwork to fund her apartment away from her husband and children, she ignores her husband’s requests for her to stop her rebellious behavior, and she exhibits sexual freedom and freedom of emotional expression in her non-sexual relationships.

Similarly, critics of *The House of Mirth* Patrick Mullen and Frances L. Restuccia both argue that Lily is intensely affected by her own materialism and the materialism of her society. Both critics make the argument that Lily is a victim of a social circle obsessed with money to the point where Lily becomes unable to endure working class existence because of its “dinginess” (Wharton 3). I distinguish my own argument from that of these critics by examining Lily’s reaction to the situation she finds herself in; Lily’s behavior when faced with patriarchal oppression is what reveals the important facets of her self. In other words, what is important is

not how her society treats her, but rather, how she reacts to that treatment, and the ultimate choices she makes as a result of that treatment. Firstly, Lily makes the choice to refuse the marriage proposals she receives—from Laurence Selden, whom she loves but is not wealthy enough for her; from Simon Rosedale, who is a nouveau riche Jew trying to climb the social ladder; and from George Dorset, who is married to but seeking a divorce from Lily's friend Bertha. Secondly, Lily chooses to resign herself to a life of poverty rather than use a packet of scandalous letters to reestablish her social position and marry George Dorset. Lily eventually decides that a life of poverty, desperation, and eventual suicide would be preferential than to lose her sense of honor by defaming Selden, whom she loves.

Lily's behavior also reflects the struggles of a New Woman, but in a different way than Edna's. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues in her book *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* that "Nineteenth-century American society provided but one socially respectable, nondeviant role for women—that of loving wife and mother. Thus women, who presumably came in assorted psychological and intellectual shapes and sizes, had to find adjustment in one prescribed social role, one that demanded continual self-abnegation and a desire to please others" (213). Lily herself expresses this feeling of being forced into a position which she knew she didn't fit: "I was just a screw or cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get to it or be thrown out into the rubbish heap" (Wharton, 308). Lily makes clear through this expression that she knows her attempts to escape from patriarchal oppression are futile, because they only lead her to the "rubbish heap" rather than any form of success or personal happiness. While Lily and Edna both experience some of

the mentality of the New Woman, their situations and level of success are vastly different because of their wealth or lack thereof.

The ways in which Edna and Lily rebel against societal rules are further influenced by their financial stability or instability. Both women are members of upper middle-class society, but their financial backgrounds are extremely different: Edna receives money from her parents and also marries into money, while the orphaned and unmarried Lily lives off an allowance from a wealthy but ungenerous aunt. While Edna is mostly free to exercise any endeavors she sees fit on her adventure of self-awakening, Lily is restricted in her struggle for individuality because of her lack of money. Lily is constantly burdened by the expenses her life and her social circle require of her, and as a result of this most of her time is spent attempting to reconcile her debts. Although Lily longs for much of the same things Edna does—to escape marriage, to have a space of her own, to control her own time and money—she cannot accomplish any of them because of her lack of money.

The similarities between Chopin's *The Awakening* and Wharton's *House of Mirth* are undeniable and prevalent; each novel has underlying themes of pain caused by various forces, such as the inability of men and women to clearly communicate with and understand one another, the inevitability of marriage, childbearing, and child-rearing for women, and the loss of self-determination that comes as a result of all these factors. What is equally as evident as these similarities, though, are the differences between the two protagonists' lives because of their level of wealth. Edna, as a wealthy married woman, decides to get an apartment of her own and essentially ignore the parts of her life which were forced upon her by society (her husband, her children, her social circle). Lily, on the other hand, as an unmarried girl entirely dependent on a stingy aunt, has little choice but to travel down the path of acquiescence by trying to find a

husband, by sticking close to her hostile friends, and by abiding by her aunt's rules. Their stories need to be compared because of the results of their behavior: while Lily is ostracized, Edna's transgressions barely raise issue with those around her. This thesis will focus on how both Lily and Edna choose to retain their sense of dignity and selfhood no matter the cost, even eventually determining that taking their own lives would serve their purpose of self-expression better than a life forfeited to being a man's possession. In its examination of Edna and Lily in relation to their class, this piece will explain how each woman's behavior and choices were a clear and direct result of her class status and financial situation, and how the specific choices they make define them. In order to fully understand each novel and in an effort to understand the possible motives behind the creation of Edna and Lily, the lives of both Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton will be examined and interpreted. Chopin and Wharton were both New Women in the sense that they were well aware of the unfair oppression of women. Furthermore, both authors were successful in fighting their own oppression—by being published authors, being self-sustained, and by embracing widowhood and divorce. However, in order to make an argument about the oppression of women, they both chose to depict women who were struggling with oppression similar to their own, but with lesser success. Both authors realized that the best way to garner an emotional reaction from the audience was to show their heroine's tragic struggle to accept the reality of her oppression.

## Chapter 1:

## A Study of Selfhood: Awakening the “New Woman” in Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier

Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* is a powerful story following the enigmatic and compelling Edna Pontellier as she discovers a multitude of ways to express herself, including through love and sex. Although *The Awakening* includes a love story, it is certainly more than just that; it is the story of a woman struggling against the constraints of middle-class society. Critics Sandra Gilbert and Cynthia Griffin Wolff have argued that Edna is a simple, sensuous creature, which seems to reduce Edna’s character too much. Gilbert argues in “The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin’s Fantasy of Desire” that Edna is a projection of Kate Chopin’s own “fantasy of desire.” Further, in her examination of Edna, she casts Edna’s feelings and actions in such a light as to make them wholly based on finding romance. In a similar way, Wolff argues in “Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” that Edna is driven by the need for comfort and sensuality, rather than any kind of feminist pursuit, and explains that Edna “interests us not because she is ‘a woman,’ the implication being that her experience is principally important because it might stand for that of any other woman. Quite the contrary; she interests us because she is human—because she fails in ways which beckon seductively to all of us” (242). I would disagree with the argument that the main aspect of Edna’s story has nothing to do with being a woman. Other critics have chosen to focus more heavily on Edna’s environment than her own person, such as John R. May and Nancy Walker, who both argue that Edna’s awakening is a result of her environment, that the Creole sensuality was too much for her fragile Kentucky Presbyterian upbringing. Certainly, Edna’s environment and her longing for romance heavily influence her feelings, but it seems unfair to claim that she is completely at the whim of them, as these critics have chosen to argue. What Edna is inexplicably driven by is her desire for

freedom, in any form she can get it—be it by looking at the ocean, painting, listening to piano, being alone, having sex (or not having sex), she openly and heart-wrenchingly longs for that fleeting feeling of self-determination which was denied to women.

These constraints which Edna rebels against include marriage and motherhood, and through these, ultimately conformity and the loss of self. Through the various kinds of love Edna feels, she experiences new, previously undiscovered parts of herself. Arguably most important amongst these many experiences is the realization of her longing to be alone. While Gilbert or Wolff would argue that Edna's sexual awakening is what defines her the most, I would disagree. Her affairs are acceptable by the standards of society, as well as by her husband. Nancy Walker suggests that Edna's affair with Robert "is expected, even by Edna's husband" (62). An affair might seem bizarre or radical to readers today, but this behavior was not wild in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and would have been kept under wraps in order to avoid scandal, as Jean V. Matthews explains: "While the state had a legitimate interest in parenthood, sexual relations in or out of marriage were purely private concerns" (115). Furthermore, one of the most radical choices Edna makes in the novel is to leave her family home and get an apartment of her own, physically away from her children and husband, and so mentally and emotionally away from the constraints of motherhood and marriage. As Madame Ratignolle shows as well as tells Edna, this behavior is radical and, in Madame Ratignolle's mind, unacceptable for a woman.

In her story, Edna struggles to retain her selfhood and individuality, and attempts to gain some kind of emotional freedom from the men in her life who wish to possess her, which she eventually learns is all of them. Critics have been extremely thorough in examining the symbolism in the novel, but few have deeply examined Edna's relationships with all the men present in *The Awakening*, though these relationships are what seem to drive the changes she

undergoes. Specifically, her behavior is driven by the way she is treated by these men, rather than her longing for romance with each of them, as Gilbert argues. She has three main relationships with men in her story: her husband, Léonce; her first lover, Robert; and her second lover, Alcée. On the surface, it seems as though Edna is searching for a way to escape her loveless marriage with Léonce, and so enters into an emotional affair with Robert, and when Robert leaves her abruptly, she falls into the arms of Alcée who comforts her with sex. Though this is an accurate summary, what is crucial to understanding Edna's development as a character is her choices regarding these men. Her marriage to Léonce is certainly a constraint in her life, but at the same time, her husband's financial stability and societal position allows Edna a certain amount of freedom as compared to what a single woman of her age and status would have been allowed. In this way, through marrying Léonce despite not being in love with him, Edna is buying herself a certain amount of leeway. This leeway includes an allowance for extra-marital affairs, be they sexual or emotional. During her stay with Léonce and their children at Grand Isle, Edna unabashedly spends her days with Robert, who "since the age of fifteen...each summer at Grand Isle had constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel. Sometimes it was a young girl, again a widow; but as often as not it was some interesting married woman" (25). Robert is known for devoting himself to women, but only emotionally. His relationships are never overtly sexual, and so in this way it becomes clear that Léonce is unconcerned with his wife's emotional involvement with Robert. The narrator explains that "the Creole husband is never jealous; with him the gangrene passion is one which has become dwarfed by disuse" (25). Léonce himself prefers to spend his time at the club rather than with his family; at Grand Isle he comes home after midnight when Edna and the children are already asleep, and he leaves to spend the night at the club again when they are back at home on

Esplanade Street, a scene which is explained to be "familiar" to Edna (10, 122). Léonce's response to her relationship with Alcée is similar; her husband does or says nothing to her to indicate that he is bothered by the time she spends with Alcée, who is, like Robert, known for his affairs. In fact, the affair begins while Léonce is out of town, and for the entirety of it, he does not even return to town to look into it. While nothing is explicitly said to assure that Léonce is unconcerned, his silence makes it safe to assume that he feels about Edna's sexual affair the same way he felt about her emotional affair with Robert.

These relationships are important in Edna's awakening because each of them demonstrates the way that men considered women their property. Léonce views Edna as a piece in his collection: "'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (4). Edna fulfills a requirement for Léonce; she checks off the boxes of "marriage" and "children" on the list of necessities in a middle-class man's life. He is kind and understanding, and he loves Edna, but at the same time he is distant and aloof in a way which was normal for husbands to be; he prefers to spend his time his own way (at the club or out of town, usually), which is not unusual for men, but which is also not allowed for Edna. Hence, it is through Léonce that Edna learns of her own dissatisfaction. Her husband expects her to be a doting mother, which she does not want to be, although he himself is not a doting father. After spending the day at Klein's hotel with his friends, Léonce returns home at eleven o'clock only to wake Edna up and scold her because their child was sick: "He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (12). Edna struggles to find a balance between the duties of motherhood which are forced upon her and her own personal growth. This struggle creates emotional distance between her and her husband, and

eventually leads her to get an apartment of her own. It is explained that during her courting, Edna “fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken” (48). Over time Edna has come to accept that her husband is kind, and she was “fond” (48) of him, but there was no excitement in the emotional connection they shared. This is owed in part to the idea that once married, a woman essentially became her husband’s property. Rather than an egalitarian marriage or even a companionship, Edna became a possession. Because of this, Edna finds herself longing to establish some kind of connection in order to explore her own thought further, and Robert offers this to her.

With Robert, Edna is able to explore and connect with nature on the island and explore her own emotions, as she learns to care for Robert in a way which she never cared for her husband. Tragically, though, in a similar way to Léonce, Robert does not think of Edna as her own person, but rather as one of the possessions of Léonce. When Robert and Edna are reunited after his sudden departure, he makes it clear that more important than Edna’s feelings about him are Léonce’s feelings about losing his prized possession, and he states the main reason he fought against his feelings for Edna: “You were not free; you were Léonce Pontellier's wife” (280). This statement hurts Edna, but the dialogue between the two also shows her strength, as she chooses to assert herself rather than accept Robert’s words:

‘You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both.’

His face grew a little white,

‘What do you mean?’ He said. (282)

It becomes clear that Robert is not interested in an Edna who is “free;” rather, he is afraid of that Edna. Examining Chopin’s word choice in making Robert actually confused after this conversation further explains that he was not expecting this from Edna at all. Robert had not expected Edna to consider herself a free woman; what he expected was for her to either become his woman or to remain Léonce’s. Edna is forced to accept that the man she thought she shared an intense emotional connection with wanted little more than to own her as a trophy.

While Alcée’s position is different from Robert’s and Léonce’s, he is certainly not interested in Edna for any noble reasons. As an infamous playboy, Alcée wants to add the “unapproachable” (193) Mrs. Pontellier to his list of conquests. What is interesting, though, is Edna’s choice to have sex with Alcée, which I will examine later. Understanding these men helps clarify why Edna feels the need to rebel against the constraints that limit her freedom.

Upon closer inspection, Edna’s rebellions cluster together into categories. The first of these categories is sexual. In each of her relationships, she has some kind of sexual rebellion in order to assert freedom of ownership over her own body. While it is never explicitly stated in the novel, Margit Stange argues in her essay “Personal Property: Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*” that Edna’s refusal of Léonce’s entreaties to “come to bed” (Chopin, 78) translates to Edna’s refusal of sex. This is further supported by Edna’s longing to sleep outside rather than to join Léonce inside (Chopin 80), and her eventually choosing to live in a separate house, away from him altogether. Stange argues that “it is by withholding herself sexually, then, that Edna exercises the ‘eternal rights of women’ in insisting that she has a self and that she owns that self” (481). The episode where Léonce is directly telling Edna to come to bed and she refuses him is among Edna’s first rebellions:

She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did. (79)

After even a minor rebellion such as this, Edna is consumed by a desire for the freedom she feels from resisting, and from controlling her own body. Furthermore, for her first affair she chooses Robert for a lover, perhaps because he is known to not have sexual relationships with the women he has affairs with. Madame Ratignolle makes this clear when she says to Robert, “If your attentions to any married women here were ever offered with any intention of being convincing, you would not be the gentleman we all know you to be, and you would be unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust you (51). What Madame Ratignolle says here, though, is different from her own actions, as she has in the past allowed Robert to devote himself to her. Where she presumably draws the line between a gentleman and someone who cannot be trusted, then, must be someone who has frequent casual sexual affairs, like Alcée. Through Edna’s choice to spend time with the “gentleman[ly]” Robert, she is purposely choosing to withhold sex. She is cementing the idea that she can have an affair if she chooses, and even more than that, she can control her affairs in such a way that she does not need to give her body if she does not want to. Yet she eventually embraces a relationship with Alcée, who unlike Robert, is infamous for his sexual relationships with married women, and she further defies the constraints of her marriage by having sex with him.

Edna’s choice to have a sexual relationship with Alcée can be interpreted in various ways, but there are a few pieces that seem clear about the situation. One is that Edna does not

love Alcée, at least not in the way she loves Robert: “Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her” (201). Another is that Alcée knows what he is doing; he knows exactly what to do and say in order to get a married woman to have sex with him. Just as much as he enjoys his pursuit of Edna, though, Edna enjoys his pursuit of her: “He sometimes talked in a way that astonished her at first and brought the crimson into her face; in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her (204). Alcée is offering something that no man has offered Edna before. He is not concerned with being a gentleman in the same way Robert was, and his vigor excites Edna. Whereas before she had exercised her strength by withholding sex, with Alcée she decides to follow her emotions, the “animalism” that she felt. What we can understand, then, is that Edna’s rebellion is not about keeping her body for no one but herself, rather, it is about giving her body only when she chooses. This idea of doing things when and where she wants to, rather than when anyone else wants to, transfers over to Edna’s other forms of rebellion as well.

The second category is artistic rebellion. Edna chooses not only to draw, but to actually sell her artwork and use that money for her own disposable income: “I won a large sum this winter on the races, and I am beginning to sell my sketches. Laidpore is more and more pleased with my work; he says it grows in force and individuality. I cannot judge of that myself, but I feel that I have gained in ease and confidence. However, as I said, I have sold a good many through Laidpore” (207). While women were allowed to make certain artistic attempts during this time, it was unusual for women to have their own incomes. They were encouraged to write, but not to publish—to draw, but not to sell. For Edna to use money from selling her artwork to fund her apartment away from her family would have certainly been a rebellion. She also

nurtures her relationship with the strange Mademoiselle Reisz, who encourages Edna's behavior and teaches Edna to love and appreciate piano and music in general. Edna's relationship with music mirrors her relationship with the ocean, which she loves deeply but also fears for its ability to incapacitate her. She recognizes the ocean's strength when she learns to swim, and similarly, she recognizes the power of music when she hears Mademoiselle Reisz play piano: "[Edna] trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (68). Not only did her mind overflow with emotion, but her physical body was under a form of attack. In this way, while her friendship with Mademoiselle Reisz may not be rebellious by itself, her encounters with music act as a stimulant towards her personal awakening as a whole.

The final category is the rebellion against social norms. Edna chooses to defy the strict rules which Léonce has for having guests over, and instead decides to spend her time how she wants to. She also rebels against the idea of living in the family home which Léonce pays for, and instead uses the money from her artwork to rent an apartment. Edna's discussion with Mademoiselle Reisz about yearning for her own house reads almost like a confessional diary entry: "I have a little money of my own from my mother's estate, which my father sends me by driblets... I can live in the tiny house for little or nothing, with one servant. Old Celestine, who works occasionally for me, says she will come stay with me and do my work. I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence" (207). Edna is unsure of herself in this passage, but she admits that what she knows is that her "confidence" (207) has grown. The third person omniscient narrator of the story explains the meaning of these social rebellions: "Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual" (245). What made Edna strong was listening to her own wants and nurturing her own self, rather than following her "obligations." The importance of these three categories—

sexual, artistic, and social rebellions—is that they are all freedoms which were made difficult for women to achieve. While they were not impossible for women to take part in, they often resulted in scandal, or at least some kind of societal downfall. Edna spent much of her life avoiding such scandals, but as a result of her awakening, she (for a short time) embraces the scandals she produces by defying societal norms and rebelling.

While Edna's rebellions may seem minor and inconsequential, or even childish at times, it is important to realize that even those small freedoms were significant, and many of them were only allowed her because of her wealth and financial stability, and her wealth is certainly considerable. Léonce owns a brokerage business (12), and she receives money from her mother's estate (245), both of which fund her lavish lifestyle. She spends the entire summer on vacation in Grand Isle, after which she returns home to her "large, double cottage" where "the softest carpets and rugs covered the floors; rich and tasteful draperies hung at doors and windows. There were paintings, selected with judgment and discrimination, upon the walls. The cut glass, the silver, the heavy damask which daily appeared upon the table were the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier" (127). She was able to afford the equivalent of a landscaper to keep her yard "scrupulously neat" (127), as well as a nanny to take care of her children, which gave her an incredible amount of freedom. Apart from this, she was able to afford an apartment of her own, and because of her husband's considerable wealth and social standing she was allowed to turn away guests and ignore parties which otherwise would have been unacceptable, as Léonce explains after hearing that Edna spent her "reception day" (129) out of the house: "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. If you felt that you had to leave home this afternoon, you should have left

some suitable explanation for your absence” (130). Léonce takes the chance to scold his wife, but only because he knows there is no real harm in what she has done. He simply wants to remind her that these rules exist, and she is supposed to follow them. She is allowed to break the rules that everyone else must follow, but at the very least she has to make an excuse to pretend that she is conscientious. In this way, Edna’s pushing the limits of her oppression was not so dangerous or radical as it might have been, had her situation been different. Despite the ease of her situation, Edna’s life still ends in suicide.

Edna’s final rebellion, her suicide, has also been heavily debated by critics. Opinions vary from it being an accidental death, to suicide from sadness over losing Robert for a second time, to a revolt against nature. In “‘A Language Which Nobody Understood’: Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*,” Patricia S. Yaeger argues that Edna feels forced to commit suicide because of a lack of communication. Yaeger explains how despite all her relationships and effort, Edna still lacks the connection that she wants, and she has come to realize that this connection is impossible (415). Wolff sees it as “originating in a sense of inner emptiness, not some finite failure of love” (253). Although there is so much interpretation possible in Edna’s suicide, what seems relevant is that even despite the privilege she had, Edna chose to commit suicide. Despite this privilege, essentially, Edna faced futility on all sides. Certainly, she could continue a life of small rebellions as long as she lived, or as long as she could before Léonce divorced her or her reputation was tarnished beyond reconciliation, but for a woman as invested in her self as Edna is, how would that fare as an option? Edna’s final rebellion was just that: a rebellion. It was not a search for peace and it was certainly not an accident—no, Edna’s final act was an act of strength. Moments before her death, the narrator explains of Edna, “She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her,

body and soul” (303). Rather than fondly remember the joy they shared as a family, or upon thinking of them deciding that she wants to live, Edna is only further motivated to rebellion by her sense of oppression. Despite this, her suicide is not bitter or angry. She felt called to “the touch of the sea” with its “soft, close embrace” (301), almost as though the embrace of nature was the only one that would not try to possess her.

Understanding Kate Chopin’s situation and background is critical to understand why she wrote *The Awakening*. Her life was influenced mainly by women; her family was extremely matriarchal. Her grandmother, her mother, and Chopin herself all chose to cherish their widowhood as a kind of freedom after their husbands died, rather than remarrying. Emily Toth, an authority on Kate Chopin’s life, further explains this in her book, *Unveiling Kate Chopin*:

Katie O’Flaherty’s roost was ruled entirely by women. These strong women also had an unusual talent for outliving their husbands. At a time when women often died in childbirth, Kate’s female ancestors enjoyed exceptional longevity. Her great-grandmother died at eighty-three, and her grandmother at eighty-eight. By middle age, or sometimes even before, they had left or lost or buried the fathers of their children, and then gotten on with their lives. They were a demographic oddity, and they raised a young girl with a notably independent and quirky vision. As a girl, Kate was surrounded by the voices of women—from her mammy to her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother, to the Sacred Heart nuns, to her best friend Kitty Garesche. (Toth 11)

As a great portion of her life was spent observing strong women, it is not surprising that the subject of much of Kate Chopin’s writing is women. Edna, especially, is a woman who manages to well up the strength she finds within herself in order to preserve her self, the self which she

feels she is losing through the rules which are forced upon her. Chopin was already widowed when she wrote Edna's story, as Chopin's husband died in 1882 (Toth, 91) and *The Awakening* was not written until 1899. The futility which Edna feels deeply contrasts Chopin's own empowerment upon getting custody of her own children and taking over her husband's business after his death (Toth, 94), so why is Edna's story so sad? Chopin's purpose was to create the simple story of one woman, not a collective summation of the lives of all women. Perhaps Chopin, in recognizing her own strength, meant to show the effects of societal rules and emotional strife on a weaker woman, because weaker women than Kate Chopin certainly abound.

Throughout her life Kate Chopin also treasured time alone, which is reflected in her portrait of Edna. She enjoyed reading and writing, obviously, but she also cherished time for simple contemplation. After marrying her husband Oscar Chopin, she wrote in her personal diary, "How hard to realize that I am married, no longer a young lady with nothing to think of but myself and nothing to do" (qtd. in Toth, 54). This importance of having nothing to think of but oneself and having time of one's own is again strongly reflected in Edna, who "would give up the unessential... would give [her] money... would give [her] life for [her] children; but [she] wouldn't give [her]self" (Chopin 120). The longing to be self-centered exists in Edna as it undoubtedly existed in the woman who penned her. For the 21st-century reader, owning and dictating one's own time is something grievously overlooked and underappreciated. The narrator of the novel explains Edna's schedule briefly in a simple display of what her life was like: every Tuesday for six years (since her marriage to Léonce) she was allowed to do nothing but don a beautiful dress and wait in her living room for visitors (Chopin 128). When she decides to take a day for herself, Léonce reprimands her seemingly harmless behavior. Through imagining how it

must have been for Edna every day for six years, it becomes clear why Chopin included such small details as Edna's day-to-day schedule in *The Awakening*, and that is because she felt the same confinement in her own married life, despite her relatively happy and healthy marriage.

It is important to recognize that *The Awakening* is not the only piece of literature which Kate Chopin wrote about struggling with marriage. Another example is her short story "The Story of an Hour" (1894), wherein the female protagonist is ecstatic over her husband's reported death, and later drops dead when she discovers that he is, in fact, alive. By understanding Chopin's upbringing and the amount of empowered widows she knew, it is not so incredible that she would write a story about a woman who is overjoyed to learn that she is widow. What makes it more interesting is that Chopin is writing these stories about struggling wives from the perspective of a woman in a happy, safe, stable marriage. Both Chopin and Edna had husbands whom they cared for. In fact, both men were intensely in love with their wives. Neither man was cruel, vindictive, or abusive, but at the same time neither were they standing in picket lines for women's rights. In her examination of Chopin's life, Toth explains Chopin's marriage to Oscar in relation to society: "Wife beating was not uncommon in Cloutierville, and some villagers claimed it was a French custom, even a right, for men to beat their wives. But Kate Chopin...did not expect [domestic discord] in marriage, nor did Oscar, who had helped his mother escape" (99). Oscar Chopin was also famous for letting Kate get away with socially unacceptable behavior, such as "mimic[ing] disapproving priests and relatives and neighbors," and would even "laugh and egg her on" (94). What this shows is that even the women who had it the easiest still had it hard. A kind husband was a gift, but it was not enough to satisfy Edna, which in turn suggests that it was not enough to satisfy Chopin. While Edna is only one representation of women, many of the struggles she faces in *The Awakening* are symbolic for the struggles that

nearly every woman in her situation—that of a middle-class woman—would have faced during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the main struggles of Edna’s life—marriage, motherhood, social rules—are many of the same problems which affect Lily Bart. Both women desire to avoid these constraints and to develop their sense of self, and when they find themselves unable to satisfy those desires they lose their will to live.

## Chapter Two:

Avoiding Dinginess: Lily Bart's Desire for Dignity in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* is much like Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, because she struggles with many constraints that women faced in the early twentieth century and throughout history: those of marriage, autonomy, and money. Lily strives to find a husband who would satisfy her emotionally and intellectually as well as financially. Like many women of her time—new women—who were beginning to realize that they were made for more than solely domestic lives and “altruistic denial of their own ambition and a displacement of their wishes and abilities” (Smith-Rosenberg 213), Lily longs for autonomy; she wants to establish herself as an individual apart from those around her. What occupies most of her time, though, is money; Lily is constantly preoccupied with monetary problems because she simply does not have enough funds from her aunt's allowance to keep up with the spending of her wealthy friends. Many critics acknowledge the importance of money in Lily's life, with Patrick Mullen discussing the effect of capitalism and materialism in Lily's society and Frances L. Restuccia addressing Lily's desire for the newest fashions and aesthetically beautiful objects. Beyond monetary issues, Lily also has problems which are unique to her, such as her exquisite beauty, which many would not consider a problem per se, but nonetheless Lily's life is complicated by it and the attention it brings her. She longs to find someone whom she is compatible with, yet she purposefully uses her beauty and intelligence to manipulate those around her and so is never satisfied. She finds herself unable to solve any of her problems because of her overpowering need to retain her sense of honor and preserve what little bit of selfhood she constructs. Ultimately, her choice to leave her pride intact destroys her and leads her to take her own life, as the victim of an oppressively materialistic society. Through

Lily's unfortunate life, Wharton is creating the story of a woman who recognizes that in order to live a socially acceptable or financially successful life she must lose some part of herself—in this case her honor. By having Lily make the difficult choices she does to avoid losing her honor, and in the end losing her life, Wharton introduces her argument that losing one's self is a more grave end than death.

There is a great deal in common between Lily (*The House of Mirth*, 1905) and Edna (*The Awakening*, 1899), who are both women living in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century.

Both women grapple with the constraints that most women were subjected to, and this fight wears them down over time. Although they both rebel against their oppression, the ways in which they rebel reveal the true difference between them: wealth. Edna, with her marriage to a wealthy and social-climbing husband, is free to rebel in ways Lily is unable to. Similarly, Lily is heavily chastised and socially exiled for even the small rebellions she chooses to make, while Edna faces little to no reaction to her much more extreme behavior—that of leaving her home and her family. What Lily's lack of wealth (compared to Edna's wealth) shows about her is how strong is her need to preserve her honor and sense of individuality. Edna's behavior could be considered less dangerous than Lily's because Edna always had the cushion of her marriage and her husband's money, but the fact that Lily too desires to preserve her sense of self establishes a pattern of women who believe their inherent rights to selfhood transcend their level of wealth.

Lily's main concern throughout her story is finding a husband. She holds on to the idea that this would solve most of her problems, or at least her financial problems. Lily can even be viewed as an earlier version of Edna, before Edna's marriage to Léonce. Edna's marriage gives her a certain amount of freedom because she is financially stable and her husband's place in society makes Edna's strange behavior more acceptable. Unlike Edna, it is made clear that Lily

has turned down multiple proposals from suitable men: “She might have married more than once—the conventional rich marriage which she had been taught to consider the sole end of existence—but when the opportunity came she had always shrunk from it” (156). In shrinking from marriages, Lily shows us her internal thoughts, that is, that her ultimate goal is different from what she had been “taught” to strive for. She wants more than a “conventional rich marriage,” and so she is consistently unable to accept marriage proposals which she works so hard to procure. As Mrs. Fisher puts it: “That's Lily all over, you know: 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” (309). Lily’s behavior regarding finding a marriage partner follows a pattern: she works hard using her beauty to attract a man, and once she has the attention of one, she manipulates him into falling in love with her. Lily’s problem lies not in attracting suitors, but rather, in accepting them. Each time she is proposed to, she sabotages herself in some way. For example, she runs away from two men who are attracted to and interested in her: Gus Trenor, the husband of Lily’s friend who pursues an affair with Lily in exchange for giving her an allowance, which Lily refuses; and Simon Rosedale, who is a wealthy and up-and-coming Jew who is attempting to enter middle-class society, and who proposes to Lily but is also rejected by her. Wharton writes of Lily’s response to these two men:

She could not have remained in New York without repaying the money she owed to Trenor; to acquit herself of that odious debt she might even have faced a marriage with Rosedale; but the accident of placing the Atlantic between herself and her obligations made them dwindle out of sight. (196)

Here the narrator calls it an “accident,” but Lily’s choice to run away to the Riviera was deliberate. She could have chosen to marry Rosedale, pay off her debts and live the rest of her

life in ease, which is what she claims is her ultimate goal, yet in this situation she has chosen once again to “go off on a picnic” rather than “reaping the harvest” of her careful labors.

As the story progresses, the real issue becomes not which man will Lily choose, but rather why she is unable to accept a marriage proposal from anyone at all. Carolyn Karcher argues a similar point, citing that “Wharton’s focus” is not on whether Lily will choose love with Selden or “wealth and social prestige” elsewhere, “but on what has made wealth and social prestige so vital to Lily and so impossible to obtain except through marriage” (Karcher 232). Though Lily is fully aware of her own desperation regarding money, which only grows worse as the story progresses, she consistently chooses to turn down each proposal, showing that somewhere in her mind, Lily realizes that she cannot marry a man whom she deems to be beneath her. I will argue that there are several reasons why Lily never accepts a marriage proposal: her investment in creating an identity for her self, her hatred of everything dingy, and her own power of manipulation by which she forces men to show themselves as weak for falling in love with her. Furthermore, I will examine her relationship with the men in the novel and how Lily behaves in those relationships, which clarifies why she refuses all of their proposals. As a result, I hope to prove that Lily chooses time and time again to put her pride before her practical needs, which leads to her tragic downfall.

There are several explanations for why Lily is unable to give herself over to a marriage partner, and one is that she intensely longs for a self. For all of her life Lily has defined herself by those around her—her friends, her suitors, even her family members—so she lacks any individual sense of identity which people naturally develop from being alone. The narrator explains that Lily “had never learned to live with her own thoughts” (197) and so she fears them. Lily fears being alone; she fears being forgotten, erased, or left behind. Even more potent than

this, though, is Lily's fear of never having a self apart from others. She is able to recognize her own weakness of relying heavily on others to abate her fear of being alone, but she simultaneously wants to develop her own individuality. The two are always tied together, which the narrator explains: "She was beginning to have 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?" (39). There is a constant battle within Lily, which seems to stem from her oppression. She has been taught since her youth that she is nothing, that her self is worthless, and that her sole purpose is to marry a wealthy, successful man. But this conflicts with what little Lily has come to know about her true self: her overwhelming strength, uniqueness, and beauty. How, then, when she knows of her own untapped power, is she to accept a proposal from men she knows are not nearly as intelligent or strong as she knows herself to be? Although the previous quotation comes from early in the story, similar conflicting thoughts are conveyed by the narrator later: "She seemed a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained" (148). This "abhorrent being" is the self that was not powerful enough to save Lily from Trenor's attempts to blackmail her into having an affair with him. What is significant in this excerpt is that Lily "ha[s] always known" some part of herself which she has nurtured in order to survive. The new self Lily is referring to—the "abhorrent being"—was created as a result of weakness, futility, and hatred that she experienced during Trenor's violent outburst and attempt to force her into an affair with him. Lily's emotional turmoil reflects that she does, in fact, have an incredibly strong character within, who resents what other people and society as a whole try to turn her into. Although she may not fully know or understand it herself, it is an important reason why she is

unable to accept a proposal, be it a marriage proposal or the proposal of an affair which would financially benefit her.

Another reason why Lily remains unable to marry is her hatred of everything she considers “dingy” or beneath her. In Lily’s mind, this dinginess she so despises applies to much more than just appearance, but also financial status, personal achievements, and general quality of life. She describes it as “a quality which assumes all manner of disguises” (37). As a result of this sweeping definition, she manages to find dinginess in many places, and cannot overlook it. Part of this hatred comes from her mother, who taught her to be the way she is, which is explained by the narrator: “She knew that she hated dinginess as much as her mother had hated it, and to her last breath she meant to fight against it, dragging herself up again and again above its flood till she gained the bright pinnacles of success which presented such a slippery surface to her clutch” (61). Lily does not simply long for a better or more aesthetically pleasing life, she hates dinginess with her entire being and is willing to sacrifice everything, down to “her last breath” to avoid a life of it. Another part of Lily’s hatred for dinginess seems to come from within Lily herself, as she attempts to make herself better by putting others down and labelling them as more dingy than her. Lily’s own life has a sort of dinginess to it, as she is completely reliant on her strict, elderly aunt for money, housing, and clothing, and she must live frugally. But by putting others below her, Lily remains able, in her own mind and by her own skewed standards, to avoid being dingy. By seeing the dinginess in her unconditionally loving, kind, and humble cousin Gerty, Lily can cement her belief that she is better off with the life and personal qualities she has rather than those her cousin has. Lily goes to visit Gerty and while climbing her “dull stairs destined to be mounted by dull people,” Lily thinks not of Gerty’s charity or goodness, but rather how Lily was “reminded too painfully of the limits to which her own

existence was shrinking” (263) by the shabbiness of Gerty’s apartment. In this way, Lily forms a habit of putting people into a category beneath her, and so is always unsatisfied with marriage proposals which she feels are unworthy of her value.

Lily’s manipulation of others, which is a complicated and important part of who she is, is another explanation for why she turns down marriage proposals. In addition to the general oppression of women at this time, Lily is additionally hindered by the weakness of her independent self, which she longs to develop and strengthen. As a result of this, she has learned to exert her power through harnessing her beauty and manipulating the people around her, men and women alike. As Lily has come to recognize her outward beauty, she has simultaneously come to understand the power it gives her. She invests herself in manipulating people in order to further herself. Lily’s ability to manipulate is indeed impressive; she manages to turn her skill into a near-perfected art form, even to the point where she can be “moved” by “her influence over [men]” (244). She invests her energy into manipulating men into loving her, but once she realizes how foolishly in love with her and how easily manipulated they are, she is disgusted with them and categorizes them as beneath her, and therefore cannot accept them. The narrator explains that Lily’s reaction to Simon Rosedale, whose proposal she rejected, is to feel that “she would not have detested him so heartily had she not known that he dared to admire her” (241). Despite her own work in seducing him, Lily hates him because he cares for her. This behavior is mirrored in nearly all of the relationships Lily has, and because of this she remains unable to accept anyone as her equal.

By examining Lily’s behavior in her relationships with the men around her, we are able to more fully understand her decisions to reject them. There are three principle relationships with men through which Lily demonstrates her resolution to keep her honor intact: Laurence Selden,

Simon Rosedale, and Gus Trenor. Lily's relationship with Selden stands out because it fuels the traditional romance aspect of the novel, with the pair falling in love. Untraditionally, Lily initially rejects Selden as a suitor because he is not wealthy enough. Although he interests her and she enjoys his company, she chooses to pursue a life away from dinginess and so apart from Selden. In the first scene of the novel Lily goes to Selden's house where he proposes to her quite frankly, and she replies, "You know I am horribly poor—and very expensive. I must have a great deal of money" (10). This introduces what Lily says is her main concern—money—but it also sets Lily up to later prove that aspect of herself wrong. Lily chooses not to pursue Percy Gryce, a wealthy but boring man she had been preparing to manipulate into marriage, all because Selden offered her the idea that she was better than marrying for money. James W. Gargano further examines Lily's choice to forgo her efforts to manipulate Gryce, explaining: "Lily's worldly mistakes are disguised blessings: her final inability to marry Percy Gryce, after all her preparations have been seductively made, stems from an innate trust in something less musty than a moneyed imbecile" (140). Gargano further offers that Lily's "innate trust" is based on "a higher concept of self" (140), which is supported by Lily's later similar inability to marry. Despite the idea that her decision to let go of Gryce is a "blessing," Lily is still frustrated, and sometimes angry, about her feelings for Selden: "'Why do you do this to me?' she cried. 'Why do you make the things I have chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead?'" (72). Despite her anger, she loves Selden because he understands the part of her—her self—that she knows deserves better than an unhappy marriage and an unhappy life. Later, but also because of Selden, Lily chooses to burn the letters revealing the affair between Selden and Bertha Dorset, which could return her to her previous social status but which would cause scandal for Selden. In both instances she is influenced by the idea of the person she wants to be,

a person of “moral strength” (262) and “self-respect” (262), and so chooses the options which will allow her to hold onto her honor and selfhood.

While Lily’s relationship with Selden may come closest to genuine love, it is not without its problems. Beyond the immediate issue of Selden’s lack of wealth, there is also the issue of his longing to possess her. Much like Edna’s Robert, Selden is afraid of a rebellious Lily. He had fully decided that “he would take her beyond—beyond the ugliness, the pettiness, the attrition and corrosion of the soul—” (154) by marrying her, yet when he sees her later that evening departing from the married Gus Trenor’s house in an unexplained and seemingly scandalous way, he immediately turns and walks away in a huff. Selden wanted Lily as he had created her in his head—as the beautiful, intelligent, charming woman who loved him and only him—so when he saw that she was not hopelessly devoted to him (as Gerty Farish is), he was afraid. In this image Selden creates of Lily, she becomes highly objectified, with Selden referring to her as a “wonderful spectacle” (66), and as “aesthetic amusement” (68). In treating Lily like a beautiful object he has failed her; in allowing himself to be manipulated by her beauty, when she offers him parts of her self (emotional intimacy) which she offers no other men, he has placed himself in the category of those who are beneath Lily, and therefore unmarriageable. Selden’s imperfections are shown to the reader, but Lily does not realize fully how Selden has failed her in this way, which makes her dedication to him even more devastating.

Simon Rosedale’s connection to Lily is not as romantic as Selden’s is, yet Rosedale remains admirable in his genuine and consistent attempts to help Lily. Where Rosedale differs from Selden is the method by which he longs to save Lily. Selden wants Lily to forsake a wealthy marriage, while Rosedale wants her to embrace that choice. Rosedale understands Lily’s

situation, in that she needs to marry if she wants to live, and he offers her a proposition which would benefit both of them:

You're not dead in love with me, I've got sense enough left to see that. And I ain't talking to you as if you were—I presume I know the kind of talk that's expected under those circumstances. I'm confoundedly gone on you—that's about the size of it—and I'm just giving you a plain business statement of the consequences. You're not very fond of me—but you're fond of luxury, and style, and amusement, and of 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 the settling. (176)

While it may seem as though Rosedale wants Lily only for her beauty, his continued behavior towards her in his attempts to help her, and to get her to help herself by using Selden's letters to manipulate Bertha, show that his feelings go deeper than the surface. Lily's rejections of him are telling, because he is offering her everything she claimed to want, and he even offers it to her in a way which shows that he recognizes her intelligence, not just her beauty. She rejects his initial proposal, and she rejects the help he offers regarding Selden's letters, proving once again that her own dignity means more to her than anything else. When Rosedale tells Lily she could save herself from ruin by using Selden's letters, she immediately rejects him. Wharton explains her choice: "She had rejected Rosedale's offer without conscious effort; her whole being had risen against it; and she did not yet perceive that, by the mere act of listening to him, she had learned to live with ideas which would once have been intolerable to her" (262). Lily easily decides to develop her "moral strength" and "maintain her self-respect" (262) rather than profit from the letters which are essentially her last chance at a life away from dinginess. The fact that Lily

would find losing her self-respect more “intolerable” than a dingy life—which had previously been so important to her—shows how truly crucial she considers her dignity.

Lily’s relationship with Gus Trenor helps to show the reader Lily’s inner understanding of herself. Trenor’s acts clarify what Lily is willing, or unwilling, to lose to fulfill her needs. She needs money, but she is not willing to lose her dignity to get it. Trenor offers her money in exchange for her company—for what he calls “a seat at the table” (145)—and to coerce her into an affair with him. Although he offers her money and through it, security, she finds the offer unacceptable and abhorrent. Lily certainly is interested in money, and she felt no guilt when she believed that Trenor was helping her financially with investments, but once she realizes that he expects a relationship in exchange, Lily has no interest in the situation. What this proves is that Lily, once again, despite her need for money chooses to preserve her sense of honor by avoiding scandal and corruption. Interestingly, what disgusts Lily even more than Trenor’s behavior is the weakness she feels during the situation; her “silent, frozen, . . . useless” (147) mind and body force her to accept her own vulnerability. Her powerlessness frightens her because it reminds her that despite the power she sometimes feels she has, in reality her identity as a woman restricts her to being possessed by men.

In her attempts to avoid becoming merely a possession, Lily comes to use what she believes to be her greatest strength: her beauty. Lily’s understanding of her ability to control others as an art form resonates within her because she often sees herself and her beauty as a kind of work of art, which is exhibited through Mrs. Bry’s *tableaux* wherein Lily literally becomes a piece of art. Lily fully embraces her beauty and gives a great deal of thought to herself as an art piece: “The impulse to show herself in a splendid setting . . . had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting

accessories of dress or surroundings” (134). Lily disregards any ideas she has about having fun with this scene, i.e. “distracting accessories of dress or surroundings,” and instead chooses the best way to present herself to awe the audience. This longing for beauty is another preoccupation of Lily’s in more ways than one. She certainly longs for physical beauty, and fears the loss of her own, but her hatred of all things “dingy” seems to express more than just that. In her outward appearance, in her identity, in wealth, in her entire life, Lily wants beauty. She longs for wealth so that she can fill her life with beautiful things rather than dull ones. Frances L. Restuccia discusses this in her article “The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton’s Feminism(s),” where she argues that Wharton is trying to convey the danger that lies in the female obsession with beauty. Restuccia argues that “Wharton’s novel conveys the feminist social message that women bred to be frilly decorations run the risks of various sorts of death” (224). The narrator of *The House of Mirth* gives evidence to support this point by saying, “since [Lily] had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly [be blamed] for failing to serve any practical purpose” (Wharton, 297). Gerty Farish is able to avoid a death such as Lily’s because she has invoked in her life many of the ideologies of the New Woman: she lives alone, she offers her time to charity rather than frivolous parties or social events, and she is unconcerned with her physical appearance. Yet Lily cannot see Gerty as a model for her own life because of Lily’s hatred of ugliness, so Lily strives to find some kind of balance. What Lily wants is precisely to serve some “practical purpose,” which I think is the driving force behind her obsession to find beauty, and to herself contribute to that beauty. She wants to be beautiful, yet she also wants to have a “purpose,” which she desires to accomplish through creating art. Although she cannot devote her life to a career because of her oppression, she can devote herself to being beautiful and creating beauty.

What becomes dangerous about Lily's attempts to turn herself into an art piece (both literally and figuratively) is that when she does this, she turns herself into a commodity. Though she is fully aware of what she is doing, Lily believes that harnessing her beauty gives her power over those around her. While she is correct to a certain extent, what Lily is ultimately doing is condoning everything her oppressive patriarchal society wants: to make women nothing more than possessions. Patrick Mullen addresses this topic in his article "The Aesthetics of Self-Management: Intelligence, Capital, and *The House of Mirth*," where he argues that society's obsession with Lily's material value as an object drives her to her death: "The social pressure exerted on the female characters in the novel...can be read as part of the tragedy of the novel...the novel emphasizes this ultimately fatal social concern with Lily's material wealth as opposed to her inherent human dignity" (46). By embracing this idea of being objectified, Lily believes she is exerting power. She is not wrong--she is able to manipulate many people into caring for her—but along the way she ignores that she might not be so beautiful or have such a high social status, and therefore be as powerful, forever. As the novel progresses, she falls victim to this fluctuating value of commodities and becomes worthless in the eyes of those who previously cherished her beauty and social success. Lily loses the possibility for a beautiful life, and so moves on to the idea of creating a beautiful death for herself through suicide.

The inclusion of Lily's suicide links her to *The Awakening*'s Edna Pontellier, and more similarities exist between the two. Both women are acutely aware of their oppression, with Edna struggling as a wife and mother, and with Lily looking for a marriage because it is essentially the only way to save herself. Wifehood and motherhood were both roles which were forced upon women during Edna and Lily's lifetimes, and so both women understand how that oppression feels. Despite their similarities, the lives of these women are different in many ways, and the

results of their behavior deserve to be examined. Both women's rebellions are radical and offer them dangerous possible consequences, which they disregard. For instance, Edna moves out of her family home and gets an apartment of her own. Lily's greatest rebellion is telling her suitors no, which may seem trivial, but it is dangerous for a woman in her position because it ultimately ruins her. It is Lily who is more cruelly punished for the rebellions she makes, with complete ostracism as the result. When Bertha Dorset accuses Lily of having an affair with her husband in order to avoid revealing her own affair with Ned Silverton, Lily is cast out of her social group immediately. Despite efforts to get back in, Lily finds that her friends are no longer her friends when she meets them during lunch and comes to understand that they will no longer accept her: "[Mrs. Trenor]'s loudly affirmed pleasure at seeing Miss Bart took the form of a nebulous generalization, which included neither enquiries as to her future nor the expression of a definite wish to see her again. Lily, well-versed in the language of these omissions, knew that they were equally intelligible to the other members of the party" (229). Although she is actually innocent of Bertha's charges, Lily is still rejected because of her lower social standing—again a result of her lack of wealth or a husband.

These differences in punishment between Edna and Lily are unimportant, though, in the face of the choice that both women make to kill themselves. What their suicides mean is that women in many situations, wealthy or poverty-stricken, beautiful or average, married or unmarried, struggled so heavily with their oppression that they found suicide the only option. Lily's suicide by overdose is a passive act; she longs for the "sensuous pleasure" and "soft approach of passiveness" that sleep brings her, but in a more permanent way (322). Even in her choice to kill herself, Lily wants beauty for herself, her life, and her death. Lily's suicide is also different from Edna's in that she references suicide before the end of the novel, which strongly

implies that her final choice to overdose was not an accident. Critical opinions on the topic of Lily's suicide vary, with Frances Restuccia arguing that Lily's suicide was a sort of "rebellion against masterlines" of fate (Restuccia, 236) and with Patrick Mullen arguing that Lily's death, though a suicide, was forced upon her because of her inability to assimilate to a low-class lifestyle. Unlike Edna's questionable death, Lily's death is more agreed upon by critics as a deliberate overdose. What is clear is that after her social exile, Lily struggles immensely to find purpose in her life, because she can no longer identify her life as beautiful. This struggle makes her question the worth of it all and contemplate death: "The only hope of renewal lay in the little bottle at her bed-side; and how much longer that hope would last she dared not conjecture" (296). Before her final choice to kill herself, Lily had already been contemplating how much more of her dingy life she could take, as she has already clarified her thoughts about living poorly: "What was the use of living if one had to live like a pig?" (33). Even long before she was living in poverty, she seemed to realize the futility of her efforts to make a beautiful life for herself. When her aunt rejects her monetary needs, the narrator says that "the last door of escape was closed" and that "she felt herself shut in with her dishonor" (173). Only in understanding Lily's hatred and terror of being alone can we fully understand what it would mean for her to feel as though she would be alone with her dishonor forever. In order to avoid dishonor, Lily chooses to burn the letters which would incriminate Selden, which in turn finalizes her doom. Lily makes this choice because she wants to nurture the part of herself where she has housed the qualities she admires. It is an honorable deed because it not only saves Selden from shame, but it saves Lily from corruption. After burning the letters and paying off her debts, Lily has done all she can to preserve her honor, yet she has also realized that living a beautiful life is impossible for her, and so understands that her only hope is to die a beautiful death.

The feeling of futility which Lily exhibits is not unlike what Edith Wharton herself felt in relation to many aspects of her life. Wharton, though very wealthy, was limited by her marriage to Teddy Wharton, who caused extensive scandal by his numerous affairs and the pair's ultimate divorce. Her own unhappy and unsuccessful marriage, one she calls a relationship filled with "bitterness," "meanness," and "vindictiveness" (*Letters*, 248), makes her critique of marriage in *House of Mirth* understandable; it can be assumed that had Lily married a man she disliked simply for his money, she would have been just as unhappy in her marriage as Wharton herself had been. In order to find some sort of joy, Wharton also shared Lily's penchant for artistic expression; she dedicated much of her time to decorating houses, a luxurious pastime which Lily never could have afforded. Biographer and Wharton expert R. W. B. Lewis explains that her creation and decoration of houses was more than just a hobby for Wharton; it was an exhibition of selfhood and independence: "After forty years Edith Wharton was in a home not inherited or rented, not purchased and remodeled, but genuinely of her own making. She was in the physical location of her own choosing, where the views near and far were, as she said, exquisite, and where everything for the moment was peaceful" (111). By exerting her control over her home—the space wherein she lived and spent all of her time—Wharton bought herself a certain amount of freedom and self-expression, similar to the way Lily feels power through manipulation and self-expression through her own beauty. In addition to her decoration of houses, Wharton also had another artistic pastime which she used to further her independence and sense of self: writing. Middle and upper-class women were encouraged to write, but were seldom encouraged to publish their writing, as Wharton did. In order to establish her independence, Wharton made writing her job, as Lewis explains: "However full the household, Edith devoted her mornings

single-mindedly to *The House of Mirth*” (Lewis 136). In this way, Wharton was able to circumvent the norm that women were not allowed to have careers.

Wharton’s forms of self-expression facilitate the reader’s understanding of her purpose behind Lily’s tragic story. In *The House of Mirth* she creates a real woman—a woman who struggles to find some semblance of individuality, yet is immensely strong when it comes to preserving her dignity. Wharton creates a beautiful, talented, and in some ways powerful woman in Lily, but in the end Lily must die. Through Lily’s suicide, Wharton articulates her argument that each act of defiance closed off the doors of escape and cemented Lily’s death. Chopin makes a similar argument in *The Awakening*, with Edna coming to realize through her various relationships with men that she would never be anything more than a possession. As each woman realizes her options for attaining, or retaining, an independent self are becoming slimmer, she becomes less opposed to the idea of death. If we take Edna and Lily to be reflections of the women—New Women—who penned them, the reality of the situation they faced as profoundly intelligent and complex yet deeply oppressed women is truly tragic.

Even with the allowances they had (education, money, etc), both Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton felt their oppression strongly enough to write numerous books about it. In those books, in order to dramatize their own oppression, they chose to write of heroines who were less successful than the authors themselves were. Unfortunately, the life of a wealthy, attractive, popular, financially successful woman such as the authors’ lives would not garner support for the woman’s cause the same way that Lily’s or Edna’s would, because the heroines struggle to understand their ideals for independence and self-respect. Chopin and Wharton strove to write the story of a different kind of woman from themselves, rather than an autobiographical story or a story generalizing the struggles of women. What they sought to express is that each woman

struggles in her own way with the oppression she is faced with; each female character in the novel, even minor characters, is a different kind of woman, and each of their stories deserves sympathy, no matter how heinous that character's behavior may seem. By showing various levels of oppression, and by focusing on women who struggled enough with their oppression to commit suicide, the authors were able to show how much the desire for self-determination affected many women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including the fictional yet powerful Lily Bart and Edna Pontellier.

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