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**Marriage and female Autonomy as Depicted in the
American Female Short Stories from 1870s to 1930s in
Selected Works of Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins
Gilman and Edith Wharton**

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candidacy for the degree of doctorate LMD in Anglo- Saxon Literature**

Submitted by

Karima ABDEDAIM

Supervised by

Prof. Fadhila BOUTOUCHENT

Board of Examiners

17/06/2022

Chairman: Prof. Nacif Laabed

University of Constantine 1

Supervisor: Prof. Fadhila Boutouchent

U. Mouloud Maamri – Tizi-Ouzou

Examiner: Prof. M. Yazid Bendjeddou

University of Annaba – Annaba

Examiner: Prof. Houcine Maoui

University of Annaba – Annaba

Examiner: Dr. Madjda Chelli

University of Constantine 1

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Dedication

*This work is **dedicated to all women**... both known and unknown, especially those women who encourage and inspire others by the gift of their own example...*

Last, but certainly not least, this thesis is dedicated to every woman and girl who has ever struggled to discover and live her own voice loudly.

To my Mother...To my Grandmother

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To my husband, who supported me through this hard path; his support made all the difference. To my little princesses Nadine and Sirine; whom I took my strength from their smiles. To my little prince Eyad; be a man who respect women dear.

Abstract

The present research examines the issue of marriage and female autonomy in selected American short fiction from the 1870s to 1930s, mainly in selected works of Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton. It studies how the undesirable status of women in marriage at that time was reflected and questioned in their narratives. Even if these women writers experienced different lives and had taken distinctive attitudes towards marriage and motherhood, they definitely share the same quest for women's autonomy in confronting the dominant and patriarchal ideologies of their time. In their fiction and non-fiction works, marriage represents unfulfilled desires, lack of autonomy and purposiveness, insecurity, depreciation, and marginalization of women. Therefore, this study is designed to assess the hypothesis that for women to be happy in marriage, they need more than a husband and children, neither they should have to choose between marriage and career, instead they should have access to equal opportunities for education and economic independence for the accomplishment of autonomy and happiness. As the study deals with social and historical issues of women, some feminist criticism and concepts are used in the analysis to explore the different issues raised. Second Wave Feminism, for instance, concentrates on the rights of women to practice their legal rights denied by the patriarchal society. As the aim of this study is the development and discovery of the female tradition of writing and rediscovering of old texts, the Gynocriticism concept is also used in the analysis. The authors understudy did not only question the sacred institution of marriage, and its validity as a social institution that brings happiness to women and promotes women's self-fulfillment and happiness, but they also open the road for other women and writers to dig into such an unquestionable institution, and therefore to reform it.

Résumé

La présente recherche traite la question du mariage et de l'autonomie féminine telle que décrite dans la courte fiction américaine des années 1870 aux années 1930, principalement dans certaines œuvres de Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman et Edith Wharton. Elle explique comment le statut indésirable des femmes dans le mariage à cette époque était représenté et remis en question dans leurs récits. Même si ces femmes écrivains ont vécu des vies différentes et ont adopté des attitudes distinctes à l'égard du mariage et de la maternité, elles partagent définitivement la même quête d'autonomie des femmes face aux idéologies dominantes et patriarcales de leur temps. Dans leurs œuvres de fiction et de non-fiction, le mariage représentait des désirs non satisfaits, un manque d'autonomie et de finalité, l'insécurité, la dépréciation et la marginalisation des femmes. Par conséquent, cette étude est conçue pour évaluer l'hypothèse suivante: « pour que les femmes soient heureuses dans le mariage, elles ont besoin de plus qu'un mari et des enfants, elles ne devraient pas non plus avoir à choisir entre le mariage et la carrière, au lieu de cela, elles devraient avoir accès à l'égalité des chances pour l'éducation indépendance économique pour l'accomplissement de l'autonomie et du bonheur ». Comme l'étude traite des problèmes sociaux et historiques des femmes, certaines critiques et concepts féministes sont utilisés dans l'analyse pour explorer les différentes questions soulevées. Le féminisme de la deuxième vague, par exemple, se concentre sur le droit des femmes de pratiquer leurs droits légaux niés par la société patriarcale. Le but de cette étude étant le développement et la découverte de la tradition féminine d'écriture et de redécouverte de textes anciens, le concept Gynocriticism sera également utilisé dans notre analyse. La doublure des auteurs a non seulement remis en question l'institution sacrée du mariage et sa validité en tant qu'institution sociale qui apporte le bonheur aux femmes et favorise leur épanouissement et leur bonheur, mais aussi, elle ouvre également la voie à d'autres femmes et écrivains pour investir cette institution incontestable et, donc, de la réformer.

ملخص

يدرس البحث الحالي قضية الزواج واستقلالية المرأة كما هو موضح في القصص الأمريكية القصيرة من سبعينيات القرن التاسع عشر إلى ثلاثينيات القرن العشرين، في أعمال مختارة لكيت شوبان وشارلوت بيركنز جيلمان وإديث وارن. تظهر هذه الدراسة كيف انعكس الوضع غير المرغوب فيه للمرأة في الزواج في ذلك الوقت في تلك الأعمال الأدبية. رغم أن الكاتبات الثلاثة عشن حياة مختلفة واتخذن مواقف متباينة تجاه الزواج والأمومة، فإنهن بالتأكيد يتشاركن نفس السعي لتحقيق الاستقلال الذاتي للمرأة في مواجهة الإيديولوجيات الأبوية المهيمنة في عصرهن. في أعمالهن، يمثل الزواج رغبات غير محققة، انعدام في الاستقلالية والأمان وتهميش المرأة. لذلك، تم تصميم هذه الدراسة لتقييم الفرضية القائلة بأن المرأة لكي تكون سعيدة في الزواج، فإنها تحتاج إلى أكثر من زوج وأطفال، ولا ينبغي أن تضطر إلى الاختيار بين الزواج وتحقيق الذات، بدلاً من ذلك يجب أن يسمح لها بالحصول على فرص متساوية في التعليم والاستقلال الاقتصادي من أجل تحقيق الاستقلالية والسعادة. بما أن الدراسة تتناول القضايا الاجتماعية والتاريخية للمرأة، فقد تم استخدام بعض مفاهيم النقد النسوي في التحليل لاستكشاف القضايا المختلفة المطروحة. الموجة الثانية للنسوية، على سبيل المثال، تركز على حق المرأة في ممارسة حقوقها القانونية التي ينكرها المجتمع الأبوي نظراً لأن الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تطوير واكتشاف التقليد الأنثوي في كتابة وإعادة اكتشاف النصوص القديمة، فسيتم أيضاً استخدام مفهوم Gynocriticism في تحليلي. ما قامت به الكاتبات محل الدراسة، ليس فقط التشكيك في مؤسسة الزواج المقدسة وصلاحياتها كمؤسسة اجتماعية تجلب السعادة للمرأة وتعزز إشباعها الذاتي وسعادتها في المجتمع الأبوي المحافظ لذلك الوقت، ولكنهم أيضاً فتحوا الطريق أمام النساء والكتاب بشكل خاص للبحث في هذا الموضوع ومحاولة إصلاح مؤسسة الزواج من بعدهن.

List of Abbreviations

A	=	Athénaïse
ATS	=	According to Solomon
AVTA	=	A Visit to Avoyelles
D	=	Deserted
DB	=	Désirée's Baby
EALF	=	Emancipation: A Life Fable
HL	=	Her letters
IWAM	=	If I Were a Man
IS	=	In Sabine
MAC	=	Making a Change
MCD	=	Madam Celestin's Divorce
MEI	=	Mrs. Alder's idea
P	=	Partnership
SB	=	Souls Belated
TC	=	The Choice
TFOL	=	The Fullness of Life
TP	=	The Pretext
TR	=	The Reckoning
TSOAH	=	The Story of an Hour
TYW	=	The Yellow Wallpaper

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General Introduction

The period 1870s-1930s, was an era of tremendous change in America; arguably, it was a time of the most radical and far-reaching change in relation to the traditional role of women, like the increasing number of opportunities available to them in a male-dominated world. This era has been described as the “era of good feelings”; the age of “progress and reform,” “The Gilded Age” and the “Progressive Era.” The changes were in every aspect of women’s lives, from the domestic to the public sphere, with great changes in their roles and attitudes. By the end of the nineteenth century, urbanization, together with the increased educational opportunities and the reduced domestic labor obligations had greatly transformed middle-class life, and women were no longer able to accept without question what tradition, custom, and public opinion dictate. There was also a shift in social attitudes regarding gender relations, and no longer could the moral prescriptions and the standards of living defined by the ideals of true womanhood keep women at home (Jackson 206).

As the American life was deeply influenced by the Victorian era, life for women was not easy. Conditioned so long to accept the patriarchal definition of their role, women rights were extremely limited in this era, from both society and law. In fact, women have no right to vote, no right to own property, and once married, they lose the ownership of all their physical property and all other cash they generated. In the private sphere, The Victorian ‘code’ gave men all the authority to control their wives’ lives, actions, and even thoughts; they should act and react as they are supposed to do not as they wanted to. Education at that time was also a major force that restricted women's access to resources and self-support. The general attitude toward the education of women by then was that girls must be educated ‘primarily and chiefly for motherhood’. So for long time,

women not only had to argue for their right to an equal education but first to prove their capacity to be educated. In many cases, women have to choose between wifedom and motherhood on the one hand and education on the other.

The institution of marriage has undergone enormous changes in this period as well. The concept of marriage in nineteenth-century America was so far different from what is known today. The American common-law of the nineteenth-century doctrines of coverture granted men a title to their wives' properties. Married women had no independent legal existence; they could not make contracts, maintain their own names, file lawsuits, have full ownership and control of the property, and in some cases could not maintain custody of their children after their husband's death. Marriage was by then a relation of authority and submission and the proper state in which to exercise domesticity. Gender roles were rigidly defined, and women's domesticity was demanded by public opinion, approved by religion, and enforced by law. Some of these inequalities continued well into the 20th century.

This male dominance and patriarchal attitudes practiced upon women in marriage kept women in subordinating status, consume their energies, and killed their ambitions. For a long time, the talents of women were directed not toward self-development but toward realizing themselves through the development of a man, and this idea of a merger of identities is one of the norms that serve always to women's disadvantage. Society severely subjected and relegated women to strict codes of conduct, behavior, ideologies, and thoughts as well as a denial of self-expression within and outside the marriage. Under such oppressions, life for women was a "continual daily scramble for existence," and these circumstances leave women unable and yet unwillingly to confront their existence, and with time, they accept this as part of their life thinking that is too late for any attempt to live (Benbow-Pfalzgraf 161).

Within that domestic sphere, however, some women intellectuals and reformists did create possibilities for women, and a wide variety of reforms gained strength in the first decades of the nineteenth century; among them were higher education, the franchise, and economic rights. The issues these women provoked were different from those of the end of the century. While these women did not seek to equalize the roles of men and women, female intellectuals and activists did not believe that women's only mission lay within the home, nor did they think that domesticity and motherhood make women unfit for full civil, intellectual, economic and political rights. Scholars demonstrated that these organizations served as vehicles for female autonomy, which allowed them to live outside the structure of the traditional family and offered them careers and some degree of financial independence (Truxal and Merrill 97). As a result, of such huge changes in the position of women, Victorian attitudes in the American society start to change.

It was in this context that feminist literature emerged. Since women could neither own property nor vote nor speak at a public meeting, when both sexes were present, so they had to find a way to define themselves, a way that gives them power and position, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world. Taking into consideration that women have historically been denied many of the opportunities for writing careers that were available to men, mostly because of gender role expectations that limit the duties of women to housekeeping and child-rearing, along with limited educational opportunities, limited travel possibilities, and the traditional expectations by publishers and readers of what a women writer should write about. Therefore, women's literature "has always had to struggle against the cultural and historical forces that relegated women's experience to the second rank"(Bomarito and Hunter 89). Women writers have to defend their position in society through their writing, yet, they were not accepted immediately. Many female authors wrote under male pen names or totally anonymous.

The important contribution by the women writers to the literary movement toward the end of the century resulted in the creation of awareness regarding female identity and created a rebellion against the male-dominated society. Furthermore, their early skillfully works, demonstrated women's ability to define themselves beyond their limiting values and expectations, and most importantly, encouraged female writers to consider themselves as serious writers (Bomarito and Hunter 149). Consequently, female writers had consciously accepted their roles as spiritual and moral guides for other women and committed their fiction to discuss more serious issues, especially those related to gender inequality, wives abuse, unjust marriage laws, discrimination in employment, and lack of educational opportunities for women.

Stories that are usually told from the woman's perspective challenge nineteenth-century standards of femininity and can be viewed as early feminist symbols since it exemplifies the issues surrounding the struggle of women for self-development in a patriarchal society that places restrictions on female identity. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a new concept came to define women called the "New Woman"⁽⁴⁾, which changed the image of fragile, stereotype of the woman of Victorian Era. The New Women, according to Sarah Jane Deutsch, were portrayed as "women with short hair and short skirts . . . kicking up their legs and kicking off a century of social restrictions" (Bomarito vol.4 147). The New Women enjoyed most things that nineteenth-century women were excluded from: less domestic obligations, greater education and higher aspirations. By 1900, more than one-half million young women had high school degrees, which was considerably higher than the number of men with degrees (Matthews 16). A guidebook for girls declared, "there has never been a period in the world's history when a girl was of more importance than she is just now . . . Some of our most able writers tell us that we are just on the threshold of 'the woman's century' " (Jackson 202).

As a result, the kinds of themes addressed in ‘New Woman’ fiction were already common in fiction throughout the nineteenth century; however, it was the treatment and interpretation of such themes that so radically differed and set New Woman fiction apart from earlier fiction (Bomarito 20). The female characters were no more victims and suffering silently. Precisely, they fought this conception of woman as domestic, virtuous, passive, and weak, devoted to the trivial, teaching morality by example, and unfit for any role beyond house walls. Instead, they depicted heroines female examples who can daringly develop self-control and show unusual strength to achieve self-fulfillment.

Many ‘New Woman’ stories strongly opposed the idea that home is the woman’s only sphere, and unlike in Domestic fiction, which praised marriage as a happy ending, in the New Woman’s Fiction not every story ends happily, and marriage may lead to misery. Stories by Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton offer powerful examples of marriage as a disaster, leading to imprisonment, insanity, or suicide. This fiction was not welcomed of course, since it questioned traditional views of marriage, motherhood, and sexuality. Still, most of those feminist fiction writers- like the selected writers under study- and while they urge women to look for new roles, they consider the reform of the institution of marriage with the same importance. Noting that until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there was little attention given to marriage as a topic in America’s literature. Scholar Allen Stein notes that until this period, after about 1870, the majority of American writers were not interested in society or its institutions (Thompson 197).

The rise of literary realism brought a new emphasis on social relationships while the developing independence of women brought new questions about marriage as an institution, and as divorce became more common, authors began to examine marriage more closely. Realist writers

tend to see themselves as teachers or moral guides, who fairly present a direct relationship between art and life, believed that “if art did not imitate life, it could not hope to influence it” (Bendixen and Nagel 20). For women writers, literary realism’s concentration on aspects of everyday life offered familiar material to shape their experiences. Unlike the domestic fiction, many of the fiction associated with realism resist marriage plots or depict them troubling (Lamb and Thompson 28). Some of the writers, who explored the conflicts inherent in marital life, at the turn of the century, were Chopin, King, Gilman and numerous other writers of the time (Scharnhorst and Quirk 73).

It is worth mentioning that women writers found the short story a suitable genre for the new feminist themes of the decade. Critic Showalter makes the point that in the 1890s, “the best work of the decade was in the short story not in the novel” (Showalter: *A Literature* 49). Likewise, in his article “*The Emergence and Development of the American Short Story*”, Alfred Bendixen notes that by the final decade of the nineteenth century, the emergence of literary feminism as one of the major achievements of the short story tradition (Bendixen and Nagel 17). These claims are certainly exemplified in the careers of Chopin, Wharton, and Gilman, all experimenting during the decade and beyond with both subject and technique in the genre of the short story. All three women feeling the imperative to create had distinctive positions as to their purposes as writers. Chopin absolutely refused any imputation of moral intent to her fiction, but both Gilman and Wharton expressed opinions to the effect that to have any value - aesthetic or otherwise - fiction must have a moral purpose.

For women, the short story offers one way for them, since they have little access to the publishing sphere to participate in the literary world. The short story can be the genre of “submerged population group”, as O’Connor describes it, since it provides a means for new voices

to be heard and read; members of the working classes, people of color, women, any of the marginalized members of society (Bostrom 35). Besides, feminist theorists who study the way in which women gain knowledge have suggested that the story serves as a way to explain the “empowering knowledge” that women share outside patriarchal structures; a way that women come to know the world (Bostrom 06). Another reason why women prefer short stories, that financially they found this genre to be the best option for supporting themselves; stories simply sold better and paid more. Furthermore, shorter forms are better suited to women writers; as Sarah Jewett said, “the short story did not take so long to write, it was easier” (Bomarito Vol. 2 318).

Kate Chopin has traditionally been regarded as a regional writer from Louisiana, and this perspective has, until recently, blocked the understanding of her contribution to the women's fiction. In her short stories, Chopin was definitely interested in exploring the inner lives of women, their sensuality, and self-awareness. She often plotted the idea that women were oppressed through unhappy marriages, starting from the belief that the Victorian model of marriage in American Society was an institution that put restraints upon women. Gilman, from her part, anticipated almost all the arguments of modern feminism, challenging many facets of women's subjugation mainly the financial dependence of women on men makes it nearly impossible for them to develop the full range of their talents. Gilman never desisted from seeking to impress upon her readers the pervasive and destructive nature of existing divisions into gendered lives, whilst Wharton, in all her works of fiction, undertook the task of establishing herself as a writer, always with a distinct morality, despite the criticisms of those who would dismiss her as a 'Literary Aristocrat', or as a mere imitator of Henry James.

The Review of Literature

Since its recovery in the feminist movement of the 1970s, Chopin's fiction has been intensively worked by Scholars. Boren and De Saussure Davis (1992), *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, is an indispensable volume, which consists of fourteen essays that consider Chopin's life and art from a variety of critical perspectives. The volume, encouraging the study of Chopin's short stories, includes an essay on female selfhood by Barbara C. Ewell, and other essays discuss some familiar feminist themes. Besides its great focus on Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, the volume does not explore closely the theme of marriage. Bernard Koloski (1996), *Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction*, on the other hand, was the first full-length treatment devoted exclusively to Chopin's short stories. Koloski, who studied the works of Kate Chopin for more than 25 years, establishes the biographical, literary, historical, and cultural contexts for the appreciation of Chopin's stories, but focus more on Chopin's views about literature, and the criticism written about her during the last twenty-five years. Another important book about Chopin short stories is written by Allen F. Stein (2005), *Women and Autonomy in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction*. In his study, Allen F. Stein focuses on Chopin's representation of women and their struggle to achieve autonomy. The author, first looks at Chopin's marriage stories, then at her courtship stories, and finally at her stories of the independent woman. While Stein shows great skills in reading many of Chopin's stories that have been quite ignored, he neglects social, historical, and cultural contextualization as well as theories of feminist and gender studies.

There was also a growing interest in Gilman's short fiction during this period, leading to the publication of several books. Denise D. Knight (1997), *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: a Study of the Short Fiction*, contributes an important overview of the writer's short stories. Knight offers important insights of students and scholars, by surveying Gilman's body of stories, which

investigates the early, autobiographical *Forerunner* and other stories to pinpoint the writer's ideology and advocacy of the principles of nationalism and reform Darwinism. Still, a larger section was devoted to Gilman's famous story "*The Yellow Wall-Paper*". Another essay collection, which explored Gilman's short stories, was Val Gough, Jill Rudd and Gillian Rudd (1998), *A Very Different Story: Studies on the Fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. Beside the deep discussion of Gilman's novels, some essays explore Gilman's short stories, but focused on utopianism, and both books did not explore the issue of autonomy and marriage closely.

Likewise, in the 1980s-1990s, Wharton drew the attention of feminist critics who found her observation of American cultural practices ripe ground for the study of women's lives, yet, many critics agree that, for the most part, Wharton's short stories continue to be unjustly ignored. A short but important effort concerning Wharton's short stories, was R. W. B. Lewis's commentary in his introduction to *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton* (1968), where he labels a group of twenty four stories entitled "The Marriage Question." Claiming that she was probably the first American writer to view marriage as such an important topic and to make it so central to her work, Lewis' selection of stories illustrates the extent of Wharton's interest in this topic and her awareness of its literary potential. Candace Waid (1990), *Edith Wharton's Letters from the Underground: Fictions of Women and Writing*, offers a study in Wharton's writing about women and the conditions of female identity, and while providing greater insight to the conditions that shaped women's existence in the early part of the twentieth century, the book does not focus on marriage plot.

In some works, the names of the three writers are studied together. Mary E. Papke's (1990), *Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*, analyzes Chopin and Wharton different visions through detailed readings of their novels and several of their shorter

works. Papke argues that neither Kate Chopin nor Edith Wharton can be called feminist writers, yet, each did produce female moral art, writings that focus persistently on the conflicts of social relations and the position of women. Papke remainder of her work offers an ideological reading of their social fiction in which their characters search for autonomy, and offers good analysis not only to Wharton and Chopin scholars, but also to those working in the fields of feminist and women's studies.

Janet Beer (1997), *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction*, is the most important contribution that gathered the study of the three writers in short fiction. A wide range of short fiction by Chopin, Wharton and Gilman is the focus for this study, examining both genre and theme. Chopin's short stories, Wharton's novellas, Chopin's frankly erotic writing and the homilies in which Gilman warns of the dangers of female dependence. There are also essays on ethnicity in the work of Chopin, Wharton's New England stories, Gilman's innovative use of genre. However, each chapter explores separate aspects of the writers and, although there are many grounds for comparison between them, each chapter Beer took an aspect of the short fiction of the individual writer and focus closely on subject and style, and unfortunately does not discuss marriage and autonomy issue.

- **The Issue and Working Hypothesis**

The undesirable status of marriage for women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America, was reflected in the fiction of that time. Married women were depicted miserable, exhausted; suffering from emptiness, unfulfilled desires, and loss of identity. Historically, men have had the material and cultural resources with which to support themselves, as well as greater opportunities to seek more satisfying relationships elsewhere. They were able to abandon their responsibilities to women and children to pursue forms of personal fulfillment unavailable to

women. Women's autonomous living, by contrast, brought them much more hardship than praise, which makes oppressive marriage harmful for women but not for men. Due to the patriarchy put on their ways, a marriage that is supposed to be the heaven for women became their worst nightmare. Miserable marriage was represented by unfulfilled desires, undefined identity, and lack of purposiveness, insecurity, careless love, depreciation, and marginalization of women.

This study seeks to examine the miserable status of women in marriage, and their quest for fulfillment, in the selected short fiction of Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton in the period 1870s-1930s. The three writers, under study, led very different lives, held different attitudes about marriage and motherhood, and approached their writing in different ways. Despite these differences, the main components of the stories are quite similar. Their works focus on the issue of women's independence and individual happiness. They all insist on the true female identity by claiming the right for the intellectual and economic independence. This study provides a social and historical analysis of the marriage plot in short fiction written by Chopin, Gilman, and Wharton by exploring the conditions and status of married women, and analyze their difficulties which prevent them from establishing a separate identity, using feminist criticisms, and feminist interpretation of marriage.

This study starts from the hypothesis that if society convinces women that marriage is the key for female fulfillment, so why married women are miserable and suffer from a crisis of identity and end up with disappointment, divorce, extramarital relations, madness or suicide. Therefore, to answer this question, the selected narratives highlight that female fulfillment does not necessarily come from marriage, but it is important to achieve a successful marriage. For women to be happy they need more than a husband and children, neither they should have to choose between marriage and career. According to the short fiction treated in this thesis, women could achieve balance in

marriage through good education, economic independence, and ethical choices. Our goal will be to determine the answer to these main questions: why women are entrapped in the institution of marriage? Why marriage that is supposed to be the heaven of women, become their worst nightmare? How can women overcome the marital problem? Does economic independence and education provide women with strong personalities to overcome marital problems? How the passiveness of women can be considered as the reason behind their marital crisis? How did the authors attempt to respond to gender issues in their time, and give the reader some keys to what they perceived to be the prescribed gender roles for women; and how their societies receive and interact with these works did the receiving societies respond to these arguments?

- **Method, Scope and Aims of the Study**

Scope of the Study

As it addresses problems related to women's quest for identity within the institution of marriage, late nineteenth century and early twentieth-century female fiction aimed to promote the consciousness among women about their high potentials and capacities to be individuals. Indeed, many scholars argue that it was in the late nineteenth century that "gender consciousness and feminist attitudes first came to the forefront of the literary imagination, changing forever how the works of female authors would be written and regarded" (Bomarito and Hunter 89). Therefore, the exploration of female social roles was a common theme in the 'female' fiction at that time, and was consistent in taking a stand against the "double standard" in women's domestic lives. Stories written from women's viewpoint have revealed women's problems challenging the standards of femininity. Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton are only three of many women writers whose perceptions of women's struggles are developed and explored through stories. all of them wrote with generally feminist aims and the desire for the attitudes and

institutions of the time to someday be altered their literary works. As a result, they still hold a lasting place in the history of women's rights in America.

Human beings have always used history in order to find their direction toward the future. The true value of those writers does not lie in what they wrote, but in what they represented: the attempt to create an accomplished, intelligent and independent American woman in the future. No doubt, considering women as human beings, focusing on the quality of women's lives in the institution of marriage, will allow them to build a healthy marriage that will protect society. Thus, it is the purpose of this study to explore the complexities in the relationships between men and women inside the institution of marriage, and how it affects the women's lives and their quest for identity. As well as to explore women's possible choices to discover and build their identities, as females, mothers and wives, throughout the analysis of feminist short fiction of late 19th century and early 20th century. In this study, we want to focus on the universality of human experience, including the necessity of maintaining one's independence and the importance of overcoming obstacles and difficult social demands. For marriage and women are the same everywhere, despite the temporal and social differences of each society. Besides, as long as the marriage is still the most important healthy institution to produce healthy generations, it deserves to make efforts to reform it, revise its problems with the new challenges that come with each century.

Hence, this thesis comes to emphasize the same message: For women to take –in-charge their own happiness and life, to discover their identities and to experience and create more dimensions in their lives. These messages are not specific for a country or a century; it is addressed to any woman from any place and time: to encourage women to be independent and intellectual. Many women today are educated, but they are still subject to their husbands, and they raise their children the same way, “as their mothers raised them”, starting from giving complete control to

brothers over their sister. The idea is not encouraging women to abandon marriage to choose a career, but to create a new generation of women gaining economic independence and experiencing growth, so they can raise stronger generations in return. So, while rising the consciousness among women, the aim is also to restore the balance in the relation to man and women and reform the institution of marriage which is the only way and environment to build a healthy society.

Thesis Outline

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One is devoted to the historical background and the context in which such literature emerged, mainly the period between 1870s and 1930s. Chapter Two is devoted to the selected short fiction of Kate Chopin, and her depiction to the female quest for autonomy inside the institution of marriage. Chapter Three, discusses Charlotte Perkins Gilman's suggestions about the importance of the economic independence of women and the possible reforms of the institution of marriage, in some of her short stories. Finally, Chapter Four explores Edith Wharton's selected stories and highlights how women's maturity and wise choices may preserve the marital relationship and women's happiness in marriage.

Chapter One: Feminism and its Historical Background

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Chapter One: Feminism and its Historical Background

Introduction

Nothing seems more natural today than that American woman should be taking her rightful place beside the man as an equal. In the past decades, however, American women worked hard to gain respect in legal, political, educational, and social rights. Particularly, the period 1870s-1930s was so important to promote the position of American women in all aspects, that we shall devote considerable attention to it in this work. This chapter cannot hope to deal in detail with the full complexity of this debate, but it attempts to indicate the dominant themes that characterized the lives of American women before, during and after the progressive era, emphasizing authoritative studies. This part of presents the status of American women, highly influenced by a patriarchal society; and the different factors that raise consciousness to bring positive changes to their lives. To better understand why women were leading miserable lives, especially in the institution of marriage, we will explore briefly the social, political limitations that dominated the American society in the late 19th century and early 20th century.

When English settlers first came to the North American continent, they brought with them the social and legal traditions and institutions of their homeland. Many of these traditions “sought to negate the legal and social identity of women, leaving them to the care and supervision of their husbands and fathers” (Mountjoy and McNeese 23). The American Revolution offered the opportunity to deliver significant changes in American society. However, *The Declaration of Independence*, which proclaimed a belief in equality, placed the limitation of “men” on its proclamation, failing to include women again in this equality (24). The 18th century ended with

the formation of the United States of America in July 1776, but the new century brought again to war and new challenges, that marked a turning point in American women's history.

I- Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

I.1. The History of Feminism

In this section, I will lay out the theoretical framework of my thesis. As the Anglo-American feminism treats literature as a series of representation of women's lives and experiences, and focuses on narratives of women who challenge distinctively female situations against patriarchal constraints to express their deepest commitments and senses of self, and therefore, aim to represent the figure of the woman as an autonomous subject, I will use Feminism Criticism in this study. I will discuss the key concepts and terms of the feminist tradition, which will help to explore and analyze the theme of marriage and autonomy in the short fiction of Chopin, Gilman, and Wharton. As the authors under study are considered as feminists, let's define and understand the word 'Feminism'. According to the *New Approach Dictionary of Living English*, Feminism "is a belief or movement advocating the cause of women's rights and opportunities, particularly equal rights with men, by challenging inequalities between the sexes in society" (Sohoni 200). Scholar Deborah Madsen states that the concerns of feminist theory are "the unique experience of women in history; the notion of female consciousness; the definition of gender that limit and oppress; and the cause of women's liberation from those restrictions" (Madsen 200). The basic concepts of Feminist Theory include gender roles and patriarchy. According to Feminist scholar Jackie Stacey, the term 'patriarchy' refers to "the systematic organization of male supremacy and female subordination" (Stacey 53). In every domain where patriarchy reigns, the woman is marginalized, defined only by

her difference from male norms and values, and while biology determines sex (male or female), culture determines gender (scales of masculine and feminine) (57).

In literature; feminist literary criticism can be defined as a literary analysis that arises from the viewpoint of feminism, feminist theory, and the politics of feminism. It uses feminist principles and ideology to critique the language of literature. Wallace states that “feminist literary theory, then, engages with the political and social goals of feminism, and it concentrates on literary culture and theory as a possible site of struggle and as a means of eventual change” (Wallace vii). Feminist literary criticism aims to free literature from class, race, or sex bias when portraying individuals, and to establish traditions of women’s writing and early ‘feminist’ thought to counter the unquestioning acceptance of ‘man’ and male genius as the norm. The advent of feminist literary criticism is considered as one of the major developments in literary studies. From the 19th century, Feminist criticism has followed what some theorists call the three waves of feminism, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. The first wave refers mainly to women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; mainly concerned with women's right to vote. The second wave refers to the ideas and actions associated with the women's liberation movement beginning in the 1960s; which campaigned for legal and social rights for women, and the third wave refers to a continuation of, and a reaction to the perceived failures of, second-wave feminism, beginning in the 1990s (Brizee et al. 29).

In this study, the focus is mainly with the Second Wave of Feminism (early 1960s-late 1970s), when feminists followed the footsteps of the first wave, they “continued many reformist agenda, advocated more radical ideas, actions and program” (Tong 23). Women may have legal rights but they are still treated as inferior, because society was still patriarchal. Hence, the second wave feminism concentrates on one important concept that is the personal is political. Betty

Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* are the substantial works produced during the second wave feminism. It includes also Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* (1975), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelist from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979).

- **Gynocriticism: (Re) Questioning Literary Texts**

As this study, the concernis with female writers, it make use of Gynocriticism, or gynocritics, that was introduced during the second wave feminism, and which refers to the literary study of women's writings (gynotexts). Elaine Showalter who coined the term in 1979, felt that feminist criticism still worked within male assumptions, while gynocriticism would begin a new phase of women's self-discovery, to establish a literary tradition of women without incorporating male authors (New, 249). Therefore, Gynocriticism extends feminist theory by arguing that women have distinct experiences that require separate analytical tools for examining literature written by and about women. Probably the best description Showalter gives of gynocritics is in *Toward a Feminist Poetics*:

In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture (New, 131).

Specific goals of feminist criticism include both the development and discovery female tradition of writing, and rediscovering of old texts, while also interpreting symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view and resisting sexism inherent in the majority of mainstream literature. These goals, along with the intent to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective, and increase awareness of the sexual politics

of language and style were developed by Lisa Tuttle in the 1980s, and have since been adopted by a majority of feminist critics. Lisa Tuttle has defined feminist theory as asking “new questions of old texts”. She cites the goals of feminist criticism as: (1) to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing, (2) to interpret the symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view, (3) to rediscover old texts, (4) to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective, (5) to resist sexism in literature, and (6) to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style (Tuttle 184).

Feminist literary criticism recognizes that since literature both reflects the culture and shapes it, literary studies can either perpetuate the oppression of women or help to eliminate it. Thus, feminist literary critics are motivated to raise questions about literature and literary criticism that are basic to women's struggle for autonomy: How does literature represent women and define gender relations? Why has literary criticism ignored or devalued women's writing? How does one's gender alter the way in which one reads literature? Is there a feminine mode of writing? Thus, feminist literary criticism examines how works of literature embody patriarchal attitudes or undercut them, sometimes both happening within the same work. A feminist literary critic resists traditional assumptions while reading a text. In addition to challenging assumptions that were thought to be universal, feminist literary criticism actively supports including women's knowledge in literature and valuing women's experiences. It examines gender politics in works and traces the subtle construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relative status, positioning, and marginalization within works.

Furthermore, feminist criticism tries to uncover the ignored elements in the text as well as to defy the accepted binarism, which associates masculinity with light, power and thought, and femininity with darkness, powerlessness, and emotion. Furthermore, feminist criticism has a

variety of forms, and feminist critics have a diversity of aims. These goals include preoccupation with women writers' ignored works, and interest in women's autobiographical writings. The recovery of nineteenth-century women's writings has produced bibliographies of lost works and details about lost lives, and most importantly uncovered the processes by which important women were removed from the American literary tradition (Lamb and Thompson 260). With these recoveries, many nineteenth-century women writers have found their way into the American literary canon: among them Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Although many types of feminism existed, including liberal feminism, socialist feminism, cultural feminism, and radical feminism, our study is concerned only with liberal and socialist feminism. Socialist feminism focuses on the public and private aspects of women's life. Simone De Beauvoir, as a socialist feminist, believes that unless and until the economic and cultural sources of women's oppression come to end, liberation cannot be achieved (De Beauvoir 89). A central concern of socialist feminism, therefore, has been to determine the ways in which the institution of the family and women's domestic labour are structured by, and reproduce the sexual division of labour. The struggle against capitalism and patriarchy are equally important, because emancipation of women cannot happen within a capitalist society. From the other hand, liberal feminism aims to achieve equal legal, political, and social rights for women. It wishes to bring women equality into all public institution and to extend the creation of knowledge so that women's issues can no longer be ignored. Yet, for liberal feminist, rights should be given more importance than materialism. Betty Friedan believes that modern societies should be reformed rather than transformed by revolutionary means. Liberal feminist gave importance to female education and equal opportunities.

Second wave feminist criticism, in particular, is concerned with the ways in which literature undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Tyson 82-83), by identifying with female characters, as a way to challenge the male-centered outlook of authors. Elaine Showalter argues that the female literary tradition comes from a self-awareness on the part of the woman writer (Showalter 136). Increasingly, other representations of women emerge, and no longer 'silent' or 'hidden' female characters are regarded of as heroic, instead they depicts women who can think, act, love or exercise power like the protagonists of the stories under study. Showalter's three phases for women's literature – the feminine, the feminist and the female – may start with imitation of the established tradition but they move to responses of protest and demands for autonomy and then to a phase of self-discovery that breaks free from the social norms, where the central theme of works by female writers was the criticism of the role of women in society and the oppression of women (137).

There is an Anglo-American version of feminism and the French feminists who rely more upon post-structuralism and psychoanalytic criticism. The Anglo-Americans treat literature as a series of representation of women's lives and experiences. They regard close reading of individual literary text as the chief business of feminist criticism. Anglo-American feminist criticism is an approach to literature that, according to Wallace, "analyzes literary texts, the conditions of their production, reception, circulation, and their cultural effects from the perspective of gender difference" (Wallace 22). Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and earlier texts such as Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* (1975) and Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976) are influential examples of this approach. None of those feminist critics had implied women lacked the talent to write well, only the opportunity, given their lack of economic independence, lack of status and

lack of time. Yet, the emphasis moved from their difficulties to how much they had achieved in spite of these obstacles in their way.

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977); introducing a further range of forgotten or neglected writers, Showalter suggests that there is a 'female literary tradition', which follows the pattern of development of any literary subculture. A three-part trajectory beginning with imitation (the 'Feminine' Phase (1840–1880), in which female writers “wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements”. They often employed male pseudonyms, tried to follow male values, and usually did not enter into debate regarding women's place in society (*New*, 137). Moving to critique (the 'Feminist' Phase (1880–1920)), which characterized by women's writing that protested against male standards and values, questioned the stereotypes and challenged the restrictions of women's language, and advocated women's rights and values, including a demand for autonomy (Showalter 11–13), and finally reaching a phase of self discovery (the 'Female' Phase (1920—), in which “women reject both imitation and protest as forms of dependency, and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature” (Showalter 13).

Women writers in this period used literature to challenge the wrong image of womanhood, and rejects the male standards and expectations of femininity, as Elaine Showalter has explained in the *Feminist phase* (1880-1920). Both Susan Koppelman Cornillon's *Images of Women in Fiction*, and Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, focuses on the stereotypical characterization of women in literature. Gilbert and Gubar argue that men, whose voice has been dominant for far too long, define and create images of women as they please, using two main stereotypical images of women which are “the angel in the house” and “the mad woman”,

both equally unrealistic. The “angel” ⁽¹⁾ character was pure, dispassionate, and submissive, and in sharp contrast to the “angel” figure, the “monster” female character was sensual, passionate, rebellious, and uncontrollable: all qualities that caused a great deal of anxiety among men during the Victorian period (Gilbert and Gubar 47).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1977), is an analysis of women's writings, and how it fits into the larger feminist literary canon. Gilbert and Gubar's main argument is that “artistic creativity, which is perceived within the dominant 19th-century tradition basically as a male quality, is in fact patriarchal superimposition upon the women writers who are imprisoned within it” (Gilbert and Gubar 26). They suggest that because society forbade women from expressing themselves through creative outlets, their creative powers were channeled into psychologically self-destructive behavior and subversive actions. Gilbert and Gubar also argue that men, whose voice has been dominant for far too long, define and create images of women as they please. According to them, the two main stereotypical images created by man are “the angel in the house” and “the madwoman in the attic”, both equally unrealistic. These images need to be examined and debunked for women to achieve literary autonomy (Bressler 177-8).

Equally, in the introduction of her book entitled *Images of Women in Literature*, Mary Anne Ferguson believes that in the world of patriarchy, women are considered passive comparing with men, both in reality and literature. Images of women in literature, created by men, have been most often presented as “stereotypes, serving as foils, motivators, barriers, rewards, and comforters to males who actively pursue adventure and their own identities” (Ferguson 6). In short, the central and most desirable characteristic of female characters has been for their passivity, and the writer who “departs from socially approved stereotype by adopting a new role developing a new life style- may pay a heavy cost in guilt and alienation” (Ferguson 4). Ferguson finds that the role of a

wife or a mother is often preferred, because both of them are expected to be happy in putting others first and serves perfectly the prevailing patriarchal system. It is expected that a mother should have qualities such as firmness, decisiveness, ability to organize time, whereas a wife is expected to be submissive, supportive and to stay in her own sphere (5).

As one of the pioneers of contemporary feminist criticism, Mary Ellman as well, in *Thinking About Women* (1965), blames women writers for accepting and reproducing stereotypes of women much as male writers do, helping in their own oppression. Ellmann lists the following as common feminine stereotypes: ‘formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy’ and names ‘two incorrigible figures: the shrew and the witch’ (Ellman 55). In patriarchal thinking, there is an unquestioned linkage between ‘female’ and ‘feminine’: feminine characteristics are viewed as natural to the female and are largely inferior to the masculine characteristics linked to the male. Feminists have responded in a number of ways to this situation. The position of inferiority might be denied and insist that women are just as capable as men and, hence, deserve equal opportunities; or it may valorize the subordinated term and claim that sensitivity and emotional responsiveness is life-affirming and more socially productive than brash self-centeredness . Ellman insists then, that female writers must reject the subordinated term, deny the position of inferiority and claim that women are just as capable as men and, hence, deserve equal opportunities (Ellman 56).

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf argues that women “collude in their own domestic and professional victimization by acting as a 'looking glass' for the reflecting back to men of their desired image” (Woolf 207). Woolf's general contribution to feminism is her groundbreaking notion that “gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and transformed” (208). Therefore, women need to define themselves as the ‘subjects’ in their works

by changing the already accepted patriarchal order. Woman has been associated in a stereotypical way with both good and evil. As an "angel in the house," woman has been credited with natural goodness, but this same description extols her as infantile, weak, and mindless—a creature in constant need of male supervision and protection. Women writers had a great challenge before them regarding their marginality in the house as well as in the society. Therefore, the stereotype image of a housewife and mother needs to be destroyed for a woman to be a writer.

By the same token, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953), focuses largely on the way women have been made into the others comparing to men, and so denied the right to define themselves. She primarily challenges social, political and religious categories used to justify women's inferior status, and argues for women's equality, while insisting on the reality of the sexual difference. She claims that men make women limited in every role they can play in society, and are thus forced to adopt certain traits and coping with lives that made them even more inferior in society (De Beauvoir 730). Because woman cannot be productive or creative, she gives herself up completely to serving men and children. As a result, however, most women are left miserable and unfulfilled. De Beauvoir finds it unjust and immoral to use the sexual difference as an argument for women's subordination, and she argue that if women are given equal opportunities, they can achieve just as much as men can (733).

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), another important contribution of the second wave feminism, reveals the way in which all of the social structures –religion, literature, science, educational practices, myth– operate to boost women's oppression. Millett shows that power relations in societies, whether in real life or in literature, occur because of sex difference (Millett 96). She referred to patriarchy within the family, which has been experienced by women and maintained by culture. Men have seen themselves as superior and privileged, so, their needs should

be taken into consideration. The sex category, according to Millett, has become stereotyped. The males have been associated with intelligence, aggression and force; however, the females have been connected with ignorance, passivity and docility. Women have been brainwashed to be compliant and submissive to men, taking it for granted as their destiny. Thus, to resist those stereotypes and male domination, women writers are expected to write a literature of their own (99).

In another important work, Betty Friedan demanded the removal of all barriers to "equal and economic advance". Her book, *"The Feminine Mystique"* (1963), was an important theoretical touchstone for the second wave feminism, for both feminists and even women who had never imagined that education and self-determination will lead to women's independence. It is not sure if Friedan read Gilman's work at some point in her career, yet her ideas were very similar to Gilman's, especially when it came to the importance of economic autonomy. Friedan believes that "the fundamental grievance" of middle-class American women was their entrapment within private, domestic life and their inability to pursue careers (Friedan 55). Therefore, she attempts to change the false image of the *Feminine Mystique* which disillusioned many educated women with the "dominant image of the happy housewife and mother", and she assumed that the housewife role was merely something from which women needed to be liberated.

To explain the concept of autonomy also, we will use Natalie Stoljar's book *Relational autonomy: Feminist perspectives on autonomy, agency, and the social self* (2000). According to Stoljar, the concept of autonomy, specifically acting on motives, reasons, or values unaffected by misleading influences such as emotions, is usually understood by feminist writers in the same way that it is understood within moral psychology (Mackenzie et Stoljar 149). Therefore, in this chapter, we will focus more on Feminist psychological perspectives on autonomy. Feminist

psychology addresses women, relationships, and the effect of society on female psychology. Feminist philosophers, like Diana T. Meyers and Marilyn Friedman, argued that articulating the conditions of autonomous choice is vital to attempts to understand gender oppression. “Relational autonomy” is the name that has been given to feminist reconceptualization of the notion of autonomy. If relationships of care and interdependence are valuable and morally significant, then any theory of autonomy must be “relational” in the sense that it must acknowledge that autonomy is compatible with the agent standing in and valuing significant family and other social relationships (Mackenzie et Stoljar 49). Charles Taylor, also indicates that autonomy is sometimes used as an equivalent to liberty, self-rule, self-determination or self-assertion, and the extent to which one fully accepts and stands behind one’s action (Taylor 71). Taylor insists about the other psychological need which is relatedness (the need to feel close to and accepted by important others or the need for belongingness), which is equally important for the well-being and adjustment of all individuals (Ibid). This suggests that while exercising the right to be autonomous, individuals need to consider the social context within which they operate.

We will also make use of Marilyn Friedman’s book *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (2003), and Diana T. Meyers’ *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (1989) . In her book, Friedman claims that autonomy is socially grounded and not extremely individualistic and that ideals of autonomy should not ignore the social dimensions and the importance of relationships and community (Friedman 29). While she admits that some social relationships are unfavorable to autonomy, Friedman acknowledges that the social grounding of identity is not inconsistent with valuing personal autonomy. She maintains that personal autonomy involves acting and living according to one's own choices, values, and identity within the constraints of what one regards as morally permissible (Friedman 37). Equally, Meyers upholds that autonomy should not disturb social

bonds, and that claiming for 'Maximal' or full autonomy is an unrealistic goal for all people. Meyers characterizes autonomous individuals as persons who do what they really want, with taking into account the authentic self that acknowledges people's involvement in social relations as well as their psychological complexity (Meyers 64).

II- Feminism and Its Background

1- Women Status before 1870s and during the Progressive

At the beginning of the 19th century, an age characterized by gender inequality, American women were expected to remain submissive to their fathers and husbands and focus on practical domestic pursuits and activities, with extremely limited occupational choices. Middle- and upper-class women generally remained home, caring for their children and running the household, while lower-class women often did work outside the home, usually as domestic servants or laborers in factories and mills (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 17). Hence, women of that time, while being urged to think of themselves only relationally, were also, being challenged to the creation of themselves as persons with distinct and valuable purposes. Cultural and political events such as WWI, increased attention to women's issues. Although modern feminism was nonexistent, many women expressed themselves and exposed the conditions that they faced, often indirectly, using a variety of creative methods (Truxal and Merrill 91). Women have strived at getting rid of gender roles by emphasizing the fact that being born a female is not an indicator of biological inferiority. Since they have lived common experience due to male exploitation, women have seen it highly important to create a union among them and to fight hard against the gender inequality.

Many historians still consider the period 1870s-1930s a veritable 'golden age' of women, some called it the "woman's century", a period that continues to fascinate scholars, who view it as

setting the stage for women's modern involvement in the American society. Women moved en masse into activism of all sorts during these years. Their organizations and associations provided the institutional foundation for widespread political engagement related to an extraordinary array of issues and problems. The campaign for suffrage was only the most well-known manifestation of this mass mobilization. Middle-class white women across the country worked for the prohibition of liquor, legal protections for women workers, government programs aimed at improving maternal and child health, laws to raise the age of sexual consent, municipal reforms like adequate sanitation and the establishment of playgrounds and parks, pure food and milk, and the peaceful settlement of international conflicts (Hewitt 330).

The end of the nineteenth century has been also an era of heavy changes for women's status. The changes in almost every aspect of the lives of women, from the domestic sphere to the public. As men were called to WWI, companies that had previously limited employment in better paying jobs to white males found themselves opening their doors to white women and women and men of color. Racial and gender tensions escalated during this time, and many jobs were in fact permanently redefined as "women's work," including teaching, nursing, secretarial work, and telephone operations. These social shifts, which had been set in motion at the beginning of the century, developed further as women were propelled into the workforce, exposing them to previously male-dominated professional and political situations. By the midpoint of the twentieth century, women's activities and concerns had been recognized as a significant element of the literary, scientific, and cultural landscape in USA, marking a revolutionary change in the social and domestic roles of women, as we will see in the coming sections.

In the early and mid-nineteenth century, American women's status continued to reflect Old World backgrounds and traditions: they enjoyed few legal and almost no political rights. The laws,

traditions, and political institutions of England served as the primary model for the United States. Women in England were denied legal rights included private matters, such as property rights and inheritance, and political rights included public involvement, such as jury duty and suffrage (Mountjoy and McNeese 21). After the Treaty of Paris in 1783 brought the independence to Americans, the legal position of women did not improve; women were not even mentioned in the American Constitution. They were, as Abigail Adams said, “excluded from honors and offices.” The English common law, gave the “custody” of the wife to the husband; including her earnings and her personal property, which he could will to others, and her real estate, which he could sell or mortgage. Some colonies and states ranked married women, insane persons, and “idiots” who could not make a will (Hewitt 88). European travelers to America commented on the lack of freedom of married women in America. Author Ellen Carol DuBois, for instance, observed that a married woman gave up all rights of person and property to her husband, stated that “no people, with the exception of chattel slaves, had less proprietary rights over themselves in eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century America than married women”(qtd. in Frost-Knappman and Cullen-DuPont 2).

In legal terms, the American women’s existence depended on their family roles; power over them passed from fathers to husbands. Married women could not own property or enter into business contracts without their husbands’ admissions, could not vote, nor could they expect to be educated as men (Mountjoy 26). Between 1800 and midcentury, a married woman was denied so many rights that lawyers said she entered a state of “civil death.” English common law stated that, “once married, a wife became a *femme covert*”, “veiled” or “overshadowed” by her new married status (Frost-Knappman and Cullen-DuPont 2). Home was her natural place, but even there her

authority was definitely subordinated to that of the husband. Basically, as one writer stated, it was true that "Husband and wife were one person", but the person was "the husband".

The limitations included the custody of their own children also. There was no question, in common law, about the superior power of the father over the control and custody of the children; he could legally apprentice his children at an early age; give them to the care of another without the permission of the mother (Truxal and Merrill 90). If a woman's husband died without a will, a wife's right to inherit property was restricted to one-third of his estate. Even worst, girls were regularly excluded from their fathers' wills. Married women had no legal right even to spend their own wages, for they were considered incapable of spending their own or other people's money. In Massachusetts, before 1840, a woman could not, legally, be treasurer of her own sewing society unless some man were responsible for her" (Frost-Knappman and Cullen-DuPont 2). The American woman, who weds a foreign husband, although they live in America, has no citizenship unless the husband become a naturalized American citizen. Concerning divorce, in some States, once that contract of marriage is made, the law makes it a very hard to dissolve (Bres 36). However, as Rose Bres Stated, there was full agreement in all of the States on just one phase of the law: "women are not excluded from full penalty for violation of any of the criminal Statutes" (41).

Even educational opportunities were very limited for women at that time. The general attitude in America in the 19th century toward the education of women was that women were to be educated to be useful members of society; and girls must be educated 'primarily and chiefly for motherhood'. It was common before the 1830s, that the course of study offered in young women's schools had consisted of fine needlework, French, dancing, music and some form of religious instruction (Hewitt 232). Because the primary justification for women's education was its usefulness to others, some worried about the dangers of too educated women, to neglect their

responsibilities or to lose their femininity. The life of the English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, served as a warning to the Americans. At first, they admired both she and her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), then rejected after she bore a child out of marriage (Hewitt 86).

The biological sciences also join to prove that gender is significant for defining intellectual identities and social roles for men and women, so that they can never learn the same way. Basing their authority on ‘nature’, they were able to present apparently neutral accounts of sex difference, which established a definition of ‘woman’ as a different group than man, with different educational needs and different social functions. Some of the most firm statements about sexual difference come from simple anatomical observations being used as the basis for judgments about mental operations was the question of brain size. Thomas Laycock (1812–76), a British lecturer in clinical medicine, writes in 1860: ‘Experience shows that woman has less capability than man for dealing with the abstract in philosophy, science, and art, and this fact is in accordance with the less development of the frontal convolutions’ (King 18). In 1887, George Romanes (1848–94), a physiologist and psychologist, also argues that, since there is a five-ounce weight difference between the female and male brains, ‘on merely anatomical grounds we should be prepared to expect a marked inferiority of intellectual power in the former’. He further claims that women’s relative physical weakness makes them ‘less able to sustain the fatigue of serious or prolonged brain action’ so that they can never hope to equal men mentally (14).

Fears about education making women unfit for roles as wives and mothers had a long history. Thomas Wentworth Higginson an American Unitarian minister, author, abolitionist, and soldier, wrote in 1859 an essay entitled “Ought women to learn the alphabet? There the whole question lies. Higginson simply identified the widespread fears that educated women would no

longer be content within their homes and roles (Hewitt 228). This was not an isolated instance of opposition to the education of women; countless voices raised. In 1873, a Harvard physician named Edward Clarke claimed that using women's "limited energy" for studying would harm the "female apparatus." It would damage women's reproductive capacity, because studying put too much tension on girls' nervous and reproductive systems, the result was illness, fatigue, damaged ovaries, and thus women could not give birth to healthy children (Ware 67). Ernest R. Groves went further to associate female education with the degradation of human race. In his book *The American Woman* (1944), he summarizes some of the reasons against women's education, saying that:

Feminine ambitions were the abandonment of divine decree registered in the physiological structure of the woman. They led toward the hardening of female character, the loss of sex appeal, the throwing away of the instinctive satisfaction of motherhood, the surrender of domestic companionableness for the deceptions and disillusionments that followed the attempt to imitate men. The penalties of such ambitions were race suicide, physical and nervous ill-health, loss of marriage opportunity, and social disorganization"(Truxal and Merrill 93).

Toward the end of the 19th century, some state universities allowed women to enroll in their degree programs. Still, in college, women were closely supervised and segregated from men. Smith, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley, Barnard, Radcliffe, Vassar, and Bryn Mawr were established to provide women with single-gender University environments designed to meet their specific educational needs. Despite the emergence of single-gender colleges for women, by the beginning of the 20th century, most public secondary schools and colleges had become predominantly coeducational. Coeducation, however, did not insure equal opportunity in education. Even girls with strong academic records were required to take domestic science or home economics (Madigan 12). Women have to wait until the late 20th century to get equal high education.

The range of professional options open to educated women at the end of the nineteenth century never matched those available to men, nor did their pay. By 1900, more than eighty-five thousand women were enrolled in colleges, making up 37 percent of all students. Yet these college graduates faced a frightening question: “After college, what?” For most, the choice remained marriage, coupled with a wide range of volunteer and civic activities. Only a minority used their higher education to pursue a career, as an attractive alternative to marriage (Ware 69). Rarely found faculty positions at coeducational universities, and never at men’s colleges. Journalism provided greater professional opportunities for women in this period. Mainly to please women readers, many papers hired women as “sob sisters,” who wrote sentimental feature stories oriented toward women readers. In the 1910s, a few women became “front page girls” or women newspapermen,” with jobs comparable to those of the best male reporters (Madigan 11). The industrial and economic changes that took men out of the home to earn their living also created new opportunities for American women. However, the choices available to women tended to be limited, both in pay and in potential for advancement. The five industries employing the largest numbers of women were textiles, boots and shoes, cigar making, the clothing trades and printing and publishing (Sanders 18).

- **Marriage, Family and the Cult of Domesticity of the Period 1870s- 1930s in America**

The concept of marriage in the nineteenth century America was so far different from what is known today as marriage. As the American common-law of the nineteenth century doctrines of coverture granted men title to their wives’ properties, marriage was by then a relation of authority and submission. The husband held property in the “person of his wife” and all she acquired by “labor, service or act,” law books declared (M. Volo and Denneen Volo 195). Historian Nancy Cott argues in “Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation” (2001), that

“a woman was absorbed into her husband’s legal and economic persona upon marrying, and her husband gained the civic presence she lost” (Hewitt 7). Ironically, unmarried women in America enjoyed a greater freedom of social interaction than married ones. Once they entered into marriage, women were subject to strict rules of attitudes, manners, and dresses. In his early descriptions of United States democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, and in particular, his celebration of “The Young [American] Woman as Wife” (1835, 1840), he describes the domestic sphere of married women as an abbey, where women enjoy but little freedom:

In America, a woman loses her independence forever in the bonds of matrimony. While there is less constraint on girls there than anywhere else, a wife submits to stricter obligations. For the former, her father’s house is a home of freedom and pleasure; for the latter, her husband’s is almost a cloister” (Bauer and Gould 39).

The sphere of a woman’s usefulness should mainly to be her family and friends. Only some activities outside the home were open to women, such visiting ‘calling’ which was a required social function governed by convention, and the involvement in charity and social reform movements because these activities were an extension of a wife’s nurturing role (M. Volo and Denneen Volo 220).

Women had no choices but to marry, in an act of social survival – or, as Marilyn French writes, women have to arm themselves with “the title of *Mrs*, property of some men”, to feel “stronger in the world” (52). Marriage remains a primary goal for girls. Marriage was, therefore, the proper state in which to exercise domesticity. The wife’s role was to complement her husband, reflecting credit on him and herself. A man took a wife to look after his affairs, and to prepare his children for their proper stations in life. It was a wife’s duty to care for her husband’s interests. To these ends, she was to be mistress of the family and run it well enough so that her husband would only enjoy it and could focus his attention on the matters of the world.

Due to the economic and social changes of the Jackson Era (1828- 1854), the American society was divided into two separate spheres: a private, female world, centered on domesticity and family ties, and a public, male world of production and politics. This physical separation of the household and workplace helped to bring a new concept of the family and family roles, which persisted until the early twentieth century. This basic notion gave rise to the importance of the virtue of domesticity. "The World Corrupts, Home Should Refine," according to Mrs. William Parkes, author of *Domestic Duties*. This was the ability of women to make their homes refuges from the problems of the world. The focus of domesticity was on the wife and mother of the household. The house become a source of stability, serenity and moral values, where women should be a guardian (Sanders 6). The home was her natural "sphere," and there she was expected to be completely fulfilled as a wife, mother and homemaker. She should create a comfortable atmosphere where her busy husband could relax from the cruel competition of the business world (8). The public sphere was seen to be harsh for a woman; it was full of temptations, violence, and distress, thus a woman's place should be in the private sphere of the home where she could be protected from the harsh realities of the world (M. Volo and Denneen Volo 218).

Not only separation in spheres but also in the distinction of behavior American men and women believed. Harriet Martineau, an Englishwoman who visited America in the 1830s, noted that "that there are virtues which are peculiarly masculine, and others which are peculiarly feminine...what are called the, hardy virtues are more appropriate to men, and the gentler to women" (qtd in M. Volo and Denneen Volo 218). Formulated in the early decades of the 19th century, this ideal of the "true woman" gave women special tasks and credited them with special virtues. According to the ideal or "cult of true womanhood"¹, a woman's four main virtues were piety, purity, submission and domesticity. Purity or innocence of mind and body was regarded as

essential for a woman. Ladies' magazines and popular fiction cautioned young women to save themselves for their wedding nights. Madness, death and worst awaited the young woman who lost her virtue before marriage. Yet, married women were expected to be passive and obedient, and to bear their husbands' faults, even their infidelities, with acceptance (Sanders 8). These ideals gave a moral justification for securing wifely subordination in the husband's absence. Only women could realize these virtues, and in return, with these virtues, could claim the esteem of the community.

Noting that, the cult of true womanhood and domesticity was supported from many institutions in the 19th century America: religion, literature, science and politics. Household manuals and books on child rearing flourished as Victorian authors attempted to create ideal mothers and perfect household managers. Men in the professions of law and medicine banded together and adopted codes that regulated the behavior of their members; these codes, like protective labor legislation, had the effect of excluding women from public activities in which they had formerly engaged (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 17). Even biologists and anthropologists used evolutionary theory to provide a scientific basis for the idea of separate spheres, and from the 1860s on, a plenty of essays, pamphlets and lectures were written to demonstrate how natural and sexual selection had operated to make women physically and mentally inferior to men.

Firstly, from religious perspective, women were expected to fill the vacuum left by the death of religious certainty, which accompanied the industrial nation, esteemed as the guardians of male virtue. The idea of virtue itself became in the mid-Victorian² period, in Mary Poovey's words, 'depoliticized, moralized, and associated with the domestic sphere, which was being abstracted at the same time [. . .] from the so-called public sphere of competition, self-interest, and economic aggression'(qtd. in King 13). Religion was seen as a remedy for the potentially restless

feminine spirit, which would guide women to accept their role as “handmaidens of the Lord” who would help to bring the world out of sin. This new role for woman was largely a response to the Second Great Awakening, a religious movement that swept the nation during the early 19th century. The clergy promoted women by praising their moral virtue, argued that women really benefited by escaping the hardship of obligations imposed on men (qtd. in M. Volo and Denneen Volo 219). Inversely, the same religion that praised women as the guardians of morals was the one that condemned and deprived her to the subordination of men.

Joining religious institutions, press and literature also promoted the cult of domesticity to keep women at home. The "mass media" of the day, magazines, newspapers, and popular literature spread the idea of separate roles for men and women to a large portion of the population. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, a number of women with a talent for writing fiction and verse spread the idea of "true womanhood" to thousands of female readers through sentimental poetry, stories and novels. The women in sentimental fiction were usually shown to be timid, dependent and tenderhearted (Sanders 10). Catharine Beecher, author and educator who made her mission in life to elevate the domestic role of women, considers self-sacrifice and the submission of the self to the common good as the highest virtue a person could possess. Since self-sacrifice was a virtue that came more naturally to women than to men, then women were the natural moral leaders of society (Barney 224). Beecher believed that all men had a set of “natural” rights that suited them for public governance, as “all women” had “natural” qualities that uniquely fitted them for governance at home (229). Perhaps even more influential than Catharine Beecher in promoting the idea of separate spheres was Sarah Josepha Hale, a journalist who, for over forty years, was the editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a magazine whose circulation reached 150,000 in 1860. *Godey's* provided the reader with advice on every aspect of domesticity: recipes for food, home medicines

and cleaning mixtures, instructions on table setting and napkin folding, child psychology, sewing, knitting and needlework patterns, home decoration ideas and women's fashions. In her editorials, Hale constantly asserted the God-given differences between the sexes: "The special gifts of God to men are mechanical ingenuity and physical strength. To women He had given moral, insight...and the patience that endures physical suffering" (Sanders 9).

When new sciences developed during the mid-nineteenth century, religion became less convincing, and while the explanations may have changed, the belief in sexual difference remained remarkably similar; they altogether support the cult of domesticity. Ironically, the same sciences that most threatened religious authority in some areas came to its side to support traditional ideas about gender (King 13). The work of Charles Darwin, in particular, reinforced the view that the differences between men and women extended beyond the reproductive system to secondary sexual characteristics. *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), primarily a work of anthropology, argues that only males evolve as a result of sexual selection. Because woman is not involved in the competitive process of sexual selection, she comes behind man in evolutionary terms. Darwin's view of evolution places her closer to the child than to the adult male (King 25). He argues that women, like the 'primitive' races, are like children compared to the evolved male adults of civilized races, since her superior qualities confirm her place on a lower stage of the evolutionary ranking. Darwin accepts the generally held view that 'with women the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man', only to argue that some of these faculties are 'characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization' (Quoted in King 25).

Likewise, social anthropologists, armed with the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, gave patriarchy scientific reinforcements by declaring that both history and evolution

allowed the subordination of women to men. Herbert Spencer, the most famous of the social Darwinists, argued that evolution had placed women in the home, and that the dictates of social survival necessitated defined sex roles and male domination. Like Darwin, Spencer based on the theory of “the conservation of energy” to argue that woman’s development was arrested because each organism had a limited amount of energy, with separate organs competing for limited resources, and the demands of the reproductive system meant woman had less available energy than man for intellectual and psychic growth (Miller 16). Moreover, in 1887, Edward Drinker Cope (1840–97), an American anatomist, presented a similar argument by reference to recapitulation theory, the idea that the development of the individual recapitulates the development of the species. In his view, because woman reaches maturity before man, her development is arrested at a less advanced stage, resulting in the preservation of primitive qualities, which males grow out of (King 18).

2- Early Feminism: Women in the Age of Reform

During the same period in which ideology of women's domesticity became prominent, opposing ideas also arose. Not all women in the early nineteenth century America were satisfied with their roles; they repeatedly complained, resisted, agitated, and fought to improve their positions. Female intellectuals and activists did not believe that women's only mission lay within the home, nor did they think that domesticity and motherhood make women unfit for full civil, intellectual, economic and political rights. They used elements of natural rights philosophy to emphasize women's similarities to men as abstract individuals with inalienable rights. Other activists used recent economic changes that brought women into the paid labor force to argue for civil and political rights. They believed that if women were taking on male obligations and doing men's work, then they deserved men's rights as well (Barney 225). In this section, I will explore

the different reforms that helped women to improve their status during the period 1870s- 1930s in the United States.

Luckily, within that primarily domestic world, women could and did create positive identities, possibilities of assertion of autonomy for themselves to shape their lives within their separate sphere. This separate sphere itself, served the feminist movement by providing an organizational network and positioning women as critics of social and economic change. In fact, as in *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), Nancy Cott suggested, women's experience within their separate sphere was a necessary requirement of feminism, which rested on the "bonds" of womanhood in the sense of women identifying with each other as a distinct group with common interest that were different from those of men. Female reformers, as extension to domestic activities, encouraged women to embody and protect society's moral needs. The mid-nineteenth-century women's rights movement grew directly out of those reform movements, most notably the temperance movement, abolitionism, and campaigns against prostitution (Barney 230).

Yet, such themes as the need to improve women's education, the demand for the expansion of women's employment, the case for the reform of the marriage laws, need actions, which went beyond the limits of their separate world. Here comes the role of "early feminism", the direct involvement in public issues. Feminism⁽³⁾ in its earliest form, generally referred as "woman question", was a movement in response to sex inequality, politically and socially, that urged women to come together and assert the values of self-determination and autonomy (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 29). The "women question" questioned the fundamental roles of women in America; issues of women's suffrage, reproductive rights, autonomy, property rights, legal rights, and marriage dominated culture.

For some intellectuals, however, the so-called the “woman-question” never referred to the suffrage or political issue, but to the cramped, dependent, anguished lives of women generally. Historian Gerda Lerner has distinguished between feminism as movements for ‘woman’s rights’, in the sense of civil and political equality, and feminism as ‘woman’s emancipation’, in the sense of a broader striving for ‘freedom from oppressive restrictions imposed by sex; self-determination; autonomy’ (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 30). Rebecca Harding Davis agreed with this emphasis. In her article “*Men’s Rights*” (1869), written for Putnam’s Magazine, Davis reveals uncertainty toward the woman’s rights movement; citing the desperate conditions of many women: prostitution, poverty, and women’s “sale” of themselves on the marriage market—are the real problem, “a tragedy more real to me than any other in life” (qtd. in Sizer 250). Mary Livermore’s understanding of the woman question from her experience in the Civil War, by contrast, led her to the political left. As historian Mari Jo Buhle has noted, her belief in an expanded destiny for women, whose potential had been tried by the national conflict, was shared by many (251).

There were intellectual influences in America in the early nineteenth, and even before, preparing women to think about their place in society and their relations with men. Abigail Adams was one of the first advocates for women’s rights in colonial America. When her husband, John was helping to draft the Declaration of Independence, she wrote to him in 1776 a private letter:

“Remember the Ladies” in “the new Code of-Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make... Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation” (Hewitt 89)..

In a response, John Adams made light of his wife’s plea, telling her, “I cannot but laugh [...] that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown

discontented” (Hewitt 90). When Adams and the other delegates signed the *Declaration of Independence*, the radical statement of equality specified men; American women would have to wait for long for their chance to equality. Like Abigail Adams, many feminists in each period raised many demands for marital, political, and economic equality; but in each period, only certain claims of feminists proved to have a chance for success (Jackson 220).

A wide variety of reforms gained strength in the first decades of the nineteenth century; among them were education and labor reforms. Equal education was a radical reform that attracted the attention of many reformers who believed that equal education would do more to improve women's status in society than voting rights (Baker 23). In her 1844 book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, the first American book to discuss at length woman's place in society, Margaret Fuller argued that a woman must develop as a whole person and not just in relation to a man; that she must have education and employment to enable her to be self-reliant and to develop self-respect. She believed that: “As the friend of the negro assumes that one man cannot by right hold another in bondage, so should the friend of Woman assume that Man cannot [...] lay even well-meant restrictions on Woman” (Sanders 3). She urged women to be able to hold any job, including political office: “We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man” (qtd. in Rossi 164).

As well, Mary Talbot in *Woman and Education*, believed that “the home does not stop at the street door — it is as wide as the world into which the individual steps forth” (Talbot 31). On the other hand, in her essay “*The Education and Employment of Women*” (1868), Josephine Butler claimed that education had great benefits not only to gender relations and society as a whole, but for those unmarried women too, she stated that:

They argue in favor of all which is likely to make women better mothers, or better companions for men, but they seem incapable of judging of a woman as a human being by herself, and superstitiously afraid of anything which might strengthen her to stand alone, prepared, single-handed, to serve her God and her country. When it is urged upon them that the women who do and must stand alone are counted by millions, they are perplexed, but only fall back on expressions of a fear lest a masculine race of women should be produced, if we admit any theories respecting them apart from conjugal and maternal relationships (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 96).

Consequently, with the hard work of American female reforms, education was the first area of progress for women during the nineteenth century. Eventually, the academy movement would lead to the establishment of the first women's colleges in the United States including *Georgia Female College 1836*, *Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania 1850*, and *Elmira Female College 1855*, among them (Sanders 3).

On labor issues, wage-earning women articulated a set of grievances centering on women's inequality at work: from unequal pay to unsafe and unsanitary working conditions and limited job options. By the 1830s, factory women were experiencing harsh conditions, longer hours, and wage cuts. In spite of the fact that women were stereotyped as unable to organize, female mill workers did go on strike, marching in processions through the streets. Pride in themselves as native-born "daughters of freemen", Women at the Lowell textile mills in Massachusetts, created a union in 1845—the *Lowell Female Labor Reform Association*. Hoping to improve working conditions, wage-earning women also testified before legislatures considering protective labor laws. Their concerns for the rights of working women found a place in the woman's rights movement (Baker 26). Unequal pay was clearly a problem facing women, but many woman's rights advocates argued that a more fundamental and persistent problem blocking women's full political citizenship and wage-earning opportunities was their inferior educational opportunities.

Women took a leading role also in the growth of the *Temperance movement* in the nineteenth century, claiming that male drinking causes domestic abuse, prostitution, and financial failure (Baker 23). Many women leaders tried to make a link between alcohol to make reform concerning divorce laws, but faced strong resistance. *The Women's Christian Temperance Union* (1873), proposed solutions included child labor laws, literacy and education, changes in the legal status of married women, pure food laws, as well as better housing, health care, and other social services (Barney 231). However, it was the abolitionist movement (1830-1870), that most firmly launched the women's rights movement. Opportunities for activism within this movement eventually led to the acceptance of women as public speakers to groups of men and women. Historian Miriam Sagan identifies that the most important lessons women learned as they operated separate non-male abolitionist societies, were how to organize and speak publicly. This was significant because, at that era, a woman disposed "to speak publicly was considered immodest and irreligious at best; at worst, she was said to have committed a crime against society and God" (Mountjoy and McNeese 41).

Abolitionist women were never more active than they were during the Civil War years, persuading the public and the federal government to free the slaves and to provide assistance and education to the freed people. Northern women wrote and distributed antislavery literature, protested against discriminatory laws and policies, circulated petitions to legislators to protect fugitive slaves and ban slavery, delivered public lectures, and raised money to support their activism (Sizer 04). In the literary mass market they actively engaged in what Jane Tompkins calls "cultural" and what Mary Poovey calls "ideological" work, finding an appropriate place of power and autonomy despite their social limitations (Harper 2). Another positive aspect of the participation in abolition, was relating it to suffrage; it served to strengthen both movements. The

troubles of women and slaves was similar: neither group held the rights of citizenship enjoyed by white men (Mountjoy and McNeese 70). Historian Nancy Cott also agrees about the emerging feminist consciousness in the America at that time, because of a recognition of a common bondage, and a common oppression of both groups: slaves and women (Bauer and Gould 49).

Still, the first formal meeting organized toward addressing gender inequality was the 1848 *Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls*, New York. At *Seneca Falls*, over 300 women and men met over three days to discuss the current state of women according to U.S. law and strategies to mobilize women across the country and foster serious change. There the attendees drafted the *Declaration of Sentiments*. This document, which adopted some terminology and turns of phrase of the U.S. Constitution, laid out the injustices of the current role of women in society, including their inability to own property, their subjugation to men, and their lack of political access, among others. The declaration was highly controversial even among women's rights advocates - many felt the harsh criticisms of male-dominated society and its ardent calls for reform of the existing order were too radical and might discourage other women from getting behind the movement. This meeting produced a program with three primary objectives: (1) to free the persons and property of married women from the absolute control of their husbands; (2) to open to all women opportunities for a sound and liberal higher education; and (3) to secure for women full political rights (Truxal and Merrill 88).

At this gathering, the convention's *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments and its Resolutions* embraced women's demands for equality in the home, the workplace, education, religion, public and political life (DuBois 23). The 1860s' *New York Married Women's Property Law* was the most significant legal victory of the pre-Civil War women's rights movement. The law expanded the property rights of women, that women as citizens were entitled to legal equality

with men (Harper 466). Equal wages, job opportunities, and shorter hours were also goals of the woman's rights movement because of the influence of working women. Women's claim to the right to vote was the most radical demand made at the convention. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, two key leaders of the women's rights movement, believed that educating the public was all-important to the progress of women in society. Stanton said, about the Declaration of Sentiments: "It will start women thinking, and men, too, and when men and women think about a new question, the first step is taken" (Baker 57).

Suffrage came to be seen as the best way to solve a variety of perceived social ills. Susan B. Anthony, in particular, argued that all other reform issues of concern to women should be given less attention. She and others believed that once women won the right to vote, they would instantly force the passage of laws that they had been demanding for decades (Baker 24). In her speech dated 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1848 *Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention Speech*:

Did I not believe that woman herself must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her own degradation. Man can not speak for her. . . . Here let me ask, how many truly harmonious households have we now? . . . There can be no true dignity or independence where there is subordination to the absolute will of another, no happiness without freedom. Let us then have no fears that the movement will disturb what is seldom found, a truly united and happy family (qtd. in Bomarito 119).

Without suffrage, women suffered indignities at the hands of those individuals who held political power. Women's participation in the political arena would serve to improve the world by protecting the rights of women and children domestically and promoting peace abroad (Mountjoy and McNeese 105).

The Civil War 1861 –1865 also marked a turning point for women and their role in society. In many ways, the coming of the war challenged the ideology of Victorian domesticity, inspired many American women to move beyond the comfort of their traditional roles, and expanded the

ideas about what their “proper place” should be (Slavicek 18). Once widely considered “the weaker sex,” emotionally as well as physically, women were officially banned from combat duty by the *Union and Confederate* governments during the *Civil War* (Slavicek 14). Nevertheless, they played a vital role in both the Northern and Southern war efforts. Their unpaid work as nurses, recruiters, fundraisers, seamstresses, cooks, and laundresses provided essential functions for the war. By performing these tasks, women fulfilled a need for labor and goods that would have otherwise drawn men from their positions on the battlefield (Frank xxii). Despite the hardships, frustrations, and very real dangers of Civil War nursing, however, nurses took comfort in the belief that their work was vitally important to their nation’s cause and to the suffering soldiers under their care. Union nurse Cornelia Hancock wrote to her sister from a Virginia field hospital in 1864. Still, she concluded, “I never was better in my life: certain I am in my right place” (Slavicek 36). Patriotism and concern for loved ones in the armed forces as well, inspired large numbers of American women to challenge traditional ideas of what was “female” behavior, and almost 400 women disguised themselves as men to enlist and fight for both the Union and Confederacy (Harper 292). Women from all classes risked their lives not only by becoming Nurses and soldiers, but also by serving—officially or unofficially—as scouts, messengers, guides, saboteurs and smugglers (Slavicek 44).

Positively, the Civil War had a greater effect on American women than any other conflict in the nation's history. “Woman” had offered “a hand, a foot, an eye, a voice, an influence, on the side of freedom and [her] country,” and this offering had created “a revolution in woman herself”, as Mary A. Livermore put it in 1882, in her book of the *History of Woman Suffrage* (Sizer 03). Women helped determine the outcome of the war and in turn were shaped by the events around them. Mary Elizabeth Massey wrote in *Women in the Civil War*: “Emotions, energies, and talents

that even they did not realize they possessed were unleashed". By the end war, these experiences had expanded many Americans' definitions of "true womanhood." During the war, women of all races and social classes gained a new sense of independence and confidence by taking part in civic and economic activities (Slavicek 36). Famous Civil War nurse Clara Barton (1821–1912), once claimed that the war placed women fifty years ahead of where they would have been otherwise in American society (Baker 55). Most women found that they enjoyed the freedom and independence they had discovered through their wartime experiences, thus refused to return to traditional roles after the war, and instead chose to continue their education or to become politically active. The change was a welcome one for many women who savored their newly acquired independence and emerging feelings of self-worth" (57).

All these efforts and reforms introduced to a new century for women. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a new concept come to define women called the "New Woman"⁽⁴⁾, which changed the image of fragile, stereotype of the woman of Victorian Era. The New Women, according to Sarah Jane Deutsch, were portrayed as "women with short hair and short skirts . . . kicking up their legs and kicking off a century of social restrictions" (Bomarito vol.4 147). The New Women enjoyed most things that nineteenth-century women were excluded from: less domestic obligations, greater education and higher aspirations. By 1900, more than one-half million young women had high school degrees, which was considerably higher than the number of men with degrees (Matthews 16). A guidebook for girls declared, "there has never been a period in the world's history when a girl was of more importance than she is just now . . . Some of our most able writers tell us that we are just on the threshold of 'the woman's century' " (Jackson 202).

The number of women who worked outside the home in the 1920s rose almost 50 percent throughout the decade. According to historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, the New Woman not only

avoided marriage, “she fought for professional visibility, espoused innovative, often radical, economic and social reforms, and wielded real political power.” It was “her quintessentially American identity, her economic resources, and her social standing” that “permitted her to defy proprieties, pioneer new roles, and still insist upon a rightful place within the genteel world” (Ware 245). Many hoped to merge marriage with career, as did one in five professional women in 1920, one in four in 1930, and more thereafter. The birthrate dropped from seven in 1800 to three and a half in 1900 (Ware 260). Innovators of the 1920s included birth control campaigners. In the pre-World War I era, Margaret Sanger had opened a birth control clinic, courted arrest, lectured across the country, and generated an avid response. Women were “awakening up all over the nation,” a St Louis woman wrote to Sanger in 1916, “and waiting for someone to lead the way”. Birth control remained a controversial cause, one that neither wing of the women’s movement endorsed; it also rested on a shaky foundation until legalized by a federal court decision in 1936 (Matthews 15).

3- American Women and Literature From 1870s to 1930s

From the rise of the periodical in the sixteenth century to the rise of literary criticism in the twentieth century, American women writers made significant contributions to literature in general, and fiction in particular. Women’s fiction in America going through the causes that led women to create their own fiction under the idea of the New Woman. Despite being denied the educational opportunities afforded to men, many women were able to express themselves in writing before the nineteenth century. Most early writing of female authors centered on spirituality, like prayers and translations of religious works (Bomarito and Hunter 1: 193). With the increasing availability of print in the nineteenth century; the literary marketplace expanded, and many women prove that they could compete and emerge on top, by writing journals, essays, letters and fiction (MacGowan 60).

Besides the social reform movements led by nineteenth-century women, such as abolitionism, temperance, and suffrage, which gave women writers a context, an audience, and a forum in which they could express their views; women's access to higher education also increased during the century, providing them with skills to develop their writings (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 89). As a result, the number of published women authors was greater in the nineteenth century than in any preceding century. By the 1850s, women were authors of almost half of the popular literary works; and by 1872, women wrote nearly three-quarters of all of the novels published in America. Women authors were very popular and prominent in the nineteenth century, and many critics and historians considered the nineteenth century was the Age of the "Female Novelist" (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 147).

However, the pursuit of writing as a career was challenging for most American women in the nineteenth century. On December 17, 1877, *H. O. Houghton and Company*, publishers of the *Atlantic Monthly*, celebrated the twentieth anniversary of their literary magazine. Among the sixty guests were such famous writers as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Mark Twain. Women, as a considerable percentage of the Atlantic contributors, were missing: they had not been invited to the celebration (Coultrap-McQuin 2). In many respects, the absence of women from the Atlantic dinner reflected the paradoxical nature of nineteenth-century beliefs about women writers. According to the most conservatives proponents of True Womanhood, being a True Woman was incompatible with being a woman writer. As one such commentator said, "If women were wise they would understand that they have a mission quite as grand as that of literary authorship. It is the mission of keeping alive for men certain ideas, and ideals too, which would soon pass out of the world" (qtd. in Casper, Chaison and Groves 182). Yet, even when women are accepted as writers, they have to respond to the norms of True

womanhood, mainly as a guardian of the cultural, religious, and moral values of Victorian society in America.

In the first place, the ideal writer was supposed to write for noble reasons; that to teach good morals, not because he needed money or he wanted fame. This ideal of the leisured writer was well suited with social expectations for middle-class women writers in the nineteenth century America. The "genteel amateur" was the term to describe the woman whose talents were supposed to be used for the entertainment of others; in this sense at least, her literary career did not challenge the expectations of her sphere (Coultrap-McQuin 14). Like ideal woman, "respectable" writer was expected to be above commercial concerns; to be both a model and a teacher of good morals, and her role is to preserve the noncommercial values of love, hope, and charity in "a secular age fascinated with business, competition, and endless expansion" (II). As a result, the majority of women writers preferred to present themselves as leisured amateurs who wrote for morals, not for money. Even though many of them wrote to support themselves, they did confess publicly the economic motivations behind their careers. In 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote angrily, "America is now wholly given over to a d----d Mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash" (qtd. in Adams 22). Hawthorne's anger towards the "ink-stained" women who wrote "trash" and who "prostitute[d]" themselves to the public, because they were threatening his own authorship. However, scholar Nancy Armstrong argued that, "the figure of the prostitute could be freely invoked to describe any woman who dared to labor for money" (Amireh 99).

Likewise, reviewers and publishers of the era created idealized descriptions of literary women, and praised most highly those writings that kept women in their sphere, as models for other women to follow. They usually argued that "women ought to write not as individuals, but as exemplars of

their sex" (Coultrap-McQuin 12). As scholar Nina Baym has pointed out, most critics accepted women as writers as long as their works made clear their primary identification as True Women (14). Ironically, while women were expected to write of domestic scenes, yet, they were criticized for doing so. Works by women writers were usually not recognized as greater than or equal to men's. One critic complained that "the majority of lady writers do not rise above the atmosphere of the tea-table, which is the element of the common novel, and have a constant downward tendency towards the kitchen" (16).

The greatest writers were assumed to have a wide knowledge of the world, to be educated and to be familiar with many people and places, and such knowledge was more accessible to and assumed more appropriate for men. Women writers who dared to write like men, in return, were stereotyped as "strong-minded" women whose intelligence made them "tough, aggressive, pedantic, vain, and ugly" (Coultrap-McQuin 22). Even though these patriarchal perspectives did not completely define women's options nor their views of themselves in the world, still, the fact they strongly influenced their choices, and sometimes defined their careers. Kate Chopin, for instance, was one of the writers who broke these conventional ideals of her time, yet, her literary career was destroyed "just when she was nearing the summit of success" (Scofield 98).

Whereas most scholars agree that Chopin case served as a warning to many writers in her time, they also agree that as the century progressed, an increasing number of women continue to express, in their writing, their dissatisfaction with gender relations and the troubles of women in general. Toward the end of the century, the "New Woman Fiction" emerged, and women writers expanded their subject matter, highlighting the lives and hardships suffered by women locked in domestic prisons. Scholars argued that it was in the nineteenth century that gender consciousness and feminist attitudes first came to the forefront of the literary imagination, changing forever how the

works of female authors would be written and regarded (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 89). Many women's novels of the period suggest that writers felt confident about women's ability to overcome obstacles in their lives, and increasingly expressed their individualism and demanded more equal partnerships, in marriage, public life, law, and politics with men in their fiction.

In her book *Woman's Fiction* (1978), Nina Baym explains that the themes of “New Women Fiction” tend to depict heroines struggling for independence through unconventional means of support (becoming a prostitute, a mistress, or an “actress”); independence through authorship, and a struggle against the perceived limitations of conventional marriage (Thompson 158). The stories, as Baym suggests, reflect the self-confidence and seriousness about women's lives that women writers themselves often showed (Baym 12). And unlike the Domestic fiction, which praised marriage as happy ending, the “New Woman’s Fiction” generally portrays the dilemma of a middle-class woman trapped in an unhappy marriage, which is the core of this thesis, and goes so far as to suggest that perhaps even the best marriage may be bad for women because it destroy their creative spirit. Stories by Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton offer powerful examples of marriage as a disaster, leading to imprisonment, insanity, or death as we will explore later (Thompson 197).

- **Women Writers and Literary Movements: Regionalism, Realism and Modernism**

The period 1870–1930 witnessed great change in the literary canon. The age of Regionalism, Realism, and Naturalism begins with the end of the Civil War and concludes with the beginning of World War I. Many women writers participated in the tradition of literary Realism and its offshoots, Regionalism and local-color fiction. The “local color” or “regionalism” referring to the literature of the United States, starts before the civil war, but the full flowering of the movement came later, especially in the 1890s. It was a historical moment in which there was

good reason for Americans to focus their attention on social relations (Thompson 123). Local-color writers and, later, Realists tended to make their appeal directly to the everyday reader, whose literary judgment was based upon common experience (Scharnhorst and Quirk 158). Women writers were particularly skilled in this literary school. This genre paved the way for the literary careers of many women writers, since the primary place for women's publishing was through the periodical that favored regionalist stories. Regional fiction, such as the short-story collections of Kate Chopin, set its characters' situations in the context of a specific culture— thus revealing social history, and women's daily lives (Thompson 27). Local-color fiction also incorporated supernatural elements because of the prominence of ghosts within regional folklore, and women writers used of the ghost tale as a means of challenging conventional gender roles and locate the Gothic within a feminist tradition. This form allowed women writers, such as Wharton, Freeman, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Willa Cather, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, more freedom to explore issues of sexuality and victimization than could be asserted in their more realistic fiction (Scharnhorst and Quirk 5).

The Rise of Realism as well, buried romanticism, and began to be noticed as a specific understanding of fiction's social role and responsibilities (Lamb and Thompson 16). For women, this genre seems to be appropriate, primarily because realism tends to be more interested in the dynamics of gender and social relationships within specific kinds of communities, unlike some forms of romantic fiction in which women play minor roles. These writers shared a concern with depicting the way women succeed or fail in a world that is largely controlled by men, within the institution of marriage (Scharnhorst and Quirk 73). These authors also opened up a path that would be followed by Edith Wharton, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Katherine Anne Porter, and others (Bendixen and Nagel 15).

Likewise, both as writers and a class, women were influenced with and affected by Modernism. “Some people,” a reporter for the *New York Sun* commented in the 1920s, “think that women are the cause of modernism, whatever that is.” Known as the “Jazz Age,” “The Roaring Twenties,” “The Era of Wonderful Nonsense”, Modernism was the major movement associated with the years 1914 to 1945, a time when authors broke sharply with the past in form, themes, or both. For many observers, there was a connection between modernism as a process of social transformation, modernism as a cultural movement, and feminism, the emergence of the “new woman” (Gray 313). Remarkably, many nineteenth century women writers, including Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton, were most active and influential as writers and artists, in the early twentieth century. Edith Wharton, for instance was building a bridge between the preoccupations of the nineteenth century and those of the twentieth (327).

Clearly, there was a change in the style and content of women’s writing, as well as an increase in the depiction of feminine images and themes in literature. The aim of modernism was to place questions of achieve or move toward newer, more appropriate means of recognition, to enable writer and reader to begin to see things properly, truly again. Thus, female writers moved toward working on themes focused on topics associated to women, bringing attention to the countless difficulties they faced redefining their identities in a changing world. Some critics argue, that the “modern novel,” could be viewed as near synonymous with the novel about the “developing” modern woman (Matthews 38). The desire for something more that leads the young woman to seek a more exciting life in the big city; a frequent theme in women’s fiction, which suggests that there is always another level of success to be attained (Stoneley and Weinstein 41). Interrogation of social values, a validation of characters’ right to be free, the open ending, leaving

the reader to draw what conclusions seemed likely or at least palatable, became all features of late nineteenth-century women's writing – and of nearly all modernist writing to follow (Lamb and Thompson 146).

- **American Women Writers With the Periodicals and Short Fiction**

The third decade of the nineteenth century had known an outstanding rise of magazine and literary periodicals. The number of magazines being published in America, according to estimates by the historian Frank Luther Mott, was more than tripled in the fifteen years between 1865 and 1880. Significantly, magazines' relationship to literature was strong; magazines printed far more fiction than they do in the twentieth century. By Mott's calculations, in the early 1870s a third of their pages were filled with serialized novels and short stories, and that percentage increased in the decades that followed (Lamb and Thompson 119). The major mid-nineteenth-century magazines were closely tied to book publishers, they served as places where the publisher could test public reaction to a new work before bringing out a collection or novel by its writer (Lauter 343). By 1870, almost all novelists with a reputation sold their works to periodicals first, before book publication. Mass circulation magazines of the early to mid-twentieth century offered authors significant financial rewards, and writers often made far more from magazine publication than from the book (350). Besides Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton was one writer who benefitted greatly from the new, high circulation magazines. She began her professional writing career in 1889 with *Scribner's Magazine* (351).

Moreover, many American women writers from various social backgrounds, writing fiction to inspire reform, understood that the best way to make themselves and their ideas known was through the periodicals. Such change through the periodical underscore Margaret Fuller's

observation that the periodical was the “only efficient instrument for the general education of the people”, she stated that:

The most important part of our literature, while the work of diffusion is still going on, lies in the journals, which monthly, weekly, daily, send their messages to every corner of this great land, and form, at present, the only efficient instrument for the general education of the people (Quoted in Cane and Alves 11).

Fuller realized that women, among others, could make their voices most clearly heard in the dominant culture from the pages of newspapers and magazines as well. Like Fuller suggested, many American women writers and editors employ the periodicals for social and political advocacy, as well as for the critique of gender roles and social expectations (Cane and Alves 2). When Sarah Josepha Hale became editor of the new *Godey's*, she articulated a wish to encourage American authors, especially women, to use the journal to speak to issues concerning women (3).

Consequently, protest magazine existed, and were read and edited by women. The *Lily*, the *Forerunner*, the *Woman's Journal*, and the *Progressive Woman* represent a focused type of protest journal aimed largely at middle-class, self-educated, white women who were concerned with many social causes. Although at its peak garnered only 1,500 subscribers, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's journal, the *Forerunner* (1909 –16) was one of many small, significant woman's protest periodicals at the turn of the century. The magazines relied on sentimental, or “feminine,” literary formulae to attract readers to their point of view (Cane and Alves 7). Gilman subverted the themes so that the short stories no longer focused on marriage and domestic relations as the culmination of a woman's life. As Gilman wrote in *Our Androcentric Culture* (serialized in the first volume of the *Forerunner* (1909 –10), “love and love and love — from ‘first sight’ to marriage. There it stops —just the fluttering ribbon of announcement, ‘and they lived happily ever after’ Is that kind of

fiction any sort of picture of a woman's life?" So, Gilman used her magazine to fight against the androcentric culture (8).

Protest magazines, however, were certainly not the only periodicals available to American women writers. Nineteenth- and early twentieth century women contributed to high-culture and popular magazines in great numbers. Although many writers, such as Stowe, Chopin, and Gilman aspired to write for the *Atlantic* or *Harper's*, the magazines of high culture, most often they wrote for the popular magazines that accepted works that could be written formulaically and quickly. Popular magazines also paid the authors more per article or per page, and many women authors very much needed the income from their work (Cane and Alves 10).

It is important to mention also that the short story form itself emerged in the United States as a feature of the literary magazines. As 'a national art form', like writer Frank O'Connor call it, the short story existed before in America with different forms, included fables, parables, and Oriental tales, but not until the rise of periodicals was there a market to encourage and sustain its production. In America, as a new nation, short fiction seemed well adapted to the limited leisure of a practical, industrious people occupied with the nation building. Embodied the new style of writing which demanded brevity and condensation; the short story privileged incident over character development or social panorama. An economic factor also encouraged the production of short fiction: periodicals offered cash for stories, providing a market for writers delayed from book publication by the absence of an international copyright law (Lamb and Thompson 156).

In many respects, the short story was the ideal form for treating the life of the isolated individual; the 'Little Man' and the 'submerged population group'; which are typical of those of ordinary life but hardly demand the developed treatment of the novel (Scofield 8). In his study of the short story *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor argued that the story's accessibility to new

writers whose cultural participation might be limited, its portrayal of characters on the edges of society, and its revolutionary potential all suggest that the short story should, as a genre, be better adapted to promoting social change than the novel (O'Connor 52). Unlike the traditional novelists, the short story writer usually does not bring his powers to answer questions of where are we going, why are we here. Rather, he focuses his attention on one side of man's experience; he illuminates briefly one dark corner or depicts one aspect of life (Werlock XI).

For women, the short story offers one way for them, since they have little access to the publishing sphere to participate in the literary world. The short story can be the genre of "submerged population group", as O'Connor describes it, since it provides a means for new voices to be heard and read; members of the working classes, people of color, women, any of the marginalized members of society (Bostrom 35). Mary Louise Pratt also noted that the story genre is particularly friendly to writers who are new to the literary scene, such as women and minorities, in a way that most other traditional genres are not (Goyet 151). Besides, feminist theorists who study the way in which women gain knowledge have suggested that the story serves as a way to explain the "empowering knowledge" that women share outside patriarchal structures; a way that women come to know the world (Bostrom 06).

Another reason why women prefer short stories, that financially they found this genre to be the best option for supporting themselves; stories simply sold better and paid more. Furthermore, shorter forms are better suited to women writers; as Sarah Jewett said, "the short story did not take so long to write, it was easier" (Bomarito Vol. 2 318). Virginia Woolf observed in *A Room of One's Own*, that women are "constantly be interrupted in their domestic and childcare duties, and fiction requires less concentrated attention than either drama or poetry" (Woolf 78). Even contemporary writers find truth in this statement. Sue Miller, in her introduction to the 2002 Best

American Short Stories volume, explains that Woolf's statement held true in her own life: "I wound up writing short stories," she recounts, "because I didn't feel I had the time or the imaginative energy left to me—after being a mother, having a job, and running a house—to undertake the longer kind of work, the work of the novel, to which I felt more suited" (Bostrom xviii).

Yet, women writers were criticized for this as well. The magazine forms were inferior forms, the product, for the most part, of youth or of women who as a rule were restricted to them "by reason of their more restricted lives and necessarily narrower outlook on the world" (Pattee 296). Some critics also believe that the short story is the genre of an apprentice writer—that is, a writer only writes short stories until he can mature into a fully formed novelist. However, replying to those who believe that the short story is easy to write because of its brevity, John T. Matthews is careful to state that "[t]he Short-story is a high and difficult department of fiction" (Matthews 26). Similarly, Frank O'Connor declares that the short story writer must be "more of a writer" and "more of an artist" than a novelist in order to represent a world within the confines of a brief text (O'Connor 97).

Still, American women produced great short stories. The short story offered a uniquely rich field for feminine writers and their increasing numbers and their product was a noteworthy phenomenon of the period. In 1895, William Dean Howells, reviewing eight current short-story collections, was surprised with the fact that "the artistry of the women seems finer than that of the men", and in his volume, *Criticism and Fiction*, he assumed:

An interesting fact in regard to the different varieties of the short story among us is that the sketches and studies by the women seem faith-fuller and more realistic than those of the men, in proportion to their number. Their tendency is more distinctly in that direction, and there is a solidity, an honest observation, in the work of such women, which often leaves little to be desired (Qtd. in Pattee 328).

Writers like Kate Chopin, without models, study or even revision, and usually at a sitting, produced wonderful masterpieces of short pieces; focusing primarily on the character and the exploration of the complex relationships between men and women within a social community. Charlotte Perkins Gilman also published genius short stories, to advance equitable gender relations. Gilman published many of her roughly two hundred stories in *The Forerunner*, the monthly she edited from 1909 to 1916 (Lamb and Thompson 168).

However, because women writers in the 1890s began to write about topics associated with New Woman fiction such as unhappy marriage, divorce, death, “fallen” women, seduction, betrayal and adultery, many of them faced trouble in getting their work published and acknowledged without harm to their person or reputation. Critics were merciless when it came to published works of women, and female authors were always women first, writers second, as Showalter stated (Showalter *A Literature of Their Own* 73). Some of important women were erased from the American literary tradition like Kate Chopin, or being denied the literary achievements and only shown in other works like Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Well-known writers such as Willa Cather or Edith Wharton continued to be read; but their work was increasingly seen as a distinctively *female* achievement. Writers who had “disappeared” from the canon and were no longer in print were judged to have been worthless (Koloski 47). Luckily, thanks to the efforts of the feminist movement of the past decade, women authors are being discovered and rediscovered, largely by women literary critics. In the fever to publish “lost” and “neglected” works by U.S. women writers including Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Edith Wharton, scholars felt an urgency to bring more works and biographies of lost works and details about lost lives back into print.

4- Women Writers and the Quest for Autonomy for: Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton

- **Kate Chopin's Journey with Female Awakening**

Kate Chopin, for example, is credited for being one of the first popular feminist authors, and she is now recognized as an important figure of the nineteenth-century American fiction. Yet, most scholars agree that she was too much of a pioneer to be accepted in her time. When, in 1894, Chopin published her first short story collection, her work received high praises; "A writer needs only the art to let these stories tell themselves", the *New York Times* wrote of *Bayou Folk* (Toth 127). "It is not an art easily acquired, but Kate Chopin has practiced it with force and charm in the several stories of her agreeable book", The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* said; and "There is not a weak line or a page which will not improve with every new reading" (Ewell 40). Her second collection, *A Night in Acadie* (1897), obtained a similarly positive reception. Hence, and counting on her national reputation, Kate Chopin published *The Awakening* in 1899, thinking that she would achieve similar success, but she misjudged the mood of the country.

It is true that her short stories with unconventional themes were published at that time, but most of them appeared in conservative magazines. *The Awakening*, however, went out beyond the limits "and this was America, not France", Bernard Koloski argues: "It was one thing for Guy de Maupassant, George Sand or Émile Zola to write in French about women exploring sex and adultery, it was a different thing for Kate Chopin to do that in English in America" (Koloski 161). The public opinion turned against her, and "the scandalous" novel was widely condemned, mainly because it rejects the Victorian conventions, and discuss openly female sexuality, adultery, depression, and suicide. The review, in Kate Chopin's hometown *St. Louis Republic*, called *The Awakening* "the story of a lady most foolish" (Bomarito III: 102). In Saint Louis, where she lived

for most of her life, the Fine Arts Club denied membership to her; *The Awakening* was removed from circulation “by express order of the librarian in the Saint Louis Mercantile Library”; her third collection of short stories "*A Vocation and a Voice*" never found a publisher; and several of her strongest late short stories were never printed at all during her lifetime (Wolff 200). Public morality had been protected, and Kate Chopin was effectively silenced.

Chopin died in 1904, never to know that her novel would achieve great success in the next decades. In 1932, Daniel Rankin, a Marist priest from her town, published the first Chopin biography: ‘an original genius’, he called her, who “writes poetic realism’ with ‘exquisite care’, and ‘remarkable skill with dialect’, and there is ‘truth in all her writings’ (Toth 243). However, he was convinced that her importance as a writer comes from her regionalist stories, as *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories*, was the title of his 1932’s book. Yet, his influence was great, and Scholars accepted what he said and repeated his judgments: “Kate Chopin was a first-rate local colorist, a fine realist, a brilliant writer of short stories. *The Awakening* was an unfortunate mistake”, some critics said (Beer “The Cambridge” 162).

In 1946, Cyrille Arnavon, a French scholar who had written an article about Chopin and the first who translates *The Awakening* into French in 1953, met a Norwegian graduate student at Harvard, Per Seyersted, and introduced to him Chopin’s works. Seyersted spent years in the United States gathering materials, and in 1969, Louisiana State University Press published his *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* and his edition *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, with a foreword by the great American critic Edmund Wilson, who praised Chopin for her works:

The great achievement of Kate Chopin was that she broke new ground in American literature. She was the first woman writer in her country to accept passion as a legitimate subject for serious, outspoken fiction. Revolting against tradition and authority; with a daring which we can hardly fathom today; with an uncompromising honesty and no trace

of sensationalism, she undertook to give the unsparing truth about woman's submerged life. She was something of a pioneer in the amoral treatment of sexuality, of divorce, and of woman's urge for an existential authenticity. She is in many respects a modern writer, particularly in her awareness of the complexities of truth and the complications of freedom. With no desire to reform, but only to understand; with the clear conscience of the rebel, yet embittered by society's massive lack of understanding (qtd. in Koloski 165).

Chopin was back, and her fiction found a firm place in the American literary canon; her stories become essential in anthologies, theoretical applications, and dissertations. Biographers and scholars, such as Emily Toth, Bernard Koloski, Barbara Ewell, Janet Beer, and others, worked to make Chopin as one of the most widely read female authors of the nineteenth century.

Certainly, Chopin would not have acquired such a reputation without the insights and influence of Per Seyersted. Emily Toth, a professor of English and women's studies at Louisiana State University and one of the important Chopin's scholars, claimed that Chopin revival was successful because it was supported by powerful men: the great literary critic Edmund Wilson and the professor Per Seyersted (Koloski 21). They make her fiction acceptable for other men to read the book. Another factor that helped this success is that Seyersted's books were published in 1969, the time of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Chopin's frank treatment of female desire and autonomy, the dissatisfactions of marriage and motherhood, and the importance of artistic expression met perfectly with the concerns of the women's movement (Ostman and O'Donoghue 16).

The importance of *The Awakening* as a revolutionary feminist text defines Chopin's place within the American literary canon, however, when *The Awakening* was rescued, Chopin's short fiction heritage was manifested as well. Most Chopin's scholars agree that her principal métier was the short story; in her lifetime and in the first half century after her death, it was also the basis for her reputation. Even more significant, the short story served as a source of her self-confidence

as a writer. Critic Barbara C. Ewell claimed that the brilliance of *The Awakening* obscured Chopin's mastery of the short story, and that is not fair to reduce her accomplishment to a single novel (Koloski 37). Moreover, Ewell emphasizes that: "we learn much about *The Awakening* from the short stories through which Chopin honed her craft—the backstories of recurring characters, the connotations of settings like New Orleans's neighborhoods or Grand Isle, the repetition of resistant females and their fates, the links between nature and sexuality" (38).

A popular local colorist during her lifetime, Kate Chopin was born Katherine O'Flaherty on February 8, in St. Louis, Missouri. Although her tombstone lists her birthdate as 1851, Emily Toth, one of Chopin's major biographers, proved that her baptismal record shows that she was born on 8 February 1850 (Toth 268). She was the daughter of Eliza Faris O'Flaherty and Thomas O'Flaherty, an Irish immigrant and wealthy businessman (Bomarito III: 74). Her mother was a true Creole of the kind who frequently appear in Chopin's fiction. At five, her father was killed in a train accident, Kate was brought home, and her grandmother and great-grandmother moved in – making three generations of women who were widowed young and never remarried (Beer 13). Thomas O'Flaherty left his family well off, and Kate grew up in a matriarchy, where women handled their own money and made their own decisions, which kept Kate from growing up in the typical nineteenth century patriarchal household, in which "a powerful husband ruled the roost" (Toth 10).

She was less familiar with the typical marital relationships of the Victorian era than many of her contemporaries, and she was sixteen before she ever lived with a married couple again, and so she had little opportunity to form traditional notions about marriage and submissive wives (Beer 13). Her great-grandmother, Victoria Charleville, undertook to teach Kate how to face life honestly, without false consciousness and without embarrassment, and she was a source of Kate's

revolt against the double standard (Snodgrass 107). Madame Charleville knew all about the strongest motives of human existence: greed, power, lust, and maternal love, but the greatest lesson, one her great-granddaughter repeated so tellingly in her later stories, was that a woman had to be independent (Toth 10). In the end, Chopin received an unconventional education from her great-grandmother, and the female community that surrounded her left its mark on her fiction, which often turns around the struggles of female protagonists to reconcile the demands of marriage, family, and social obligations.

Another important factor of Kate's special education was the Sacred Heart Academy, which she joined again in 1866, where teachers and role models and student leaders were all women and girls. She saw women doing everything, daringly expressing their opinions, and the education there was more academically challenging and more innovative about women's roles. Their curriculum aimed to create "intelligent, active, unselfish women, with minds and hands trained for the sphere in which God has placed them, whether it be home-life or some wider social field " (Toth 155). The students were to "take part intelligently in conversation," write interesting and correct letters, and discuss scientific discoveries and current events. In short, the Sacred Heart students were not being trained to be wives, at least in the traditional American sense. They were trained to become "companions intellectually of their husbands, mothers fit for their sublime trust, women able to bear life's responsibilities and courageous to meet them", and this what would shape Kate later in her marriage (156).

Two years after graduating from the Sacred Heart Academy in St. Louis in 1868, Kate met Oscar Chopin, and in 1870 they get married (Bomarito III: 74). After they produced six children in nine years, his business failed and they moved in 1879 to a French-speaking village in north Louisiana called Cloutierville ("Cloochoyville"), a hamlet in Natchitoches (pronounced Nack-uh-

tush) Parish, where he managed part of the family plantation. During her years in this remote part of Louisiana, Kate became intimately acquainted with the Cane River Creoles, Cajuns, and Negroes ⁽⁵⁾. The Natchitoches planters admired her, and her poorer neighbors considered her as a "Lady Bountiful" who listened kindly to their problems. Later in her fiction, she expressed much of what she observed, and this gave her short stories the rich, specific detail that provide them the label "local color" fiction (Toth 89).

While Chopin would frequently depict fictional women who feel restricted by their husbands, there is little evidence that she was dissatisfied with her own marriage. According to all accounts, "she was a perfect wife and mother," says Seyersted, and her marriage was a happy one. As for the marriage: "Kate was devoted to Oscar and thought him perfect". Another informant, Mrs. John S. Tritle agreed: "Kate was very much in love with her Oscar," and she and her husband always preferred each other's company to anyone else's (Seyersted 73). During their marriage, Kate acted as independent woman. She never thought of herself as anything but her husband's equal: she enjoyed an exceptional degree of freedom to determine her own role in marriage (Unger 205). As for Oscar Chopin also, he always considered his wife as an equal, encouraging her to plan an interesting and independent life for herself and treating her as intelligent friend and beloved wife. His relatives often blamed him for allowing her to forget her "duty"; but Oscar and Kate merely laughed together over these comments (Toth 52).

However, in 1882, Oscar came down with a sudden, violent attack of swamp fever; within days, he was dead, and at thirty-one Kate Chopin was left a widow. She was desperately lonely, but for more than a year, she capably managed the business that her husband left (Wolff 207). In widowhood Chopin experienced severe personal and economic stress, which she relieved by reading books by Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer, and she began

questioning the benefits of certain values and ethical constraints imposed by society on human nature and especially on women (Bomarito III: 75). Despite Chopin's success as a widow in Louisiana, her mother urged her to bring the children home to St. Louis, so she moved just a year after Oscar's death. Her mother, who was a confidante and supporter, gave her an uncommon sense of security about her own point of view, and for the rest of her life, Kate Chopin would be thinking about women's loyalty to women (Beer 19). Yet, her mother's death broke her again; and she was alone with her deep sorrow. When she emerged from this dark period, Chopin became a popular young woman. She was interested in the "woman question" and very independent in her own attitudes, but not attracted to causes or movements (Wolff 206). In 1904, on a very hot day, Chopin rallied to enjoy the St. Louis World's Fair; but she had a cerebral hemorrhage and died on 22 August (Sylvester 106).

Chopin did not work seriously at her fiction until she was a widow and had returned to St. Louis, Missouri. Under the influence of Frederick Colbenheyer, her family doctor, she stopped being a practicing Catholic and took up her study of Darwin, Huxley and Spencer. Later he suggested to her to try writing fiction and in 1888, she hesitatingly began two stories (Boriçi 248). In May 1889, Kate Chopin offered her first completed story to the *Home Magazine*, and in September 1890, she published her first novel *At Fault* in St. Louis at her own expenses. In reviewing the novel, St. Louis critics praised the author's style, but criticized the book on moral grounds. Encouraged by her success, she soon finished a second novel, but after a number of publishers refused it, she later destroyed it. She succeeded more with her stories, which soon appeared locally, then in national children's magazines, and from 1893 in well-known periodicals as *Vogue*, the *Century* and the *Atlantic*. In 1894, with the publication of *Bayou Folk*, a collection of 23 stories by Houghton Mifflin & Co., Chopin became a master of Regionalism (Toth 381).

Reviewers praised her mastery of the dialects and picturesque of rural life. William Marion Reedy, editor of *Sunday Mirror*, judged her Louisiana stories to be better than those of George Washington Cable and declared that the collection was “the best literary work that has come out of the Southland in a long time” (qtd. in Toth 382). However, Chopin was disappointed with the *Bayou Folk* reviews, as she noted in her diary, few showed ‘anything like a worthy critical faculty’. Reviewers saw regional charm in her stories but did not recognize how many stories are about “women without men – women who are kind and selfless, often in the face of great cruelty”. One superficial reviewer even wrote that ‘In Sabine’ is ‘full of humor’! (Toth 153).

Her second collection of stories, *A Night in Acadie*, was published in 1897, by Way & Williams, in Chicago, was in some ways, a continuation of *Bayou Folk*; the second volume shares the same Louisiana locales and even some of the same characters appeared in the first collection. However, as Barbara Ewell notes, in *A Night in Acadie* "Chopin's bayou world persists, but its romance and charm seem diminished, its happy endings muted. In fact, there are both fewer love stories and fewer tragic conclusions than before" (Koloski 94). In short, this is more mature, more daring work, and Emily Toth points out that several of the stories show women experiencing "awakenings" of various kinds. The collection received less notice than its predecessor did, because as Toth stated, both these Franco-American women “knew a thing or two that conventional Americans did not want to hear” (Benbow-Pfalzgraf 298).

For publication of her stories, she set her sights on the magazines that had the ability to make a writer's reputation on the national level: the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper*, and *Century magazine*. Yet, because these periodicals were conservative and respectable, the editors considered some of Chopin's themes too daring, and she rarely succeeded in publishing her work there (Kort 52). By 1894, Chopin had found the editor who would publish her most radical and subversive

stories. Josephine Redding, who headed a new magazine called *Vogue*, was “an unconventional independent woman who believed that society ladies would appreciate ironic and pithy revelations about women’s lives and secret thoughts” (Toth 172). Alone among magazines of the 1890s, *Vogue* published fearless and truthful portrayals of women's lives, and with *Vogue*, Kate Chopin did not have to pretend to be unambitious, or to love housework above all things; and there she published the critical, brilliant stories about women for which she is best known today. *Vogue's* openness delighted Kate Chopin, but it may also have betrayed her, because it makes her think, unwittingly, that *The Awakening* would be welcome in the 1890s (Toth 173).

A common misconception about Chopin is that she took neither her writing nor herself as an author very seriously; however, Chopin scholars, especially Per Seyersted and Emily Toth, proved the opposite through profound research of her public and private documents. Although Chopin herself propagated a public image of herself as a spontaneous writer who writes ‘completely at the mercy of unconscious selection’ and without much self-discipline, her letters and manuscripts, as Toth and Seyersted show, reveal a “highly disciplined, ambitious writer whose aims sometimes conflicted with expectations for women, and especially for mothers” (Toth and Seyersted 131). Although she wrote only one or two days a week so that she could spend time with her six children, she produced more than a hundred short stories between 1889 and 1898. Her carefully crafted short fiction reflected what she knew best: “Creole culture in the American deep South and the conflict between personal desire and societal obligations faced by married women during the Victorian era” (Toth 159).

Chopin was nine years old before she entered St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart, but she already read for English and French authors. By the time she graduated from the academy in 1868 she had absorbed Cervantes, Dante, Goethe, and many English novelists and

poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries— Austen, the Brontës, and Coleridge among them. However, it was French writers who influenced her sense of life and her craft as a writer. She read and admired French classical and contemporary figures such as Flaubert and De Stael, Zola, and especially Maupassant who provided philosophical perspective and fictional method when she began to write earnestly (Snodgrass 63). With Maupassant, Chopin had a closer intellectual relationship, and she even translated a number of his stories from French into English.

Yet, she was intellectually independent, and much as she admired Maupassant, whose realism and formal sophistication she admired, she went beyond his technique and style. She believed that the artist must possess “the courageous soul that dares and defies”, and must have strong wings to soar “above the level plain of tradition and prejudice” (Boriçi 249). She possessed the ability to perceive life and put it down on paper creatively: her emphasis was on women's lives and their continual struggles to create an identity of their own within the Southern society of the late nineteenth century. Chopin's works can indeed be seen as a response to European works in general - works which focused predominantly on gender and which, as Helen Taylor proposes, “...shared her concerns with questions of sexuality, bourgeois marriage and woman's role” (Koloski 52).

Though she tended to the French school, she believed that American writers, with their “wider and more variegated field of observation,” might equal, and perhaps even surpass, the French authors. Among the writers whom Kate Chopin admired during the time she was becoming a writer, was William Dean Howells, who sent her a brief note of praise for her short story “Boulot and Boulotte”, in his powerful position as editor of *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly* magazines. For the depiction of strong, independent female characters, Chopin looked to Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman: the first for her “technique and nicety of construction,” the other for

her ability to depict frustrated women (Seyersted 700-701). In short, her ideal, as Scholar Florinda Boriçi states, was “the invisible and impersonal author who wrote with an objectivity coupled with humor and sympathy” (Boriçi 249). In other genres, she admired the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, and she knew his work well enough to argue with it in *The Awakening*. In one of her essays, she insisted that “no author can be true to life who refuses to pluck from the Darwinian tree of knowledge and to see human existence in its true meaning” (qtd. in Boriçi 311).

Although, in her time, Chopin’s short fiction was categorized as Local Color fiction, often set in the rich, multicultural contexts of the Creole and Acadian communities in Louisiana, including their location within the regionalist tradition and their engagement with racial and class issues (Toth 156). However, her concern is particularly notable in her exploration of those women who challenge conventions in a patriarchal society where the female character recognizes and accepts these restrictions. However, Chopin’s feminist readings, in fact, helped her to construct her unconventional plots and criticize the sacred institution of marriage in the late nineteenth century. She read George Sand who wrote about the changing role of women in France and Western culture, Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, who turned their focus from the virgin to other characters: widows, old women and married women (Bomarito III: 103). Hence, when she starts writing, she employs such plots. Readers, in the nineteenth-century, would find a married woman’s life uninteresting and plotless: once married, Western culture assumes that a woman’s future—sexually, economically, and socially—has been settled (Toth 30). In contrast, Chopin recognized that the married woman could be more exciting, she could place her where a single woman of the 1890s could not be, as Emily Toth observes (31), since the question about the married woman’s sexuality is open.

In her fiction, Chopin explored new areas of literature: not only Regionalism- realism- but also modernism and feminism. Kate Chopin was considered a writer from the American literary Regionalism for centuries, because of her ability to capture local intonation and dialect and to portray folk humor, but it obscured the universality of her literary achievements. Scholars have seen her use of local color techniques as a strategy to gain a foothold in the literary marketplace and to stake a claim in contemporary debates about gender, race, and region (Chopin and Adams 21). Chopin was influenced by the French realism since it was highly attached to the popular American realism. The realist literary tradition found in Europe used to show the very facts of society; writers such as Émile Zola and Flaubert revealed in detail the very reality. For Chopin as for many writers, Realism initially provided an alternative to the sentimentalism who had idealized marriage, family, and female dependence; and this was seen in her works in which she depicts women who went beyond conventions and tried to secure their own happiness (Koloski 163).

As for Modernism, many critics believed that Chopin anticipated features of Modernism tradition in her works. Emily Smith-Riser, in one of the few articles on modernism and Chopin, claimed that ‘Chopin expresses a modernist’s disillusionment with Victorian society’s conventions through her treatment of religion; [...] Kate Chopin was a modernist before her time’ (Beer 133). Similarly, Joseph Allen Boone, in his book *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (1998), links Chopin’s narrative strategies evoking ‘states of interiority’ both with Freud’s attempt in the 1890s to explore the unconscious and with recent theories of women’s writing. Boone sees the contradictions in Chopin’s work, as a very modern attempt to represent a divided consciousness, and he therefore confidently defines Chopin as both protomodernist and protofeminist (Boone 78). Similarly, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, an American historian known for

her writing about women and society, describes Chopin as “very important as one of the earliest examples of modernism in the United States” (Wheeler 67).

- **Charlotte Perkins Gilman New Concept of Feminism**

During her lifetime, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a world-famous writer, lecturer, and reformer, whose work was influential and widely celebrated; she has been called the “leading intellectual in the women’s movement in the United States during the first two decades of the twentieth century” (Degler xiii). When Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her first nonfiction book in 1898, *Women and Economics*, almost overnight she became “the leading intellectual in the women's movement.” Her ideas were widely circulated and discussed; she was in great demand on the lecture circuit, and her intellectual circle included some of the most prominent thinkers of the age. Yet by the mid-1960s, she was nearly forgotten, and *Women and Economics* long out of print. She played a major role in modernizing the early 1900s Women’s Movement, which was evolving and, instead of serious criticism of society, she suggest reform.

Still, looking at articles from the *New York Times* during that early 1900s shows the negative standing she had in the media. The negative reputation was given to Gilman by the overwhelmingly patriarchal press. In a book review of Gilman’s *The Manmade World, or Our Andocentric Culture*, an editor writes: “Since the beginning of recorded history the most civilized part of our world has held that woman was at the bottom of all the evil from which we are suffering. Now comes a woman who tells us that it is all the other way”. What it shows is the low tolerance for women who do not fit into the typical female mold. Not only were men outspoken against her writing, but women too. Men seemed to be threatened with the idea that women would gain more power, and there would be an unequal power balance in the opposite direction. Women disagreed

mainly because they did not understand her radical point of view; there was confusion about the work women did in the home that was unpaid, making it impossible to become independent.

Like Chopin, it was only with the rebirth of the feminist movement in the 1960s that interest in Gilman's works was revived (Negri 13). Carl N. Degler and Elaine R. Hedges were the first who began recovering Gilman's work in 1966 and 1973. In 1966, the historian Carl Degler reintroduced Gilman's work to a new generation of readers. By editing *Women and Economics*, Degler returned Charlotte Perkins Gilman to history. After *Women and Economics* was reissued, Gilman's most famous works of fiction were also rediscovered and republished. By the time "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was reissued by Elaine R. Hedges and the Feminist Press in 1973, the women's movement was gaining momentum. Gilman's story of a woman objectified by both marriage and medical science, and denied full bodily autonomy; spoke to many of feminists' immediate concerns. "[W]ith the new growth of the feminist movement," pronounced Hedges in her afterword to the volume, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman is being rediscovered": here was a model of a woman's resilience in "one of America's foremost feminists" as well as a text "directly confront[ing] the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship" that so vexed women's rights advocates in the 1970s (37- 39).

Following Hedges, other pioneering scholars, include (among others) Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Jean Kennard, and Annette Kolodny, also focused on "The Yellow Wallpaper". Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* published in 1979, focus on the narrator's liberation from her patriarchal world; they proclaim "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is "a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which (like *Jane Eyre*) seems to tell the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (89). As a result of efforts that feminists made, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" has become a recovered classic,

enshrined in the U.S. literary canon, regularly anthologized, and taught widely in literature and women's studies or gender studies courses, and helped secure Gilman's place in the contemporary literary canon. Similarly, *Herland*—a utopian novel portraying an idealized all-woman society visited by three U.S. men, who learn to perceive women as equals— espoused sentiments popular with Second Wave activists. *Herland* emphasizes the “common humanity” of the sexes and critiques women's lack of autonomy, which, Gilman argued, denied them the ability to reach their full potential (Lane xi).

In 1980, Ann J. Lane brought out *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, which includes Gilman's short stories and excerpts of novellas originally published in *The Forerunner*, such as *Unpunished* and *The Crux*. Lane did so, hoping to place “‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ for the first time in the context of a wide selection of Gilman's fiction in general, [so that] it becomes a piece with them, while remaining at the same time special and different” (qtd. in Davis 30). Denise D. Knight also was responsible for many of Gilman's recoveries. Knight brought out *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1994), and, in 1997, she edited and wrote an Afterword to Gilman's unpublished feminist detective novel, *Unpunished*. With Jennifer S. Tuttle, Knight edited *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, a much-awaited volume published in 2009 by the University of Alabama Press. Others have joined in these recovery efforts, and among other texts, several overlapping collections of her shorter fiction have appeared since then; nearly all of Gilman's novels and book-length nonfiction studies have been reprinted; and her autobiography has been republished twice, accompanied by a two-volume edition of her diaries (Knight and Tuttle).

Gilman was born Charlotte Anna Perkins on July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut, to Mary Perkins (formerly Mary Fitch Westcott) and Frederic Beecher Perkins, a librarian and

magazine editor. She had one brother, Thomas Adie, her two others died in their first year (*Living* 5). The Beecher family was well known in the political arena for their work and involvement in civil rights, religion and social reform. They were educators, authors and artists, and Gilman fit perfectly into this family of hardworking, intellectual individuals. In her extended family circle, abolition, women's rights, and economic equality were righteous causes deserving the most prodigious efforts. Besides her paternal grandmother, Mary Perkins, Great-aunts Catharine, Isabella, and Harriet, in particular, were important role models for Gilman as a child (Allen 32). Growing up in the bosom of the Beecher family, she decided at a tender age to dedicate herself to a life of "world improvement"(Matthews 127).

Gilman's father Frederic Perkins, was, like so many Beechers, good with a pen. He was a lover of books, an editor, librarian, and short-story writer, but uncomfortable with family life. He abandoned the family soon after Charlotte's birth, returning only for occasional visits, provided only meager financial support on an irregular basis until 1873, when Mary Perkins filed for divorce. The only real contribution her father gave Charlotte was a shared rampant thirst and love of literature. Like Kate Chopin, Charlotte moved into a female-dominated household in Providence, consisting of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother and she began to attend young ladies' school (Baym 1659). Gilman experienced chronic poverty; depending upon the kindness of relatives, Mary Perkins, continually plagued by debt, moved her family 19 times in 18 years (Davis 211). Observing her mother's misery, who was forced into roles of unusual self-reliance, and never liked the autonomy that was thrust upon her, greatly affected Gilman (Davis and Knight 30). The girl Charlotte never forgot the lesson: married or not, every woman needed the ability to earn a good living to insure her survival and sanity, not to mention her self-development. This would become her doctrine, the insight that would lead to many others, the

entering wedge of what became a broadly feminist critique of the sexist ideas that lay behind the dangerous belief that a woman should be dependent on her husband (Benbow-Pfalzgraf 29).

Outside of their several dwellings, Gilman's formal education was not exceptional. Because she moved 19 times in 18 years, Gilman was for the most part self-educated (Lane 15). However, her rootless and impoverished childhood in Rhode Island, coupled with her mother's emotional detachment, produced an intellectual and objective adult determined to be self-supporting. Gilman supported herself by lecturing, teaching, editing, running a boarding house, and writing. After graduating from art school in 1880, Perkins worked in commercial illustration and tutored children. In her free time, she taught herself German and French, wrote poetry and short stories (Miller 29).

In 1884, at age 24, she had married the Rhode Island artist Charles Walter Stetson, but she was skeptical about combining marriage, work, and motherhood. Before marriage, Walter promised that he would not object to her writing, a promise he failed to keep. She claims in her autobiography and diaries that she objected to the conventions of Victorian marriage, not to Walter himself, whom she describes as loving, devoted, and tender (Davis 113). Marriage, and motherhood plunged Charlotte into wrenching internal conflict as the constraints of nineteenth century domesticity undermined her ideal of autonomy (Matthews 127). Charlotte's almost immediate pregnancy put additional strain on a relationship burdened with economic and domestic hardships. Ill throughout the pregnancy, Charlotte experienced a serious postpartum depression following the birth of their daughter Katharine Beecher Stetson on 3 March 1885.

Putting herself in the "care" of a prominent neurologist, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia, a specialist in the treatment of so-called neurasthenic (hysterical) women, who proposed to her the "rest cure." Among his other patients were Jane Addams a few years ahead of

Gilman and Edith Wharton a few years after. He disapproved of intellectual activity on the part of women and classified it as pathological. He told Gilman, that he had already treated two "Beecher women." Convinced that their illnesses had been exacerbated by their stubborn, unnatural imitation of men, he suspected his new patient of similar tendencies (Allen 39). Mitchell's rest cure consisted of putting the patient to bed and keeping her there. He sent Gilman home with the following orders: "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. . . . Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live." After several months of following his directions "rigidly," Gilman realized that her condition had actually deteriorated, that she was more helpless than she had been before going to Philadelphia (Allen 39).

Gilman rejected Mitchell's system and began to take charge of her life once again. Realizing that her option was "not between going and staying with her husband" but between "going insane and staying sane," in 1888, Gilman separated from her husband -a rare occurrence in the late nineteenth century. When her health measurably improved, she attributed some of her problems to her marriage, and obtained a divorce in 1894. Following the divorce, Gilman moved with her daughter to California, where she was active in organizing social reform movements. Gilman was establishing herself as an author in her own right, so in 1894, she sent her daughter back to live with her ex-husband and his second wife, Grace Ellery Channing, who was a close friend of Gilman's. She told herself and her little girl that it was going to be good for Katharine to live with her father and stepmother in a more "normal" household, a decision that Gilman paid a very high price, in guilt, resentment, and public censure (Allen 41).

In 1900 she married her younger first cousin George Houghton Gilman, who was also a member of the Beecher family. From the earliest days of their marriage, Houghton encouraged his

wife to continue her writing and lecturing. Having assisted her with editing before they were married, he continued to provide a sympathetic ear after the wedding, consistently extending very substantial help to her. While traveling alone, Gilman's daily letters addressed to "My own Best-Loved" reveal that her relationship with Houghton afforded her not only profound comfort and stability but also a great deal of joy (Allen 46). For the next three decades the unconventional couple lived in New York and Connecticut. In spite of recurring bouts of depression, Gilman published seven novels, hundreds of short stories, and close to a dozen nonfiction books, all of which explored alternative social organizations that would enable women to find meaningful work outside the home (Kort 109).

In January 1932 Gilman learned that she had breast cancer. As she had anticipated, her husband Houghton was very upset about her illness. "He suffered a thousand times more than I did," she wrote. Houghton died very suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage on May 4, 1934. In the fall of 1934, Gilman flew to Pasadena to be near her daughter Katharine Stetson Chamberlin and her family for the last year of her life. Grace Channing Stetson came and stayed with Gilman in a very modest little house on South Catalina Avenue during Gilman's last months. On August 17, 1935, Mrs. Gilman fulfilled her intention to end her life as her malady advanced. The letter, left by her, was a part of the text of this final chapter of her autobiography, beginning: "Human life consists in mutual service," and ending "I have preferred chloroform to cancer" (Bomarito V. 5 485).

Gilman did not start her career seriously until her separation from Walter in 1888. Denise Knight sees Gilman's breakdown as the turning point in her life. "After I was finally free," she wrote later in her autobiography, "wreck though I was, there was a surprising output of work, some of my best [...] Made a wrong marriage—lots of people do. Am heavily damaged, but not dead."

(Kort 107). In that first year of freedom, she wrote some thirty-three short articles, and twenty-three poems, besides ten more child-verses" (Allen 40). In 1892 she published a short story in *New England Magazine* that would many years later become a classic of feminist literature. "The Yellow Wallpaper," a fictionalized version of her own nervous breakdown. While the story was acknowledged as a powerful Gothic tale, in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, and reprinted by William Dean Howells in *Great Modern American Stories* (1920), it was not until the late twentieth century that its importance as a feminist text was recognized. It was republished by the Feminist Press in 1973, and by Virago in 1981, and was discussed in the introduction to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's pioneering work of feminist criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

Although she published a number of other stories, none of them are famous like 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' (Scofield 185). Gilman published 186 short stories in magazines, newspapers, and many were published in her self-published monthly, *The Forerunner*. She also wrote many novels, again more notable for their ideas than their literary style. *The Crux* (1911) deals with the controversial subject of venereal disease; *What Diantha Did* (1912) is about an independent woman who sets up a food-preparation and housecleaning business. Her detective novel *Unpunished*, left in manuscript at the time of her death, was published in 1997 (Kessler xix). Three of her novels were explicitly utopian. *Moving the Mountain* (1911) is set in a socialist America in 1940, in which women's roles have been reformed. *Herland* was serialized in *The Forerunner* in 1916, and not published in volume form until 1978. The rather uneventful sequel, *With Her In Ourland*, was also published in *The Forerunner* in 1916, and reprinted by Mary Jo Deegan and Michael R. Hill.

Still, her nonfiction works gained better success. In 1897, when she wrote the first draft of *Women and Economics* (1898), Subtitled *A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and*

Women as a Factor in Social Evolution, the book was an immediate success, widely read and discussed both in the United States and abroad (Kessler xxix). Jane Addams called it a masterpiece and Florence Kelley wrote that it was "the first real, substantial contribution made by a woman to the science of economics." Writing in the *Woman's Journal* Henry Brown Blackwell called it "brilliant, suggestive, instructive, and inspiring." In the *Dial*, Arthur Woodford hailed Gilman's "profound social philosophy," made her book "almost startling in the vividness of its truth." Annie Muzzey, writing in the *Arena*, welcomed Gilman's "declaration of freedom to reject the false and meretricious, and to exalt the real and abiding union of man and woman." Both the *Nation* and the *London Daily Chronicle* compared the book favorably to John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. The former called it "the most significant utterance on the subject since Mill's," while the latter noted that since Mill "there has been no book dealing with the whole position of women to approach it in originality of conception and brilliancy of exposition" (xxx). Even conservative reviewers offered the book a sort of grudging respect. "While the ideals of this author may not appeal to us," wrote the reviewer in the *Independent*, "we must admit that there is some force in her criticisms, and some reason in her suggestions." (Kessler xxxi).

It was no less welcome abroad, where it was translated into seven languages, including Dutch, Russian, Hungarian, and Japanese. Perhaps the most effusive review came from the *Westminster Gazette* in London: This book unites in a remarkable degree the charm of a brilliantly written essay with the inevitable logic of a proposition of Euclid. It deals, of course, with the woman question, but in a manner so striking, from a standpoint so novel, with a wit so trenchant yet void of offence, that no apology is needed for its publication in England after making something of a sensation in the United States. Nothing that we have read for many a long day can approach it in clearness of perception, in power of arrangement, and in lucidity of expression. No

wonder that in its time it was "considered by feminists of the whole world as the outstanding book on Feminism," according to the *New York City Review of Literature* (Bomarito V.5 486).

It was followed up in 1900 by *Concerning Children*, which questioned the belief that women have natural maternal qualities, proposing that mothers and babies would both be best served by the provision of public nurseries. Her subsequent works on feminism, labour and society included *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), a witty attack on the myths surrounding domesticity, *Human Work* (1904), a fairly unsuccessful book, which Gilman nevertheless saw as her finest achievement, *The Man Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), and *His Religion and Hers: A Study of the Faith of Our Fathers and the Work of Our Mothers* (1923).

Gilman also began writing articles regularly for some of the most popular magazines of her day, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Century*, *Scribner's*, *Appleton's*, the *Independent*, and the *Woman's Home Companion*. In 1894-95, Gilman served as editor of the magazine *The Impress*, a literary weekly that was published by the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association. From 1909 to 1916, Gilman single-handedly wrote and edited her own magazine, *The Forerunner*. Over seven years and two months the magazine contained eighty-six issues, each twenty-eight pages long. Available by subscription only, the *Forerunner* reached a circulation varying between five thousand and seven thousand, and sold for ten cents an issue or a dollar a year, about the same price as commercial monthlies at the time. Like any magazine, the *Forerunner* contained virtually every genre of writing, from essays to poetry to sermons, satires to serialized novels, and much of Gilman's work originally appeared in there (Negri 13).

By publishing *The Forerunner*, Gilman hoped to inspire woman to take the steps towards changing the concepts of what a woman "should be" and stimulate the community to promote a commonality in the civil liberties of women. Its mission, as Gilman describes it, is to "stimulate

thought; to arouse hope, courage and impatience” (Kessler 181). With the expression of these ambitions, Gilman defines her work against “yellow journalism,” the term coined by a newspaper editor in 1897 to describe media practices that exploit, distort, or exaggerate the news (Kessler 181). Gilman sought to expose an ideology of patriarchy and to create a female reading community that stood in staunch opposition to what she considered the menacing effects of the yellow press (Kessler 182). As Gilman herself describes, “*The Forerunner* . . . does not fill your brain with more facts, but stirs it to new action. . . . It stands for Human Progress, and concentrates upon the Progress of Women only because their present position is the world’s stumbling block.” Yet, like many magazines then and now, the *Forerunner* was not easy to keep afloat financially; despite Gilman's celebrity, it earned only about half of its production costs through subscription fees, and her husband Houghton regularly lent Charlotte money to keep it going (Kessler xxvi). The magazine ceased publication in 1916, and the complete *Forerunner* takes up 28 full-length books.

Gilman wrote her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1925), after World War I, when her reputation was fading. The autobiography narrates her childhood; her sustained desire to contribute to humanity; her marriage to Walter Stetson and subsequent breakdown after the birth of her only child, Katharine; her productive years as a lecturer, writer, and editor; her second marriage, to her first cousin, Houghton Gilman. She wrote the final chapter just weeks before her death in 1934 having placed the book with a publisher, Appleton-Century (Tinnemeyer et al. 221). Her biographer Gary Scharnhorst suggests we read Gilman’s line in *His Religion and Hers* (1923) as explanation of the title of her autobiography: “We should not say ‘life’ as a noun but ‘living’ as an active verb” (Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 114). Critics now recognize *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, published posthumously (October 4,

1935), as an enduring part of her literary legacy; excerpts appear in a range of collections about her life and work (Tinnemeyer et al. 221).

The fact that Gilman had a taste for New England publications early in her career is not surprising, as she was one of the Beechers (Kessler and Tuttle 31). She became familiar with the works of New England writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Dean Howells, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Scharnhorst xxv). When she was editor of the *Impress*, Gilman inaugurated a “Studies in Style” series, which featured imitations of writings by a number of prominent authors, including not only Hawthorne, but also New England writers Louisa May Alcott and Mary Wilkins Freeman (Kessler and Tuttle 32). Additionally, Gilman's feminist theory was part of a historical debate among women. According to Cynthia J. Davis, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Margaret Fuller were among progressive women intellectuals, whom Gilman knew or whose writings she read and admired. She reads also for many earlier feminists who wrestled with the problems of marital rape, male tyranny in marriage, female economic slavery, and women's right to full human development - including Sarah Grimke, Lucretia Mott; Lucy Stone; Victoria Woodhull; and Belva Lockwood (Davis et al. 30).

Jane Addams, the other female public intellectual of her generation, presented an intellectual influence for Gilman and obvious overlaps in their thinking. Her ideas on social justice, women, and social change permeate Gilman's notions of “social service, labor, feminism, and ethics.” Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman met for the first time in 1894. According to her diary in the summer of 1897, she had discussions with Addams on the economic relationship of the sexes. Those discussions helped solidify the ideas that she expressed in her famous work, *Women and Economics* (Grimm 47). The two women spent the next decade and a half - the Progressive Era - producing a large number of works. They both tended to focus on children, which

was a logical extension of the work of the most prominent woman and female intellectual of the previous generation, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the co-initiator of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 (Grimm 47).

While, therefore, the major influences on her thought overall were Ward's sociology, reform Darwinism and Edward Bellamy's socialism (Egan 106). From these social Darwinists Gilman learned to see human social progress as an evolutionary process which follows the same scientifically observable patterns and principles as does animal evolution. However, she did not agree that humans are caught in a struggle for the survival of the fittest. Wishing to incorporate potentiality for change and choice into scientific explanation, she found a more satisfactory account of human development in the critics of pure social Darwinism, the so-called "reform Darwinists" (McAlister 105). For Ward there exists also a social mind, an aggregate of individual human minds. In order to explain the meliorating power of education on generations of people, he believed-as had Lamarcke, Darwin, and Spencer-in the transmission of acquired characteristics. Gilman found this a suggestive idea, which could serve as the foundation of a new social order to correct the wrongs of the past. One had only to raise into the human race the nobler sentiments and virtues which would ensure an improved society.

- **Edith Wharton and the Female Leisure-Class Struggle for Autonomy**

Briefly neglected in the decades following her death, Wharton has increasingly been recognized as one of the most imaginative and creative intellectual forces in English in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her novels, novellas, and short stories were driven by ideas and by the psychological necessity to solve the problems that her own past creations had posed. Linking art to survival (both her own survival and that of the larger world), Wharton's fiction succeeds by evoking troubling realities in monitory parables. Joining raucous and

unexpected humor to profound sadness, her finest work returns again and again to the place of sacrifice in the violent forging of civilization itself.

Wharton's reputation suffered a further decline after her death, and for some years she was seen as a student of the Jamesian novel who was never quite able to match James. But in more recent years her fiction has come to be appreciated on its own terms, with a fuller recognition of the nuance, passion, and social critique out of which her finest novels are composed. After suffering a decline in reputation in the first part of the twentieth century, Edith Wharton has been rediscovered by newer generations of readers. For a time after her death, readers found her fiction old-fashioned, its world no longer representative of American life. But she was, in fact, one of the major figures of an important group of women writers at the turn of the century who modified the nineteenth-century sentimental-romantic tradition of women's fiction and turned it toward modern realism. Such proto-modernist and modernist writers included women as different from Wharton as Kate Chopin, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, and Gertrude Stein – a rather remarkable group. In addition to seeming old-fashioned, Wharton (like Henry James, who became her close friend) was criticized as an elitist uninterested in the lives of ordinary men and women. Her disdain for the low breeding and social blunders of newly rich vulgarians has suggested to some readers that she saw even the faults of the upper classes as intrinsically more important than the life-struggles of those of lower social standing. This is a distorted view of her work.

Wharton's works of fiction with their keen social observation, rich detail, and penetrating satire have come to be regarded as masterful and important contributions to the literary tradition of the 20th century. Born into a wealthy family in New York City, Wharton rebelled against the rigid, traditional, stifling attitude toward women and toward the middle classes who had to work

for a living. During Wharton's life, "critics grudgingly admired her craftsmanship, but backhandedly referred to it as too clever and too artificial. As Helen Killoran explains, "they held two culturally deep-rooted prejudices against her"—first, she was a female writer, one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "scribbling women," and second, she belonged to the privileged upper-class society (Scharnhorst and Quirk 189). It is also here, in her sixties, that scholars and critics have, in a sense, left her, as well. Yet during these years, she was as productive and popular a writer as she ever was. Throughout the 1920s, however, Wharton had the increasing sense that her fiction was being misread, and she often measured the distance between her intention and her critics' interpretation (*Letters*, 483)

Clearly identifying herself as an American writer, Wharton rejected all attempts to categorize her as American *woman* writer. Expressing dislike for the "colorists," the late nineteenth-century, largely female, local color writers who captured the culture and customs of regional America, Wharton did, in fact, record, in careful detail, the appearances, activities, and social rituals and traditions of a unique class and place in American urban life. She worked hard to make clear that her subject had larger implications. In *A Backward Glance*, she describes at length her long-lasting affiliations with European male intellectuals, writers, and artists. Critic Donna Campbell points out that for Wharton, rejecting the label of local color was more than an aesthetic choice: "[she] realized that to be taken seriously in the 'man's game' that American literature was becoming, she would have to repudiate the local colorists thoroughly and unmistakably" (173).

Despite the fact that she lived through social, cultural, and political changes that affected the growth of modernism, reflected on artistic movements that led to modernism, and addressed influences on modernism in her own writing, Wharton chose not to identify as a modernist writer.

As her career as a writer of fiction peaked in the 1920s, she was considered by many critics to be America's premier writer of fiction. Late in life, she lamented the tendency of young writers to disregard old forms and established values in favor of radical experiments and a rigid adherence to "theory" (Kaplan 66). Wharton was also unable to find a connection with another woman writer whose career corresponded chronologically with her own: Willa Cather.

Edith Wharton (Edith Newbold Jones) was born on January 24, 1862, during the American Civil War, into a world that could hardly have been more discouraging of her desire to be a writer. Her parents, George Frederic and Lucretia Stevens Rhinelanders Jones, descendants of prosperous English and Dutch businessmen, bankers, and lawyers, were pillars of the fashionable New York society that she would depict in many of her fiction. It was a society in which the only acceptable aim for a young woman of the upper class was to enter into marriage with a gentleman of the upper class and become mistress of a household. The Joneses were a wealthy New York family. Like most young women of her class and financial position, Wharton was educated privately.

When she was four years old they moved to Europe, spending the next five years traveling throughout Italy, Spain, Germany and France. Back in New York young Edith continued her education under private tutors. She learned French and German and a voracious reader, she studied literature, philosophy, science, and art. As an adult, she resided in Europe and believed French culture to be superior to all others. As a child and adolescent, Wharton spent most of her time in her father's library, and in her autobiography she referred to literature as her "secret garden" (Champion 364). Her biographers emphasize this limitations of old New York. Shari Benstock, for example, in *No Gifts from Chance*, points out that "for American women of Edith's social class, education reined in rather than expanded their natural curiosity, cultivating in them a charming, but false, naïveté" (Benstock 32). Decades later, Wharton would proceed to famously

denigrate "the cause" for women's rights in private letters to friends like Mary Berenson, that she believes "women were made for pleasure and procreation" (Liming 188).

At age 17, Edith Jones "came out" into society, making the rounds of dances and parties in Newport and New York, observing the rituals of her privileged world. In 1883, she became engaged to Edward Robbins Wharton, known as "Teddy", who was 33 years old. Like many men of his class, he had no real job but lived on a trust fund, and he filled his time with sports, fishing, riding, and camping. Though imperfectly suited for each other, the couple filled their early married years with travel, houses, and dogs, but beyond that he had no intellectual or aesthetic interests whatsoever. Among his wife's sophisticated friends he felt either bored or foolish and was generally excluded from her interests. Although proud of his wife's accomplishments, it is unlikely that he ever actually read her books. Many of Edith's artistic friends, like novelist Henry James, thought that her marriage to Teddy was the worst mistake she had made in her life. Despite their growing hostility, the Whartons' marriage lasted a total of twenty-eight years.

At the age of 36, she suffered a nervous breakdown, commonly called "neurasthenia". Wharton, like her contemporaries Charlotte Perkins Gilman, consulted Dr. S. Weir Mitchell who prescribed for her his famous treatment the "rest cure", and against his advice, she persevered with her writing. In 1908 she recalled this period of ill health in a letter to her friend Sara Norton: "for *twelve years* I seldom knew what it was to be, for more than an hour or two of the twenty-four, without an intense feeling of nausea, and such unutterable fatigue that when I got up I was always more tired than when I lay down" (*Letters*, 139-40). The key to this self-renewal was a gradual refocusing of her literary ambitions, and a healing of self through the redemptive properties of words. As Diane Price Herndl points out, while Wharton, like Gilman, discovered that "writing could be curative, whether she had consciously undertaken it as therapy or not" (Herndl 123).

In 1907, at the age of forty-five, she would begin a passionate love affair—apparently the only of her life—with the journalist Morton Fullerton. The relationship was brief, but it marked a profound emotional and sexual awakening for Wharton. Teddy, meanwhile, began to suffer from mental illness—possibly manic depression. He also took a mistress, and embezzled money from his wife to buy his mistress a house. In 1913, Edith divorced him. Wharton chose a Paris courtroom as the site of her divorce. The privacy of French divorce proceedings strongly influenced her choice of locale (Letters 300). In France, neither the oral testimony given in a divorce case nor the evidence submitted to the court were made public. Furthermore, no reporters were admitted to French divorce proceedings, and newspapers were prohibited from publishing accounts of them. Wharton, who had read love letters published in reports of divorce proceedings, knew such privacy could not be counted upon in America (Lewis 224).

After her divorce, Edith continued to visit the United States to preserve her American citizenship, even though she chose to live permanently in France. Beyond her writing, Wharton's life was also distinguished by her selfless service to France and to the European refugees who flooded Paris during World War I, work for which the French government made her—the first woman so recognized—a chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur in 1916. When she died in 1937, her coffin was attended by French war veterans on recognition of her adopted country. When World War I began, she devoted much of her time in assisting refugees and orphans in France and Belgium. She helped raise funds for their support, and was involved with creating and running hostels and schools for them. She aided women in self-sufficiency by finding them means of employment. Edith continued to write until her death in Hyeres, France on August 11, 1937 at the age of 75. She was buried in a cemetery at Versailles in France. All of Edith's papers and unfinished

work were given to Yale University with the stipulation that certain of them not be released until 1968 (Garrison 99) .

Edith began writing poetry and fiction as a young girl. She attempted to write a novel at age eleven. Her first publication was a translation of the German poem, (“What the Stones Tell”) by Heinrich Karl Brugsch, when she was 15. Her family did not wish her name to appear in print because the names of upper class women of the time only appeared in print to announce birth, marriage, and death. Consequently, the poem was published under the name of a friend’s father, E. A. Washburn. He was a cousin of Ralph Waldo Emerson and supported women’s education. He played an essential role in Edith’s efforts to educate herself and he encouraged her ambition to write professionally. In 1877, at the age of 15, she secretly wrote a 30,000 word novella "*Fast and Loose*". In 1878 her father arranged for a collection of two dozen original poems and five translations, *Verses*, to be privately published. In 1880 she had five poems published anonymously in the *Atlantic Monthly*, then a revered literary magazine. Despite these early successes, she was not encouraged by her family nor her social circle, and though she continued to write she did not publish anything again until her poem, “The Last Giustiniani”, was published in *Scribner’s Magazine* in October 1889.

After a decade of troubled married life, Edith Wharton took to writing in earnest – most notably short fiction for magazines –and in 1899 she published her first collection of stories, *The Greater Inclination* (MacGowan) . The book that made Wharton famous was *The House of Mirth*, published in 1905, but between that book and the publication of her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, in 1934, she published sixteen novels and novellas, eight collections of short stories, several works of nonfiction, and two volumes of poetry as well as many articles, translations,

introductions, and reviews. Thus, in those years right around the turn of the century, Edith Wharton began a literary career almost unparalleled in its scope, vision, and ambition, once it was finally released, her energy was astonishing.

Although most literary scholars tend to think of Edith Wharton as a novelist, she was in fact one of the most accomplished story writers among American authors of her time. She began her career as a writer of tales in *Scribner's* in 1891 and in all, she wrote 86 stories and 11 novellas, most of them first published in magazines and then collected in 11 volumes. For Wharton the story was not a means of apprenticeship before writing novels but an end in itself. She used stories to work out ideas and explore themes that later found treatment in her novels. In a letter of 1907 she spoke of doubts about her ability as a novelist, her tendency to try to cover too much ground at the expense of 'the smaller realism that I arrive at, I think, better in my short stories', and 'the sense of authority with which I take hold of the short story'.

Edith Wharton was a prolific writer in a number of genres. She completed works of nonfiction including essays and books on the decoration of homes, French culture, and the art of writing fiction. She published travel writing and an autobiography. Having received the Pulitzer in 1921 and the honorary degree of Doctorate of Letters by Yale University in 1924 and having been nominated for a Nobel Prize in literature in 1927, Wharton clearly succeeded in becoming a major American writer recognized for her artistic talent, intellectual power, and cultural critique. In her long career, which stretched over forty years and included the publication of more than forty books, Edith Wharton portrayed a fascinating segment of the American experience. She was a born storyteller, whose novels are justly celebrated for their vivid settings, satiric wit, ironic style, and moral seriousness. Her characters, such as Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence*, *Ethan Fromme*, and the charming but ineffectual Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, are some of the most memorable

in American literature. Often portrayed as tragic victims of cruel social conventions, they are trapped in bad relationships or confining circumstances. Her own life stands as an example of the obstacles that a woman of her time and place had to overcome to find self-realization.

Wharton placed stories in such magazines, whose circulation grew through the 1920s. She published stories in the most economically successful magazines. "The top five leaders in advertising revenue in 1920—*Saturday Evening Post*, *Literary Digest*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Pictorial Review*, and *Woman's Home Companion*—grossed \$71,922,000, or 56 per cent of the total, and the top ten accounted for 70 per cent" (Peterson 78). Wharton published in all except *Literary Digest*, receiving high fees for her work. Quality magazines sustained her reputation even as she published in high circulation venues, despite her ambivalence toward them.

Edith was influenced by French, German, and Italian cultures from early age. From her father's large library, she read English and French literature by Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Jean Racine, Jean La Fontaine, and Victor Hugo. She read all of Johann Goethe's plays and poems and the poetry of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Edith was fascinated with stories and began composing them herself when she was a child. In 1902, she began a correspondence with Henry James, to whom she had been introduced by mutual friends. He judged her at the time as a gifted writer but perhaps too imitative a student of his; their friendship would grow, as would James's estimation of his friend's talents, until James's death in 1916. Wharton was also a friend to many gifted intellectuals of her time: Sinclair Lewis, Jean Cocteau and André Gide, were all guests of hers at one time or another. Theodore Roosevelt, Bernard Berenson, and Kenneth Clark were valued friends as well. But her meeting with F. Scott Fitzgerald is described by the editors of her letters as "one of the better known failed encounters in the American literary annals."

Wharton also credited four men as having "ranked foremost among [her] Awakeners": Henry Coppée, William Hamilton, Blaise Pascal, and Charles Darwin (*Backward* 71-72). The first two were most likely found in textbooks used by Wharton's brothers (Lyde 28); the others would have appeared on her father's library shelves. Wharton read their difficult books before the age of seventeen. Wharton's four "Awakeners" suggest, as Marilyn Lyde notes, "a mind at once strongly rational and objective, yet tinged with the metaphysical cast" (26). Coppée and Hamilton are philosophers; Pascal and Darwin are scientists whose writings have major philosophical and religious import. Because science added legitimacy to all the professions in the late nineteenth century and distinguished the specialist from the lay person (Kaplan 75), female writers who utilized scientific concepts and metaphors had a greater chance of escaping traditional categories of femininity.

Charles Darwin, is the figure most often associated with her, both because of the strong determinist strain in her fiction and because of the monumental position Darwin occupied in the nineteenth century. Wharton considered theories of evolution and the processes of reason that accompanied them of paramount importance, and she followed all the current scientific developments. A self-proclaimed student of "the wonder-world of nineteenth century science" (*Backward* 94), she listed in her commonplace book "definitions of a large array of sciences and scientific philosophies" (Lewis 108). It would be a mistake, however, to think of Edith Wharton as an unquestioning follower of Darwin, or to label her fiction as naturalistic. Wharton, like Chopin, was inclined to accept Darwin's rational conclusions, but she remained skeptical of easy Victorian assumptions about moral or social progress.

As we have seen in their biographies, these writers have in common many things. All the events in their lives shaped their experiences reflect very distinctly both the shape of their lives and the movements of their thoughts. Both Chopin and Gilman were almost forgotten for over half a century, but resurrected by American feminists in the 1970s, and Wharton, who remained much more visible than of Gilman and Chopin, was sometimes seen as a writer in his shadow. But like Chopin, Edith Wharton has been subject to criticism since the very beginning of her publishing career. Like Chopin and Gilman, Wharton was writing as a professional but also as an artist who was successor to a complicated set of regional and aesthetic precedents and was seeking the best means of assimilation as well as innovation.

Culturally, Chopin and Wharton wrote in a time characterized by many restrictions for women, including the expectation that women become wives and mothers while relegating their personal desires to the background. Some critics even consider Chopin to be a predecessor of the feminist authors of the 20th century (Adams). Not many writers during the mid- to late 19th century were bold enough to address subjects that Chopin willingly took on. Although David Chopin, her grandson, claims "Kate was neither a feminist nor a suffragist, she said so. She was nonetheless a woman who took women extremely seriously. She never doubted women's ability to be strong". Explicitly rejecting the term "feminist," Chopin was especially uncomfortable with the sexual liberationist ethic that was emerging as an important strand of feminist thought (Kessler). Mary Papke join Seyersted to argue that Chopin and Edith Wharton are not feminist writers. Neither woman aligned herself with the feminist movements of her day, nor did either label herself a feminist. Each did, however, produce what one might call, for want of a better term, female moral art in works that focus relentlessly on the dialectics of social relations and the position of women therein.

Gilman advocated equal education, women's suffrage, women's autonomy, payment for housework, meaningful work outside the home, dress reform, marriage on the basis of love over economic necessity, and community child care—the most radical part of her agenda. Many visionary ideas that Gilman predicted for women have become realities in this millennium (Davis 30). Gilman feminism was widely cultural in its analyses and prescriptions. Organizationally, she was active in the women's club movement, assisting with the development and leadership of several clubs in California. She appeared on innumerable speaker's platforms for clubs throughout the United States and at several international meetings of clubwomen. She strongly supported the women's suffrage movement but did not make it her number one priority. She recalled in her autobiography how she "had worked for Equal Suffrage when opportunity offered, believing it to be reasonable and necessary, though by no means as important as some of its protagonists held." But she recognized that constitutional equality with men would not be sufficient to liberate women (30).

American writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, utilizing tropes of both domesticity and violent conflict, found short fiction a highly congenial genre for expressing their desire for change (Bendixen and Nagel 207). Wharton first came to international recognition through her short stories. They remained at the core of her writings throughout her career, a commercial hub of her 'business'. She portrays the illusive social assumptions and constructions that constrict the inner and outer lives of both men and women and explores the dilemmas that face them in a society rigid, in its attitudes toward marriage and sexual freedom (Thompson). Since one may correctly observe that Wharton's writing focused on themes similar to those of Chopin, Wharton's success creates a curious contrast to Chopin's relative failure as a writer. At the same

time, Wharton's short stories show, through form and content, a concern with masculinity and the nature of male social and political power.

Edith Wharton began publishing well-crafted short fiction in *Scribner's Magazine* and *Century*, showing an objectivity and frankness in her narratives of marriage, divorce, adultery, and female entrapment. Amy Kaplan has convincingly described her as a "realist" whose work is located "at the complex intersection of class and gender" (Bendixen and Nagel 164). Between 1889 and 1899, Chopin composed almost one hundred stories, many for *Vogue* and *Youth's Companion*. The persistent theme of her short fiction is desire, neglect, jealousy, infidelity, or emotional confusion and circumscribed by such biological inevitabilities as pregnancy, childbirth, aging, and death (Lamb and Thompson 156). Chopin and Gilman reject the domestic, both as trope and social structure, using anti-domestic themes to drive home to their readers the injustice and inhumanity of fin-de-siècle women's roles. Gilman, as a reformer, devoted herself to the production of clearly feminist fiction, to advance fair gender relations, especially as they related to labor, economics, and domestic responsibilities (Bendixen and Nagel 18).

Conclusion

The nineteenth century was an era of great changes in the lives, roles and attitudes of American women. By being involved in various social reform movements, as a kind of "public housekeeping" to make the world as a better place, women's efforts proved that it could give meaning to their own lives and changing the world around them. Everywhere there was a call for women to arouse and participate, "with voice and pen, with hand and head and heart" (Stanton 74), to sustain their advancement. Although the ideology of domesticity and gender inequality persisted until the late 19th century, the successive efforts of female reformists and writers weakened these ideologies and allowed new ideologies to grow stronger. As a result, the

Progressive era had known unmistakable changes in the lives of American women, in particular: increasing rates of higher education; a growing presence in the workplace, and, in the home, trends toward smaller families, marriages at later age or even lifelong singlehood, and increasing acceptability of divorce. All these changes make women more firmly in claiming for their self-worth and personal fulfillment, both inside and outside their spheres.

The issues of political and economic equality appeared in the declarations of Seneca Falls. But most middle-class women (and men) challenging sex inequality only approved and adopted these ideas after social conditions progressed far enough to clarify their meaning and value. By the turn of the century, legislative action had greatly reduced the legal disabilities that concerned early feminists. Both the new domestic and the new feminist ideals assumed women's legal rights. The suffrage movement tried to extend them, however, professional domesticity denied their importance. The general progress of economic, political, and cultural institutions weakened some symbols and values to strengthening other examples. Throughout the nineteenth century economic growth, the emergence of science, and the expansion of education boosted such culture. People no longer gave so much deference to religious symbols and values. Throughout the twentieth century, merit increasingly edged out other criteria as the accepted way of deciding who among those competing should get jobs, degrees, or offices (Frank 193).

In short, women proved their ability to reach the best intellectual standard of men, and to enter every realm of knowledge. Unconstrained by traditions of sex, women will naturally and without comment seek the intellectual goal, which they think good and fit for them. No wonder then that the idea of personal fulfillment dominated in both fiction and real life in the mind of women, a theme that will be discussed extensively in the coming chapters. Literature, for most women, emerged as a significant path; for it was not only a possible route to money and fame, but also a

path that enabled them to go beyond class, race, and gender restrictions. Cultural and social circumstances both played a role in creating the paradoxical place of the woman writer in nineteenth-century America. As seen in the chapter, these women lived in a culture that tried to limit them to their domestic sphere, and arguments about woman's separate sphere extended to discussions about all aspects of life and work, including authorship. Early feminist ideas appeared mainly in literature, and the "New Woman" fiction emerged as a kind of rebellion, a response to the attempt to control women by controlling literature of the period.

Various women writers exhibit different degrees of feminist awareness. The early literature includes both the worldly skepticism of Edith Wharton and the radical utopianism of Gilman, and similar differences of opinion or emphasis, are also found in today's literature. It is therefore only natural that earlier writers should sometimes reveal a limited or hesitant approach to the question of women's rights and their place in society. Like male authors, female authors are influenced by the ideas and values of their times. Even if some of them were conservative, there is often a half-hidden or unstated awareness in their works of the problematic situation of women in the world. Some authors American explore texts in detail, demonstrating patriarchal patterns, or the complex response of women writers to their own authorial status. Some dare to challenge the literary canon that is so dominated by men. This may explain their non-insertion as common in American Literature, the insertion of ignored female writers (e.g. Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman) into the canon. It also entails the study of a literary tradition of women writers.

Notes:

- (1) The term “angel” stems directly from Coventry Patmore’s 1854 poem “The Angel in the House,” in which he described his pious wife, and giving the Victorian women an ideal model to emulate.
- (2) "The Cult of True Womanhood," 1820-1860, is a term coined by historian Barbara Welter to describe the process of acculturating women to this ideal in America. Welter identifies four main virtues that a "true" woman must exhibit: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity ("The Cult of True Womanhood" 2).
- (3) The term Victorian was used in the late nineteenth century to refer to English life during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). Following Carl Degler, Michel Foucault, and others; the term is extended its coverage to France and the United States as well. For all their differences, the three countries formed an Atlantic community, a transatlantic culture that tells us more about Victorian attitudes and institutions than we could learn from a single nation. They believed that in the nineteenth century, England and France were a much greater part of the American consciousness than now. Whether defining themselves against the Old World or trying to imitate it, Americans were deeply influenced by European ideas and culture (King 11).
- (4) The English word ‘feminism’ was not in use within this period. The French word *féminisme* was coined by the Utopian socialist, Charles Fourier, and used only by him. The words did appear in France in the 1870s and 1880s, championed by one of the women included in this anthology. By the 1890s, both terms were widely used there. The Oxford English Dictionary locates the first English usage in 1895; American advocates of women’s rights took even longer to adopt the term.⁴ (Bomarito and Hunter 2: 30)

(5) The origins of the term 'New Woman' are disputed, but it appears to have entered the language in 1894 when it was used in a pair of articles written by the novelists Sarah Grand (born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke) and 'Ouida' (the pseudonym of Maria Louise Ramé) in the North American Review. Once coined, the term became popular shorthand to describe the new breed of independent, educated women.

(6) The Creoles were pure-blooded descendants of French and Spanish colonists; the more impecunious Cajuns [Acadians] were descendants of French settlers whom the British had expelled from Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century) The Creoles were pure-blooded descendants of French and Spanish colonists; the more impecunious Cajuns [Acadians] were descendants of French settlers whom the British had expelled from Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century (Johnson et al. 684).

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Chapter Two: Wild Angels and Voiceless Women in Kate Chopin's Selected Short Fiction

Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore some selected short stories of Kate Chopin, and discuss the female quest for fulfillment and autonomy inside the institution of marriage. Most of Chopin's stories deal with marriage and present an unconventional perspective on this theme. In this part of this study, I will focus mainly on the stories that depict miserable women, who suffer from the restrictions in their traditional roles in conventional marriages from one hand, and the limited range of possibilities available to them from the other hand. The guiding question for this analysis is why the married protagonists in these narratives often find themselves entrapped in a miserable life, that they can neither cope with nor leave or change. I will introduce the concept of fulfillment in marriage as being an illusion in the "Emancipation: A life fable" and "The Story of an Hour". Then I will move to explore the passive women, who seem unaware or unable to move beyond their traditional role in "Madame Célestin's Divorce", "A Visit to Avoyelles", and "Désirée's Baby". Lastly, I will shed light on the rebellious New Woman who stands against the institution of marriage in "Athénaïse", "In Sabine" and "Her Letters".

Even though Chopin did not think of herself as a feminist, she often plotted the idea that women were oppressed through unhappy marriages. Certainly, Chopin totally disagrees with the myth that marriage is a woman's only '*raison d'être*', and an institution which she ought lovingly to give up her identity. So, her stories clearly show that what really trapped women was the patriarchal habits of thought, which defined a woman's role as being only complementary to that of men. The inner conflicts faced by Chopin's married heroines are essentially issues of autonomy,

which Allen F. Stein – one of Chopin’s Scholars- defines as “a woman's guidance by her own free will” (Stein 106). Yet, her female characters frequently face choices between what society expects of them and what they really desire. And while some of them decide to follow their own path at any expense, others face different restrictions from both society and their own potentials, like the lack of the appropriate education or the financial support as we will see in this chapter.

1- Illusion of Emancipation in “Emancipation: A Life Fable” (1870) and “The Story of an Hour” (1894)

In this section, I will explore the theme of the illusion of emancipation in women’s lives in two of Chopin’s stories: “Emancipation: A Life Fable” and “The Story of an Hour”. Chopin wrote confidently in 1870, about freedom in the allegorical tale entitled “Emancipation. A Life Fable”, a short tale that traces briefly but daringly on a subject that she would spend much of her career exploring: women’s limitations and the desire for fulfillment. According to Emily Toth, in her biography *Kate Chopin* (1990), Chopin started with this theme unconsciously when she was only eighteen years old, before she married and before she revealed any interest in a literary career. Years later, when she turned to write in earnest at the age of thirty-eight, her life and experiences as a woman apparently asserted the truths she expressed first in “Emancipation”, and her development as a writer enabled her to express them again with increasing skill in her fiction (Toth “Kate” 58). The fable, expresses Chopin’s franc attitudes toward marriage and autonomy, showing symbolically that in her time, marriage for a woman is restrictive as a cage, and women have to free themselves from that cage, regardless of cost. She rejected the overprotection that society usually offers to women; and for her, the freedom is stronger than any other impulse in life.

Like many of writers in her time, Chopin perceives marriage as entrapment. In the fable, she describes the creature living in a cage: “born in a cage [growing safely] under the care of an invisible protecting hand: food was ever at hand, water was brought, and a bed of straw upon which to lie” (Chopin, *EALF* 28). Chopin uses a range of restrictive words that describe the narrow life in the cage: close, walls, bars, cage, corner, protecting, care, rest, fearing, crouched, and wondering. In return, when the animal escapes from the cage, she defines the joy of freedom more firmly: awaking, the open door, seeking, finding, joying, the sky broader, more light, the world wider. At first when she speaks about the life of the animal in the cage, she said, “was born in a cage”, but when the animal becomes free, she said “So does he live”. This statement reveals that the animal starts living only when he went outside the cage: once he steps out “the open door”, he starts “seeing each time more Light, the sky grows broader, the world waxing wider” (Chopin, *EALF* 28). He is now experiencing and tasting the true meaning of life: “seeking but finding, joying and suffering” (Chopin, *EALF* 28).

The title of the fable itself reveals Chopin’s message. Whereas the concept of ‘fable’ allows the reader to anticipate a universally acknowledged truth about the human condition through an example of animal behavior, the word ‘emancipation’, as scholar Katharine T. Corbett explains, counterbalances the movement toward a too narrowly genre-bound reading as its primary connotations are human (Corbett 148). Janet Beer claims that the word ‘emancipation’, which derives from Roman law and generally used to signify ‘manumission’, means the release from bondage, rather than the condition of being free (Beer, *Kate Chopin* 69). The use of the fable in itself, Beer adds: “forces attention back to the question of the granting of human dignity - the right to self-determination - at the heart of the question of emancipation; those who would deny the

status of human to the enslaved were not unused to equating slaves with beasts” (Beer, *Kate Chopin* 69).

Chopin’s moral is clear: one must live in the world and be of it; one must discover a self in body and in mind even though that quest be painful and disillusioning. However, this story of the animal rejecting security within the cage and embracing life of freedom with all its suffering, received different interpretations. Florinda Boriçi, in her article “*Emancipation: A Constant Theme in Kate Chopin’s Short Stories*” (2014), suggested that the animal represents the humans, while the story mirrors the story of original sin from the Bible: the caged animal with all its needs met is like Adam and Eve in paradise before the fall, the couple is never able to go back to garden, and they must experience suffering and labor like the animal (Boriçi 248). It is possible also, as Rachel Adams claims, to read this story as an allegory for the author’s desire to release from all social bonds, when she found herself engaged to Oscar, whom she would marry in 1870 (Adams 17). Emily Toth suggests that through the animal, Chopin refers to the restrictive rules guiding proper female behavior, as found in her commonplace journal, Chopin copied Anna Bronwell Jamison’s observation that a girl’s moral education consisted chiefly of prohibitions (“you must not do this----you must not say that----you must not think so”), as well as her conclusion that suppressing female “ passions, power, tempers [and] feelings” was “monstrous” (Toth and Seyersted 54).

Nevertheless, and while the creature in this fable is referred as ‘he’ (a male), his experiences indicate those of many of Chopin’s female protagonists in later works; leaving the marriage cage, for the pursuit of fulfillment. Therefore, another convincing interpretation of the fable is that woman is a slave who, once emancipated, will prefer suffering to the comfort of marriage. The cage represents the patriarchal world, or more precisely the conventional marriage,

and the use of the animal was a symbol of instinct search for freedom. Allison Berg, in her book *Mothering the Race: Women's Narratives on Reproduction, 1890-1930* (2002), argues that Chopin represents women's psychic entrapment in marriage through the metaphor of a cage in this fable (Berg 61). Jana Wesson-Martin as well, discussing Chopin's protagonists in her book *Never Too Late to Be: Women's Yearnings for Self-realization* (2011), cites that "the cage of marriage is but an inner cell in the prison of house of femininity, of womanhood, which the nineteenth century had constructed for its women" (Wesson-Martin 89). The image of awakening animal itself, appears in other works of Chopin. In her novel *The Awakening*, when Dr. Mandelet recognizes Edna's shift from a "listless woman into a being who seemed palpitant with the forces of life", "[s]he reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (Chopin, *The Awakening* 94). So, even if critics disagree about the theme that Chopin intends to express in this tale, Chopin tells us, that even animals have the instinct of being free, so what about women?

Indeed, Chopin was not the first who associated caged animals, which is a strong symbol of wrongful imprisonment, with a married woman. Women's position was a central topic in the nineteenth century, both in political debate and in literature, and therefore it is not surprising that caged animal imagery was used to address the issue. According to *The Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, an animal in a cage might stand for any trapped or exiled person, and it stood in particular for a woman's restricted life in a society dominated by men (Ferber 26). In her epic poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Elizabeth Browning describes a woman who "has lived / A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage, / Accounting that to leap from perch to perch / Was act and joy enough for any bird" (Raine 28). Mary Wollstonecraft used a bird metaphor to criticize women's situation wrote: "Confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves,

and walk from perch to perch. It is true they are provided with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin; but health, liberty and virtue, are given in exchange” (Wollstonecraft 60).

Yet, for Chopin, no cage can be gilded enough to make freedom unattractive. While the majority view that domesticity is natural for all women, Chopin believes that “whether you’re beaten or pampered, fed the best foods or starved, kept in filth or kept clean, a cage is still a cage”, in the words of Bernard Shaw (Shaw 97). American suffragist and social activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton also warned woman against such a trap; as she wrote, “No matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone and for safety in an emergency they must know something of the laws of navigation” (Bloom 107). Certainly, Chopin’s female characters believe in such ideas and often seek their chance for emancipation.

However, and while the caged animal in Chopin’s fable chooses his freedom even with suffering, the end of the story suggests that, in a patriarchal world, this emancipation is just an illusion: a fable itself. The complicated nature of limitations imposed to women’s existence in the Victorian society in which Chopin lived, makes it difficult, perhaps it is even impossible, to escape. Therefore, by using the word “a fable”, Chopin suggests that this kind of emancipation will be just a life fable and not an accepted truth. Chopin ends her story with one reality that the cage remains empty, meaning that, as Janet Beer explains, ‘emancipation’ itself remains empty as the cage, because, in the world of patriarchy, there is little chance for emancipation to exist (Beer, *Kate Chopin* 66). The freedom offered by such world, like the freedom experienced in fables; in fact, only fake freedom.

This truth is openly expressed in another more crafted story of Chopin. Originally entitled “The Dream of an Hour”, “The Story of An Hour”, was first published in *Vogue* (December 1894),

after it was refused by the editor of the *Century*; because he felt it lacked “ethical value” (Ostman 8). Boldly, the story examines issues of feminism, namely, a woman’s dissatisfaction in a conventional marriage and her desire for independence. The story was written at the moment when the first reviews of *Bayou Folk* had both satisfied and increased Chopin’s secret ambitions, and because of its brevity and stunning final irony, this tale has quickly become Chopin’s most-read and one of the most frequently anthologized stories (Unger 217). Susan Cahill - the editor of the bestselling *Women and Fiction* series - called it “one of feminism’s sacred texts” (Cahill 39), and Emily Toth considers it “as a criticism of marriage as an institution that traps women” (Toth 11). Robert C. Evans, author of *Kate Chopin's Short Fiction: a Critical Companion* (2001), sees this story as “a way of letting out the oppressed feelings by relieving disappointments and enslavements” (Evans 125). Other critics agree that it illustrates, even more than most of her fiction, the most prominent example of a woman who is trying to determine her identity (Werlock 619).

Despite its brevity, "The Story of an Hour" presents a complex view about marriage, and explicitly explores the themes of female freedom and self-fulfillment within marriage in the nineteenth century. Mrs. Mallard reflects properly the image of the middle-class women in the nineteenth century. In the very first sentence, Chopin introduced to us the protagonist as Mrs. Mallard, which reveals her identity as nobody but a wife. According to the scholar Mary E. Papke, Mrs. Mallard -like most women in the nineteenth century- had only two possibilities in life: to become a married woman or an old maid (Papke 34). In her famous feminist book *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett considers that holding the husband name is itself a kind of imprisonment for women; as she argues that: “their chattel status continues in their loss of name, their obligation to adopt the husband’s domicile” (Millett 31). Once married, women in the nineteenth century were

defined as “a relative being”, as Simone De Beauvoir states: “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being” (De Beauvoir 16). So, by introducing the protagonist as Mrs. Mallard, the reader is prepared to receive the theme of imprisonment in the story.

Along with introducing her as a married woman, Chopin announced in the first sentence too, that Mrs. Mallard is suffering from heart trouble, and the “great care [that] was taken to break to her as gently as possible the sad news of her husband’s death”(Chopin, *TSOAH* 285), reflects her image as a weak and sensitive woman. Scholar Allen F. Stein suggests that the protective forces of society, the sister Josephine as the representative of her own family –protection as a daughter- and the friend Richards as the protective male attitude towards women, come together “to shelter and to protect Mrs. Mallard, who is the paradigm of the ideal of a woman in society as a weak, delicate and gentle creature” (Stein 69). These characteristics, in fact, are favorable in the Victorian woman: her weakness is encouraged. In his book, *A father legacy to his daughters* (1774), one of the most popular treatises on female education of the time, Dr. John Gregory, a Scottish physician, advises his daughters saying: “But though good health is one of the greatest blessings of life, never boast of it, but enjoy it in grateful silence. We so naturally associate the idea of female softness and delicacy, with a correspondent delicacy of constitution” (Gregory 58). Almost a century later, in the time Chopin wrote her story, female’s weakness was still favored, and women were still supposed to be weak, never pretending to possess any strength; and Mrs. Mallard was behaving according to these norms. After all submissiveness was one of the most important virtues of the Victorian woman, along with piety, purity, and domesticity. “Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes”, Barbara Welter states, “With them she was promised happiness and power” (Welter 1).

However, Mrs. Mallard's reaction to the news of her husband's death proves that she is more than just a model of the Victorian woman of the nineteenth century, but a New woman character. After learning the news of her husband's death, and after a while when she became alone, Mrs. Mallard's true reaction appears. A weak woman may collapse for such news, may think on the losses, grievances, and loneliness that she has to face. In contrast, Mrs. Mallard surprised the reader by thinking of the happiness and the long life that she would live without her husband: "there was something coming to her and she was waiting for it fearfully. What was it? [...] When she abandoned herself, a little word escaped She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" [...] She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her" (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286). Barbara Ewell points out that this moment marks a turning point in the story, as the main character looks outward and begins to realize something important about her life" (Koloski 89).

In addition to her surprising actions, what makes Mrs. Mallard a New Woman is also her conflicting desires: what society wants from her, in contrast to what she wants herself. Indeed, Mrs. Mallard was behaving as a stereotype because she cannot but respond to her society's values. Alone in her room, Mrs. Mallard revealed her unconscious dissatisfaction with her marriage that her society would not accept. In Chopin's time, advice-givers insisted on the image of devoted wives and mothers. An advice written in *Hill's Manual of Social and Business Forms* (1888) said:

Whatever have been the cares of the day, greet your husband with a smile when he returns. Make your personal appearance just as beautiful as possible. Let him enter rooms so attractive and sunny that all the recollections of his home, when away from the same, shall attract him back [...] It is the wife's responsibility to provide her husband a happy home... the single spot of rest which a man has upon this earth for the cultivation of his noblest sensibilities (Hill 167).

Therefore, women's own desires and needs are almost never shown in such conditions. Simone De Beauvoir explains in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), that women's voices are covered because a wife is expected to have superhuman qualities: virtuous, perfect, honest and so on' (De Beauvoir 474), and this is why many wives let themselves go, they are being themselves, only in the absence of their husbands", exactly what we have seen with Mrs. Mallard. Although the marital relation of Louise with her husband is unknown, she is depicted as the typical woman from a high position who performs her common activities as the lady of the house. So, she does not want to lose her social status as a respectable woman, and the image that Mrs. Mallard shows to her sister and her husband's friend was what her patriarchal society expects from her.

Another aspect that shows Mrs. Mallard as a New Woman is the name itself. According to *Cambridge dictionary*, the word 'Mallard' refers to a species of wild duck in which "the male is very colorful and the female very drab and submissive". Allen F. Stein suggests that the naming implies a very conventional male-female relationship in a marriage where the husband is the authority figure and the wife is a submissive dependent (Stein 34). *Mallard* also connotes a sense of naturalness, but also wildness, which implies the natural instincts and suppressed emotions of a natural being. Therefore, the name *mallard* with its two different connotations creates a double vision that enables the reader to see two different images of Mrs. Mallard: the first is a conventional wife shaped by the traditions and accepted standards of society, and the second is a natural woman with a strong sense of freedom. The wife that was previously described as heart-troubled is now certain and intelligent: "But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought" (Chopin, *TSOAH* 285).

So again, the motif of naturalness in contrast with the motif of conventionality comes out to introduce another dimension in Louise's existence: behind the submissive wife, lies a natural being capable of violent emotions or "monstrous Joy". Altogether, these characteristics introduce to the New Woman image, which appears in the character of Louise after widowing. While Louise's society obliged her to live as 'a relative being', who is supposed to be weak and delicate in conventional society, the death of her husband brought her strength and life as 'an autonomous being'. When Louise realizes her new independence, she notices that "the trees were all aquiver with the new spring life" (Chopin, *TSOAH* 285). Her insistence on solitude itself is both rejection of society and the first step of the process of being an autonomous individual, with a life filled with hope: "there was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286). It is significant that why at first Chopin called her Mrs. Mallard, but just right after she declares her independence (by pronouncing the words *Free! Body and soul free!*), her sister calls her by her first name Louise, an independent being.

It is noteworthy also to mention that the narrative method that Chopin used helped her to create a strong dynamic character. Nancy Kress, in her book *Characters, Emotion & Viewpoint: Techniques and Exercises for Crafting Dynamic Characters and Effective Viewpoints* (2005), explains the importance of narrative to characterization: by showing and telling. In showing (also called "the dramatic method"), Kress claims that the author simply presents the characters talking and acting, and leaves it entirely up to the reader to assume the motives and tempers that lie behind what they say and do. The author may show not only external speech and actions, but also a character's inner thoughts, feelings, and responsiveness to events. In telling, Kress adds, the author intervenes authoritatively in order to describe, and often to evaluate, the motives and dispositional qualities of the characters (Kress 75). So by focusing on the stream of consciousness, which means

by showing not telling, Chopin – as a female writer- depicted Mr. Mallard objectively, and not as a woman in defense of her own sex.

- **Space and Female Awakening**

The setting, as well, plays an important role to explain the theme of imprisonment and emancipation. The use of the city shows the new opportunities opened to Louise as New Woman after the death of her husband. Several scholars, in fact, have noticed Chopin's relationship with the city: Emily Toth, Bernard Koloski, Tom Bonner, Barbara Ewell, and Suzanne Jones, among others. Helen Taylor claims that the city in Chopin's texts is largely idealized, as "a bringer of life, change, vitality and sexuality" (Taylor 76). Scholar Heather Ostman also argues that in several instances in Chopin's fiction, the city is depicted as a place of awakening, where "protagonists make realizations about themselves that enable them to draw conclusions about their lives they could not realize in other places" (Ostman 12).

The inner settings play an important role as well. In fact, the home, the locket and the walls are symbols used to express female imprisonment. Like the cage in the fable of emancipation, Mrs. Mallard is locked in the home. Home can offer refuge from the hostile world, but it can be also a prison for women. Enclosed spaces usually evoke how people are stuck in relationships and life they can never get rid off. In their classic book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explained the significance of houses and enclosed rooms, as a symbol of women's anxieties about their roles and the limitations set to their existence by society in the nineteenth century (Gilbert and Gubar 85). In Chopin's time, women were still restrained to the private sphere of the home and were often denied participation in the public sphere. Simone de Beauvoir also, considers the home as a prison and marriage as entrapment for women: "Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a

boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly” (De Beauvoir 574).

However, while the home represents the patriarchal society and limitations of women’s lives in the nineteenth century, the room, with the locket, represents a form of resistance against this imprisonment. When Mrs. Mallard heard about her husband’s death, she first wept in the living room, then she moved to her own room alone and locked it, “she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286), and there she lives her moment of awakening. Chopin here uses the private space as a way of resistance, as she has already suggested in her diaries that what a woman needs a “*pigeon house*” of her own, where she may construct her own story (Bomarito III: 103). Similarly, in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf argues that women need to have rooms of their own; preferably with locks. These private rooms give women the ability to think independently and without interruption (Woolf 4). The concept of a room as a private space here helps Mrs. Mallard to focus on her new opportunities, and discover her real impulses for a new and free existence.

Another symbol, which frequently appears in Chopin’s works, is the open window. In her own room, and alone “there stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286). The open window from which Louise watches, represents the freedom and opportunities that await her. In other works, *The Awakening* for instance, Chopin clearly describes that Mademoiselle Reisz’s windows are always open, Mademoiselle Reisz, who serves as an inspiration for the awakening of Edna Pontellier, is an independent, self-supported expert pianist, an unconventional woman who is governed by her own will, rather than by any expectations of society (Jones 139). Thus like Mademoiselle Reisz’s open windows, which symbolize the open passages to feminine selfhood and freedom, the open window in “The Story of an Hour” also

symbolizes the open path to a new inspiration leading to a new spirit for a new life: she was “*drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window*” (Chopin 537). The “elixir”, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, is “a substance believed to maintain life indefinitely”. So, like the animal in the cage, who start living only after stepping out of the cage, Louise will now start living after her husband’s death. It is therefore no coincidence that when Louise turns away from the window and that view, she quickly loses her freedom.

The springtime, which is given considerable emphasis in the story, also reinforces the hope about Mrs. Mallard’s new autonomous life. As a season of life and rebirth, springtime serves as symbolic of endless possibilities for a happy life. Outside her window, she can see a world “aquiver with new spring life the delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 285). The reference to summer “spring days and summer days” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 285), means the long new life she would live. Scholar Sylvan Barnet argues that Chopin “did not worry to tell us the city, or kind of house, because it doesn't matter. What really matters is the new life that Mrs. Mallard feels, and this has been shown by the springtime, a time of new life” (Barnet et al. 287).

All the previous symbolic references, the locked room, the open window and springtime, imply that Chopin is preparing a rebirth for the protagonist, and introducing her common theme: the female awakening. In her own room, Louise is having her spiritual rebirth: “There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 285). This “something” is, as Louise herself feels it, the “possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286). Mary Papke points out that “as a dynamic character Mrs.

Mallard goes from dormancy to vitality, from the repressed to the assertive: it is the birth of new self, a new identity, and the preceding change is almost a mystical experience” (Bloom 64). Now Louise can no longer ignore that voice within herself that says, “I want something more than my husband and my home”, in the words of Betty Freidan in *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 78). Mrs. Mallard, ‘the relative being’, will grieve for the husband who had loved her, but Louise, ‘the autonomous being’ will look only for self-fulfillment. Thus, Louise’s hunger for selfhood and freedom finally breaks free when she comes out of her room.

Chopin, who was not interested in romantic plot as much as she was interested in defending women’s autonomy; believes that self-assertion is more important than love itself. She often criticizing the institution of marriage and the man himself, for disappointing women. According to Emily Toth, this is why Chopin remains a widow, and it was a lesson that she has early learned from the widows of her family, who chose not to remarry (Toth 195). Remarkably, in this story, Chopin was careful to make clear that Louise did not hate her husband: to have made Brantly an oppressive husband would make the story a trivial melodrama in which an oppressed wife is freed from a tyrannical husband, as Mary Papke argues (Bloom 57). What Chopin wants to say in this story then, was much important: women should love themselves first. Louise’s feelings for Brantley suddenly seem less important than the vision of her bright future of freedom.

In her moments of awakening, Louise starts to question the meaning of love; she realizes that there would no longer be a “powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286). What is love compared to self-fulfillment? “What did it matter! What could love”, the “*unsolved mystery*”, counts for in face of “this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 199). Carl Rogers, an

American psychologist and one of the founding fathers of psychotherapy research, said that ‘we can love a person only to the extent we are not threatened by him’ (Qtd. In Greer 164). Betty Friedan also wonders: “How could we ever really know or love each other as long as we played those roles that kept us from knowing or being ourselves?” (Friedan 521). Germaine Greer, in her feminist book *The Female Eunuch* (1970), went further to state that love is not possible between inferior and superior, because the inferior cannot free their love from selfish interest, either the desire for security, or social advantage (Greer 158). “The proper subject for love”, she stated “is one’s equal, seeing as the essence of love is to be mutual, and the lesser cannot produce anything greater than itself [...] The essential factor in self-realization is independence, resistance to enculturation” (Greer 158).

While marriage is not always presented as a negative thing, not even in these stories under study, it is evident that the marriages of the time did include an unequal power balance and a possibility for the husband to control the wife. This control is not only accepted, but also even expected, by the society around the married couple, which severely limits a woman’s freedom in marriage. Thus, despite the love between husband and wife, Louise considers her husband’s death as a release from the oppression of marriage itself. Knowing that this was not the first story where the protagonist becomes happy with widowhood, we safely can say that Chopin suggests that all marriages, even the kindest ones, could be oppressive. Bert Bender argues that what created the inequality in any marriage life is the fact that “husband finds real self-realization in his work and action whereas wife dooms in the repetition and routine household that cannot promise happiness for her” (Bloom 92). In fact, not only Chopin, but many writers believed that marriage could be repressing for women. Margaret Fuller considers that, if the woman must “obey,” this means she is restricted from following the dictates of her individual mind, and subject to those of another;

she ceases being a "unit," lacking the completeness necessary to develop "the organization both of body and mind" to develop "communion with the one" and thus "perfection" (Fuller 59).

Similarly, Simone De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, believes that marriage has always been a different thing for a man and for a woman, because it gives rise to hypocrisy, lying, hostility and unhappiness" (De Beauvoir 429). As a devoted wife, a woman is expected to think only about her husband and her children and not to think about herself as an individual. "Marriage shuts her up within the circle of herself"; she becomes the "lady of the house" where it becomes her duty to assure the happiness of the family, De Beauvoir argues (474). This explains why Louise Mallard become happy for the death of her husband, because finally: "There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself [...] the spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own" (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286).

Yet to say that Mrs. Mallard was not conscious about her oppression until the death of her husband is not true. Some expressions in the story reveal that she already feels oppression: "She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long" (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286). Even in Louise's mind, this conflict is illustrated with the symbols of the "patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above another in the west facing her window" (286). Dissatisfaction in marriage grows up secretly in Louise's mind, and she could only pronounce it when her husband dies. Even though in the story there is no mention to which way Brently Mallard oppressed his wife, but it seems that marriage itself in Victorian society was oppressive.

The moment of awakening, in fact, is generally preceded by disappointments and dissatisfaction in marital life, and it existed always as an inner conflict that is silenced by society. Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, identifies the problem as being 'boredom', which is: "the inability

to find meaning, to complete a perception, to arrive at an understanding: partly grasped, but forever just out of reach. It is not a lack of interest, but interest frustrated, cut off, imperfectly held. So says the Chronicle today. But for me it is the fear of emptiness” (Millett 97). Likewise, this emptiness that doctors name “*the housewife’s syndrome*” (Friedan 09), and which Betty Freidan called ‘*the problem that has no name*’, as she states:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all? (Freidan 01).

So, what has really caused Louise’s “physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 285), was not due to “the storm of grief” after hearing the news of her husband’s death, but because of the long-time self-control or suppression in the conventional and patriarchal environment she was living in.

Unfortunately, like in Chopin’s story “Emancipation: a life fable”, the freedom of Mrs. Mallard seems to be an illusion, a fable itself. Chopin sometimes shows that these moments of freedom can be extremely short, as Mrs. Mallard discovers when her husband returns home uninjured. Ironically, her new life will last only an hour: she looks forward to “summer days”, but she will not see even the end of this spring day. In fact, the significance of Mr. Mallard opening the home door with a locket, “Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard” (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286), shows that she has no possible chance for freedom outside the home, unless she dies. Besides, all signs of life the spring day, birds and trees, are all outside of

the home, which is locked with a key that only her husband has. For Louise the only way to escape from the cage of marriage is by death: whether her husband's or her own death. The line "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills" (Chopin, *TSOAH* 286) was an irony. Louise's death could be seen as a release: if, for an hour, she thinks of herself as autonomous and independent, so, Louise's fortunes are reversed suddenly, and she dies not out of 'joy' but from disappointment to return to her socially constructed identity.

2- She is the Other: Submissive Wives in "Madam Celestin's Divorce" (1893), "A Visit to Avoyelles" (1893) and "Désirée's Baby" (1892)

In the early 1890s, Chopin seemed to question the meaning of love and marriage. She wrote several stories suggesting that marriages made out of passion were dangerous to women. Some of these stories were easy to publish; others were impossible. In selected stories of this section, published in *Bayou Folk* and written within ten months from August 1892 to May 1893, Chopin depicts women who are weakened by passionate love, and thus do not search or maintain any kind of autonomy. These stories, as Janet Beer observes, are "about change and resistance to change", where the outsiders will suppose that marriage must be a bitter prison for the helpless wife, while the wife apparently feels otherwise and consistently refuses all offers to help her leave and make a better life (Beer, Kate Chopin 79). In "Madame Célestin's Divorce" (1893), the female character refuses to get a divorce from her drunken husband to satisfy her society from one hand and because she is still in love with him on the other hand. In "A Visit to Avoyelles" (1892), Mentine, the female character, was living in misery, yet, she was not even conscious about her bad status because she is blindly in love with her rude husband. Even worst, in "Désirée Baby" (1892),

Désirée goes further, she ends her life because she could not imagine her life without the love of her husband.

Like in “*The Story of an Hour*”, Chopin first introduced to us the protagonist of this story as ‘Madame Célestin’, a married woman, but never name her first name throughout the story. This implies that this woman, unlike what the title reveals about divorce, will still be married until the end of the story. What we have explained previously about what it means to be a married woman in the nineteenth century America is also significant for Madame Célestin; she is also restricted by her conventional society. Yet, as a working-class women, Madame Célestin -to some extent- could enjoy more freedom than does Mrs. Mallard, the middle-class woman, as we will see later.

In the first sentence of “Madame Célestin’s Divorce”, Chopin states: “Madame Célestin always wore a neat and snugly fitting calico wrapper when she went out in the morning to sweep her small gallery”(Chopin, *MCD* 225). Many critics believe that clothes at the turn of the twentieth century have revealed more than mere fashion statements. They have pointed out that women’s social identities were heavily tied to marriage in the late nineteenth century, many writers were quick to point out how women’s clothing signaled immobility and their lack of self-ownership. In her essay “Fashioning the Hybrid Women in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” (2002), Carolyn L. Mathews, argues that Chopin consistently uses dress as a means of representing female identity, to revise nineteenth-century feminist discourse on self-ownership (Bomarito III: 35). Hence, Chopin depiction of Madame Célestin’s clothes, has revealed a lot about her personality, attitudes and class. Wearing “a neat and snugly fitting calico wrapper when she went out in the morning to sweep her small gallery”, signifies that she is a woman respectable enough (‘*calico wrapper*’) to look like a married woman, tasteful enough (‘*neat*’) to look like a

leisure class lady, but also practical enough (*'snuggly fitting'*) to allow her moving comfortably. As a married woman who belongs to a religious society, Madame Célestin should avoid inviting sexual advances by her clothes. She is neither loud nor flashy, but neat and respectable.

Unlike women from the leisure class, Madame Célestin must work for some economic needs, so her clothes should be comfortable to facilitate her activities. Clearly, as Mathews argues, in contrast with “the ruffled tea gowns and velvet-trimmed walking dresses”, shown in women’s books, the working class should adopt the idiom of men’s dress, “insistently expressing seriousness, activity, and purposeful work” (Bomarito III: 37). Fashion historians and theorists like Joanne Finkelstein and Fred Davis have discussed the importance of more “masculine” dress for nineteenth-century women who entered the professions (Mathews 88-97). Equally, Helen Gilbert Ecob perceives this physical reformation, in term of clothing more practically, as women's only means of escaping her genteel imprisonment, "since physical weakness handicaps woman's activities, bars the way to higher education and hinders the development of many noble traits of character, it follows that an important step in the attainment of true womanhood lies in the direction of physical reformation" (Murton 23). This explains why Madame Célestin wears more practical clothes.

Another aspect that characterizes Madame Célestin, unlike Mrs. Mallard also, who seems silent and calm, that she is a talkative woman, who “usually had a good deal to say” (Chopin, *MCD* 226). Social reformer Ida Tarbell in her book *The Ways of Woman* (1915), claims that talkativeness is a hallmark of femininity. This talkativeness shows again that Madame Célestin is not a New Woman, but rather a stereotypical feminine woman. The New Woman hates talkativeness, because as Tarbell argues, “to allow the simple interests of daily life to run unconsciously and merrily off the tongue does not harmonize with the strenuous career she has

planned for womankind” (Tarbell 63). Although talkativeness helped Madame Célestin to gain her living as a teacher, yet, talkativeness plays another role almost as important as this of teacher and preserver of human speech, and especially in the case of Madam Célestin’s life; it helped her to endure her troubles: “Of course, she had talked to him of her troubles. Everyone knew Madame Célestin’s troubles”(Chopin, *MCD* 226). For Madame Célestin, talkativeness serves as entertainer and consoler too: “Lawyer Paxton enjoys what she says [...]or, when he had time enough, to hear what she had to say. Madame Célestin usually had a good deal to say” (Chopin, *MCD* 226).

Therefore, according to the characteristics of Madam Célestin, the way she dresses and her talkativeness and prettiness, we know that she is not one of Chopin’s New Woman heroines who ‘dares and defies’ her society. For a while we are about to believe that Madame Célestin is going to take the decision of divorce, “But all the confessor’ in the worl’ ent goin’ make me put up with that conduc’ of Célestin any longa”(Chopin, *MCD* 226). However, looking to her femininity and prettiness, as a woman “*face beamed with satisfaction*”, for any compliment, we know that she will not take such a step. Scholar Lynda G. Adamson argues that many of Chopin’s thoughtful women usually try to establish autonomy through realistic expectations of themselves, but one of the largest barriers to their discovery is the inability to overcome their perception of others’ attitudes toward them (Adamson 309). Even though belonging to the working class makes her looking for divorce more acceptable, Madam Célestin is limited by her society’s restrictions. She stands to fit the definition of “The feminine stereotype”, that the Polish American psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch introduced as:

The feminine stereotype drew an extraordinary picture of woman as the ideal life-companion. They are the loveliest and most unaggressive of helpmates and they want to remain in that role; they do not insist on their own rights—quite the contrary. They are easy

to handle in every way—if one only loves them. They demand love and ardent renunciation of their own active tendencies (Greer 109).

Obviously, Madam Célestin demands no more than love, because once her husband comes back and promises her with some sweet words, she changes her mind. Even when she speaks about her case, she makes it look as if the Lawyer is more concerned than her about divorce: “I been thinking,—I reckon you betta neva mine about that divo’ce” (Chopin, *MCD* 226).

In this story, the reader may wonder why Madam Célestin has little desire to be rescued and less desire to leave such a relationship, even in the presence of a potential rescuer, which is found in the character of lawyer Paxton. Noting that, when Chopin wrote this story, divorce became less uncommon, sex roles had changed, and people demanded more from their marriages. It was also a time of great change for divorce in the American legal system; a number of changes were made to the legal status of women, especially concerning marriage laws. One of them was the amendment to the *Married Women's Property Act* in 1884 that made a woman no longer a 'chattel' but an independent and separate person. Scholar Julian Barr claims that between 1867 and 1906, the United States courts granted 945,625 divorces, among them 616,909 cases between 1886 and 1906, and 218,520 were granted (Griswold 732). Besides mental and physical cruelty, desertion was a common reason for divorce. This was seen as a form of cruelty to the victim because it undermines women's social and economic status, these historical elements are well reflected in this narrative of Madame Célestin.

Certainly, the case of Madame Célestin would be successful, because she had every reason to get divorced, among them the cruelty of a drunken husband, the lack of economic support and desertion, as the lawyer states: “That’s it, that’s what I say; he has practically deserted you; fails to support you. It wouldn’t surprise me a bit to learn that he has ill-treated you” (Chopin, *MCD*

227). Yet, Madame Célestin resisted divorce, as she belonged to a Catholic society. It is noteworthy to mention that the late nineteenth century had known also a struggle between Church and the Laws. In his article *The Separation of Church and State in the United States* (2010), Steven K. Green argues that despite the separation of church and state, which has been part of the nation's legal and cultural terminology since the early 1800s; seeing that their power was weakened by laws, religious leaders become more consistent to impose religion on their communities (Green). They found that their role becomes more important as guardians of society and family, so, they insisted on religion in women's lives in particular. In 1841, Caleb Atwater, an American politician, historian, and early archaeologist, writing in *The Ladies Repository*, a monthly periodical, devoted to literature, arts, and religion: "Religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence" (Maddox 45). One reason religion was valued was that it did not take a woman away from her "proper sphere," as the bishop convinced Madame Célestin, "It would move even you, Judge, to hear how he talk ' about that step I want to take. ... How it is the duty of a Catholic to stan ' everything till the las ' extreme ' " (Chopin, *MCD* 278).

Kate Chopin was, in the words of Emily Toth, 'a renegade Catholic' and, through this story, seems to be confused about a situation that was impossible for Catholics to achieve at the time (Toth 104). Madame Célestin reveals this reality when she describes her talk with the bishop to Lawyer Paxton:

Ah, he's a eloquent man. It's not a mo'eloquent man in Natchitoches parish. I was fo'ced to cry, the way he talked to me about my troubles: how he undastan's them, an' feels for me. It would move even you, Judge, to hear how he talk' about that step I want to take; its danga, its temptation. How it is the duty of a Catholic to stan' everything till the las'

extreme. An' that life of retirement an' self-denial I would have to lead, - he tole me all that" (Chopin, *MCD* 226).

Both the reader and Lawyer Paxton are led to believe that Madame Célestin will go ahead and divorce her husband, but through her discussions with 'Père Duchéron', her confessor, and then with the bishop, we know that divorce will not happen. This indecision running through the text, as Emily Toth argues, seems to reflect Chopin's criticism of the Catholic Church and its patriarchal views of the dangers of abandoning one's husband from a male (the bishop's) point of view (Toth 11).

Another factor that prevents Madame Célestin from divorce is belonging to the Créoles. Even though if this marriage does not provide women with any of their essential needs, the Victorian Society in general, as Margaret Fuller claims, considers marriage to be compulsory for women (Fuller 68). The late nineteenth century Catholic Creole¹ society, in particular, had strong expectations of control female sexuality, as depicted in Chopin's fiction. The Creole society was somewhat less strict in its norms of acceptable topics of conversation and physical expressions of affection than the Northern, Protestant societies. However, the Creoles had absolute "convictions about the indissolubility of marriage and the adequacy of maternity for feminine fulfillment", as Barbara Ewell states (Ewell 147). Madam Célestin's discussion with the lawyer reveals her fear of opposition from the creoles to divorce, and the Lawyer's answer also reveals that he expects such an opposition: "Certainly, to be sure; that's to be expected, Madame, in this community of Creoles. I warned you that you would meet with opposition, and would have to face it and brave it" (Chopin, *MCD* 226). The freedoms of this society are superficial, and based on strong expectations of commitment to the norms of proper behavior, Barbara Ewell argues (Ewell 52).

Furthermore, it is evident in Chopin's fiction that the Creole society has strong and clearly defined gender roles within marriage; such a society demands from women to be patient and bear their husband's faults, and the only permitted relief should be in religion : "Oh, don't fear, I'm going to face it! Maman says it's a disgrace like it's neva been in the family. But it's good for Maman to talk, her. W'at trouble she ever had? She says I mus' go by all means consult with Père Duchéron—it's my confessor, you undastan' (Chopin, *MCD* 226). We also find here the authority of Créole mothers over their daughters. Madame Célestin faces strong opposition from her mother about the divorce, yet she works with her advice to see the bishop. Her mother did not want her daughter to get divorced because, as scholar Joyce Coyne Dyer comments, that these Creole women, although 'seemingly less constrained than other women, were actually among the most conservative members of their sex in the nineteenth century' (Dyer 219).

Divorce, then, was not a possible choice for Madam Célestin. As Norma Basch succinctly remarks in her book, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (2001), that: "marriage was a metonym for the social order. To be married was often the sole object of an individual's life, a means of fitting into society and following its most important contract between a man and a woman" (Basch 14). Basch describes the power and importance of marriage in the Victorian period in particular as: "a contract unlike any other. It was the simultaneously private and public contract that defined the obligations between husband and wife, bound their union to the political order, and shaped constructions of gender" (Basch 23). Divorce, on the other hand, undermined marriage and 'rocked the foundations' of this social order. Newspapers from the nineteenth century show that divorce was written about and mentioned, but more in a scandalous or moralistic tone, as if they were trying to shock people

into avoiding divorce. The status of marriage was to be upheld as far as it was possible in order to maintain the status quo of society.

Certainly, Madame Célestin, the feminine woman, knows in what society she lives; her prettiness does not allow her to confront the Catholic Créoles institution. A woman like Madame Célestin learns to accept herself as the ‘Other’, in other words, inferior and dependent, and while accepting herself as passive, De Beauvoir argues that she enters a vicious circle whereby she agrees to become “what-in-men’s-eyes-she-seems-to-be” in order to secure her place and not devalue herself sexually and socially (De Beauvoir 690). She adds that, as a “feminine woman”, Madame Célestin makes herself as an “object and prey” and thereby renounces her claims as a sovereign subject (De Beauvoir 691). Similarly, Germaine Greer, another feminist writer, in *The Female Eunuch* (1970), suggests that women are conditioned to conform to society’s expectations of femininity because they gain value only by being valuable to men (Greer 17). Yet, Madame Celestin, as a prototype of female refinement and embodiment of domesticity, is not totally blamed for her dependent attitude, because the upbringing of women in that period trained them to develop any strength of character or any professional skill to live independently. The protagonist’s small skills such as sewing and giving music lessons are not enough to support her for a living; so, she has no choice but to depend on a man.

Also, as part of Madame Célestin’s characteristics as a feminine woman, is her vulnerability; her “*unusually rosy*” face that morning, may suggest that a satisfying sexual relationship with her husband makes her giving up the divorce. For a moment, the reader expects that Célestin would not keep his promises for long, because he is a drunken man, yet Madame Célestin believes him because, she does not expect but some love and appreciation from her husband. Kate Millet, in her book *Sexual Politics* explains that the concept of romantic love affords

a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit, 'since love is the only circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity' (Millet 99). Thus women in love, like Madame Célestin, do not care about their own autonomy. A woman who gives up her own separate identity for the sake of vicariously participating in the autonomy of some man exemplifies exactly Beauvoir's description of the tragic woman in love. In De Beauvoir's view, such a project is doomed to fail. No man is divine enough to deserve such a sacrifice. A woman will realize that fact soon enough, after which she will spend the rest of her life trying to hide, from others and herself, the sad pointlessness of her sacrifice (De Beauvoir 691).

This problem, that women's search for autonomy could be weakened by love and society's restrictions, is better seen in the second story of this section. In "A Visit to Avoyelles", Chopin describes a woman's destructive isolation, faded beauty, hopeless poverty, and endless childbearing; some of the characteristics of women, as Emily Toth states, whose lives brought low by the demands of husbands and children, she had personally witnessed, in rural Louisiana (Toth 172). Mentine, the protagonist of "A Visit to Avoyelles", a girl who was once ambitious, was admired by Doudouce, but she falls into the trap of love, captivated by the handsome eyes and pleasant speech of Jules, but as miserable after marriage; she has changed to the point that Doudouce would not recognize her if he met her outside. The story suggests that marriage might not be just repressive, but destructive and miserable for female ambitions if driven by blind love.

Unlike in the previous stories where the narration focuses on the female characters, Chopin in this story directs her narration to describe Mentine in the eyes of others. The story itself is told by the perspective of Doudouce in a third-person narrative point of view restricted to his consciousness. According to the American novelist and literary critic John Gardner, a limited third person viewpoint puts a critical distance between protagonist and narrator, because the narrator

can “see” something happening to the protagonist that the character himself might miss, since the narrator is extremely close to the main character (Beer 159). Chopin made use of this technique of narration to shape her protagonist Mentine, who was unaware of the dramatic change in her status, and using the perspective of Doudouce to tell the story. Everybody noticed the change in Mentine’s status, but only Doudouce could see in details what happens to the attractive young woman he once loved: “He would have known her sweet, cheerful brown eyes, that were not changed; but her figure, that had looked so trim in the wedding gown, was sadly misshapen [...] There were lines, some deep as if old age had cut them, about the eyes and mouth” (Chopin, AVTA 188).

Ironically, Mentine’s guilt is love, which was and still be the reason for her misery. Mentine, suffering in a hopeless way for the small comforts of life because of her inability to choose the worthy man. Doudouce knew that Mentine would have married him if “had not Jules Trodon come up from Avoyelles and captivated her with his handsome eyes and pleasant speech” (Chopin, AVTA 188). Chopin in this story does not only criticize the institution of marriage, as much as she warned against the blind love that undermines women’s status. Even if love is not always blamed, a woman must choose a husband who can take care of her, as in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft insists that, if women should marry out of love, they must choose a man's mind not his appearance; otherwise, these women might doom themselves to bitterness and resentment (Wollstonecraft 66). Unfortunately, Mentine was both the offender and the victim by her wrong choice; she is “no longer beautiful [...] the delicate bloom of her existence had been rudely brushed away; because she was in a manner fallen” (Chopin, AVTA 189).

Yet, Chopin often blames her male character for the low status of her protagonists. Mentine’s husband “was not kind except to himself”; in the presence of Doudouce, he humiliates

his wife with heartless implications: “Well, you’ a lucky man, you,” he exclaimed with his swagger air, “able to broad like that, encore! You couldn’t do that if you had half a dozen mouth’ to feed, allez!” (Chopin, AVTA 188). Chopin makes it clear here that men actually learn to despise the women they have created. Margaret Fuller describes such a situation as: “Woman is the flower, man the bee. She sighs out of melodious fragrance, and invites the winged laborer. He drains her cup, and carries off the honey. She dies on the stalk; he returns to the hive, well fed, and praised as an active member of the community” (Showalter 53). No wonder that while the poor Mentine fades, her husband Jules flourishes as Doudouce remarked: “This husband of Mentine surely had not changed during the seven years, except to grow broader, stronger, handsomer” (Chopin, AVTA 188).

Ironically, and thinking back of the previous stories, the reader may find the situation ironic: how Mrs. Mallard, a middle class woman, whose husband looks kind to her, starves for any chance for emancipation, in contrast Mentine, a low class woman whose husband ill-treated her, desires for no rescue. Yet, we may find a possible explanation for this, since Chopin herself focused on the poverty of Mentine. According to Abraham Maslow, in his *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943), where he explains the hierarchy of the human basic needs, he argues that the physiological needs are the most pre-potent of all needs. If all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background (Maslow 272). It is then convincing why Mentine seems unaware of her status, because her unmet needs are much more than self-fulfillment; she was living “as poorly as pine-woods people [...] she was suffering in a hopeless, common, exasperating way for the small comforts of life” (Chopin, AVTA 187). The urge for self-fulfillment, the desire for emancipation and autonomy are, in the extreme case, forgotten or become of secondary importance

in Mentine's case. Certainly, Mentine has long road to recognize her need for autonomy. Emily Toth claims that "A Visit to Avoyelles" shows that rural areas were populated by poor, oppressed women, and that those women were too weakened by love or duty to rebel (Toth 172).

The last passage of the story, "but her face was turned away from him. She was gazing after her husband, who went in the direction of the field" (Chopin, AVTA 189); suggests that Mentine is not yet aware of her status. Despite Doudouce strong wishes to "save" her, she is obviously content with her choice. Feminist philosophers argue that romantic love proves to be morally damaging to women. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that females and males are socialized to join unequally in romantic love, the female to submerge herself in the identity, projects, and perspective of the free, active, self-determining male. In such a case, marriage, which is made to seem attractive and inevitable, becomes a trap. This makes women complicit in the production of their own subordination and misery as seen in Mentine's case.

As love could not ensure happiness to Mentine, it proves in many stories that even a mother's unconditional love cannot save a daughter from suicide, if she is rejected by her husband as seen in "Désirée's Baby". Another story was written in 1892, and published by *Vogue* in January 1893 under the title of "The Father of Désirée's Baby". It was also included in *Bayou Folk* (1894), and as it was often anthologized, it remained continuously in print while most of Kate Chopin's work was virtually unavailable. Scholar Teresa Gibert, in her article "*The Role of Implications in Kate Chopin's Louisiana Short Stories*" (2003), argues that this story gains such widespread, because Kate Chopin's main themes—marriage and motherhood—are explored through a submissive and vulnerable female protagonist who is far from being like the emancipated heroines of her later fiction (Gibert 70). Daniel Rankin, who did not feel the need to reprint "Désirée's Baby" in his book *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Tales*, judged it "perhaps . . . one of the world's

best short stories" (Rankin 65). Emily Toth describes "Désirée's Baby" as being a shocking story, in the Maupassant tradition, but it is also very American; it fits themes of Poe, Hawthorne, Shakespeare, and other male writers, and readers who are fascinated by stories such stories of vulnerable young women dying violently, find this story appealing (Toth 146).

The story turns around Désirée, a girl who had been adopted by Valmondé family. Nothing was known of her origins; however, the belief was wide that she had been left accidentally behind by a party of Texas bound pioneers. Désirée married Armand Aubigny, a passionate, aristocratic man, and they were happy especially with the birth of their boy. Yet, as the days pass, Armand discovers that his baby looks like Negroes; he concludes that his wife, an orphan, is of mixed racial background, and cruelly sends her away. Desperately, Désirée carrying her son, disappeared across a deserted field and never come back again. Several weeks later, when Armand was burning his wife and son's personal effects he comes upon a letter from his own mother. She wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery."

Through this story, we can see the continuation of Chopin's most central theme, the evil that follows when one human being gains power over another and attempts to make that person conform his preset standards or expectations. Rachel Addams claims that "Désirée's Baby" represents Chopin's most pessimistic view of marriage as an arrangement that often begins to the mutual satisfaction of both parties but later dissolves into conflict and unhappiness (Adams145). Additionally, Elizabeth McMahan argues that Chopin wrote "Désirée's Baby" to illustrate how the theme of marrying for love is just as problematic as marrying for any other motive because that type of love depends too much on the admiration of the husband (Ostman and O'Donoghue 49). The story, in short, addresses topics that were controversial in its time, including patriarchal

marriage, which is our concern in this thesis. Like in the previous story, love proves that it does not always generate hope, but misery, especially in the presence of absolute female subordination.

Désirée's inability to recognize herself as nothing but Armand's wife leads to her eventual downfall in the story. Chopin in fact, from the beginning of the story, carefully portrays Désirée as lacking a personal identity, someone which others project their "desires", as her name suggests. Ellen Peel also adds that Désirée functions as a floating signifier on which the other characters project their desires (Peel 227). Like Mentine in "A Visit to Avoyelles", Chopin does not give a room to develop Désirée's personality, instead, Chopin characterized her by others' treatment of her as a possession to emphasize her marginality. Abandoned when she was of the toddling age, Désirée has no name, no origin or background; as an orphan, literally, she is "nobody". When Monsieur Valmondé finds her one day at the gate of his plantation, Madame Valmondé welcomes Désirée as a gift of her passionate wish for a child. The Valmondés objectify her as "*the idol of Valmondé*".

When the "beautiful and gentle" Désirée is married to Armand Aubigny, a highly respected and wealthy man, he also claims her like new property, and prideful, he brands her with his name: "He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana?" (Chopin, DB 196). Ellen Peel explains that namelessness has a particularly female cast in this society, since women, including Désirée, lose their last name at marriage, and on this virgin page (the nameless Désirée), Armand believes he can write his name, the name he inherited from his father or, more broadly, "the patriarchal Name of the Father" (Peel 78). Yet Chopin never called Désirée as 'Mrs. Aubigny', not even Miss. Valmondé, to emphasize her marginality, first as an orphan, and later as an abandoned wife.

In fact, this story illuminates Chopin's critical reading of the woman's extreme vulnerability if she chooses to live according to patriarchal prescriptive. In Armand's world, Désirée deserves marginalization since she has passed herself off as other than what she should have been: "he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name" (Chopin, *DB* 199). Désirée also comes to believe in this destiny that Armand chooses for her; her identity is extremely dependent upon her relationship with Armand as his wife and mother of his child. If he denies his child and no longer desires her, Désirée is not only abandoned, but she is no longer desired as her name indicates; as Peggy Skaggs argues in *Kate Chopin*, "her place and even her name depend upon man's regarding her as a prized possession" (Bloom 26). Her sense of self is directly tied to her husband's happiness; "when he frowned she trembled [...] When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God" (Chopin, *DB* 197). She seems content with the idea that she is no longer her own woman. Through this, McMahan adds, "Chopin is showing us that a woman who views herself solely as a wife seriously limits her options should her husband choose to discard her" (McMahan 34).

Désirée does not even perceive the possibility of a female world. After she writes to her mother, Madame Valmondé answers: "My own Désirée: Come home to Valmondé; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child " (Chopin, *DB* 199). Yet, unlike her mother, she proves to have less consciousness of her innate self: "she had identified herself, as Armand did, as an idol, and like all idols is silent, white, motionless, unconscious, easy to destroy", Papke argues (Papke 59). Feminist author Germanie Greer describes such vulnerable women as:

Such a woman cannot be a person, for she does not exist in her own terms at all. Her significance can only be conferred by the presence of a man at her side, a man upon whom she absolutely depends. In return for renouncing, collaborating, adapting, identifying, she is caressed, desired, handled, influenced and occasionally desired in vain. What right can this

creature have to demand ardent love and desire, seeing as she is powerless to offer it? This is a woman born to be abandoned by her ungrateful husband at the very pinnacle of the success she helped to make for him, for a shameless hussy of nineteen (Greer 109).

Repeatedly, Chopin displays her child-like charm, "in her soft white muslins and laces... looking like nothing so much as a child herself" (Chopin, *DB* 199). Désirée was even the last to realize that her child is not white, and it never occurs to her that her baby's blackness comes from her husband. In fact, it is her childlike, helpless ignorance and innocence, which are the most marked characteristic that destroyed her.

Désirée was also extremely passive; when Armand was treating his slaves bad or good according to his mood she never stands up to her husband's value system, and never criticize his racism, his sexism, or his treatment of slaves. She never questions whether one man's moods should have such power over other people. Ellen Peel argues that Chopin sympathetically but critically shows that her characters define problems in terms of the lack of individualistic qualities such as love and mercy, not in terms of the subordination of one group by another, in which "superiors should have a sense of *noblesse oblige*, but they remain superior" (Peel 86). No wonder then, with such nature, with no sense of herself as a separate person, once abandoned and marked as an undesirable, she can no longer carry on her life, as she tells her mother: "I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live" (Chopin, *DB* 198).

In this story as well, love proved to be destructive. Scholar Elizabeth McMahan considers that, of all the assumptions that Chopin makes about marriage, she also "suggests in this story that such total devotion to a mate can also prove disastrous for a woman" (McMahan 34). Désirée, the child who was so deeply desired and loved by her adoptive parents, never knowing anything but love, and unable to comprehend any other emotion, she loves her husband desperately. Armand

too is supposed to have fallen in love at first sight: "That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. . . . The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles" (Chopin, *DB* 187). Thus, it is obvious that they had truly married for love, a detail that makes this marriage different from the other marriages that Chopin explores. Yet, there is a great difference between the love of Désirée and that of Armand. Armand's severe blame for Désirée is surely related to her "obscure origins," but it also responds to his arrogance and inability to accept even the possibility of any wrongdoing or imperfection on his own part.

Armand uses Désirée just as he does his slaves, an indication that he is a man obsessed with Control, which is one of the characteristics of patriarchy. As with any system of privilege that elevates one group by oppressing another, control is an essential element of patriarchy: men maintain their privilege by controlling women and anyone else who might threaten it. Given the primacy of control, it becomes the cultural standard for a truly superior human being, which is then used to justify men's privileged position. Men are assumed (and expected) to be in control at all times, to be unemotional (except for anger and rage), to present themselves as invulnerable, autonomous, independent, strong, rational, logical, dispassionate, knowledgeable, always right, and in command of every situation, especially those involving women. These qualities, it is assumed, mark them as superior and justify their privilege. Within this system of race, sex, and class, Emily Toth observes that, the most complacent representative is Armand Aubigny: "Confident that he is a white, a male, and a master, he feels in control of the system" (Toth 185).

Chopin's choice of setting itself is significant, as the story takes place in an antebellum Creole community, which was according to Ellen Peel, ruled by institutions based on clear dualities: master over slave, white over black, and the man over the woman (Peel 228). Historian

Francoise Basch argues that very early in the women's rights movement, the focus was on the idea that marriage was a form of slavery and a source of oppression, and that marriage represented the overall issues of the lack of rights for women (Barr 48). They used slavery as a comparison, because most of the women's rights activists were also abolitionists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Henry Blackwell, and Lucy Stone believed that women were like slaves because they lost their names and took the name of the person who essentially owned them; they lost all rights once this "transaction" occurred, and some were even sold to the highest bidder, and these factors can be seen within both the marriage relationship and the process of slavery (Barr 49).

Still, the reader may wonder why Désirée chose suicide, since she is free, even if her origins are obscured. De Beauvoir explains the reason why women cannot dispute male sovereignty, is because "it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One" (De Beauvoir 479). Therefore, in this gendered terrain, Armand is obviously the center, and Désirée the marginalized "other", even though the meanings of race, sex, and class are threatened by Armand's surprises at the end, it does not seriously disturb the system of power relations. By interrogating the life awaiting Désirée as a free black woman with an infant, the conclusion that she committed suicide becomes all the more persuasive (Ostman and O'Donoghue 55).

However, some feminist critics have asserted that Désirée's choice is actually a victory, for two reasons. First, because Désirée herself chooses her destiny, within the limitations imposed by her society. Second, they see death as a more honorable choice than total submission or marginalization. Désirée's literal departure from the plantation, even if viewed as a voluntary exile, is also a decision ultimately made by Désirée herself to leave behind her position of "otherness." The American critic Rachel du Plessis claims that, "this provides a degree of lack of closure to the

story, in spite of its seemingly tightly constructed plot, a technique frequently employed by women writers to write beyond the ending” (Versluys 194). Scholar Teresa Gibert argues that the absence of *Désirée* itself from the ending is significant: “although submissive, the young woman does have some power. Her boldest action is disappearance” (Gibert 40). Indeed, by escaping she has freed herself from those who once projected their desires on her. Even if she does kill herself and her child in the bayou, Peel argues, it is significant that the deaths are absent from the text, because in this way the work allows some hope, however slight, for the race, class, and sex the characters represent (Peel 84).

In the end, it is perhaps quite appropriate that "*Désirée's Baby*" should be so widely accepted as representative of Chopin's work, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff claims; because it captures her preoccupation with those life experiences that bring people to the margins of emotional reality (Wolff 129). In the narratives of this part, love, marriage and motherhood, among such experiences, with their necessary and potentially destructive sacrifices of personal freedom, just beyond, there exists a great threat to the female autonomy, and sometimes life as seen in "*Désirée's Baby*". These sacrifices that make other protagonists to rebel against, in Chopin narratives, as we will explore in the next section.

3- Escaping the Cage: Women's Rebellion in "Athénaïse" (1895), "In Sabine" (1893) and "Her letters" (1894)

In the preface to the widely popular *Women Who Kill* (1980), Ann Jones explains that she began researching and writing about women murderers when at the conclusion of a seminar on women's literature, a student asked, "Isn't there anything a woman can do but kill herself?" (Jones xv). In some of her stories, Chopin wrote about women who "can do" other things than

killing themselves like Désirée, or wish emancipation only in their dreams like Mrs. Mallard, or just give up their trials with the first opposition like Madam Célestin. Chopin depicted women who rebelled against their roles in society, and “longs to escape the ‘dead walls of societal constraint that confront the unconventional woman at every turn” (Stein 22). In the three stories analyzed in this section, the common theme is the attempts of the female protagonist to take action themselves in the hope of changing their conditions.

The new force, which was freed in Kate Chopin through the success of *Bayou Folk*, is seen particularly in her heroines who live out their strong impulses. “Athénaïse” (written in 1895, published in 1896) is not so well known as the other stories, but it is a superb work, one of Kate Chopin’s very best—an “American classic,” as scholar Susan Lohafer describes (Koloski 09). Nancy A. Walker claims that, if Chopin could represent marriage as both harmful and joyful, more lengthy exploration of her uncertainty is found in “Athénaïse”, in which the heroine rebels against marriage not because she hates her husband but because she was against the concept of marriage itself (Bloom 188). The name “Athénaïse” was taken from her maternal grandmother, Mary Athénaïse Charleville Faris, who had married very young. Marriage had not meant ecstasy to Chopin’s grandmother, and in “Athénaïse,” Chopin presents marriage as entrapment for young women, and it had certainly entrapped her grandmother half a century earlier, when her husband abandoned her and their seven children (Toth 182).

Most female writers, at the end of the nineteenth century, Chopin among them, took women as the subject of their works, and challenged marginalization, both as women and writers. She describes women who were pushing against the limits that society imposed on them. Actually, the tension between woman’s increasing sense of free self and man’s adherence to conventional attitudes constitutes the core of Chopin’s exploration in the stories under study. Yet, for Athénaïse,

the fictional character in the story, the experience of marriage and resistance was more positive and rewarding. With no real repression and constraint, from neither husband nor family, Athénaïse runs away from her home because she is not mature and responsible enough to endure marriage complexities. Here, Chopin shows that marriage could be oppressive for young women when they are not ready for it yet, but most importantly, that life will take its correct way, when respecting the female freedom to choose her own life. As we explained previously, the late 19th-century Catholic Creole society depicted by Chopin, had clearly defined gender roles within marriage, and strong expectations of faithfulness to the norms of proper behavior. The Creole marriages also include an uneven power balance and an assumption that the wife is to be passive, which results in the ending of the young woman's independence, to become only someone who lives for the comfort of husband and children (Boren 147).

Thus, Athénaïse's failure to perform her marital duties to the satisfaction of her husband puts her in a critical situation. When she visited her parents a few months after her marriage, she was criticized heavily by a servant for this "unchristian like behavior" (Chopin, A 427), because the place of a married woman is her home. Even a daytime visit is reproachable, and when the visit is prolonged, it becomes necessary for the husband to bring her "back to a sense of her duty" (Chopin 428). Indeed, in "Athénaïse", we can touch also this a strong sense of the society's need to break the spirit of a woman if she is too independent and tending to rebel against "distasteful conditions" instead of accepting them "with patient resignation" (Chopin, A 433). This is clearly seen in Athénaïse's parents, who believed that marriage is "a wonderful and powerful agent in the development and formation of a woman's character" (Chopin, A 434). Choosing the right husband who knows how to handle his wife is important as well, as Athénaïse's father states, "Cazeau is the one! It takes just such a steady hand to guide a disposition like Athénaïse's, a master hand that

compels obedience. This attitude of Athénaïse's family was typical for the day, and was representative of a patriarchal myth that Chopin found particularly offensive; and it was, in fact, against these attitudes that the rebellious spirit Athénaïse stands.

Athénaïse is, as Gouvernail, the journalist she meets in New Orleans, realizes "self-willed, impulsive, innocent, ignorant, unsatisfied, dissatisfied" (Chopin, A 360). Not yet ready for full sexual commitment to a husband and lover, Athénaïse acts against convention and leaves her husband; simply because she is unhappy and does not like to be married. She is "not one to accept the inevitable with patient resignation," and she continues to rebel against "distasteful conditions" (Chopin, A 433), among them masculinity, that she "can't stan' to live with a man; to have him always there" (Chopin, A 431). Cazeau, Athénaïse's husband, is described as "severe-looking" with "coarse and stiff" hands and a manner that commands respect "and even fear sometimes", which leads the reader to think that this domination has driven Athénaïse away. However, Chopin's narration provides a balance that prevents us from sentimentalizing Athénaïse and demonizing her husband. It is made clear, for instance, that Athénaïse is emotionally immature, '*perhaps too childlike*' (Gilbert 358).

Cazeau is a kind and generous husband, who never mistreats his wife. Athénaïse herself admits that her grievance is not against Cazeau-the disciplined, practical, but caring husband-but rather against married life for which she feels "a constitutional disinclination", because she considers it "a trap set for the feet of unwary and unsuspecting girls" (Chopin, A 431). It was the ideal of a shared life which was not what she had thought it to be: "I hate being Mrs. Cazeau, an' would want to be Athénaïse Miché again" (Chopin, A 431). She feels that marriage excludes her own sense of identity and permits her oppression. Her attempts go unheard: "Her friends laughed at her, and refused to take seriously the hints which she threw out, feeling her way to discover if

marriage were as distasteful to other women as to herself” (Chopin, A 436). Even her parents insist that marriage is the best thing for her. Her husband as well, refuses to discuss their marriage. Scholar Martha J. Cutter argues that both friends and family fail to allow Athénaïse the self-possession she desires, and she flees again, this time to her last available alternative- the life of an urban, independent woman (Cutter 17).

Yet, still immature, Athénaïse’s dissatisfactions are never clearly focused: she wants life to be without commitment and responsibility. As Linda Byrd points out, “[s]he wants the pretty, easy side of life, not the side that involves the realities of facing the less agreeable aspects of one’s mate and partner” (Fisher and Silber 67). While Athénaïse, staying with her parents, enjoys her mother’s cooking and dancing parties, Cazeau continues to work very hard. Athénaïse is a rebellious young woman, who married Cazeau just “*because she supposed it was customary for girls to marry when the right opportunity came*” (Chopin, A 216). Then, she feels that she hates being married and the sight of such unpleasant things as her “[husband’s] coats an’ pantaloons hanging in [her] room; his ugly bare feet-washing them in [her] tub, befo’ [her] very eyes” (Chopin, A 216). After leaving her husband and living in New Orleans at a boarding house, Athénaïse first enjoys her freedom and life away from Cazeau. When she has become acquainted with Gouvernail, “a liberal-minded fellow”, Athénaïse enjoys the “comforting, comfortable sense of not being married” (Chopin, A 216). After spending a few days in New Orleans, Athénaïse gradually feels lonely and begins to “crave human sympathy and companionship”. When Athénaïse realizes that she is pregnant; she immediately returns to her husband, her body now awakened with passion for him. The journey that Athénaïse lives to reach her maturation proves her readiness to grow and learn, as Michael Worton notes (Beer, *The Cambridge* 109).

The possibility of growth is equally seen in Cazeau, Athénaïse's husband. At first, he was described as being serious, 'distinguished looking', and somewhat arrogant, evincing both respect and fear from those who know him. At the beginning of the story, he regards his young wife as merely another of his possessions, worrying less about her than about the pony she used to visit her family, "there was not a moment in which to think of Athénaïse" (Chopin, A 427). When he first remarked her 'growing aversion' to him, he visited her in her parents' house, to "bring her back to a sense of her duty", thinking that "he would find means to keep her at home hereafter" (Chopin, A 418). Cazeau also realizes his wife's discontent in their marriage: "The marriage had been a blunder; he had only to look into her eyes to feel that, to discover her growing aversion. But it was a thing not by any possibility to be undone" (Chopin, A 418). Janet Beer argues that Chopin makes it clear within the first two sections of the story that Cazeau sees his wife as both objects of desire and as a child to be disciplined, is in no way to be regarded as his equal, and in this respect, he typifies the traditional nineteenth-century male attitude to women (Beer 139).

However, a key incident forces Cazeau to recognize her as a separate individual whose emotions, wishes and choices must be respected in order for him to have any self-respect. The memory of the Black Gabe incident apparently makes Cazeau see for the first time the parallel between himself as husband and his father as slave owner – and he realizes, with sudden shock, how 'hideous' he has been. In one moment, he realizes that, in forcing his wife to return to him, he has allowed her no freedom, no choice. This experience changes him profoundly. Avril Horner, in her article *Kate Chopin, Choice and Modernism*, explained that Cazeau discards the value system of the old, pre-war South that has been shored up by insidious metanarratives of race and gender, and that has socialized him to treat both slaves and women as inferior. He rejects an order, which has privileged him and given him a secure definition. Instead, he becomes a modern subject:

a man whose identity is no longer secured by tradition but who is dependent on his own integrity from one moment to the next for his sense of self (Beer 140), and renounces his traditional and legal authority as a husband.

When Cazeau wakes up in the morning to discover that she has left during the night “as if she had been a prisoner and he the keeper of the dungeon” (Chopin, A 439), he does not go to bring her back. He decides that Athénaïse’s choice to return back to him must be made of her own free will. Their marriage clearly allows Cazeau the possibility to control Athénaïse, and it is only his personal choice not to “[force] his commands upon her...” (Chopin, A 439). In his article *Chopin’s Enlightened Men*, Bernard Koloski claims that Cazeau is as impressive as the sophisticated journalist Gouvernail. He is, it’s true, imperious, short tempered, too sure of himself, but he has what Barbara Ewell calls “a blunt integrity” (O’Donoghue and Ostman 194). He is at least as depressed as Athénaïse over the state of their marriage, having lost, he is convinced, his last chance for happiness. He will not search her out in her hiding place, but will wait patiently for her, hoping she will not come back unless she can in some way “return affection and respect for the love which he continued and would always continue to feel for her” (Chopin, A 439). So, while Athénaïse grown up, Cazeau has grown, too, As Susan Lohafer phrases it, “legal duty, male desire, marital custom—these are Cazeau’s guides before his enlightenment. Sensitivity, love, and decency—these are the promptings of his finer nature, and in listening to them, he becomes a better man and, therefore, a better husband” (Koloski 195).

Chopin’s use of settings in the story emphasis her theme: the patriarchal home of the Créoles, the promising New Orleans city, and the night image. Firstly, while the plantation represents the patriarchal society that limited Athénaïse’s freedom, the city New Orleans represents her chance for emancipation. The plantation taken away her previous freedoms as a

single woman and has forced her into being a submissive wife. Home and “marital disempowerment likens Athénaïse ‘indirectly...to a slave’”. Athénaïse was aware that she did not marry for love and she cannot help but feel like she is being held back in this marriage of convenience. Women, in the patriarchal plantation culture of the South in the nineteenth century, had to hide or suppress their own desires and dreams so that their husbands and household could be successful. It did not matter for such a society that these women were being forced to compromise themselves. Barbara C. Ewell states: “In the United States as in most nations and cultures, patriarchal customs explicitly defined women as selfless. They were named and described only in terms of their relationships to men—daughter, wife, mother, sister, widow” (Ewell 158).

Whereas many feminist writers see motherhood as one of the restraints that prevent women from achieving self-fulfillment, Kate Chopin presents motherhood as a mean of fulfillment and hope. Emily Toth insists that Chopin herself, when she was first pregnant, “entered a new phase of her life with joy and doubt and fear, emotions she describes over and over in her fiction: a woman's bashful delight in discovering her pregnancy, as depicted in “Athénaïse”” (Toth 89). Some scholars claim that Athénaïse came back home when she learns she is pregnant, because she does not have much choice; she could hardly survive alone, what if she gave birth. Yet, the ending of the story (when Athénaïse was deliriously happy and “steeped in a wave of ecstasy”), suggests that Athénaïse does not return to Cazeau because she is trapped by her pregnancy but because the child within her has awakened her to “the richness that life with Cazeau can offer her”. Chopin was “sensitive to the deeply satisfying pleasures of motherhood and the rich sensuality of reproduction” as Barbara Ewell states (Ewell 111). Chopin describes this particular degree of sensuality many women experience after giving birth: “The sensation with which I touched my

lips and my fingertips to his soft flesh only comes once to a mother. It must be the pure animal sensation: nothing spiritual could be so real so poignant" (Toth 128).

Her pregnancy does "not only receptive to sexuality but offer[s] her a new power that she did not, and could not, have as a maiden . . . the possession of her body in its full potential", Ewell adds (Ewell 111). From his part, Allen Stein argues that Athénaïse returns to her husband when she discovers that she can only fulfill the demands of her nature within her marriage (Stein 176). Similarly, Susan Lohafer explains: "Touched by the wand of maternity, Athénaïse blooms instantly into womanhood, ready and eager for the role and the passion of a wife" (Koloski 160). When she returns home, it is to begin a true marriage in which she and her husband are happy to be together and to have chosen each other. Rachel Adams notes that this story seems to propose that learning to accept one's proper place in the social order is a sign of maturity; on the other hand, it suggests more affirmatively that a woman must have the freedom to choose when and with whom she will assume that place (Adams 137).

Nonetheless, when compared with "The Story of an Hour" or other stories, the ending of "Athénaïse" may be somewhat disappointing from a feminist point of view, as it ends with a woman returning to her husband instead of reaching independence on her own. Athénaïse, after a brief attempt at "freedom," finds profound satisfaction in motherhood, a conventional nineteenth-century ideal of female fulfillment – is likely what enabled Chopin to publish this story in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1896 and as part of her collection *A Night in Acadie*. No longer feeling emotionally isolated, Athénaïse feels suddenly happy: "No one could have said now that she did not know her own mind" (Chopin, A 452). On the surface, all seems resolved, yet, Chopin's refusal to provide narrative explanations for her characters' decisions leaves them open to different

interpretations. One possible interpretation is that the story suggests that happiness lies not in rebellion but in conforming to the expectations of one's family and of society.

Perhaps, for Chopin, something significant achieved in the story: the discovery that marriage is only fair and happy, if both partners enter it with free will, instead of it being "a trap set for the feet of unwary and unsuspecting girls" (Chopin, *A* 434). Even if Athénaïse is not completely successful in gaining her freedom, there is a sense of hope and optimism in "Athénaïse" that has perhaps been lost in other Chopin's stories. Michael Worton notes, Athénaïse learns to think seriously about her choice of life, recognizing that while she may have been ready to embrace the vows of poverty and chastity, the vow of obedience was well-nigh impossible for her (Beer, *The Cambridge* 109). More importantly, Athénaïse learned to choose in reality and in difference: Cazeau, by giving his wife the choice to come back with her own will, he also gave her the chance to grow more mature. "It is an individual recognizing that love can exist only in difference and that difference can exist as true dialogue only when selfness and self-respect exist on both sides", Worton adds (Beer, *The Cambridge* 109). Athénaïse may indeed anticipate satisfaction in the selfless role of a mother, but the conclusion suggests that she will also find happiness through her newly acknowledged sexuality, a part of human nature that Chopin's work often presents as an essential influence on the actions of individuals.

In other stories, however, reform is not always possible. Written in November 1893, "In Sabine" is the only published story of its era in which a battered wife escapes, and the only one with a happy ending, literary archaeologist Susan Koppelman claims. Still, the story was not praised as innovative, because it did not fit a conventional role; perhaps it was too innovative or too feminist to be acceptable, Toth argues. Magazines rejected it, and it reached print only because Chopin slipped it into *Bayou Folk* at the last moment, along with the other stories of troubled

marriages (Toth 147). The story is about an abused wife, 'Tite Reine, a daughter of Baptiste Choupic's, who runs away from her home, to get married to a man who becomes violent, and isolated her from everyone. Like in "A Visit to Avoyelles", the story highlights the destructive consequences of a young girl's mistaken choice of a husband. Yet, unlike in other stories, Chopin offered her protagonist the chance for freedom to correct her way by running away from her abusive husband, without a hint of conflict or regret. Though 'Tite Reine does not possess the characteristics of the New Woman, her tale treats an issue that some women of that era brought into public discussion: an individual's expectation of love and respect in marriage and, equally, the need for a way out of a union that lacks these qualities.

'Tite Reine was depicted as a fallen woman, "an imploring look from 'Tite Reine's eyes [...] a look of such heartbroken entreaty" (Chopin, *IS* 265). The "Baptiste Choupic's pretty daughter, with "piquant face with its saucy black coquettish eyes ; her little exacting, imperious ways that had obtained for her the nickname of 'Tite Reine, little queen" (Chopin, *IS* 266), is now a miserable wife, abused and beaten from the drunken rude husband, who makes her work hard with his black slave. 'Tite Reine, whose "regal authority is written in her name"; and her "will have been the law in her father's household"(Chopin, *IS* 266), is unhappily married to "a big good-looking brute," Bud Aiken. She had "changed a good deal. She was thinner, and her eyes were larger, with an alert, uneasy look in them; [...] She wore cleanly homespun garments, the same she had brought with her from Bayou Pierre; but her shoes were in shreds" (Chopin, *IS* 264). Living in poorness, "the one room that constituted his home was extremely bare of furnishing,—a cheap bed, a pine table, and a few chairs, that was all. On a rough shelf were some paper parcels representing the larder [...]A tin basin outside on the gallery offered the only bathing facilities to be seen" (Chopin, *IS* 265).

Like Mentine and Désirée, Tite Reine was never called Mrs. Aiken, because she is too stuck in “the imperfect union, the form of a union where union is none”, as Margaret Fuller describes it (Fuller 58). Tite Reine’s mistaken choice leads her to disaster. In the choice of a husband, nineteenth century advisors, even females, insists on honor and good qualities, because marriage, Janet Beer explains, “puts women at risk because it is seen as the end, the completion of the woman, not something that has to be lived or endured” (Beer 45). Mary Wollstonecraft among them, advises girls that “they should not be led astray by the qualities of a lover—for a lover the husband, even supposing him to be wise and virtuous, cannot long remain” (Wollstonecraft 14). She stated that “I wish to convince [women] that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness”, explaining that “that kind of love which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt” (Wollstonecraft 16).

Undoubtedly, Tite Reine’s family opposed her marriage with that disgraceful man, which leads her to run away with him. This is an important aspect of the narration of the nineteenth century; where such kind of foolish love was typically presented as a dangerous deviation that held the promise of tragic consequences. Tite Reine running away reveals that she was not fully conscious, or not mature enough to know which man was Bud Aiken in reality. From the description, Chopin provides for Tite Reine, we see that she was acting like child; the way she cries and speaks when she was with Grégoire. Yet, Chopin often sympathies with women, because had grown up in a household of women where battering did not take place; she had never had to consider it acceptable, or inevitable, for a husband to abuse his wife (Toth 182).

Tite Reine’s ‘blind love’ leads her to isolation, humiliation, poverty, and all kind of domestic violence. Germaine Greer in her famous book *The Female Eunuch* (1970), identified

domestic Violence as being all “instances of physical, verbal, and emotional violence, all of which affect the mental, emotional, and physical health of women” (Greer 119). The drunken Bud Aiken practices all these forms of abuse over his wife. He beats her hardly, and sometimes to death: “I tell you, he beats me; my back an’ arms—you ought to see—it’s all blue. He would ’a’ choke’ me to death one day w’en he was drunk, if Une’ Mort’mer had n’ make ’im lef go—with his axe ov’ his head” (Chopin, *IS* 266). He mock on her; “Then sometime’ he plague me mos’ crazy; he tell me ’t ent no preacher, it ’s a Texas drummer w’at marry him an’ me; an’ w’en I don’ know w’at way to turn no mo’, he says no, it ’s a Meth’dis’ archbishop, an’ keep on laughin’ (Chopin, *IS* 267). He humiliates her: “how it had amused him to witness her distress and terror when she was thrown to the ground” (Chopin, *IS* 267), and even narrates the story of ’Tite Reine’s fall from the horse he told with much spirit, mimicking quite skillfully the way in which she had complained of never being permitted “to teck a li’le pleasure” (Chopin, *IS* 267).

Even worst, while laying at home playing cards, smoking and drinking, he “sent her into the field to pick cotton with his slave old Uncle Mortimer” (Chopin, *IS* 267). The poor wife does not fear but him: “I ent ’fred o’ nothin’ ’cep’ Bud.” (Chopin, *IS* 266). Even her name, he did not pronounce it correctly, “Rain!” it was his way of pronouncing ’Tite Reine’s name” (Chopin, *IS* 264). Chopin, since she was against any kind of abuse against women; depicted Aiken as an abusive, lawless, and cruel drunkard and quintessential 'white trash.' to make the reader sympathize and forget about Tite Reine’s fault. She even gave a hint to Fraud and theft, practiced by Bud Aiken: “the solitary pig which they owned, and which Aiken had mysteriously driven up a few days before, saying he had bought it at Many” (Chopin, *IS* 264).

As we have mentioned early in the chapter, Chopin was disappointed about the reviews of her first collection “*Bayou folk*”, especially those who considered "In Sabine" to be humorous! It

has a happy ending, that's true, but the plot is anything but comical, Janet Beer claimed (Beer 45). How could the life of a young girl suffering from all kinds of domestic violence be humorous? No wonder, the nineteenth century conventions do not really consider wife abuse as a crime; as scholar Julian Barr claims, and without actual danger to life or permanent injury then, legally, violence against a wife was considered justifiable. There were no laws protecting women concerning domestic violence; it would not be until 1871 that Alabama became the first state to repeal the right of men to beat their wives, and about ten more years, in 1882, Maryland became the first state to make wife beating a crime (Barr 49).

However, abuse, many feminists believe, is a key factor in women's oppression and has been used as a tool by men to establish and maintain social control over them. Such treatment can restrict a woman's participation in life outside the home, obstruct her personal fulfillment, isolate her from friends and family, and lead to financial dependency, which in turn can lead to homelessness, financial ruin, and, in extreme cases, even death. Therefore, women movements of the time make it their concern to stand against domestic violence. Temperance advocates of the nineteenth century, for instance, saw it as a women's issue, arguing that wives were the primary victims of drunken husbands, who took money from the household for drink and beat women and children in drunken rages. The temperance movement, was, according to historian Elizabeth Pleck, "the first American reform campaign to depict for the public the cruelty of domestic violence. Temperance reformers regarded family violence not as [a] distinct social problem, but an evil consequence of alcohol." This became a women's rights issue because reformers thought that it was not a wife's responsibility to help her drunken husband and that she was better off without him.

As a result, they advocated for more women's rights, including property rights, to make separation possible. Elizabeth Cady Stanton is an example of one of these reformers. She pushed for divorce laws covering drunkenness in New York, which had passed the state house but not the senate. In a speech to the New York State Woman's Temperance Society in 1852, Stanton called drunken husbands the "moral monster" and said that women were the greatest victims of intemperance, yet they did not have the power to end this suffering at the ballot box (Barney 231). She also argued a very common sentiment regarding women who stayed with drunken husbands, that they should not bear children with them because they thought alcoholism was inherited. Stanton and others pushed the idea that this was distinctly a women's issue, that violence was caused directly by alcohol, and that alcohol prevented men from representing the family properly at the ballot box (Barney 235).

Historian Pamela Haag, when looking at violence in the United State during that period, recognized that men saw it as their right to beat their wives, and with no laws protecting women, especially when the violence happened in private, the only legal way for a woman to gain protection was through a divorce (Barr 51). Yet, culturally, it was not really acceptable, as we have seen in "Madame Célestin's Divorce", and it had also negative consequences. Women who found themselves in need of money do not have a lot of choices because of their limited education. In fact, through the story, Chopin makes a very clever hint to the importance of education in women's lives and fates. When Tite Reine was complaining about her husband with her rescuer Grégoire, she told him: "If I would know how to read an' write, an' had some pencil an' paper, it 's long 'go I would wrote to my popa. But it 's no pos'office, it 's no relroad,—nothin' in Sabine" (Chopin, *IS* 267). Tite Reine, cannot even write to her family to ask for help, because she forget how to do so. Female education in the nineteenth century was very limited; even a wealthy girl

like Tite Reine, could not have an appropriate education. By not being prepared for the reversal of fortunes awaiting them, and by growing up believing labor is a disgrace, women were likened to children helpless. Uneducated women, who suffer from domestic violence, will not find any financial support or help in case of divorce, since their chances in labor will be very limited, especially if their families would not accept them back.

For all these reasons, and because Chopin protests abuse against women, we may understand why she gave the chance to Tite Reine for a new life. She even provides her with the New Woman's characteristics, in showing resistance and revolt against this emotional abuse and domestic violence. And with the strong intensions of Grégoire to help, "She would not return to the room where her husband lay; the nearness of a friend had already emboldened her to inward revolt" (Chopin, *IS* 265). As Richard Fusco points out in his discussion of 'In Sabine', in his book, *Maupassant and the American Short Story* (1994); Chopin effectively distracts her readers from the serious business of the end of a marriage by the manner in which the story is told: "In Sabine" exploits sentimentality in a manner typical of 19th-century melodrama, progressing linearly to the happy conclusion that the audience wants. As the story proceeds Chopin is careful to include details of Grégoire and Tite Reine's different destinations - there is no suggestion that they are running away together – but nevertheless her central female character is being aided in an escape from marriage and, indeed, just such an escape is the ending the reader is led positively and hopefully toward (Fusco 147-8).

In some of Chopin's later works, particularly those written during or after 1894, she moves towards depicting women who are more active and more voiced. Early in her career, when she wrote charming Creole stories with happy endings, she had little difficulty in publishing them. Likewise, when depicting women who were silent and submissive, the reading public readily

accepted her works. As Chopin developed as a writer, however, she found herself testing the limits of her publishers and her audience, as Emily Toth has shown, by depicting heroines with strong desires and voices (Toth 175). Stories she wrote throughout the 1890s have sexual attraction, sexual repulsion and sexual fulfillment as their subject: she portrays discontented, husbands and wives who are attracted to women and men other than their spouses.

One of nineteen Kate Chopin stories that *Vogue* published, "Her Letters" was written on November 1894, and published on April 1895. Chopin apparently intended the story to be included in her third collection of stories, to have been called *A Vocation and a Voice*, but the volume was for unknown reasons canceled by the publisher and did not appear as a separate volume until 1991. A few days before she wrote "Her Letters", Chopin also reviewed a novel by Émile Zola describes a woman with a secret lover in his novel *Lourdes*, published in 1894 (Koloski 80). Jane Le Marquand observes that Chopin was becoming more deeply involved in a subject of woman and her struggle to assert an individual identity beyond the bounds of that inscribed by the dictators of patriarchy. This subject is central to "Her Letters", and serves to make this story an excellent example of the way in which Chopin uses a male form and conforms to the male convention only to subvert it, and cleverly so, from within its own bounds.

Commenting slightly on patriarchal control, "Her Letters," depicts women revealing a passionate nature considered inappropriate by conventional standards of "Victorian" America, and achieving fulfillment in roles outside marriage. The story also highlights some of the key challenges of the institution of marriage, in terms of communication between husband and wife, and how they spend an entire life ignoring each other nature and needs. The story of a woman who will die soon with a disease, thinks to destroy a bundle of letters she received from a lover some years ago, but deciding at last to leave the letters to her husband in the hope that he will destroy

them unopened. After throwing the letters into the river, the husband becomes completely obsessed with that secret his wife was hiding. At the end, he kills himself by drowning in that same river that contains all the secrets.

Unnamed woman, Unnamed man, the story takes place in an unnamed city, apparently in the late nineteenth century, because Chopin describes the man walking across “the bridge that spanned the river—the deep, broad, swift, black river dividing two States” (Chopin, *HL* 325). She was probably thinking of St. Louis, where she was living when she wrote the story, and she is probably referring to the famous Eads Bridge, completed in 1874, which spans the Mississippi River at St. Louis (Weinstock 47). When dealing with sexual attraction Chopin did not necessarily use the regional mode, although it is the genre that dominates in the stories which treat ethnicity and the post-colonial. Janet Beer in her article *Without End: the Shape and Form of Desire in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction*, argues that, when looking at the stories which are most powerfully concerned with physical desire, however, it can be seen that many are without specific location and do not fit neatly into the category of local color (Beer 41).

Barbara Ewell, from the other hand, believes that the characters’ anonymity deepens the “sense of mystery and distance, which intensifies in the ironic contrast between our intimate perspective on the woman and the misperceptions of her character by her husband and closest friends” (Ewell 69). Chopin presents to us a woman who lives a dual life; showing her husband and surroundings an image different from her true self. Her husband “*knew her to have been cold and passionless*” (Chopin, *HL* 324). For their friends, she was praised by some for gentleness, kindness, and by others for cleverness and tact; yet, “she had been unsympathetic because of her coldness of manner”, and her beauty “lacked warmth of color and expression” (Chopin, *HL* 325). At first,

Chopin gives us a picture of a calm, well-organized, level-headed woman, who issues instructions to servants. Nevertheless, alone in her room, we see a very different woman: a woman who “staring into the fire with pained and savage eyes”, and “With feverish apprehension” search among the letters “Which of them had she so ruthlessly, so cruelly put out of her existence?” A woman who “laughed with pleasure, and held it to her lips [...] in which every word of untempered passion”(Chopin, *HL* 323). Here, the reader may wonder; for a woman who is “Cold and passionless” with her husband, how could another man “changed the water in her veins to wine, whose taste had brought delirium to both of them” (Chopin, *HL* 323)? The answer depends heavily on the nature of marriage and her relationship with her husband.

In fact, this woman looks very similar to Mrs. Mallard, the protagonist of “The Story of an Hour”: she is, too, a typical woman from a high position who was “watchful of [her husband’s] comfort and happiness” (Chopin, *HL* 324); and then the wife had a life in which she was “expected to be submissive, supportive and stay in her own sphere” (Ferguson 6). We should also focus on the narration itself, which reveals the spiritual separation between husband and wife. The two protagonists, a husband and wife, are shown in separate parts of the story in order to demonstrate how little they really know each other. Chopin introduced in the first section the woman’s version about the letters, than in separate sections she moved to the husband, after the death of his wife. The husband does not even appear in the first section with his wife, not even does she mention it as much as she thought about her letters and her lover. Until she is about to disappear in person from the story the word 'husband' is not mentioned and even then, it only appears in the instructions she leaves to him about destroying the letters unopened.

Another reference about the nature of this woman’s marital relationship, is in what Chopin in the story calls the “the man-instinct of possession”: “...As quickly as the suggestion came to his

mind, so swiftly did the man-instinct of possession stir in his blood" (Chopin, *HL* 324). The woman is a possession for the man, and the social expectations allow the husband to dictate the woman's behavior, which makes many relationships painful and unrewarding. The sensual side of the wife's nature that we have seen in the first part, is one that her husband has clearly not seen, or has chosen not to see. In fact, this instinct of possessiveness is what makes his wife hide her true nature, but more importantly, is what drives him to madness and suicide. Any suggestion of having an autonomous being is denied to him, Janet Beer claims, and this means that he loses what he has understood as his 'manhood' because his notion of such is constructed upon women being entirely knowable, without secrets and without passion (Beer 48). His wife's secret threatens his ownership of her: His wife is to him an object, something to be possessed, both physically and mentally; and her secret stands against this possession.

As Simone De Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex*, "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being", a world in which man is subject and the absolute - Woman is but "Other" (De Beauvoir 16). So, if his wife decided to be the subject, this means that he will be the 'Other'! She has broken the codes of patriarchal society, has asserted an individual self-separate from that designed for her by man. Chopin undermines patriarchy by endowing the 'Other', the woman, with an individual identity and a sense of self, a sense of self to which the letters she leaves behind give voice.

Significantly, the letters played a subversive role in the story. The wife dies, but her letters take the existence of their own, affirming the presence of a subject who subverts patriarchal ideals. Martha J. Cutter argues that "Covert texts such as these letters take away the pedestal for the existence of the subject by suggesting that men do not really know the women they marry, live with, and believe they construct" (Cutter 21). Texts, Cutter adds, "have a life of their own, a life

that can create a subversive dialogue which can disturb the patriarchal story, the "master plot"'. After the husband destroys them, the letters live on in his mind, and undermine his sense of knowledge, for he surely will never know their content. What once seemed to him to represent truth is now questioned; there is no evidence to prove that his wife was unfaithful. Yet the letters suggest otherwise, that his wife had another life, and this challenged his role as man, as Mary Papke sees, "he is powerless by his inability to know" (Papke 67).

The suspected actions of his wife are not themselves the reason for his decline, but rather the possibility that she may indeed have acted for herself, against and beyond the bounds of his knowledge and power. As suggested by Barbara Ewell, "the subversive force of the letters to cause this male decline springs not from the woman's decision to leave them to her husband's care, but from a weakness within their relationship" (Ewell 106), a weakness founded in his "man-instinct of possession". He cannot live without her being his own, without ownership of her entire being, and is eventually, in his madness, drawn back to the river in the belief that within its waters lies the mystery he seeks to unravel: "Only the river knew. It babbled, and he listened to it, and it told him nothing, but it promised all. He could hear it promising him with caressing voice, peace and sweet repose. He could hear the sweep, the song of the water inviting him"(Chopin, *HL* 305). Here, Chopin exposed a world that kills individuality - in both women and men - by forcing them to subscribe to the ideal social and sexual roles, as Ewell proposes (Ewell 162).

However, these letters are also subversive for the woman too. It was not her husband's presence or counsel has sustained the woman for the last four years of her illness: "they had sustained her, she believed, and kept her spirit from perishing utterly" (Chopin, *HL* 398). Moreover, the letters, not her husband, or even her lover provide the story's one moment of erotic pleasure: "but what if that other most precious and most imprudent one were missing! in which

every word of untempered passion had long ago eaten its way into her brain; and which stirred her still to-day, as it had done a hundred times before when she thought of it”(Chopin, *HL* 399). For these letters, Barbara C. Ewell claims, "...substantiate a hidden, sensual life - her real life- and she prefers the memory of that life to the empty reality of her marriage" (Ewell106). It is not her lover's presence which the woman delights, but the signs of their mutual esteem, the words which made up their dialogic intercourse.

For the woman, the discourse has become a subversive replacement for the bodies of men. The letters themselves were another way for this woman to claim her autonomy. The woman was sustained by the letters, for it is only through these that she can reach her true self - her passionate inner being. Ewell claims that, through the letters she is able to relive the passion which marriage attempts to conceal beneath the superficiality of the patriarchal convention, to become once more that hidden self which represents "the reality that conventions and superficial perceptions only conceal or distort" (Ewell 106); the true identity which only she possesses. As Peggy Skaggs points out, which makes her living a "double life", a socially acceptable outer life as the ideal woman, and that life which has been forced underground by marriage and patriarchal convention and which is symbolized in the letters (Papke 42).

More surprising however, is this woman's reaction; in her decision not to destroy the letters, and leaving them for the "one, above all, who was near to her, and whose tenderness and years of devotion had made him, in a manner, dear to her" (Chopin, *HL* 322). She knew that her letters would cause "ultimate injury to that other one whom they would stab more cruelly than keen knife blades" (Chopin, *HL* 323). Yet, in making this decision, the woman takes control of her destiny, or, at least, the destiny of her identity, and ultimately becomes subject, subverting the patriarchal world which attempts to objectify her. To destroy the letters would be to destroy the only remaining

portion of her inner being. Instead, in keeping them alive, Cutter claims, she allows for escape into the world of her true self, escape from the oppressive world of marriage (Cutter 26). Marriage, traditionally regarded as a woman's ultimate goal and highest reward, became a sort of limitation, which controlled and ignored female passions.

For the Victorian woman, sexuality was only a natural part of life under the sanctions of marriage. A woman's sexuality was not her own; Victorian women came to be seen as guardians of morality because unlike men, they were not driven by passions, in fact, they were hardly believed to have a sex drive at all. In such a world, these women are destined to become cold and passionless, just like the heroine of this story. The New Woman movement understood that to remove themselves from male dominance, they needed to take possession of their own bodies: to change their position from sexual object to sexual subject; to be an active participant and agent of their own sexual desires, power, and pleasure. Alison Graham Bertolini claims that the main challenges facing heroines of the nineteenth-century literary genre of female adultery are to discover an autonomous identity, articulate their desires, and assert their sexual rights, “reclaiming their bodies and through their bodies the right to freedom” (Ostman and O'Donoghue 105).

William Acton's observation regarding female sexuality meanwhile, published in 1862, summed up the medical man's view of the ideal woman's sexual desires, or rather the lack thereof: As a general rule a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attention. However, what Chopin wants to express here is deeper. Chopin's works provide a woman's perspective on the issue of female sexual choice and argue that women, too, experience instinctual sexual desire. Between 1892 and 1894, Chopin allows her female character a degree of self-assertion, in term of choosing sexually to whom they gave themselves.

Nothing posed so horrible a threat to Victorian morality as the beast of desire. Emily Toth claimed that Chopin's anger with both the Biblical and scientific descriptions of womanhood was obvious at this point in her career, when she had begun to create a female who posed the greatest possible threat to Victorian religion and science by claiming full equality with the male as a passionate participant in the sexual reality (Toth 190).

Clearly, the woman of the story is unhappy in her marriage, a fact reflected in the description of her world: "*leaden sky in which there [is] no gleam, no rift, no promise*" (Chopin, *HL* 322). Therefore, the death of marriage has forced this woman to find herself, and autonomous fulfillment, outside of its bounds. For women to break out of this need to relate to themselves as a man's property, they first had to break away from the institutions that were perpetuating this cycle. Barbara Ewell states: "'Self-ownership,' in the second half of the nineteenth century, signified a wife's right to own her body—a right feminists were demanding as the key to female autonomy" (Ewell 22). Jane Gallop explains, "Infidelity ... is a feminist practice of undermining the Name-of-the-Father. . . . [However] Infidelity is not outside the system of marriage, the symbolic, patriarchy, but hollows it out, ruins it, from within" (qtd. in Cutter 34). Similarly, Janet Beer explained that, often wives find sexual interest or satisfaction in illicit affairs, which are closely associated with the freedom to choose the objects of their desire (Beer, *Kate Chopin* 69). Yet, Wollstonecraft wonders why men seem to expect impossibilities, that is, why they expect "virtue from a slave" who has been rendered weak and vicious by society (Wollstonecraft 61).

Like many other serious writers of her time, she read and admired Darwin's *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871); she accepted the idea of sexual selection, she disagrees with Darwin on certain points, mainly about women's role in sexual selection. She questioned his interpretation of the female's role in sexual selection concerning the inferiority of

women and his theory of “the female’s passivity in the sex drama as a creature without desire” (Bender 197-8). It is clear from Chopin’s writing that there is no doubt that the woman in “Her Letters” made a definite choice to make love with another man; and it is clear that she greatly enjoyed their sexual encounter and was by no means the submissive partner. She responds to the description of Darwin that “some females will desert their mates if they take "a strong fancy" for another; and some are even so "profligate" that they "prefer almost any stranger to their own mate" (Bender 217). Allen Stein argues that Chopin wanted to convey the message that women were independent, sexual creatures who were quite capable of initiating lovemaking (Gilbert 928).

Moreover, “Her Letters”, does not only focus on adultery as much as it raises other issues: the double standard attitude, and the cultural restrictions for women, that could lead to adultery. Although the society is unnamed in the story, but as we have previously explained, the setting seems to be in the 19th century. Probably what makes the woman end her relation is that she wants to preserve her status, as a middle-class woman, with all the privileges of such position. So, even if this woman does not love her husband, divorce, even legally possible, would raise other complexities in her life. Primarily, this conventional society, would never allow her to gain a separation to marry another man. Other issues also raises with separation, as previously discussed, like economic dependence.

The ending, again, was a surprising one. At first, it seems fair that a woman who lived adventurously, who broke out of the conventions of her society, paid her debts to society with death. It seems logical too to say that for women in such societies, marriage comes to represent death, a death of the true independent self. Yet, death here works inversely. As previously seen in “The Story of an Hour”, that death denies women from accomplishing their goals, yet it was also a way for these women to take control of their fate. In this story, instead of being the female

character who commits suicide, it is the man who put an end to his life. His “man-instinct of possession” leads him to see that the only salvation is to know “the secret of her existence”. The fact that his death was caused by his wife’s decision to leave the letters, it is clear then that this wife decides to impose her identity in a patriarchal world. Martha J. Cutter calls such stories of resistance a “voice covert”: a voice (Cutter 27), which attempts to undermine patriarchal discourse through mimicry and through absorbing the patriarchy from within its own structures.

To conclude with, Chopin has made women the subject of what is supposedly a male-centered world. She provides us with an image of a New Woman who is not conditioned by marriage, and choose to whom she gave herself. More importantly, Chopin makes explicit for her readers the extent to which a one-sided account of a marriage can be false, by beginning with the picture of the sensual life of the woman; and following it with the husband's mistaken estimate of her nature. By leaving the letters, she is enabled to take the control of her life, and her husband’s life as well.

Conclusion

Many critics believe that Kate Chopin’s prominence was rarely recognized in her day; her focus on the constraints of married women in her fiction is one of her most sophisticated and radical commentary on feminist themes at that time. She commonly explored in the themes of her works dedicated to women’s rights, marriage, and choice in life. Yet, she did not consider herself a feminist or a suffragist, finding such labels inhibiting and contradictory to the larger freedom she sought, and she took very little interest in any organized feminist groups. She seemed more concerned with the individual than with society and social movements. So, by being called an artist of local color she was not given the real credit she deserved. Her fiction was persistent to depict women who challenge society, in many ways, from dominant ideologies of gender distinction in

their era. In some works, Chopin did not even attempt to publish them, such as "The Storm" which posited a direct challenge to the moral standards of her time. Yet she did not give up entirely on challenging these standards; rather, her challenge went underground it became less open and direct, more covert and inscribed.

Through her narratives, Chopin expresses her wish that individuals be allowed enough freedom to live authentic existences, lives that, if need be, escape the prevailing prejudices of their time. In "Emancipation. A Life Fable", she tries to convince women that the dangers of independence might be compensated by the joy of freedom. The tale also anticipated her preoccupation with this restless dissatisfaction of women who desire freedom and test the boundaries of Victorian social conventions. In "The Story of an Hour," dramatically, Chopin implies that death might be better than marriage, at least from a nineteenth-century wife's perspective. Chopin tells in this story that even the best marriage could be repressing for women, in a society that limits the possibilities for women's self-fulfillment. The female protagonists stand to deliver an important message of how society could wrongly interpret things, and perceives a woman's position not as an individual, but just as a wife and a mother. Still, the desire for self-fulfillment – in fact presents the strongest impulses for life in many women's lives, stronger than love marriage and partnership. They also show, emancipation offered by the patriarchal world is unfortunately a forbidden pleasure that can be imagined only privately.

In other stories, Chopin depicts women's inability to voice their own experiences. In "Madame Célestin's Divorce", we have seen how, at the small influence of a promise of improvement from her husband, Madame Célestin submits to the warnings against divorce from her family, her church, and her society. Chopin shows that, under such constraints, the woman makes no claim for herself as a subject because she lacks the concrete means. Evidently, her choice

would help her not to pay the cost of being isolated, because either way, she will be dependent, and such dependent dispositions is deep-rooted in her society and upbringing. The need for women to be protected and loved, brings up types of women who are so dependent and act in such inconsistent ways whenever any temptation or different possibilities present themselves. Their dependent nature is precisely the cause of their inconsistent attitudes and accepted subordination.

In “A Visit to Avoyelles” and “Désirée’s Baby”, Chopin openly confronts the problems of marriage and shows that oppressive marriage is unethical. She reveals how overmuch love can blind one to the loss of his own autonomy and personal dignity. Unfortunately, women had no control over their lives; they were slaves whose only main priority was to live for their owner (husband) rather than themselves, which brought an unhealthy balance between both in society and marriage. Marriage is one such experience, with its necessary and potentially destructive relinquishment of personal freedom—affection and replenishment balanced always against the threat of pain. Chopin’s analysis of womanhood ideology and quest for self here takes on a darker hue. These stories show that blind love offers the illusion that the individual has become complete, yet, this illusion is easily shattered when the individual discovers that the unified whole does not exist.

In “Athénaïse”, Chopin introduces a kind of women who long for a world beyond their narrow environments. What is important in such a story is not so much the success or failure of individual women to achieve autonomy, but to start on a journey towards a greater sense of selfness. Chopin also illustrates that happiness in a relationship can come only with maturity and with mutual respect, when both men and women are ready for emotional and spiritual growth. So, while Chopin considers the institution of marriage as oppressive as slavery for women, she also gives examples of motherhood as creative and reparative. Sometimes an unmistakably abused wife

will seize happily upon her chance for freedom, and depart without a hint of conflict or regret, as seen in "In Sabine". The protagonist's guilt was love, but unlike in other stories, she discovered early that love, as Shaw states, "loses its charm when it is not free" (Shaw 114). Chopin does not try to define or find the source for the mystery of love in her fiction but she writes again and again of the dangerous effects of powerful emotions and the consequences of its urging. She warned girls who cannot take care of themselves to be entrapped in oppressive relations. She draws attention also to the importance of education and financial independence to provide women with new chances.

More boldly, in "Her Letters", she wrote about loveless marriage and forbidden desires. She saw and understood all aspects of the female psyche, and her particular interest was the woman's awakening to her true nature, whether traditional, emancipated, or a mixture of the two. Those unhappily married women are in revolt against endings, against the idea of them as finished or completed in the act of marriage. Chopin depicts characters striving to subvert typical definitions, including female roles. Additionally, she foreshadowed a sexual liberation that was nearly unthinkable in her own time, but one that would help shape the lives of women for years to come. She dared to write of the private needs of women by not only admitting the possibility that women have strong sexual needs of their own, but stating it as pure reality. What she told directly—and without moral judgment—was how certain women were beginning to challenge the patriarchal rules that had sought not only to confine them to well-defined social and vocational domains but to control their inner life as well.

In conclusion, though Chopin describes many women in her stories who are perfectly happy in a conventional marriage, she has also a number of heroines who demand freedom, emancipation and authentic existence. Chopin felt that a woman should be allowed the role she

choses. She presents her stories objectively and refrains from all moralizing. By making emancipation as a constant theme in her works Chopin challenged assumptions about the roles and restrictions of women in her society and laid claim to new freedoms for women. That is why she is highly praised nowadays as a forerunner of the twentieth-century feminism.

Notes:

- (1) The Creoles (aristocratic descendants of the original Spanish and French settlers, sometimes still wealthy and always bearing an air of elegance and ease).

Chapter Three: The Threat of Domesticity in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Selected Short Fictions

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Chapter Three: The Threat of Domesticity in Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's Selected Short Fiction

Introduction

This third chapter will explore the struggle of women between domesticity and the desire for fulfillment as a source of unhappiness in marriage in selected Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short stories, which highlight the lives of women who claim autonomy. In these stories, Gilman's feminist message represents a strong resistance against the prevailing androcentric culture that kept women "boxed in" patriarchal constructions that associate women as a 'female' to a specific space i.e. the domestic sphere. The first part of this chapter will deal with stories that show the sex distinction as a restriction to women in "If I were a man", "According to Solomon" and "Deserted", where Gilman explains the double standard in dealing with women issues. In the second part, I will move to the stories of old women who accomplished their roles as mothers, but still starve for fulfillment in "Mrs. Elder's Idea" and "A Partnership". Finally, the third part will end up discussing domesticity as an obligation that destroys women's mental health in "Making a change" and "The Yellow Wallpaper".

1-Women's Bondage under Androcentrism Society in "If I Were a Man" (1914), "According to Solomon" (1909), and "Deserted" (1893)

This section will discuss the restrictions created by the androcentric culture that stands against women's fulfillment within the institution of marriage in three stories by Charlotte Perkins Gilman entitled "If I Were a Man"¹ (1914), "According to Solomon"² (1909), and "Deserted"³ (1893), and how the liberation would be possible with the cultural and economic independence of

women and the collaboration of men. Androcentrism here refers to cultural perspectives where the male is taken to be the norm of humanness and all things outside of masculinity are defined as “other” (Jones 334). The term ‘*androcentrism*’ was introduced in 1911 by Gilman in her book *The Man-Made World; or Our Androcentric Culture*, where she states that “masculine patterns of life and masculine mindsets claimed universality while female ones were considered as deviance” (Gilman, *Man-Made* 8). Under this gender symbolism, even when the qualities in women are positive, such as love or self-sacrifice, they are defined to be auxiliary to a male-centered definition of the self. Thus, despite the appearance of balance, the female is always relative to the male, rather than complete herself.

Gilman wrote these stories within twenty-one years (from 1893 to 1914), yet not much has changed: Victorian culture and assumptions were still dominant in American society by the turn of the century. In the stories under study in this section, the marital relationship is unbalanced; the female characters pretend to be a feminine stereotype, and the male revealed the dominant, rational, imperious husband. In these stories, Gilman discussed the major criteria that created and extended female inferiority such as the artificial femininity (shown in the dress of women made up and demanded by male conceptions), women confinement to home and domesticity, the lack of education, and most importantly women’s economic dependence on men.

To explain the sex distinction and double standards in the turn of the century American society, Gilman in the story “If I Were a Man” uses the technique of “inversion”, which involves imagining how women would feel if they found themselves in men’s bodies and clothes and roles. When Mollie Mathewson, inhabits her husband’s body and clothes for a day while keeping her own mind, her surprise with these new sensations (pockets, shoes, mobility, comfort, efficiency), reminds the reader of all what women lose by following the social and cultural norms that confine

them to unfairly limited ways of life. Mollie is an example of the feminine stereotype of the turn of the century: ‘the pretty little Mollie Mathewson’, is ‘true to type [...] a beautiful instance of what is reverentially called ‘a true woman’ (Gilman, *IWAM* 935). She is ‘Little, Pretty, Whimsical, capricious, charming, changeable, devoted to pretty clothes and always ‘wearing them well’ (Gilman, *IWAM* 935). The different comments of Gilman about Mollie’s appearance ‘of course — no true woman may be big’, ‘no true woman could possibly be plain (Gilman, *IWAM* 935), evokes Gilman’s criticism on the androcentric assumptions about how should a true woman look like. By that time, even women’s outer appearance demonstrates the expectations, which men contributed to them as being ‘typically feminine’; which means they are supposed to have long hair, to wear decorative clothes, and to be in a constantly weak physical condition.

When her fancies come true (literally), Mollie’s first impressions of being a man are related to the physical force and activity: ‘At first, there was a funny sense of size and weight and extra thickness, the feet and hands seemed strangely large, and her long, straight, free legs (Gilman, *IWAM* 935). This emphasis on size and force was opposite to her characteristics as a true woman (“no true woman may be big. No true woman could possibly be plain” (Gilman, *IWAM* 935)). Then, Mollie’s feeling becomes a sort of superior pride, “a new and delightful feeling of being the right size. Everything fitted now [...] Her feet?... His feet! Never before, since her early school days, had she felt such freedom and comfort as to feet’ (Gilman, *IWAM* 935). The right Size, freedom, and comfort reflect the androcentric culture that considers man to be the ‘human prototype’ who, by biological and religious determination, was superior to women, and as “universally human ideals of autonomy, self-mastery, and creative potency” (Atkinson et al. 178).

In her earlier works, Gilman challenges the commonly held assumptions about which qualities rightly belong to men or women, and argues that much of what man calls beauty in a

woman is not human beauty at all. She believes that the small size of women, consciously preferred, stands against human progress. Yet the male, as the selector, prefers -for practical and sentimental reasons- to have "his woman" smaller than himself (Gilman, *Man-Made* 58). The effects of this prove to be harmful to the race. "Under his fostering care", Gilman states, "we have bred a race of women who are physically weak enough to be handed about like invalids, or mentally weak enough to pretend they are—and to like it" (Gilman, *Man-Made* 58). In *The Arts of Beauty*, by Madame Lola Montez, Countess of Landsfield, also published in New York, in 1858, she states: "the world has yet allowed no higher 'mission' to the woman than to be beautiful" (qtd. in. De Beauvoir 14). Similarly, considering the meanings of the lived female body, Beauvoir explains that the cultural assumptions alienate women from their body's possibilities. The reason is, as De Beauvoir states: "woman is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex'" (De Beauvoir 15). This means that women appear essentially to the male as a sexual being, De Beauvoir adds: "For him, she is sex — absolute sex, no less [...] He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other"(De Beauvoir 15).

Whereas men were defined with intelligence, rational thinking, and inborn authority, women, on the other hand, were supposed to be identified with low intellect, high emotionality, patience, submissiveness, and the basic longing for "being mastered". Mollie was 'a loving wife and devoted mother'; possessed of 'the social gift' and the love of 'society' that goes with it, and, with all these was fond and proud of her home and managed it as capably as — well [...] If ever there was a true woman it was Mollie Mathewson' (Gilman, *IIWAM* 935). These characteristics again emphasize the image of Mollie as the 'angel in the house'. Gifted by the blessed qualities of purity, and submission, she held the function of a peace-making, caring mother and loving wife completely devoted to her husband and the well-being of her family. Yet, for women, possessing

good qualities is not something regarded "as particularly meritorious" as De Beauvoir states. The main conflict in the story arises when Mollie forgets 'to give him the first time' the bill, and the fact that she has 'been afraid to the second', shows that their marriage is not based on equality and partnership, but on the common assumptions of any Victorian marriage at that time. In other words, women are naturally expected to be good homemakers, as De Beauvoir claims; "It is implied that the man must be the breadwinner, and the woman the house maker. It is a part of the 'contract' (De Beauvoir 458). Each partner is supposed to accomplish his expected role. The husband Gerald Mathewson, for instance, was a stereotype of a Victorian-like man, who rarely "would not do what she wanted him to' (Gilman, *IWAM* 935).

Likewise, in "According to Solomon", while the couple's marital relation seems perfect, full of love, respect, and admiration, there are some prejudices from both parts; the husband holds conservative thoughts about women and their roles, and the wife hides her true feelings and thoughts. The title of the story itself explains how the relationship is working, everything should be done 'according to Solomon'. Even Solomon's frequent use of the quotations was part of his imperious personality. Mrs. Bankside, Solomon's wife, a middle-class woman, holds some characteristics of the angel figure: She was "a fascinating girl; pretty, clever" and "efficient in everything her swift hands touched" (Gilman, *ATS* 780). She perfectly plays her expected role as a submissive wife; she does not like her husbands 'unvalued valuables' gifts, yet she never complains. Her duty as an ideal wife was to show respect and gratitude: "Love for Solomon, pride in Solomon, respect for Solomon's judgment and power to pay, gratitude for his unfailing kindness and generosity" (Gilman, *ATS* 780). Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* explains that when women— free and autonomous beings — find themselves living in a world where men compel them to assume the status of the other, they learn "resignation and passivity". "After all, to see things

clearly is not her business”, De Beauvoir states (De Beauvoir 569). When Mrs. Bankside’s friend recommended her work, Mrs. Bankside at first thinks about her husband’s opinion: “Solomon would never forgive me, I’m afraid” (Gilman, ATS 781), although she wanted this work heart and soul. Women are culturally taught to accept masculine authority, and give up criticizing, investigating, or judging themselves, but leave it to the masculine world, as De Beauvoir notes. Their role in life was limited to provide a moral and emotional center to the man’s public life because according to the cultural gender code of the time, only women with these virtues could claim the esteem of the community.

In *Women and Economics*, a book served as a solid explanation for the marriage market and for the value of women's work in the 1890s, Gilman illustrated how humans "are the only animal species in which the female depends upon the male for food"(*Women* 5). Influenced by Marxist ideas, Gilman believed the root of gender inequality is economic, and that men are able to dominate women because they control the means of production and the distribution of economic power, which is the source of political power, social status, and control of family life. This economic dependence, Gilman argues, leads women in their being denied the enlarged activities which have developed intelligence in man, and the education of the will which only comes by freedom and power, and that such state of arrested development of women, both intellectually and emotionally, proved to be damaging to men, women, and society as a whole. She hoped her work would help to remove the economic element of marriage by allowing women to become financially self-sufficient and, thus, the marital relationship would be based on respect love and true partnership.

Moreover, the cultural nineteenth-century traditions make the institution of marriage centered around a passive female who depended upon her mate for her very survival and a male

who regarded his mate as something he has paid for. When Mrs. Bankside, asks her husband why he spends a lot of money on her, he answers simply: “That’s a wise investment, as well as a deserved reward” (Gilman, *ATS* 780). The use of the words ‘investment’ and ‘reward’ evokes the sex-economic relation that Gilman has often criticized in her works. In *Women and Economics*, Gilman claims that men produce and distribute wealth; and women earn their share of it as wives, which assumes that the husband is in the position of the employer and the wife as an employee (Gilman, *Women* 10). The comfort, the luxury, the necessities of life itself, which the woman gets, are obtained by the husband, and as a result, “women are viewed as chattel, not valuable members of society” (Gilman, *Women* 5). To Gilman, it was absurd to pretend that marriage under these conditions could be viewed as anything but an economic arrangement, that extends the subordination of women.

Even though Solomon is a generous provider, as he usually repeats to his wife: ‘Take all you get my dear — its none too good for you’ (Gilman, *ATS* 780), yet, he spends money on her in his own way. He does not consider his wife wise enough to earn or spend money: “my dear...but if you had all the money you’d like to give away — there wouldn’t be much left” (Gilman, *ATS* 780). Her brother as well, another male character who represents the stereotype of Victorian man, also shares Solomon’s way of thinking about women. When she asks him once if he would mind sending her his Christmas present (which is usually a good amount of money) beforehand, his answer was “Not on your life [...] You can’t buy ’em many things right on top of Christmas, and it’ll be gone long before the next one” (Gilman, *ATS* 781). In fact, Solomon’s thinking, and the brother as well, was common at the turn of the century; men hold conservative thoughts about the ability of women to choose the right thing, and thus, they claim their superiority to think, decide, and choose what is good for women. When it comes to gift, Solomon does not know his wife’s

taste, or more precisely, does not care, but he chooses the gift according to what he believes to be more appropriate: “It was his custom to bestow upon her one solemn and expensive object, [...] but the consideration was spent on the nature of the gift — not on the desires of the recipient” (Gilman, *ATS* 781). Always expensive, yet useless for her: “There was the piano she could not play, the statue she did not admire, the set of Dante she never read, the heavy gold bracelet, the stiff diamond brooch — and all the others” (Gilman, *ATS* 781).

Furthermore, among things that reveal Solomon’s patriarchal attitudes is digging in his wife’s ancestries. He is very proud of his pedigree, he is a descendent “of generations of unbroken New England and old English Puritan ancestry [...] Pious, persistent pigheaded folk were they, down all the line” (Gilman, *ATS* 780). He is annoyed that his wife does not possess such honorable ancestries, and “the more he found the worse he felt, and the lower ran his opinion of Mrs. Bankside’s ancestry” (Gilman, *ATS* 780). Although he likes much of her personality, he often blames himself and wonders about marrying her in later years, because of all her uncertainties.

In fact, Solomon’s desire to control everything reveals patriarchy by which men used to oppress women. Gilman argues that man usually looks for monopoly power over his female both before and after marriage because he believes if she is inexperienced, she will easily submit to the fact that he is the only source of her happiness (Gilman, *Man-Made* 67). Equally, De Beauvoir claims that marriage incites man to capricious imperialism, that it is not enough for him to be accepted as counselor and guide; he wants to be the lord and master, and the slightest sign of independence on her part seems to him a rebellion (De Beauvoir 544). One expert of that time, addressed husbands as follows: “Make your wife as dependent on you as you can in all matters relating to the management of your home and life” (Matthews199). It is apparent then, that Solomon wishes if his wife possesses the qualities of the “Angel in the House”, someone who is

supposed to find her happiness in her husband's pleasure, and 'her spirit of incorrigible independence', ruins his plans.

Considering all these social and cultural ideas, it is not surprising that Mrs. Bankside hides her true wishes and thoughts from her husband. When she declares her daring comment about women's desire to break laws, her friend was astonished if she talks to Mr. Bankside like that?. Of course, she does not; her answer was "Indeed I don't! [...] There are lots of things I don't say to Mr. Bankside" (Gilman, *ATS* 783), because being submissive is strongly demanded to be a true woman. Following the best wisdom of the day, "A wise woman never outsmarts her husband" If indeed she does have intelligence, then she is "twice a fool"—once for being a woman in the first place and twice for having a talent she can't use (Kerschen 175). As demonstrated in Gilman's fiction, the characteristics of "true womanhood" were crafted only to satisfy the desires of men. While the androcentric influences were pervasive, the varied educational forces had a minor impact in the education of women because of women's prescribed domestic sphere: "Her restricted impressions, her confinement to the four walls of the home, have done great execution, of course, in limiting her ideas, her information, her thought-processes, and power of judgment" (Gilman, *Women* 66). Consequently, the "disproportionate prominence" women gave to what they did know further encouraged and sustained their subjugation, submission, dependency, naiveté, and exaggerated femininity.

The worst example of men who is found in the third story "Deserted", Ellphalet, who was not a caring husband, yet not different from Solomon and Gerald in his patriarchal attitudes. The fact that Ellphalet transformed his bank account to his wife's name might seem as if he considers her as an equal partner, yet he does not consider her aware enough to possess independent thinking to misuse this trust. He never explains to her what are the difficulties he

faces, he rents a room of the house for a strange woman without telling her, and refuses her mother to come and he even sold her own property that she inherited from her father without her permission. When she asks him about it, he answered: “You don’t know nothin’ about business an’ never will, ... they all come from your father, but when you married me it made ’em mine, and it ought to’ (Gilman, *D* 834). Although his wife works, on average, fifteen hours a day, lost much sleep and thanks to her work wich put to the family all its real estate, yet, he claims the right to manage money and house: because patriarchy assumed that since “man supports the family. He’s got to hold the property” (Gilman, *D* 835).

In addition to all these conditions, comes the fact that Ellphalet is drunken. A part of the androcentric culture was the idea that the wife must remain with the husband eve when he is a drunkard, or diseased; regardless of the effects against the wife and children. By the 1880s, the United States married women granted trade licenses, separate economy, and control over their earnings, and most economic laws were in favor of women in such situations. However, the ideals of ‘the man-made’ family still obtain. Naturally, divorce was regarded not only to be a social crime but also an indelible offense ‘against the Bible’. The effect of this on the woman has been certainly to weaken and overshadow her sense of the real purpose of the family. This patriarchal ideology is in fact the primary means by which women are oppressed and marginalized. Although Mrs. Johnson suffered in the fifteen years of her laborious marriage, yet, because of androcentrism, as De Beauvoir explains, women prefer to compromise and adjustment to revolution (De Beauvoir 571).

Additionally, the power and superiority of men extended to define every aspect of women’s lives, including the dress, which was another feature of the sex distinction that Gilman criticizes in “If I Were a Man”. With man’s mind and eyes, Mollie was surprised how women wear ugly

things, yet spend much on them: “Women have no business sense!” ... ‘and all that money just for hats —idiotic, useless, ugly things!” (Gilman, *IWAM* 936). Gilman’s comments on the dress are critical, and in her 1915 *The Dress of Women*, she argues that the distinct costumes of men and women were meant to ensure that ‘we should never forget sex’ (Gilman, *The Dress* 76). While men’s clothing design puts utility first, the design of women’s clothing still puts form over function, silhouette over utility. Mollie, as a man was surprised by the dress of women, “Never in all her life had she imagined that this idolized millinery could look, to those who paid for it, like the decorations of an insane monkey” (Gilman, *IWAM* 936). The above quote humorously, highlights the way women are considered as ornaments, and when their clothing is designed for its form rather than its function, the result is ‘unnatural, unhealthy and ridiculous’ (Gilman, *The Dress* 78).

Gilman and Thorstein Veblen—as contemporary sociologists, social economists and feminists, regarded women as the greatly oppressed cadre, thus the first “private property” or the nineteenth-century slaves of fashion. In *The Economic Theory of Women's Dress* (1934), Veblen began by positing an essential difference between “dress” and “clothing.” Whereas clothing had the functional role of protecting a person from the elements, dress stemmed from “the principle of adornment” (Veblen 66). Although adornment “in the naive aesthetic sense” was of little economic importance, it soon “emerged from the primitive efforts of the savage to beautify himself with gaudy additions to his person,” to become “an economic factor of some importance” in “its function as an index of the wealth of its wearer-or, to be more precise, of its owner, for the wearer and the owner are not necessarily the same person” (Veblen 67). Gilman too sees that to satisfy the demand of a human being for human relationship, as clothing is essentially a social product, a social necessity, and as this kind of “society” is all that most women know, their clothing is mainly

modified to the arbitrary demands of this world. The major objection to the dress of women, even beyond the ill effects to health, is the interference with comfort and freedom, and the continual insistence on sex-distinction (Gilman, *The Dress* 79).

Besides the lack of productivity, the dress of women by that time represent also suffering and bondage. The shoes, for example, shown in Mollie's "little high-heeled slipper", are not only mechanically defective but sometimes instruments of torture". Farther, Gilman claims that it is not a pleasure for all women to spend their lives in an endless and hopeless pursuit of new fashions. It adds heavily to the care, the labor, the expense, of living. "It is a pitiful, senseless, degrading business, and they know it", Gilman states (Gilman, *The Dress* 65). De Beauvoir also believes that elegance is bondage; being well dressed takes time, care, and money. It makes women need extra money; and the cost is so high that, it may lead some women to steal or engage in prostitution or accept financial 'assistance' in order to be well dressed (De Beauvoir 510).

The problem, Gilman argues, is that the requirement that women adhere to fashion in their dress interferes with their being respected and taken seriously as a human beings, and this maintains their inferiority more and more. Equally, De Beauvoir argues that by following fashion, a woman makes herself into a "thing", condemned to play the part of the 'Other' who is refused access to society (De Beauvoir 436). This was just another way for men to control women, by telling women they are better off in their "eternal feminine," and thus kept away from men's knowledge and left without all the men's concerns like work, careers, and power (De Beauvoir 437). Unfortunately, the woman who dares to break the rules risks to be rejected. Mollie's speech to other men shows that women have no choices but to follow men's desires, otherwise, they would be rejected: "but who's to blame for that? We invent all those idiotic hats of theirs, and design their crazy fashions, and, what's more if a woman is courageous enough to wear common-sense

clothes — and shoes — which of us wants to dance with her”. Gilman herself explained this point explicitly in her book *The Dress of Women*, that “if a woman shows originality in design, daring in execution; or appear in public in a sensible, comfortable, hygienic, beautiful, but unfashionable costume, would the admiring men flock to her side?” (Gilman, *The Dress* 57).

Domesticity and confinement of women home also were among the limitations and obstacles that stand in the face of women's autonomy that Gilman discussed in these stories. As much as Mollie was taken by the joy of ‘being the right size’, and the ‘the possession of money’, she feels differently and delightfully about the outside world. Not the world ‘she had been reared in; where home had covered all the map, almost, and the rest had been ‘foreign,’ or ‘unexplored country;’ but the world as it was, ‘man’s world, as made, lived in, and seen, by men’ (Gilman, *IWAM* 937). The cult of true womanhood idealized virtuous domesticity in a way that settled women's continued subordination. The effect of domesticity is to have narrow-minded female. Even Gilman comments in ‘Deserted’, that some matters were ‘far beyond the reach of Mrs. Johnson’s busy feminine brain’ (Gilman, *D* 834), which was a hint to the effect of domesticity. In her book *Our Brains and What Ails Them*, published in *Forerunner* in 1912, she writes, “So the human brain has grown, by normal use and exercise, in the male; and been stunted, denied normal use and exercise in the female. . . .”. She supported the idea that the major lack in the minds of women is in experience: “We have given them a different education, different exercises, different conditions in all ways” (Gilman, *Our Brains* 31).

More apparent in the middle- and upper-class women, who were encouraged not to use, but to *deny*, their talents and capabilities. Bourgeoisie wives were “cooped up in [their] fortresses [...] like fairy tale princesses“, as Gubar puts it (Gubar 142). They were not allowed to do any kind of higher profession, not even the domestic service expected of women of poorer families. These

ideas served middle-class men's interests in controlling their wives and keeping them at home and at the mercy of their husbands' income. As seen in "According to Solomon", a proud and conservative man like Solomon would never allow his wife to work, because this would undermine his status as an economic provider. When he first knew that his wife earns money, he was very astonished and injured: 'Earned it! My wife, earning money!'(Gilman, *ATS* 784). The wife's role in such an economic unit is that of non-productive consumer: "to consume food, to consume clothes, to consume houses and furniture and decorations and ornaments and amusements [...] always to take and never to think of giving anything in return except their womanhood" (Gilman, *Women* 111). As long as women are economically dependent and consumers, they will easily be manipulated, and therefore they will not even think about a possible domestic revolution and will remain bound in their passive existence.

The absence of serious and interesting mental exercise for "females of the middle, and higher ranks," could be fatal, however. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the vague syndrome gripping middle- and upper-class women had become so widespread as to represent not so much disease in the medical sense as a way of life. A few of the moral managers did recognize that the intellectual and vocational limitations of the female role, especially in the middle classes, were as maddening as its biological characteristics, as we will see in the coming stories. Only with useful employment, can women improve their mental and physical health, and give meaning to their lives. We have seen how Mrs. Bankside feels great pleasure when she learns how to make towels, her "Hands that had been rather empty were now smoothly full" (Gilman, *ATS* 782). The feeling of producing something makes Mrs. Bankside happier and shinier: "As the days shortened and darkened she sparkled more and more; with little snatches of song now and then; gay ineffectual strumming on the big piano; sudden affectionate darts at him, with quaintly distributed

caresses” (Gilman, *ATS* 783). Even her health become better, and ‘any hint of occasional querulousness disappeared entirely’ (Gilman, *ATS* 782).

Ironically, whereas men limit women to the separate sphere of the home, they blame them for their limited thinking. Mollie herself felt surprised about ‘what men really think of women’. One think that women ‘haven’t much mind to make up, you know — and if they do, they’ll change it’ (Gilman, *IWAM* 937). The Episcopal clergyman fears ‘that they will overstep the limits of their God-appointed sphere’, and the other reminds him that ‘Their natural limits ought to hold ‘em’ (Gilman, *IWAM* 937). But that in the face of these facts, Gilman wonders, they should so naively speak of “feminine vanity,” “feminine love of change,” and the like, and joke serenely, about the “feminine love of shopping”. Gerald in “If I were a Man” argues that if women ‘brought evil into the world’, men also ‘have had the lion’s share of keeping it going ever since’ (Gilman, *IWAM* 938). In her article “What Do Men Think of Women?” in *The Forerunner*, Gilman wrote:

Suppose that women were the great bankers and financiers of Wall Street, ponderous creatures holding the financial fate of the nation in their hands (or trying to) and that the men of Wall Street were only a flood of chattering boy stenographers. . . . What would women think of men? . . . Or suppose that men wore costumes of such contemptible sort as to hamper them completely; shoes with deforming heels which would not allow them to stand or walk in comfort, much less run; trousers of such make that they could not take a free step and had to be helped about like cripples; hats which drowned face and head in irregular huge masses of velvet and feathers, robbing humanity of all dignity and intellect, . . . —what would women think of men then? Could a woman respect a man with his hat brim resting on his shoulders, his legs tied together, his body shaped this way and that from year to year according to his corsets? (Gilman, *The Home* 205).

Gilman, opposing such ideologies, claims that the woman is the equal of men, both intellectually and physically, only because that man produces ideology, it returns the woman to her otherness into an inferior being, a biological being. When a woman's world is bounded by the walls of the home, Gilman believes, society always has a high price to pay. She claims that women

could not progress personally within the confines of the home, nor could they contribute to society. She states: "Science, art, government, education, industry, - the home is the cradle of them all, and their grave if they stay in it" (Gilman, *The Home* 218). Being so kept, women cannot develop humanly, as men have, through social contact, social service, true social life. For Gilman, women suffer from "mental myopia", when they are kept "house-bound" in the traditional housing design, like "snails" in narrow "shells". The home atmosphere is theirs from birth to death, in which they work, play, rest, and do all things, and to spend the whole time in attending to their own affairs in a narrow space like home inevitably restricts the mental vision; and causes those same personal affairs to seem larger to them than the rest of the affairs of the nation (Gilman, *The Home* 219).

More than half a century, Gilman was already tearing down the walls of women's "arbitrary imprisonment", before Betty Friedan coined the term "the feminine mystique," and, like Friedan, Gilman argues that the "exclusive confinement" in the home made the woman less a person, that a "mental myopia" comes over her as she focuses only on the proximate, to the exclusion of the visionary (Gilman, *The Home* 56). This makes the woman far less attractive to her husband than misty ideology might suggest. "We are taught that man most loves and admires the domestic type of woman," Gilman writes. "This is one of the roaring jokes of history. The breakers of hearts, the queens of romance, the goddesses of a thousand devotees, have not been cooks" (Gilman, *Building* 57). Because they lived most of their lives within its four walls, women had a little opportunity (and no encouragement) to develop a morality that encompassed more than the home and its inhabitants. Women's lifelong preoccupation with personal service led to a narrow, distorted view of the world (Gilman, *Building* 45).

Alongside the joy of physical power, Mollie in "If I Were a Man" also was super happy with the feeling of owning her own money, and the pockets came as a revelation for her. From one

side, Gilman refers to what we previously explain the functionality of men's clothes (shown in pocket), because pockets were still a distant dream for women in 1991, as Paula Treichler says (Bomarito V. 5 501). Yet, the significance of the pocket (as a symbol of economic independence) is another important subject that Gilman usually relates to women's autonomy. Mollie 'with a deep rushing sense of power and pride, she felt what she had never felt before in all her life — the possession of money, of her own earned money — hers to give or to withhold; not to beg for, tease for, wheedle for — hers' (Gilman, *IWAM* 937). Gilman had always believed that the economic independence of women allows her to overcome many restrictions in her life. The economic independence gave women the pleasure to spend their own money as they please, without begging or justifying. When Mrs. Bankside sells her handmade towels, she 'hid and saved this precious money — the first she had ever earned' (Gilman, *ATS* 782). The money that she saved from her work was not little, and she 'handed out to her astonished relatives such an assortment of desirable articles that they found no words to express their gratitude' (Gilman, *ATS* 783).

De Beauvoir, like Gilman, believes that the ultimate cause of inequality is in part economical. "The traditional form of marriage", she states, "is now undergoing modification, but it still involves oppression, which the two spouses feel in different ways" (De Beauvoir 463). Beauvoir admits that there are some cases where marriage has achieved many positive conditions, but that equality will never be obtained as long as the man is the provider and economically in charge. 'The mercenary marriage' that Mollie in "If I Were a Man" mentions at the end of the story, is a perfectly natural consequence of the economic dependence of women. This may lead, as Gilman explains, that marriage will be avoided at all. "It is glaring proof of the insufficient and irritating character of our existing form of marriage", Gilman writes; "that women must be forced to it by the need of food and clothes, and men by the need of cooks and housekeepers. We are

absurdly afraid that, if men and women can get these needs of life by other means, they will cheerfully renounce the marriage relation" (Gilman, *Man Made* 300).

Importantly, by the economic independence of women, Gilman claims that money would no longer define marital relationships, and both spouses would avoid a lot of problems in marriage. In other words, once women are economically independent; men will please women by their actions, not by gifts. Gilman clarifies such a point in her book *The Dress of Women*:

Think for a moment of how different the relation of the sexes would be, if women were independent, and *provided them for themselves*. Then what would a man do who wanted to please a woman? He would have to please her by his actions—not his gifts. He would have to *be* what she liked, instead of giving her what she liked, which is easier far (*The Dress* 103).

The issue of the dress itself, according to Gilman, can be reformed once women become economically independent. Gilman saw in woman's consuming interest in fashion a reflection of the female's part in the sex-economic relation, since women depend on sexual attraction for a livelihood. Once sexual attraction is no longer the sole basis for woman's securing a living, then the feminine sex would be emancipated from its preternatural concern for fashion. In her essay, "Why Women Do Not Reform Their Dress" explains why "in the human species alone the female assumes the main burden of sex-attraction". The reason is simple for Gilman since a woman depends on the male for her living, she must please him (Gilman, *The Dress* 56). "The man has in his gift all the necessities of life, the comforts and luxuries, the honors, too—and she, to secure these things, must first secure him", Gilman argues. The adoption of wiser and more beautiful clothes hurts no one but women themselves. If women freed themselves once and for all from this utterly unnecessary slavery, began to use their own judgment and their own will on their clothes,

the psychic effect would be of immeasurable importance, not only to themselves, but to their sons, brothers, and husbands (Gilman, *The Dress* 126).

The economic independence of women, however, is essential and critical in many other instances, it does only provide women with pleasure to own and spend money, but it protects women and children in case of a drunken husband, as in “Deserted”. Gilman makes it very clear at the beginning of the story, how it was unjust that women work harder than men do, yet they are not rewarded for house labor. Mrs. Ellphalet Johnson was a very hardworking woman — even her next-door neighbors admitted that’ (Gilman, *D* 834). She finishes everything before her husband’s breakfast, while he prefers keeping the store, ‘because he could sit down more’ (Gilman, *D* 834). Not until she starts reading some books of the lawyer renting their room, that she become aware of her legally strong position, as the owner of everything. Moreover, the lawyer, ‘moved by a strong sense of human kindness to this struggling woman and seeing the responsibilities of life with wider reach’ (Gilman, *D* 835), helped her to understand her position, and ‘urged upon her a new view of her duties to her children and the world’ (Gilman, *D* 835). This in fact is Gilman’s criticism of the limited education of women and its impact on their lives. In her magazine *The Forerunner* she aimed to change the idea that women must be passive and their only role be in household duties. Gilman wanted to attract the average woman to become a reader, and aid in persuading them to fight for a just change in society.

Gilman conducted a lifetime campaign against the ideology of female mental inferiority. Her goals were to establish that women were the intellectual equals of men and to encourage women to trust and to extend their rational powers. Her strategy was to show that the empirical underdevelopment of women’s minds was the product of an unfair, “artificial environment” and not evidence of a lack of intellectual power. She encouraged women to be energetic with their

intelligence: "Exercise your minds," she urged women, "look abroad. Look at the world as a whole, the people as a whole. Look up and down the ages. Review the past. Foresee the future. Stretch your brains." In the *Forerunner* she said the goal of education was to teach individuals to "see clearly, to understand, to properly relate one idea to another, to refuse superstition and mere repetition of other people's opinion" (Gilman, *Women* 97).

As the goal of many feminists is to undermine patriarchy through writing, Gilman frequently depicted in her fiction women who were neither angels nor monsters. In "If I Were a Man", she uses the inversion, to give her protagonist Mollie a way to resist the androcentric assumptions. Mollie whose physical appearance goes along with Patmore's description 'the angel of the house', is not in fact someone whom Patmore would call as an 'ideal' woman, because she '*was wishing heart and soul she was a man*', a notion of independence that Victorian ideal would never accept. Equally, Mrs. Bankside was neither an angel nor a monster but an adventurous independent woman, her spirit of independence was stronger, and she enjoyed the adventure: "I always did love to smuggle!". Even her comment about laws evokes that women in fact did not submit or like what is practiced upon them. 'We don't make 'em — nor God — nor nature. Why on earth should we respect a set of silly rules made by some men one day and changed by some more the next?' (Gilman, *ATS* 783).

By the same token, as a way of resistance, and breaking away from androcentric thinking, Gilman ironically described Ellphalet as 'deserted', a term usually used to describe an abandoned wife. Waking up very late and calling vainly, "with quite advanced profanity, for his faithful wife, he found her not in attendance" (Gilman, *D* 835), Ellphalet was still expecting that his wife is there waiting for him. Yet, as we introduced before, Gilman's female characters are not always stereotyped, as they seem at first, and like Chopin's characters, they often choose the path of

independence when they face hard choices. Mrs. Johnson finally, decided to ‘desert’ her husband, sell the store, and “gone into business independently, and should do well by the children” (Gilman, *D* 835). Gilman inverted women and men’s roles, since women’s subordination comes from economic dependence to the man, and since the wife was doing all the work of her husband. By doing this, she insisted that women could be free if they are economically independent, and this also can reform the institution of marriage, since the wife promised to welcome her husband again if he stops drinking and work again. Fortunately, for both, this decision makes the husband a new man.

Gilman as a social reformist suggests that the relationship between spouses would be better if men help women to achieve their autonomy. Though Solomon has deep-rooted patriarchal ideas, he was open-minded, an attitude that helps to undermine patriarchy and reform the institution of marriage. His first reaction was displeasure. He, possessing this Victorian attitude toward women’s work and earning money never imagine his wife as independent; this would threaten his authority as a superior and a provider: ‘He swallowed hard as he looked at her; and his voice was a little strained’ (Gilman, *ATS* 783). Yet, when he sees how his wife becomes happier for her usefulness, he accepts the issue proudly: ‘He got used to it after a while, and then he became proud of it’. He was even ready to face anyone if asks him why he allows his wife to work: “The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates” (Gilman, *ATS* 783). In many ways, the satisfaction of women reflects happiness in the marital relationship. Solomon, without knowing the reason, remarks his wife’s happiness and become happy too: “her husband was moved to fresh admiration of her sunny temper” (Gilman, *ATS* 782).

Hence, what Gilman wants to express in these stories, that the origins of women's inferiority are the result of the combination of their own passivity and men's oppression. However, it is unfair to blame men, since they are, like women, confined in a system of representation, for masculinity is often connected with aggressive behavior and competitiveness. Just as women are conditioned to be "angels," "man as oppressor is not 'born' with his gender characteristics biologically and innately given. Rather, these are socially and culturally 'constructed' ". As Juliet Mitchell states: "The broader patterns of patriarchal exchange of women between men in society are reproduced within the individual psyche" (qtd. in Stacey 58), and this proves to be true in Gilman's narration, as we will see later in the coming stories.

2- The Revolt Against Domesticity in "Mrs. Alder's Idea" (1912) and "Partnership" (1914)

In this section, we will discuss two of Gilman's stories, where she shows that the domestic environment oppressed women through the patriarchal beliefs maintained by a society that their role should be limited to motherhood and household. The two stories, "Mrs. Elder's Idea" (1912), and "A Partnership" (1914), were first published in the *Forerunner*. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* projected and reflected a white, middle-class norm for women's lives centered on familial issues. The *Forerunner*, instead, existed to counteract popular images of women and such personal limitations on their everyday lives that the mass media spread. According to Cane and Alves, the short fiction published in *The Forerunner* depicts ordinary women who deflect the traditional paths of their lives to create better situations for themselves and, in so doing, improve the lives of those around them" (Cane and Alves 97).

Like many American women at the turn of the century, Mrs. Elder and Mrs. Haven were faithful to the “feminine mystique”, which says, as defined by Friedan, that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity (Friedan 35). During the period of motherhood, which was the most important business of women in their society, they were both convinced that women’s natural occupation is motherhood, and their right place is home. Mrs. Elder had had two children, “fulfilling the formula announced by Mr. Grant Allen, [...] that each couple must have four children, merely to preserve the balance of the population; two to replace their parents, and two to die” (Gilman, *MEI* 892). Two of her children died; and two, growing, and leave home. Mrs. Haven too had completely given her life to her children ‘after the fashion of conscientious American mothers’, and as long “as the children grew bigger and enjoyed the big house and big yard as children should” (Gilman, *P* 930), she had enough business to do. She had never felt that her place was anywhere but at home; for she “had always stayed in it, had been continuously busy in it, and apparently happy in it” (Gilman, *P* 930). Her name itself ‘Mrs. Haven’, which means a place of safety or refuge, implies her image as a true woman.

The *feminine mystique* was powerful that it convinced women that the great mistake of Western culture, through most of its history, has been the undervaluation of women’s role. While the two stories were written in the first half of the twentieth century (1912- 1914), the traditional thinking that the only true profession a woman ever has to fulfill was that of the mother’s profession was still persisting. In *Our Androcentric Culture* (1911), Gilman argues that women are raised to believe that good women are supposed to be filled with joy in their lives as unselfish wives and mothers; confined, of course, to the house. ‘*The fashion of conscientious American mothers*’, that Gilman mentions, defined enough responsibilities to give women a full-

time job in the home, and supplied a moral justification for women's domesticity. Actually, such culture comes as a reaction to stop the threat of declining birthrates among white women. Between 1800 and 1900 the birthrate for white American women fell from just over seven to 3.56. Scientific popularizer Grant Allen, whom Gilman named in the story "Mrs. Elder's Idea", published a controversial article in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1889, entitled *Plain Words on the Woman Question*, charging that white women's education and work outside had distracted them from their most important duty: procreation. To Allen, women were mothers first, humans second. Allen's proposal that women put off their own intellectual interests and have at least four children to preserve "the race". By "race," Allen most certainly meant the white, native-born middle and upper classes, those portions of society whose birthrates had dropped the most (Allen and Walker 77).

Another social traditional belief that supported the feminine mystique was closely connected to Darwin's famous book *The Origin of Species* (1892). Darwin's Theory contributed to the current belief that woman was the harder sex, her ultimate role as a mother was vital for the preservation and survival of the species. Darwin's Theory also served to promote a new concept known as the "Woman Question" which questioned a woman's ability to be both a mother and a professional. Of course, the overriding opinion contended that motherhood was indeed a role of greater priority in a woman's life. This ideological ascendancy joined science and medicine (alongside the continual spread of industrialization) and further promoted the "sexual division of labor" because it was based on the assumption that biology was destiny (qtd. in Barterian and Evans 98), and above all else, these ideologies promoted motherhood and household tasks.

As explained previously, the Victorian woman's domestic role and submission to man is not necessary simply for the preservation of the family, or even society, but for the preservation of the race. The shift in women's roles in the late nineteenth-century, creates a threat that the home

was no longer considered sacred and women were not being appreciated for their role maintaining. By the turn of the century, birth rates dropped significantly in nineteenth-century America. Political leaders, together with natural and social scientists, amplified fears about white women's declining fecundity by warning of race suicide. Coined by Gilman's friend the sociologist Edward A. Ross in 1901, the term "race suicide" had been a popular idea for years before it acquired a name. It described white Americans' anxieties about falling birthrates and the loss of virile manhood as a result of, among other things, women's increasing presence in public and professional life, and the loss of male autonomy in an increasingly corporate world. Women, Ross claimed, either wasted vital maternal resources on personal endeavors or lost interest in maternity as they pursued education and careers, threatening white ascendancy (Simone). Even before Darwin, the uterus was seen as the most important organ not only in the female body, but of the 'Race'. The idea of an evolutionary imperative reinforced existing ideas that women had a moral responsibility to fulfill their role as mothers, and to accept their subordination to men, and any attempt to change this would result in the degeneration of the human race.

From this same viewpoint, equally important to the culture of the day, comes the requirement that the woman shall serve the man. Middle class women should be managers of the household. This gave women a new set of obligations to fill their time. Gilman said "Where no servants are employed, domestic industry is still at its first stage, mother-service" (Gilman, *The Home* 74). As such it is not regarded as labor, in any economic sense, but as a sex-function proper to the woman. She is expected to do the work because she is a woman, without any regard to special fitness or experience. In fact, Gilman argues that men's freedom from domestic responsibility made them socially superior to women, and women's domesticity reinforced this advantage. Thus, associating women with home was a way to keep them subordinate to men. This

is clearly seen in the attitudes of Mr. Elder and Mr. Haven. While Mr. Elder believes that ‘for a Woman: A Husband, Home and Children. Good for whatever ails her’ (Gilman, *MEI* 892), Mr. Haven, believes that ‘woman’s place was the home’ (Gilman, *P* 931), wonders why his wife complain: “I don’t understand, Margie. Here’s the house — as big as it always was. Isn’t that — an interest?” (Gilman, *P* 931). The dominant male, Gilman claims, “holding his women as property, considering them always as his, not belonging to themselves, their children, or the world; has hedged them in with restrictions of a thousand sorts” (Gilman, *The Home* 85).

In this regard, and like many feminists Gilman admits that motherhood and the existing form of marriage reinforce the subordination of women, since they involve women’s sacrifice of freedom, independence and attractive work. Feminist writer Ellen Key, for instance, thinks that women can best develop all their abilities, especially their feminine qualities, through marriage, and that women should not combine motherhood and work outside the home until the end of their child-bearing period. Yet, Gilman believed that if the proponents of domesticity justifies women subordination because of her important role of motherhood, so what would older women do in the rest of their lives? Simone de Beauvoir goes further to claim that motherhood is a way of turning women into slaves. It did not have to be that way, but it usually ended up that way in society precisely because women were told to concern themselves with their divine nature. They were forced to focus on motherhood and femininity instead of politics, technology or anything else outside of home and family. De Beauvoir believes that humans differ from animals because they are able to seek individual purpose instead of just aiming to advance their species (De Beauvoir 478). It is unjust that men are encouraged to pursue a higher purpose, create new things, and focus on their individual selves, while women should focus on the general good of the species .

Though Mrs. Elder and Mrs. Haven enjoy their roles as mother, the occupation of motherhood does not last forever, and they are now falling into emptiness. For Mrs. Elders, she “would have been glad to continue her ministrations”, but these young persons were not children any more, and [t]he cycle which is supposed to so perfectly round out a woman’s life, was closed for the present” (Gilman, *MEI* 893). For Mrs. Haven too, her business has gone, and while her husband also misses his children as much as she did, he is still having his business and “had merely plunged more actively into the affairs of his office” (Gilman, *P* 931). Though some societies honor the wisdom of their elders more than do others, men have had access to the type of job in which age is likelier to be seen as an advantage, like the profession of judge for example. For old women, this is not the same case. Old women, around fifty or alike, in full possession of her powers; she feels she is rich in experience; De Beauvoir states, “that is the age at which men attain the highest positions, the most important posts”. A woman has been taught only to devote herself to someone, and nobody wants her devotion any more. “Useless, unjustified, she looks forward to the long, unpromising years she has yet to live (De Beauvoir 554).

In addition, devoting the rest of their lives to household tasks was not an attractive idea for both women. Mrs. Elder ‘grimly’ remarks ‘Perhaps he expects me to do the housework,’ and Mrs. Haven clarifies to her husband that the household was never her main interest; ‘I can’t begin to mother a house at my age [...] It’s not an occupation for me” (Gilman, *P* 933). Gilman in fact, was against the common idea that to be a good housewife is to be an end in itself, rather than as a means to a greater or more meaningful goal. In defending female humanity against the charges of biological inferiority, Gilman believed that ‘Mother is a role, women are human beings’. ‘There is no real reason,’ she argued, “why women should not be women, wives and mothers, and also members of society, performing that social service which is our first duty as human beings”

(Gilman, *The Home* 76). Gilman was against the waste that results in attaching a woman's worth to her maternal function: "The maternal duties require the segregation of the entire energies of the mother to the service of the child during her adult life, or so large a portion of them that not enough remains to devote to the individual interests of the mother"(Gilman, *The Home* 79). Gilman's thinking on this point was strongly supported by the writings of Harriet Taylor, who had expressed similar outrage at the conventional wisdom of her era: "To say women must be excluded from an active life because maternity disqualifies them for it, is to say that every other career should be forbidden them in order that maternity should be their only resource" (Rossi 55).

Both Mrs. Elder and Mrs. Haven now finding their life meaningless. Mrs. Elder wakes up one gray, muggy morning, to find that her actual life becomes dull and repetitive that it holds no meaning. "DID you ever repeat a word or phrase so often that it lost all meaning to you? Did you ever eat at the same table, of the same diet, till the food had no taste to you?" (Gilman, *MEI* 892), this was Mrs. Elder's feeling toward familiar objects, dishes and even toward her husband's figure. Likewise, Mrs. Haven feels now that her life becomes vacant; "She had been trying not to face it — the vacancy. But it kept gaining on her, rising like a tide, and finally it swept her quite off her feet, and she felt as one swimming in a calm gray horizonless sea" (Gilman, *P* 930). Gilman explains that women who were "just housewives" could hardly have escaped wondering whether their contribution to society was appreciated. "There could be no more cruel reminder of the essential functionless of the older woman in the culture of consumption than the reduction of the last several decades of a woman's life to "a desert of wasted time", Gilman states (Gilman, *The Home* 79). The desert that Mrs. Haven describes as a "gray endless ocean had other women in it, millions of them; some bobbing idly like loose corks, some surrounded by little trays of playthings like the patrons of some German bad; some slowly drowning" (Gilman, *P* 931).

When Mrs. Elders become and 'Ex-mother' (with Gilman's term), she was only a woman of forty-two, in excellent health, and would have been extremely good-looking if she could have 'dressed the part.' As well, Mrs. Haven was 'a busy practical woman' and 'an able-bodied woman of fifty-one', when she finished her role as a mother. Men, however, cannot understand why their wives are depressed, because they already have their lives. However, after the occupation of motherhood is finished, what shall old women do in the decades "between menopause and death", as Erma Bombeck put it. Shall they wait the rest of their lives to 'get used to it' as Mr. Haven proposed to his wife? The old woman, De Beauvoir argues, rid of her duties, she finds freedom at last. She can also permit herself defiance of fashion and of 'what people will say'; she is freed from social obligations and the care of her beauty, her children are old enough to get along without her. Unfortunately, she finds this freedom at the very time when she can make no use of it. De Beauvoir finds that in patriarchal society woman escapes slavery only at times when she loses all effectiveness (De Beauvoir 556).

Mrs. Haven who always believed that her marriage was that of partnership, now after her business of motherhood was gone; she feels that their partnership was gone as well: "Their partnership in parentage was at an end, but his business went right on. His real partner, Mr. Edgers, was a bachelor, yet he had done his half of their common work all these years. They went right on — that partnership — where was hers?" (Gilman, *P* 931). According to Beauvoir, "In the early years of marriage the wife often convince herself with illusions, that she is the real partner of her husband, then she sees that her husband could get along very well without her, that her children are bound to get away from her. The home no longer saves her from empty liberty; she finds herself alone, forlorn, a subject; and she finds nothing to do with herself" (De Beauvoir 461).

In both stories, Gilman makes it very clear that the problem between both couples was never love. Mr. Elder “was kind to [his wife] in most things; he was fond of her [...] They had no quarrel, no complaint against each other” (Gilman, *MEI* 893). Likewise, Mr. Haven’s relation with his wife was based on mutual love and respect. He was a loving husband, very fond of his wife, and of his home, and he had been an excellent father too, “not only holding up the entire household by his efficient labors outside, but really helping her in her more intimate parental problems” (Gilman, P 933). Still, they cannot understand their wives’ need for autonomy. Mr. Elder’s concerns in life, for example, had never been similar to his wife’s, and her preferences had never amounted to more than topics of conversation, ‘to him, and distasteful topics’. According to the androcentric culture, it is never the duty of the husband to interest in his wife’s concerns, but quite the opposite as is held to be the duty of wives, to interest herself in his. Mrs. Elders loved the city; he loved the country above everything else. Her fondness for shopping was an unending delight; to him and a silly vice.

Therefore, if life goes good between spouses, it is only when women make compromises. Mrs. Elder, as she was supposed to be an angel in the house, often avoid conversations; she “was a woman naturally chatty, but skilled in silence” (Gilman, *MEI* 892). The reason behind Mrs. Elder’s ‘hard-bitten silence’ was her husband extreme dislike of argument. Why argue, when you could not help yourself? When Mr. Elder decided to buy a farm and move to the country, he settles everything before telling his wife, although he know she hates the country; it ‘got on her nerves’. This fact shows that he does not consider her as a real partner, but a follower who is supposed to accept his plans, as “he had decided that it would be good for his wife even it she did not like it; and that conviction gave him added strength” (Gilman, *MEI* 893). After informing his wife, and without hearing her opinion, which will change nothing, he sat down again “feeling that the subject

had been fully, fairly and finally discussed, yet generously, he let her talk about the matter one evening” (Gilman, *MEI* 893). The use of the word ‘generously’ shows that Mr. Elder considers himself as a good and open-minded husband, although his act is far from showing such quality.

Equally, when Mrs. Haven starts complaining about the emptiness she feels, her husband took her for travel; It is true that it helped Mrs. Haven to a more “settled frame of mind, a sounder health” (Gilman, *P* 933). When they return, he plunges again into his affairs, and she “plunges into that gray ocean”. When she suggested to him that she want to work, he aggressively reacted, “it’s perfect nonsense, Margie,” he insisted, “business! What do you want of a business? Don’t I earn money enough? Don’t I give you money enough? It’s absurd — utterly absurd!” (Gilman, *P* 933). He, possessing conservative thoughts about gender roles, was totally unable to grasp what benefit for his wife, the housewife, to run a business by herself and to earn money while he is able to provide her, or even ‘why she should not be content to ‘improve her mind’ eternally! When she insisted on her plans, he said: “do what you like — but don’t expect me to enjoy it. Fortunately I’m doing well enough and people know it — they won’t think you are helping me, at any rate” (Gilman, *P* 933).

This revolt against domesticity in fact was not particular to Mrs. Elder or Mrs. Haven; it was common at the turn of the century. During the same period in which successive formulations of women’s domesticity became prominent, opposing ideologies associated with women’s rebellion also arose. These include the early feminism, the suffrage movement at the turn of the century. These popular feminist ideologies grew in reaction to the fundamental changes in social life, the same changes that motivated the transformations of the domestic ideal for women. Feminism, in particular, rather than adapting women’s domesticity to the new social conditions, they proposed ideas that put women’s place outside the home. Over the long run, successive

ideologies of female domesticity weakened while popular feminist ideologies grew stronger. According to Nancy Armstrong, women became aggressive, whether against themselves or against another, only when barred access to those legitimate means of self-expression readily available to men (Rooney 101).

No wonder that both women growing depressed and dissatisfied with such restrictions, especially that they have no reason to accept them anymore. Mrs. Elder finds herself heartsick at the prospect of being shut up in a remote country farm; “A dull cloud oppressed her dreams; she woke with a sense of impending calamity, and as the remembrance grew, into awakening pain” (Gilman, *MEI* 894). As much as this emptiness deepened, the feeling of revolt grows stronger; it becomes “a sudden over-mastering wave of revolt, till she longed to escape anywhere at any cost?” (Gilman, *MEI* 894). When her husband announced to her his plans of living in the country, and after she had talked from hour to hour — till she had at last realized that all this talk reached nowhere, she decides to make her own plans, silently. Mrs. Haven too, after a difficult conversation with her husband about her plans, and his complete refusal to her plans, decided to follow her own no matter what he would say. She valued her husband’s love, she would on no account neglect his comfort, but she began to feel sure that he had no right to limit her activities during the hours he was away from her by what she now saw to be mere prejudices. She would be happier, of course, if her husband supports her in her plans, but she could not give them up; she could not settle down to spend twenty or thirty years in ‘getting used to it,’ just to please him.

Like Gilman, many feminists stress the need for female useful employment, when the occupation of motherhood come to end. American suffragist, social activist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s meditation on aging in “*The Pleasures of Age*” urged women to look more deeply into themselves for the sources of self-authority and personal fulfillment. Envisioning a “nobler type

of womanhood,” she encouraged women in their golden years to engage in the “pleasures of self-reflection” and to pursue “soul-satisfying pleasures in a higher sphere of action”, instead of sacrificing for others (Stanton 41). Challenging the conventional wisdom that a woman’s useful life ended after her child-bearing years, Stanton urged older women to pursue self-actualization and to take it upon themselves “to improve every talent they possess” through the study of “useful sciences,” the “fine arts,” or even “practical work in the trades and professions.” According to Stanton, the “brave souls” of “true women” were needed everywhere,” so women should not sit idle in their old age, but excel in some “earnest life purpose.” By discovering her “earnest life purpose,” a woman past child-bearing age could still become “fitted to a higher plane of action” and achieve self-fulfillment. Stanton claims, the opportunity to do this—especially later in life—was one of the greatest “Pleasures of Age.”

Gilman’s message was not different. In her fiction she often gave her old characters, both men and women, the chance to discover the “Pleasures of Age”, even in other stories undiscussed in this chapter. Mrs. Elders was still powerful and possess the energy to achieve autonomy in her life; ‘Why not?’ she said to herself. Even in the night she woke and lay smiling, while heavy breathing told of sleep beside her; saying inwardly, ‘Why not?’. She was obsessed with shopping, and so she wants to become ‘a professional shopper’. She gathered her family and ‘smiling, flushed, eager and excited as a girl,’ she announced her plans, challenged her husband: ‘I don’t care whether you agree or not!’ she stoutly proclaimed. “But I’m going to do it. And you mustn’t say one word” (Gilman, *MEI* 894). As well, Mrs. Haven When her husband refuses her idea about work, just because people would think he is unable to support his wife economically, she answered him: “What is the use of improving my mind if I never use it” (Gilman, *P* 934).

As seen before, Gilman's male characters although holding conservative ideas about women's role, they help and appreciate their mates once they decided their own path. Mr. Elder respects his wife's desire to leave home; and never said a word till it was all done. Similarly, when Mrs. Haven insisted on her plans, her husband says: 'You may do what you please, of course. I can't prevent you — it is a little late to begin to interfere with you now, my dear' (Gilman, *P* 934). Moreover, Mr. Haven did not only respect his wife's desire to open a business, but he does not allow her to pay for the charges of her own business. Yet, when Mr. Haven looks at his wife's papers he was not only surprised; but pleased in spite of himself: "A large and growing trade, a demand from neighboring towns, a branch already started in one, and in the city, three — there was need for careful management" (Gilman, *P* 895). He even enters with her in real business, and formed a Baking Company of solid importance and assured success, and finally become true partners.

The effect of fulfillment proves to be good for men, women and marriage as well. The happiest part of Mrs. Haven's work was that she feels "a wonderful sense of youth that came with it. Youth is a beginning; it is full of 'first times,' and enjoys them. Her work gives her an eager joy she had not thought ever to feel again, "the joy of beginning". She did not fade and wither and 'get used to it', instead, "she grew wiser, abler, more efficient, and more interested yearly" (Gilman, *P* 936). Mrs. Elders as well, now fulfilled, starts experiencing new life, with an unusually happy Christmas, and an unusually happy Summer following. Everyone, even her husband was happy for this change, and she becomes more attractive and younger in his eyes and ever more desirable. When he visits her, he found "an eagerly delighted family; and a wife so roguishly young, so attractively dressed, so vivacious and happy and amusing, that the warmth of a sudden Indian Summer fell upon his heart" (Gilman, *MEI* 894). Now Mr. Elder was convinced that "two half

homes and half a happy wife, were really more satisfying than one whole home, and a whole unhappy wife, withering in discontent” (Gilman, *MEI* 894). Happily ended, both women achieve autonomy, and succeed in running a business, even with their limited training to the outside world. They prove to be as good as men in business if they are given chance. Gilman had always believed that women’s entry into the public arena would harm no one, on the contrary, it will create always better life for both women and men, but limiting women into domesticity could be fatal as we will see in the coming section.

3- ‘The Madwoman’ in the Home in “Making a Change” (1911) and “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1890)

In this section, I will discuss two of Gilman’s stories, “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “Making a Change”, where she shows how feminine self-effacement often leads to depression, suicide or madness. These stories fit perfectly the feminist theories dealing with patriarchy, where men have access to the world while women have access only to the home, and “the common humanity” of women has largely been ignored. Both stories stand as a representative symbol of the oppression of nineteenth-century women by male authority and protest the arrested development of women, and their imprisonment in the role of wives and mothers.

While “The Yellow Wallpaper” shows a young mother falling into madness because of the limitations and imprisonment, “Making a Change” was the optimistic version, in which a young wife was saved from suicide by allowing her to achieve fulfillment. The plots of both stories parallel the circumstances of Gilman’s own married life, and her own wish fulfillment or as an attempt to explore other, better choices that she might have made for her own life. At first wed to an artist who believed that she should support his work by keeping his home as a refuge for him,

Gilman was made to feel that her own work held little importance (Gilman, *The Living* 61). This, she discovered, treated neither marriage partner fairly; in fact, it was deconstructive to individual well-being. It was only after her separation from Walter Stetson that Gilman was able to assert her own work as a priority. Later, in developing the criteria under which she would marry Houghton Gilman, she made it clear that she would never allow her work to be submerged by the duties of housekeeping. Thus in her stories, Gilman uses the circumstances of her own life to locate happier solutions for women who find themselves in the same dilemmas.

Although "The Yellow Wallpaper" was not the first or longest of Gilman's works, it is without question her most famous piece, which became a bestseller of the Feminist Press. Gilman wrote the story in two days in 1890, but it took two years before the story was finally published. She encountered early opposition to its publication, despite the support from William Dean Howells. The story was rejected from the *Atlantic Monthly*, with the following comment from the editor: "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!" (Lane 145). A critic suggested that "husbands should keep it out of young wives' hands" (Davis 102). Yet, once published in the *New England Magazine* in 1892, the story was met with a mixed reception. Positive reviewers describe it as impressive because it is the most suggestive and graphic account of why women who live monotonous lives are susceptible to mental illness (Bendixen and Nagel 51). However, none of those reviews is a link made between her social advocacy and the story, and it was reprinted in different venues over the years: most frequently in collections of tales of the supernatural. It's called a "remarkable study in progressive mania", and "a strange study of physical environment" but never a feminist story or anything of that kind until the later twentieth century as an important feminist text (Dock 110).

In “Making a Change”, the story began with a baby crying, a husband asking to make him silent, and a depressed wife who was near to breakdown or madness. Julia Gordon, an artist who abandoned her career for the sake of marriage and motherhood, the woman who had been the greatest musician on earth — is now looking at her husband, “dumbly, while wild visions of separation, of secret flight — even of self-destruction — swung dizzily across her mental vision” (Gilman, *MAC* 771). Julia was more near the verge of a complete disaster than the family imagines. With a mind too exhausted to serve her properly, she was “motionless, her chin in her hands, her big eyes staring at nothing, trying to formulate in her weary mind some reliable reason why she should not do what she was thinking of doing” (Gilman, *MAC* 771). In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman's unnamed narrator was also a new mother and wife who suffers from a nervous disorder that kept her in bed. She feels tired all the time, as she describes her feeling: “I don’t feel as if it was worthwhile to turn my hand over for anything, and I’m getting dreadfully fretful and querulous. I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time” (Gilman, *TYWP* 771).

Given current medical knowledge, the modern reader would likely diagnose both protagonists as suffering from postpartum depression, as they had given birth to a baby not too long. In her book *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, Elaine Showalter, suggests that the true ghost that haunts the female narrator in Gilman's text is the “specter of infanticide,” a desire that stems from postpartum depression. Showalter writes: “Psychosis, involving hallucinations and delusions, can develop from postpartum depressions marked by crying spells, confusion, sleeplessness, and anxiety, which in return “transformed” into violent self-destruction (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 63). Gilman herself, in her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, describes such status after the birth of her child:

I was unable to read, and that my mind was exclusively occupied by unpleasant things. This disorder involved a growing melancholia, and that, as those who have tasted it, consists of every painful mental sensation, shame, fear, remorse, a blind oppressive confusion, utter weakness, a steady brain ache that fills the conscious mind with crowding images of distress (Gilman, *The Living* 90).

She wrote in her memoir, that she suffered from a “helpless gloom”, inability to concentrate, loss of appetite and weight loss, and fatigue so profound that “the knife and fork sank from my hands—too tired to eat” (Gilman, *The Living* 91). She said she could not “read nor write nor paint nor sew nor talk nor listen to talking, nor anything... Absolute incapacity. Absolute misery” (Gilman, *The Living* 91).

At the turn of the century, such status was diagnosed as a mental disorder, which was like a curious epidemic sweeping through the middle- and upper-class female population in both the United States and England. Diaries and journals from the time give hundreds of examples of women slipping into hopeless invalidism. A complex of symptoms including fatigue, anxiety, stress, eating disorders, and depression. Doctors found a variety of diagnostic labels for the wave of invalidism gripping the female population: “neurasthenia,” “nervous prostration,” “hyperesthesia,” “cardiac inadequacy,” “dyspepsia,” “rheumatism,” and most famously “hysteria”. Hysteria in particular, which Gilman herself was diagnosed with, had been the typical female malady, the very name of which derived from the Greek *hysteron*, or womb; but between 1870 and World War I—the “golden age” of hysteria, the “hysterical” had become almost interchangeable with “feminine” in literature, where it stood for all extremes of emotionality (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 35). As Dr. Edward J. Tilt noted in his textbook on female diseases, “mutability is characteristic of hysteria, because it is characteristic of women the feminine, it seemed elusive and enigmatic, resistant to the powers of masculine rationality. Dr.

Weir Mitchell, also a pioneer in this female terrain, calls hysteria "the nosological limbo of all unnamed female maladies" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 37).

However, the other face of the story is that, as women began testing their boundaries and contesting their freedom at the turn of the century, some of the more powerful opposition came from the scientific and medical establishment which specialized in nervous and mental illness. Doctors explicitly linked the epidemic of nervous disorders—anorexia nervosa, hysteria, and neurasthenia with the fin de siècle to women's ambition. They warned that the pursuit of these new opportunities for self-cultivation and self-fulfillment in education and work that are offered to women, would lead to sickness, sterility, and race suicide. It has been claimed that nervous afflictions were the result of the "new woman's" indifference to marriage and motherhood and attempted incursion into the male intellectual and public world. For instance, Dr. William Alexander Francis Browne (1805–1885), one of the most significant asylum doctors of the nineteenth century, claims that women's "imperfect and vicious" education deserved some of the blame for their mental weakness:

[Education] tends to arrest the development of the body; it overtasks certain mental powers, it leaves others untouched and untaught; so far as it is moral it is directed to sordid and selfish feelings, and substitutes a vapid sentimentalism for a knowledge of the realities and duties of life. From such a perversion of the means of training, what can be expected to flow but sickly refinement, weak insipidity, or absolute disease? (Browne 68).

Mental breakdown, according to doctors then, would come when women defied their "nature," attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or even additions to their maternal functions. Neurasthenic women, said another doctor, were those who led faulty lives and required for correction a radical change in lifestyle. It was dangerous for any woman to expend energy on anything other than her primary reproductive purpose, as the

consequences could be grave not only for herself, but for her children, as Poovey explains: ‘She would become weak and nervous, perhaps sterile, or more commonly, and in a sense more dangerously for society, capable of bearing only sickly and neurotic children – children able to produce only feeble and more degenerate versions of themselves’ (qtd. in Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg 340).

At first sight, it would be a reasonable justification to what happens for Julia Gordon and the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper”. Julia in “Making a Change”, the ambitious artist who falls in that indefinable nervous disorder “neurasthenia”, which was considered, in some circles, to be a mark of intellect and sensitivity. It was known that the career woman was a well-identified threat to the social order, but so, too, was the housewife who had insufficiently purged herself of her unfeminine traits. In December 1956, *Life* ran an article entitled “Changing Roles in Modern Marriage”, explaining how feminism, although a thing of the past, had nonetheless produced the fatal error of the career woman syndrome, the author went on to caution that, even if the wife did not have a career, there might still be problems: “the wife, having worked before marriage, or at least having been educated and socially conditioned toward the idea that work (preferably some kind of intellectual or artistic work) carries prestige,” may well become depressed about being “just a housewife.” Even if she avoids this, “in her [dissatisfaction], she can work as much damage to the lives of her husband and children (and her own life) as if she were a career woman, and indeed sometimes more”(Changing 35).

These beliefs went further to prevent women from tasks such as reading or social interaction, and many women obeyed these rules, either because they had no choice or out of fear of becoming a hysteric. In several scenes in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, the protagonist’s husband, a doctor himself, does not want his wife to engage in intellectual activities such as reading and

writing. The narrator tells her story by means of a diary entry. Whenever her husband approaches, she quickly hides her journal: "There comes John, and I must put this away, --he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman, *TYWP* 772). It was considered unfeminine for a Victorian woman to be intellectually active, if she read, she would either pick up a ladies magazine or enjoy a novel or short story specifically aimed at the female reader. Discouraged from developing either their minds or their bodies, physically as well as intellectually, women were appreciated for being childlike and "fragile" and they were conditioned from childhood to believe that such qualities are desirable.

To make things worse, doctors who treated mentally ill women in most cases made their conditions disastrous, as they did not recognize that male oppression of women was in many instances the root of the problem. If a woman feels unhappy, anxious and confused, psychology persuades her to seek the cause in herself. Whether the disorder was anorexia, hysteria, or neurasthenia, American psychiatric treatment of nervous women intended to establish the male's total authority. The standard treatment for such neurotic disorder was Silas Weir Mitchell's rest cure, (first described in 1873), a technique that this distinguished American neurologist had developed after the Civil War. In many ways, Mitchell's rest cure reflects men's critical attitudes towards female madness. Mitchell expounded upon his beliefs about women's nervous conditions saying: "American woman is, to speak plainly, too often physically unfit for her duties as woman, is not fairly up to what nature asks from her as wife and mother". Mitchell's remedies were simple then: to return to traditional gender norms and a strict separation of spheres. Showalter notes that while "science had once attacked entrenched authority; the new scientific expert himself became an authority" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 58).

Yet, the rest cure is frequently prescribed for neurasthenic women, but not for men. With middle-class men, the preferred treatment for neurasthenia was “travel, adventure, vigorous physical exercise” (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 66). Women were encouraged to rest and withdraw from any social activities and were thought to become healthier if they physically remained in place. Elaine Showalter explains that hysteria, and its history, has been a systematic medical endeavor to create female-only psychology. Women diagnosed with it represent the chief clientele for a nervous disorder. It is interesting to note that, Showalter observed, “the cultural denial of male hysteria is no accident: it’s the result of avoidance, suppression, and disguise”(Showalter, *The Female Malady* 64).

Women who were put under the rest cure and recovered to lead full and active lives—like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jane Addams—were exceptions. In his scholarly work *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880–1920*, Jackson Lears argues that, “for many neurasthenics, the therapy was worse than the disease (Lears 53). Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall Paper” illustrates one response. The protagonist’s mental and emotional conditions get worse with the cure. In the beginning, when she is merely slightly depressed, the protagonist sees clearly that the treatment is making her condition worse. Eventually, she becomes too sick to continue protesting and she loses her ability to judge her own situation. She gets weaker and sicker and she loses all her energy even to write in her journal, which had been her only comfort to her when she first arrived. “I don’t know why I should write this. I don’t want to. I don’t feel able” (Gilman, *TYWP* 774). The protagonist in the story is at the mercy of her husband not only because he is “The Man,” but also because he is ‘*a physician of high standing*’. Her brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing about her case.

Gilman rebel against the rest cure itself gave its fruits in fact, in saving many women's lives. In a short, revelatory article of 1913 ('Why I wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper"') she tells how for many years she 'suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown, tending to melancholia', and how her physician advised her to live 'as domestic a life as possible', and 'never to touch pen, brush or pencil again, as long as I lived'. Gilman records that she was told that her doctor had admitted to changing his treatment for neurasthenia after reading her story; and she concludes her article: '[The story] was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being crazy, and it worked.' One doctor, Dr. Brummell Jones, tells her that, until her story appeared, "there has been no detailed exact picture of incipient insanity" (Dock 93).

Gilman criticizes this cure and blames it for worsening women's status. She argues that women goes mad not because their biology or intellect but actual form of marriage that imprison women in the role of wives, mothers and householders. This restrictiveness and dependence made many Victorian women depressed and discontent, without being able to realize the origin of their unhappiness. It is this pent up "excess of being," Gilman argues, this arrested development, that leaves women unfulfilled, and leads both protagonists of the two stories to a helpless state. Likewise, in such essays as "*Neurasthenia and Its Relation to Diseases of Women*" (1886), Dr. Margaret Cleaves, attributed female neurasthenia not simply to overwork but to women's ambitions for intellectual, social, and financial success, ambitions that could not be accommodated within the structures of late-nineteenth-century society. She herself was the daughter of a doctor who had encouraged her to pursue a medical career. She argues that women were more at risk than men in trying to follow careers, since they were accustomed to using their brains "but little and in trivial matters" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 137).

Many intellectual women from Gilman's generation, suffered from similar disappointment. Jane Addams, the famous social reformer, a well-educated for a girl, ambitious to study medicine, who was also gripped by "a sense of futility, of misdirected energy" and was conscious of her estrangement from "the active, emotional life" within the family which had automatically embraced earlier generations of women. Margaret Sanger, the birth control crusader, twenty years old, happily married, and, physically at least, seemed to be making a good recovery from tuberculosis. Suddenly she stopped getting out of bed, refused to talk. Ellen Swallow (later Ellen Richards—founder of the early-twentieth-century domestic science movement) at twenty-four, an energetic, even compulsive, young woman; felt estranged from the intensely domestic life her mother had led. "Lay down sick ..." she entered in her diary, "Oh so tired ..." and on another day, "Wretched," and again, "tired."

In his article *Feeling crazy: Self-Worth and the Social Character of Responsibility*, Paul Benson argues that it was as if they stopped in their tracks, paralyzed, and the problem wasn't a lack of things to do. Jane Addams, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the others and even her protagonists, all of them had family responsibilities to meet; and they were women with other interests too, science, or art, or philosophy. Yet, for a while, they could not go on. For, in the new world of the nineteenth century, what was a woman to do? Did she build a life, like her aunts and her mother, in the warmth of the family—or did she throw herself into the nervous activism of a world which was already presuming to call itself "modern"? (Stoljar and Mackenzie 76). Beauvoir writes that the wife will then find that 'the home no longer saves her from empty liberty' and that she is bound to feel lonely and restless (De Beauvoir 341).

It is no longer possible to blame the problem on the loss of femininity: to say that education and independence and equality with men have made American women unfeminine. Betty Friedan

in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, named this disappointment as “the problem that has no name”, a kind of crisis identity and feeling secret that they want more than a home and husband. More and more women are asking themselves the same question, as if they were waking from a coma, they ask, “Where am I...what am I doing here?” (Freidan 02). A young wife whom Friedan interviewed said: I just don’t feel alive (Freidan 07). Sometimes a woman would say “I feel empty somehow...incomplete.” Or she would say, “I feel as if I don’t exist.” Sometimes she thought the problem was with her husband, or her children, or that what she really needed was to redecorate her house, or move to a better neighborhood, or have an affair, or another baby (Freidan 05).

The feeling of desperation, Friedan concludes, comes because women feel entrapped by the enormous demands of their roles as housewives: wife, mistress, mother, nurse, consumer, cook, an expert on interior decoration, child care, appliance repair, furniture refinishing, nutrition, and education. Their days are fragmented between such small tasks that they can never spend more than 15 minutes on any one thing; that even if they had time, they already lost the power to concentrate (Freidan 15). Almost the same idea of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who also struggled under the domestic load occasioned by her large family. She wrote to her friend Susan B. Anthony a letter saying that:

I pace up and down these two chambers of mine like a caged lion, longing to bring to a close childrearing and housekeeping cares. I have other work at hand [...] Oh, how I long for a few hours of leisure each day. How rebellious it makes me feel when I see Henry going about where and how he pleases. He can walk at will through the whole wide world or shut himself up alone, if he pleases, within four walls. As I contrast his freedom with my bondage, and feel that because of the false position of women, I have been compelled to hold all my noblest aspirations in abeyance in order to be a wife, a mother, a nurse, a cook, a household drudge (Stanton).

Marriage, for Gilman and her two protagonists, was seen as a prison for women's ambition and autonomy. In both stories, the protagonists' confinement to home and their feelings of victimhood in the household is to some extent responsible for their misery. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", The protagonist knows that marriage was a kind of oppression: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman, *TYWL* 771). For instance, many textbooks omit the phrase "*in marriage*" from the story. The reason for this omission is related to the androcentric culture, as Gilman's views on marriage were not accepted totally at her time. From the beginning of the text, the protagonist makes several remarks about her position as a wife and the lack of influence she has on her husband. Frequently, the husband tells the protagonist how to behave and what to think, or rather, not to think about: "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman, *TYWL* 772). The husband also calls his wife "a blessed little goose" and "little girl", and he talks to her in the third person as one would with a child: "Bless her little heart! She shall be as sick as she pleases!" (Gilman, *TYWL* 772). This is an indication of an unbalanced relationship, where the husband was considered to be intellectually superior to his wife, resembling the relationship of a father to his child.

The choice of narration itself provides the reader with a more realistic, first-hand account and insight into the character's dilemmas. In both situations where she had no choice, she used the pronoun *one* instead of *I*: "*but one expects that in marriage*", "But what is one to do?". By using a first-person narrative voice in order to further underscore her feminist message. "Personally, I disagree with their ideas", referring to her husband and her brother, who both are physicians. Noting also that the narrator is nameless, which is a literary device often used to demonstrate the universality of the condition of the woman narrating the story; in other words, the experiences

recorded by this person could be happening to us, or to the women next door, or to any woman, given the same circumstances.

Like Gilman, Simone De Beauvoir believes that marriage has always been a very different thing for men and for women. It is something recommended to be pursued for a woman, but a man wasn't pressured to enter a marriage in order for his existence to have importance. For man, marriage provides the perfect synthesis of them; he could be successful at his job, powerful and wealthy and marriage would work for him as a counterweight in the pursuing of the ultimate balance (De Beauvoir 449). The contrary, the wife should devote herself to her husband and home as seen in Julia's case, when she got married, she abandons her career as an artist to take care of her house and household, which was common in her time and class. Often, there was a conflict between some commitment to her work and the man, but the moral, in 1939, was that if she kept her commitment to herself, she did not lose the man. De Beauvoir states that "there is alarming disappointment attached to marriage itself [...] nothing is more depressing than to become aware of a fate over which one has no control" (Beauvoir 444).

Julia Gordins, as well, the protagonist of "Making a Change", becomes mentally exhausted and disappointed because she is entrapped in the institution of the home that kills women's ambition. When the child cries, the husband asks Julia is there no way to stop that child crying?, and the use of the pronoun "that" here, refers to the distance between the father and the son, that even if he found a way, it is not his not business or role as the head of the house to care for the baby. Frank Gordins, well brought up, the only son of a very capable and idolatrously affectionate mother, believed that it is a woman's duty to know how to raise a child. The answer of the wife "so definitely and politely that the words seemed cut off by machinery", reveals how much she is distressed and exhausted and feeling entrapped. Then, we come to learn that her nerves were at the

breaking point, which does not only come from her lack of sleeping, but her inner conflict that she could not fulfill her duty as a perfect wife, and this is shown when she resist letting her mother-in-law taking care of the baby.

As such, in her book *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, Gilman explains that marriage is such an imprisonment for women, because a man, a healthy, well-placed man, has his position in the world and in the home, and finds happiness in both, since his wife meets his requirements as a husband, and his other requirements he meets in other ways; the world outside does that. But she, for all field of exertion, has but her house and him ; “for all kinds of companionship but the husband; he stands between her and the world” (Gilman, *The home* 227). This in fact was seen when Frank Gordon in “Making a Change” leave home to work because he, as a man, once went out, he dismissed the whole matter from his mind and bent his faculties to a man’s task — how he can earn enough to support a wife, a mother, and a son.

Again and again, like Chopin, Gilman makes it clear that it is not love that lack in the life of the couple that makes their lives miserable. Frank Gordins had fallen deeply and desperately in love with the exalted beauty and fine mind of his wife. Yet he never understands her needs: “If Frank had been an alienist, or even a general physician, he would have noticed it. But his work lay in electric coils, in dynamos and copper wiring — not in woman’s nerves — and he did not notice it “(Gilman, *MAC* 888). The protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” admits also that her husband loves her, and he unconsciously was not meant to control her; “He is very careful and loving. He takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more. Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick” (Gilman, *TYWP* 774). Although he was a physician of high-standing, he does not understand her. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him. When she complains, he does not take her seriously, he is the man and the physician, and she

is just a woman. “Since the husband will be older and better educated than his wife, De Beauvoir believed, he will “give no weight at all to her opinions when he does not share them [...] As a rule the husband takes pleasure in the role of mentor and guide” (De Beauvoir 449).

The tragedy of marriage, De Beauvoir clarifies, is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness; it dooms her to repetition and routine. Noting also that Gilman called her Julia –by her name and not Mrs. Gordins, which refers to her personality as an autonomous being. Even her relationship with her husband seems to be based on love and mutual respect and the freedom of speech. Yet, responding to the Victorian myth that the women should be the angel of the house, she insists on her pride that she should and can take care of her child without any help, that is “if her nerves were weak her pride was strong. The child was her child, it was her duty to take care of it, and take care of it she would. She spent her days in unremitting devotion to its needs, and to the care of her neat flat” (Gilman, *MAC* 889). To a man, it seems natural that it should be the wife who does the housework and assumes alone the care and bringing up of the children. The independent woman herself considers that in marrying she has assumed duties from which her personal life does not exempt her. She does not want to feel that her husband is deprived of advantages he would have obtained if he had married a 'true woman'; she wants to be presentable, a good housekeeper, a devoted mother, such as wives traditionally are (De Beauvoir 654).

The problem of Julia was that she found no way out from her imprisonment. What remains open to the woman who has reached the end of her resistance but suicide? With “her chin in her hands, her big eyes staring at nothing, trying to formulate in her weary mind some reliable reason why she should not do what she was thinking of doing. But her mind was too exhausted to serve her properly” (Gilman, *MAC* 889). While reduced domestic obligations gave middle-class women more free time, greater education gave them higher aspirations. By 1900, more than one-half

million young women had high school degrees. Exclusion from good jobs and public life made it difficult to fill these women's longings. Women had fewer children, more education, and a greater capacity to buy commodities that were formerly fabricated at home. No longer could the moral prescriptions and the standards of living defined by the ideals of *true womanhood* keep women at home (Mathews 191). De Beauvoir explains that:

At twenty or thereabouts mistress of a home, bound permanently to a man, a child in her arms, she stands with her life virtually finished forever. Real activities, real work, are the privilege of the man: she has mere things to occupy her which are sometimes exhausting but never fully satisfying. Her renunciation and devotion have been lauded, but it often seems to her bootless indeed to busy herself 'with the care of two persons for life'. Just as the young girl dreams of what her future will lie, so she evokes what might have been her past; she pictures her lost opportunities and invents retrospective romances' (De Beauvoir 552).

In "Making a Change", the protagonist takes care of her own house, which is an additional burden to her imprisonment. The traditional explanation of the determination of a woman's worth within marriage was the woman's role as a household manager. House service played an extremely large part in the life of the upwardly mobile family of the day. Gilman was concerned with the amount of time that the typical housewife spent in buying and maintaining household ornaments, whether the housewife had the assistance of servants or not. In large generalization, the women of the world cook and wash, sweep and dust, sew and mend, for the men. We are so accustomed to this relation; have held it for so long to be the "natural" relation, that it is difficult indeed to show that it is distinctly unnatural and injurious. The father expects to be served by the daughter, a service quite different from what he expects of the son. This shows at once that such service is no integral part of motherhood, or even of marriage; but is supposed to be the proper industrial position of women, as such (Gilman, *Human Work* 34).

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, things are worst. The protagonist’s vivid imagination has created another world of creeping women behind the pattern “there are [...] many women” representing the growing number, desperate to escape from patriarchal oppression. She describes how the woman manically shakes the bars; and how “she is [...] trying to climb through.” The bars that imprison (repress) these women in the wallpaper (society) prevent their escape. This patriarchal control shows a striking consequence to non-conforming women in society. The protagonist shares her suffering with the reader: feeling confined by the attic room and barred windows continually tortured by the metaphorical pattern of the wallpaper, or, expected roles in society. As she begins to ignore John’s advice, she ‘sees’ the woman escape.

The wallpaper itself, is symbolic in terms of the vivid depiction of a woman trapped in her roles as mother and wife. Smith states that the wallpaper is an element of domestic décor and it acts as a perfect symbol for ‘The Cult of Domesticity’, “suggestive of a woman’s ties to home and family” (Smith 27). Gilman subverts this idea of conforming to patriarchal rules by referring to the wallpaper as disgusting; describing it as a prison holding women behind the pattern forcing them to stay within the laws of ‘True’ Womanhood. Smith argues that The wallpaper, a simple, common object, stands for a profound critique of nineteenth-century society as it represents entrapment oppression, and imprisonment of women [in a] male-dominated society (Smith 12). The narrator, in opposition to the woman behind the wallpaper who is free to walk around, cannot leave the house, but her intellectual being is still free to roam. The wallpaper is stripped off in places, including “all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach”, hinting that perhaps she is not the room’s first adult prisoner.

Motherhood as well was an obstacle in the way of women’s fulfillment. In “Making a Change” Julia Gordon abandon her career as an artist to take care of her child. At the turn of the

century, many women entered work outside the home; however, the tendency throughout the period was for a woman to leave work in favor of child-rearing and home-making. Not only the image of the angel in the house was celebrated, but the “The Victorian Mother” was romanticized at that time. Sheila Rothman writes in her book *Woman's Proper Place, A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present*: “In the 1880s, child-rearing manuals gave primacy to notions of maternal instincts and the innate and all-beneficial effects of motherly affection”. The view that women belonged to the home was rarely argued (Rothman 47).

Moreover, many turn-of-the-century women shared Edward Clarke’s suggestion that female higher education be tailored to prepare women for motherhood, not jobs outside the home. Rather than seek outside careers or interests, these women encouraged their peers to turn motherhood itself into a profession, complete with ample tools and specialized education. Such demands often included evolutionary language about the survival of the species and encouraged women to take their maternity seriously, for the sake of their own offspring and the progress of humanity in general. Even intellectual women believed that the outcome of marriage, with or without true love, was motherhood, which added another dimension to female usefulness and prestige, which secured her even more firmly to the home. “My Friend,” wrote Mrs. Sigourney, “If in becoming a mother, you have reached the climax of your happiness, you have also taken a higher place in the scale of being...you have gained an increase of power.” Swedish feminist Ellen Key, in *The Century of the Child* (1909), argued that women should devote themselves solely to maternity. Key suggested that all parental and societal decisions be based on the best interests of the child, not the mother (Key 115). She demanded the total dedication of women to maternal functions, a point that Gilman does not agree about. While Key believed that each individual mother was the person best suited to meet every one of her child’s needs—educationally,

emotionally, nutritionally, and health-wise, Gilman suggests that those women who developed themselves as individuals made the best mothers.

Ironically, while the protagonists of “The Yellow Wallpaper” was put in child room, a significance that women are imprisoned in the role of motherhood, she was denied to take care of her baby herself. The baby is only ever briefly mentioned in the text: “It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby”, she says “And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous” (Gilman, TYWP 779). However, the reader gets the impression that if she were well, the woman would see to numerous other activities first, rather than spending all of her time with her newborn baby. She mentions that she longs for social contact, discussions with her friends and being able to write openly. For Julia Gordon, she does not enjoy such luxury of having a babysitter. To some extent she was imprisoned in the image of the angel of the house, which enforces her to be an ideal mother. Yet, she fails, because as Friedan and Gilman claim, the unfulfilled mothers cannot be better mothers. Julia, struggle to fit the image expected from her puts her in a very bad nervous status. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan exposed such cases of many women who misbelieved that being just housewives and mother would feel their lives with joy and fulfillment. One woman told her: “I can’t think what I was trying to do with my life before, trying to fit some picture of an old-time woman pioneer. I don’t have to prove I’m a woman by sewing my own clothes. I am a woman, and I am myself, and I buy clothes and love them” (Friedan 328).

Gilman points out that the patriarchal form of family life that has replaced the natural one, has also alienated women from developing their feminine and human capacities. What man has done to the family, is to change it from an institution for the best service of the child to one modified to his own service, the vehicle of his comfort, power and pride. Therefore is not motherhood that keeps the housewife on her feet from dawn till dark; it is house service, not child

service, Gilman argues (Gilman, *Living* 109). Women "work longer and harder than most men, and not solely in maternal duties." What an ironic situation, Gilman claims. "In spite of her supposed segregation to maternal duties, the human female, the world over, works at extra-maternal duties for hours enough to provide her with an independent living, and then is denied independence on the ground that motherhood prevents her from working!" (Gilman, *The Home* 88).

However, at the turn of the century, many American women began to revolt against domesticity, both socially and personally, and suddenly, "having it all" became the motto of a new wave of American women. Many longed also for the pleasures of motherhood, for family and domestic life. Could women have it all? An important career to which they now believed they had become entitled, at the same time having the warm, loving support of family life? Or would they, like Gilman and the women of her generation, have to sacrifice one for the other? Of course, Gilman understood that men face no such painful choice. To a large extent, men already do "have it all" the careers and the nurturing families to come home to, and "the reason those who do have it all *do* is precisely the reason that women do not" (Gilman, *Women* 78). Gilman feels sorry that while a man may have a home and family, love, companionship, domesticity, and fatherhood, yet remain an active citizen of age and country, women, on the other hand, must "choose". "Must either live alone, unloved, unaccompanied, uncared for, homeless, childless, with her work in the world for sole consolation; or give up all world-service for the joys of love, motherhood, and domestic service", Gilman states (Gilman, *Women* 79).

A part of the problem of women's dilemma, according to Gilman, is the "unevolved" typical American home, which is isolated, unspecialized, wasteful, and unhealthy. The work of a household manager, under existing conditions, was exhausting to mind, muscle, and nerve, and

therefore added a big deal to the limitations and obstacles to women's fulfillment. The problem of housework also is in the waste and amount of labor required. While wasting, in house-service, 40 percent of the productive industry of the woman world, we thus lose not only by the low average of capacity here stated, but all the higher potentiality of many women for the more valuable forms of world-service (Gilman, *Building* 92). Much that society has gained in economic efficiency through the specialization of man's labor has been lost in requiring women to perform nothing but the unskilled, undifferentiated labor of the home, Gilman believes. The lack of specialization forces the woman to be the cook - nurse - laundress chambermaid- housekeeper - waitress - governess, yet master none (Gilman, *Building* 147).

Gilman's ideology was rooted in the belief that women would remain subservient to men as long as they were required to spend long, solitary hours each day overseeing the maintenance of their individual households. Therefore, in order for women to be able to achieve economic independence, not just the functions of the home must come into question, but also the construction of the spaces of the house as a means of creating and enforcing the ideologies of gender. In *Building Domestic Liberty*, Allen outlines Gilman's ideal domestic model: a feminist apartment hotel, in which individual women, together with their families could live in private apartments but utilize professional cooking, cleaning, and childcare services located in the same apartment complex. However, Gilman did not stop at having these services provided outside the home; she removes from the home and the house those spaces constructed to serve these purposes like Kitchen (Gilman, *Building* 139). In this way the gendered ideology of the home can be broken, and it would facilitate women's balancing of work and family and also provide some social support and contact for wives who were homebound.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman illustrates the harmful effects of being imprisoned-in domestic space; the architectural space of the nursery within the house constructs the gender identity and treatment of the narrator. Such element of surveillance suggests that gender constructions are closely guarded and maintained, with bars, windows, and there is no escape. In “Making a Change”, however, she remedied this condition by proposing new spatial arrangements. Gilman’s new concepts of home revolved around bringing specialization to domestic tasks. When Julia Gordon bring an amazing French matron, to do the household and cooking, she could finally pursuit her career as musician again. The matron came in by the day to take care of the home, she did the purchasing and planned the meals. This was Gilman’s idea about the professionalization of cooking, that it must be in the hands of trained experts, professionally and nutritiously prepared. Even Frank Gordon enjoyed “meals of such new delicacy and careful variance as gave him much delight”, and proudly invited one of his friend home to dinner, just to show him. The friend admits ‘you’ve got the best cook I ever saw, or heard of, or ate of — I suppose I might say — for five dollars’ (Gilman, *MAC* 890).

Child-care arrangements would have to change too. Gilman believed that the home environment was doing harm to children. The inefficient organization of the home was such that the work of cooking, cleaning, and maintenance held the importance, and leaving few time and energy for child-care. Day care, provided by well trained and professional day-care workers, would be far superior, Gilman believed, “to the haphazard, erratic, and unpredictable care given to children by their mothers, no matter how well intended” (Allen 115). Gilman rejected Key’s demands for what she called “primitive motherhood”. She believed that household and child-rearing duties were better performed by trained specialists because doing so would increase the level of job performance as well as liberate individual housewives to follow their own professional

interests and develop themselves as individuals. According to Gilman, “a mother who is something more—who is also a social servant—is a nobler being for a child to love and follow than a mother who is nothing more—except a home servant” (Gilman, *Building* 149).

In “Making a Change”, the mother-in-law professionalizes childcare by opening a “Baby Garden” on her rooftop and thus Gilman in this narrative defines motherhood as a public identity and childcare as a form of community labor. The place was a sunny roof-garden, with sand-pile, and big, shallow, zinc-lined pool; with flowers and floor mattresses, and “the upper flat, turned into a convenient place for many little ones to take their naps or to play in if the weather was bad” (Gilman, *MAC* 892). The babies were happy, and so Mrs. Gordins senior. Children, Gilman argues, would learn more and develop better if they spent part of the day taught by trained experts rather than in a “small isolated building, consecrated as a restaurant and dormitory for one family” (Allen 116). Even Frank admit that his mother can take care of the child better than his wife; “Julia, my mother knows more about taking care of babies than you’ll ever learn! She has the real love of it — and the practical experience. Why can’t you let her take care of the kid” (Gilman, *MAC* 887).

Gilman was not the only nineteenth-century writer who analyzed the relationship between gender inequities and the architectural spaces in which women and men lived their lives. The move toward some form of socialized housing was promoted by various thinkers such as Charles Fourier and Robert Owen. For example, Fourier “taught that the isolated household was an unacceptable impediment to the achievement of female equality” (qtd. in Allen 20). In 1825 Owen, with the help of an architect, developed a model for multifamily housing with community facilities (Allen 20). As a result of the work of these writers, a number of attempts to establish various forms of socialized housing around the country. Gilman visited some of these models, such as Hull House and N. O. Nelson’s model village of Le Claire, and was strongly encouraged by the effectiveness

of communal services such as cleaning, laundry, the provision of food. These visits served to reinforce her vision of a collective form of architecture that broke away from the confining spaces of the home. What remains unique about Gilman's vision for socialized architecture is her statement that social evolution depended upon an architecture that freed women from the restricting confines of the home (Allen 21).

Gilman had two main objectives in her new social and economic arrangement. First, she wanted "home cares and industries" to follow the "other necessary labors of modern life" and "become elevated and organized". Women needed to adopt "the quality of coordination, - the facility in union" in order to gain economic efficiency. This would allow women to be freed from the burdens of having to remain in the home to work and enable them to contribute their talents to society at large. Second, sought to change the entire focus of the Victorian woman; she wanted her to learn "to make and save rather than to spend and destroy." Gilman was constantly aware of the pressures on the middle-class Victorian woman to keep her house in a state of near perfection. She yearned for a new era when "the home will be [a woman's] place of rest, not of uneasy activity; she will learn to love simplicity at last, this will mean more beauty and less work. As previously mentioned, the new domestic arrangement of the home will allow "both fathers and mothers would be free to live a "bachelor" existence", as Fourier puts it (Gray 184).

The result of these changes, Gilman argues, would be neither the reduction of motherhood nor the estrangement of wifely affections. In fact, it would mean a larger motherhood, with women free to love and care for their children, which is, after all, what they do best, and leaving all the other work to others, who are trained to do it. With such reform, Julia was saved from the fate of the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper", that is madness and becomes happier as she said to her husband: "And dear — my own love — I don't mind it now at all! I love my home, I love my

work, I love my mother, I love you. And as to children — I wish I had six!” (Gilman, *MAC* 892). Apparently, it was totally wrong to keep two women, one suffering from too much domesticity, and the old suffering from too little, and both are denied doing what they most know and like. The mother-in-law become a different woman herself; “now that she has her heart and hands full of babies” (Gilman, *MAC* 892), a kind of fulfillment for her as well. The kid as well ‘outgrew his crying spells’, because he has now better care. Achieving economic independence also helps Julia to re-establish their household. Both they earn about a hundred dollars a week, with which they hired expert housekeeper and cook, and achieve their autonomy as well. In the end, Gilman argues, the economically independent mother, “widened and freed, strengthened and developed, by her social service, will do better service as a mother than it has been possible for her before” (Gilman, *Women* 135).

Gilman's main interest was to make society itself a better place by freeing women from their constricted "homemaker" role in the social order, which would, in turn, free men and children from their own narrow roles. Distributing household tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, to paid specialists would increase the value of the work, enable women to become economically productive members of society, and eradicate marriages based on economic necessity. In this way also, Gilman proposed a system whereby some women, especially old ones, would turn domesticity into a profession so that others, presumably those with more resources, could pursue more interesting careers. By specialization and reforming the institution of the home, Gilman claims, the "new woman" will be no less female than the "old" woman, though she has more functions, can do more things, is a more highly specialized organism, has more intelligence. She will be, with it all, more feminine, in that she will develop far more efficient processes of caring for the young of the human race” (Gilman, *The Home* 87). Professionalization of cooking will

allow a woman to "stand beside man as the comrade of his soul, not the servant of his body", and the organized child-care, performed by trained professionals, would free mothers and fathers alike, and would produce a generation of happier, healthier children.

It would mean also a larger domestic partnership for the married couple, with women freed to achieve autonomy that will make them more interesting, more desirable, and more affectionate to their spouses. When Frank at first knew about the new change, he feel hurt, but his mother answered: "You can't feel very badly about a thing that makes us all happy, can you?" (Gilman, *MAC* 893). In fact, before knowing these plans, he start enjoying his life, that even he said to a bachelor friend. 'You fellows don't know what you're missing!'. With these changes, Frank Gordins was pleased, vastly pleased, to have his wife's health improve rapidly and steadily, "the delicate pink come back to her cheeks, the soft light to her eyes" (Gilman, *MAC* 893); and when she made music for him in the evening, "he felt as if his days of courtship had come again". He was pleased too that his mother seemed to have taken 'a new lease of life'; she was so cheerful and brisk, so full of little jokes and stories, as he had known her in his boyhood; and above all she was so better with Julia. Therefore, Gilman concludes, when "the mother of the race is free, we shall have a better world" (Gilman, *Women* 137).

For the protagonist of "The Yellow wallpaper", no one was there to save her. A woman with a strong personality and vivid imagination, as she was, could never fit into the role of the angel in the house, without sacrificing the core of her being and even her sanity. Women were socially conditioned to control their imagination so when the protagonist rips down the wallpaper, she destroys her prison merging herself with the woman in the wallpaper; finally releasing the controlled rage of women in society. Gilman protagonists, as previously mentioned, do not respond to the stereotype image of the angel in the house. The protagonist's hidden anger which seems to

get manifested as ‘madness’ are against those who are the cause of her imprisonment, her husband and her brother. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the dark double who stands for the heroine's anger and desire, as well as for all the repressed creative anxiety of the nineteenth-century woman writer. The narrator already rebels against John by secretly writing her journal, but she cannot rebel against society, leaving her no other option than to go mad. Critics have read the narrators detachment from her own writing as the result of her controlling husband and the rest cure he administers. With his exclusive rights to diagnose and interpret, John serves as a marker for patriarchy's monopoly on a variety of discursive practices.

The story ends with John faints. Since readers are deprived of his awakening, numerous questions have been raised on a most disturbing open ending. When the narrator is creeping around the room and refuses to let John in, he feels powerless for the first time in the story. His crying for an axe implies his need for help, and his fainting proves his helplessness when his wife has decided to defy society in the only way she can: by going mad. The critical debate, says Gubar, has been over whether the narrator, who has gone completely mad, is liberated or entrapped as she crawls, out of her room and across the body of her husband (Gilbert and Gubar 91). Her insanity released her; no longer oppressed living by societal rules. The protagonist escapes her “textual/architectural confinement” by helping her double escape. Critics who favor liberation see her as having become self-responsible or in her madness having attained a “higher sanity.” Her madness may constitute a triumph over her husband. Critics who favor entrapment argue that there is no real liberation in complete madness. Still others argue that positive change will have to await changes in the culture.

Conclusion

In an essay published in the *Forerunner* in 1911, Gilman wrote that “a young woman should be allowed to have her career, a happy marriage and children”. The selected stories

discussed in this chapter illustrate how women's lack of autonomy is detrimental to their mental, emotional, and even physical wellbeing. Gilman refutes the notion that in order to be a proper wife a woman must give up her career and be cheerfully self-sacrificing. Rather, her protagonists are shown revolting against domesticity, and struggling to make a serious pursuit of their careers possible while they remain autonomous human beings devoted to their married state.

In such stories like “If I Were a Man”, “According to Solomon”, “Mrs. Elders Ideas” and “Partnership”, Gilman was fighting against the sex distinction and double standard that keep women in subordinating status. She strongly claimed that this androcentric culture injures the motherhood, the wifehood, and the individual. According to Lane, Gilman frequently states that, “[t]he most important fact about the sexes, men and women, is the common humanity we share. A healthy social organism for both men and women, therefore, requires the autonomy of women” (Gilman, *Building* xv). Women are human first, which means for Gilman that they themselves are engaged in developing what it means to be human. To fight this sex distinction, Gilman suggests many reforms concerning home and family.

While both Gilman and Chopin insists on the new woman image in their fiction, Gilman differs on her insistence not only on the economic independence, but in getting the women out of the house. Gilman believed that through intellectual and financial independence the new woman could attain social equality. The economic independence of woman will change all these conditions as naturally and inevitably as her dependence has introduced them. In a socialist society, women would not have to depend upon men for food and could then select mates based on attraction and affection. She insists that when women become economically independent, the market for marriage, should take on a different hue. No longer would a woman seek the economic protection of a man, since she would have economic security in her own right.

Similarly, and convinced that “the great social instinct, calling for full social exercise, exchange, and service” (*Women* 302), existed within women as well as within men, Gilman called for an educational tradition that would prepare both sexes to participate actively and cooperatively in the advance of civilization. Noteworthy, as in “Deserted”, Gilman presented education as the means to rescue their lives in case of drunken husband, and in “Making a Change”, and “The Yellow Wallpaper”, she showed that art does not always secure a good job for women. Gilman maintained that women’s intellectual powers should not be directed solely toward the home. Striving to establish women’s role as an equal economic factor within society, she wanted women prepared for careers within the more diverse, traditionally male-dominated spheres of business, law, and medicine.

Gilman’s views on true marriage does not differ from that of Chopin, it is based on true companionship, which comes from liberty and democracy. Companionship in marriage, free of the sexuo-economic dependence. Marriages will be happier and men and women happier when "both sexes realize that they are human, and that humanity has far wider duties and desires than those of the domestic relations." Gilman sought to change the perception of woman from object to subject; where "new woman" would play a leading role. The prototype of this "new woman" that she was no less female than the old woman she was wholesome, healthy and physically emancipated, a companion to men rather than a dependent. She remained dedicated, however, to the highest ideals of duty to family, womanhood and social benefit.

Remarkably, Gilman does not blame men or consider him as the real oppressor in her fiction. She believes that he is also a victim of an ideology. Because the men making decisions generally believed and preferred the ideas that justified their superiority to women, social institutions promoted those ideas. They advocated ideas promoting male interests in blissful

ignorance, themselves victims of ideology. Most of the time men did not concern themselves with gender inequality; they accepted it unquestioningly as part of the natural order. In sum, Gilman understood that in order to achieve full humanity and build a better community, each woman must make her own decisions and become the heroine of her own story. Through this rebellion, Gilman manages to conclude each story with a happy ending (with the notable exception of "The Yellow Wallpaper"). Women in these stories make decisions; they are led to see the inequality of the world around them; they take advice and assistance from doctors, lawyers, and confidantes. For Gilman, who claimed she wrote only "to express important truths, needed yet unpopular," the short story form was a way to open people's minds to the possibilities of the human race (*The Living* 304). For her, writing meant more than it did to most people. She wrote for the people and humanity, to expose truths and injustices. She had high hopes for society to be able to change with proper education and equality.

Notes:

- (1) First published in *Physical Culture* 32 (1914): 31–34, an American magazine on bodybuilding, health, and fitness. The Magazine was founded, and for much of its run edited, by Bernarr Macfadden.
- (2) "According to Solomon." Forerunner 1:2 (1909):1–5. "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Other Stories. Ed. Robert Shulman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. 122–129.
- (3) "Deserted." San Francisco Call July 17, 1893: 1–2. "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Other Stories. Ed. Robert Shulman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. 62–65.

Chapter Four: Unhappily Ever After Heroines: Loveless

Marriages in Edith Wharton's Short Fictions

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Chapter Four: Unhappily Ever After Heroines: Loveless Marriages in Edith Wharton's Short Fiction

Introduction

The study in this chapter will focus on Edith Wharton's selected short stories that turn around women's quest for autonomy inside/outside the institution of marriage. Wharton reveals her feminism by insistently posing questions about women and the roles which society expects them to play. The main subject in these stories is the conflict between conventional society's insistence on conformity and the individual's desire for emotional fulfillment. In other words, these narratives center on the social conventions that bound women, forcing them to conform to patriarchal standards, and those women who did not conform, fall down in a social exile. In "The Fullness of Life," "The Pretext" and "The Choice," we will discuss the failures of communication between husbands and wives and the limited options available to women to choose what they really want. In "Souls Belated" (1899), "The Reckoning" (1904), where Wharton permitted her protagonists some freedom to resist marriage in favor of a less conventional liaison, we will discuss the moral dilemmas, the guilt, shame and punishment that accompany such choices, when they work against the conventions.

Edith Wharton is best known for her detailed portraits of class conflict, in particular, of the so-called leisure class. This class that she knew well as a result of her privileged upbringing, is often criticized in her writing, reflecting the way marriage worked within this class. Wharton's scholars identified her with many genres: as a naturalist, realist and modernist. Recent feminist interpretations place her in the modernist camp, as Carol J. Singley writes in *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, that Wharton was "a realistic and modernist innovator in her own

right" (Singley 7). In his article *Edith Wharton and the Collapse of Gentility* (2011), G. R. Thompson points out that Edith Wharton used to be called a "society novelist," but her work is more accurately categorized as "New Woman's Fiction" or the "New Domestic Novel of Manners" (Thompson 217). Noting that Wharton lived through social, cultural, and political changes that affected the growth of modernism. In fact, she was born in 1862, in the midst of the Civil War, and died in 1937. She witnessed World War I, the Great Depression, traveled and lived in Europe. All these events influenced her fictional writings' choices. So, the break from Victorianism, World War I modern ideas serve as fictional materials to show the complexity of societies and how this has affected women's lives.

Since Wharton belongs to and writes about the upper class society, where education and economic conditions do not pose a problem like in Chopin's and Gilman's narration, her concept of female fulfillment and autonomy focus on intimate and social relationship. Wharton's women are not free of sentiment and sentimentality, they do feel passion and desire, pain and disappointment, and these emotions need to be accounted for in their understanding and experience of marriage and relationships. Nonetheless, Wharton believes that love does not take place in a social vacuum because it is influenced by traditions, practices, social and political institutions, and guided by gender norms. Her female characters are often seen to be equipped with decent attitudes, great perseverance, and the ability to adapt themselves to the demanding environment in best possible manners. In her stories, it is obvious that there is emphasis on maintaining balance between a need to be autonomous and being considerate of others in one's pursuit of autonomy. Therefore, women have to confront not only their gendered Otherness in relationship to men but also an internalized alteration that works to subjugate them and circumscribe their limits as we will see in this chapter.

1- Spiritual Homelessness in “The Fullness of Life” (1893), “The Pretext” (1908) and “The Choice” (1908)

In this section, I will discuss Wharton’s stories that show the emotional sacrifices demanded of those who desired respectability. These stories, “The Fullness of Life” (1891), “The Pretext” (1908) and “The Choice” (1908), reflect Wharton’s belief that marriage is the only suitable or acceptable relationship for women in particular, as a practical means of support and social status, regardless of the degree of love or happiness achieved. Although Wharton does not oppose divorce, and focus on women’s need for romantic fulfillment, she tends to adopt a relativistic view on these subjects, considering the moral implications of the individual situation in each work.

Wharton, like Chopin and Gilman, grows up to learn that men have multiple options in life, while women are expected to remain in ‘*the valley of childish things*’¹: They should care not for their intelligence but for their physical appearance (Wharton, *A Backward* 94). Like Chopin and Gilman too, she depicted marriage as an imprisonment for women: spouses are bored, disillusioned, disappointed, unhappy, frustrated, distrustful, and so forth. In her fable the “The Fullness of Life”² (1891), Wharton provides an autobiographical account of incompatible marriage in which she explores the conflict between social and personal expectations. When the protagonist of “The Fullness of Life” died and her soul went to the sky, she feels desirable rest and peace to be free from life troubles as well from the bounds of marriage and responsibilities expected from women: “a vague satisfaction in the thought [...]that she should never again hear the creaking of her husband’s boots — those horrible boots — and that no one would come to bother her about the next day’s dinner... or the butcher’s book...” (Wharton, *TFOL* 3848). The protagonist goes

further to confess that she dies before even knowing what was really the meaning of life: “How beautiful! How satisfying!” she murmured. “Perhaps now I shall really know what it is to live” (Wharton, *TFOL* 3849). She reveals to the “Spirit of Life,” that her deepest regret that she has yet to experience “the fullness of life” — a state inadequately conveyed by the words “love” and “sympathy” but exquisitely captured through rare, isolated experiences in nature or literature, but never in her marriage.

When the Spirit of Life, asks her about her marriage, she replied, with ‘an indulgent scorn’, that her “marriage was a very incomplete affair.” Most marriages in the late nineteenth century in fact were *incomplete affairs* because of the lack of harmony between couples and because the male plays a negative role in the marital relationship. The fact that the woman was fond of her husband, does not mean that she was emotionally fulfilled: “You have hit upon the exact word; I was fond of him, yes, just as I was fond of my grandmother, and the house that I was born in, and my old nurse” (Wharton, *TFOL* 3849). Even when they were “counted a very happy couple”, she confesses that she “never loved anyone, in that way”, the way to taste with him the fullness of life: all the pleasures she knew-- flowers, literature, nature-- all came from outside her marriage.

Critics agree that, in this story, Wharton depicts one of her best-known images that describe the female nature: as a great house, full of rooms: “there is the hall, through which everyone passes going in and out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room, where members of the family come and go as they list” (Wharton, *TFOL* 3849). The woman's soul sits hidden and unexplored beyond outer rooms; sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes. Her husband, she insists, never got beyond the outer rooms and the worst he “*was quite content to remain there*”. Her husband does not even seem to share with her any of her interest, when they went together to the museum, he insists to go back home, because he was

uninterested. When the Spirit asked her if those moments of beauty were shared with her husband, she answered: “Oh, no — never. He was different [...] in short, we never understood each other in the least” (Wharton, *TFOL* 3850). This again emphasizes the inability of her husband to understand her.

In other stories like “The Pretext” and “The Choice”, are serious and tragic where marriage becomes a prison, with the lack of emotional connections, and characters experience loneliness and isolation within the marital relationship. In “The Pretext”³ (1908), the middle-aged Margaret Ransom, and the wife of a small town college lawyer, is caught up in romantic liaison with a much younger man. In their society, Margaret and her husband are counted to be perfect couple, but Margaret feels the opposite. She leads a traditional, stable, conventional New England life with her methodical, colorless husband. “In her life, there had not been much to hurry for, save the recurring domestic tasks that compel haste without fostering elasticity” (Wharton, *TP* 3611), an expression that shows how much her life was conventional like any woman at the turn of the century. Her face “had grown middle-aged while it waited for the joys of youth” (Wharton, *TP* 3613), this reveals that Margaret, like the woman in the previous story, never feel the fullness of life in her marriage and that her husband never reaches the deep side of her soul. In the scene that follows, Wharton introduces the husband Robert Ransom, who sees but does not see: he looks at his wife with a “shortsighted unobservant glance”, and does not notice that she is distressed. Again, her husband like the husband of the woman in the story “The Fullness of Life”, thinks that he understands her very well: “Not that she had ever fancied herself, poor soul, a “femme incomprise.” She had, on the contrary, prided herself on being understood by her husband, almost as much as on her own complete comprehension of him” (Wharton, *TP* 3614). Yet, Margaret feels that her marriage is “a sort of all-round fake”, she encapsulates the problem that most of Wharton’s

protagonists experience in their marriages. She has a marriage of convenience, the convenience of the good name of 'the family' and social status.

In "The Choice"⁴, the protagonist's marriage was as well an incomplete affaire; it lacks harmony and the relationship was unbalanced, as the wife was the economic provider for a selfish, vicious husband. The worst of it that the husband considers his wife as material thing that he can choose like a cigar or a boat, as his speech to his friend reveals: "If I have the thing at all, I want the best that can be got.' That's my way, you know, Swordsley; I suppose I'm what you'd call fastidious. Always was, about everything, from cigars to woman" (Wharton, TC 4057). He lives on his wife's money, yet; he is arrogant and proud by his choices in spending: "Well, if you have my standards, you can't buy a thing in a minute. You must look round, compare, select. [...] Ten to one there's only one fit to buy, just as there's only one champagne fit for a gentleman to drink" (Wharton, TC 4057). His marriage is no more than a business and as a way to realize the wealth and position. Under such circumstances, adding the fact that he was a drunken no wonder that the wife was unhappy in her marriage, to the point she wishes him to die, as she revealed to her lover:

I wish it always — every day, every hour, every moment! [...] I wish him dead. When he goes out I pray for something to happen; when he comes back I say to myself: 'Are you here again?' When I hear of people being killed in accidents, I think: 'Why wasn't he there?' When I read the death-notices in the paper I say: 'So-and-so was just his age.' [...] I think of the men who die from overwork, or who throw their lives away for some great object, and I say to myself: 'What can kill a man who thinks only of himself?' And night after night I keep myself from going to sleep for fear I may dream that he's dead. When I dream that, and wake and find him there it's worse than ever" (Wharton, TC 4059).

Even her comment -with sorrow and irony- that people may die, but "*in happy marriages*", reveals to which extent she was miserable, hopeless and helpless in her marriage.

Many critics agree that Wharton's theme of imprisonment is related to her personal life. In his article "*Mrs. Wharton's Mask*", Marius Bewley points out that the quality that so many of her heroines have of being hopelessly trapped, seems projected from some deep center in herself, from some concealed hopelessness, frustration, or private rage (Wharton, *A Backward* 167). At the root of the problem, was her increasingly unsatisfying marriage to Edward Wharton and especially their lack of intimacy, both intellectual and physical. As biographer Hermione Lee concludes, Wharton's depiction of marriage in her stories noticeably revealed "too much about her isolation and frustration" (Wharton, *A Backward* 169). In fact, we consider, the protagonists of these stories, like Wharton, are caught in marriages that they desperately wish to escape. In a 1908 diary entry, Wharton wrote of her marriage, "I heard the key turn in my prison-lock [...]. Oh, Gods of derisions! And you've given me over twenty years of it. Je n'en peux plus ["I can't take any more of it"]" (qtd. in Wolff 51).

Some biographical elements can explain why the author dealt with topic. However, Wharton also criticized the society's code of conduct, superficial values and double standard regarding marriage as a whole. According to Barbara White, Wharton became a writer not because she revolted against her native society, but because she was bored with it; and that restlessness of the spirit was a primary achievement in such a world as hers (White 43). Marriage was indeed an obligation compulsory for every woman in the society especially after the adolescence year, which suggests that not only women ought to be stereotypically seen just as wives, but the act of marriage itself was a part of the society's lifestyle. Besides that, it is generally accepted that marriage is a commitment pledged based on mutual respect and agreement from both genders; man and woman, yet, the society tend to put more load on women concerning the perseverance of the institution of marriage.

Although there is some understanding between couples in these stories, but no real passion or emotional attachments. Such unions leave them in a vulnerable position, without any real bond; the marriage which lacks passion and provides infrequent communication, remains incomplete affair. Margaret Fuller describes such marriages as “the imperfect union, the form of a union where union is none” (Fuller 99). It ceases being a “unit” because it lacks the wholeness necessary to develop “the organization both of body and mind” to develop “perfection.” It is not until such a perfection of a union is achieved that a union can be successful (Fuller 100). As Wharton’s female characters are rebellious and passionate, they cannot resist coldness in marital relationship. Unlike Chopin and Gilman, Wharton’s women never exist apart from men, another man, their frustration, alienation and emptiness in marriage, lead them, to look for emotional fulfillment outside marriage. In “The Fullness of Life”, when the protagonist knows from the Spirit of Life that there is a compensation that every soul which seeks in vain on earth for a soul-mate and does not find, will find that soul in heaven and be united to it for eternity, a glad cry broke from her lips and she cried, joyfully: “Ah, shall I find him at last?” (Wharton, *TFOL* 3849). She insists on him to “go down together [...] into that marvelous country” (Wharton, *TFOL* 3849), a significance that she was deeply missing a soul-mate on earth.

Similarly, in “The Pretext”, Margaret Ransom, let herself be led without “any conventional feint of resistance” (Wharton, *TP* 3617), to love the young Englishman, Guy Dawnish. Secretly, she feels that those feelings are not wrong, but “the wrong would have been in sitting up there in the glare, pretending to listen to her husband, a dutiful wife among her kind [...] She enjoyed her company with Dawnish, and His nearness had become something formidable and exquisite — something she had never before imagined” (Wharton, *TP* 3619). Sometimes, Margaret Ransom feels some “guilt” and shame of mental disloyalty, but the joy of emotional awakening was

stronger than her shame, for what had happened “had simply given her a secret life of incommunicable joys, as if all the wasted springs of her youth had been stored in some hidden pool” (Wharton, *TP* 3617).

During her affair with the American journalist William Morton Fullerton from 1908 to 1910, and the circumstances in which their relationship progressed, critic Elizabeth Ammons claims that Wharton projects her internal feelings in her love affair on Margaret Ransom. She re-creates the part of herself which was the rational and practical lover in the character of Margaret (Ammons 67). Wharton, in her mid-forties, seems to have first experienced emotional and physical passion in this relationship. A letter to Fullerton written just days after her affair began shows Wharton desperate for life's pleasures but destroyed by conflict: “How strange to feel one's self all at once . . . It would hurt no one - and it would give me my first last draught of life” (qtd. in Ammons 79). Wharton decided, of course, to take that “first last draught of life” and enjoyed with Fullerton a passion that her marriage did not provide. Yet, she represents both her ability to understand human weaknesses and the newly found maturity and experience of a skillful lover. Through the internalization of the feeling of guilt and its influence on the moral development and actions of Margaret, this story, Ammons claims, enacts the devastating impact of the strict conventions of upbringing on the emotional and sexual development and behavior of women in the 1890s, and questions the reliability of these conventions as the standard of virtue for women (Ammons 93).

In “The Choice”, things went further to the extramarital affair of Isabel with her husband's friend Wrayford. When her lover told her that staying with her husband would destroy her more and more, she simply answers “not while I have you [...] in any way” (Wharton, *TC* 4058). In this story, Wharton suggests that for many women the Victorian marriage was dissatisfying and left

them bored and restless. This feeling of hunger and a desire for more sustenance from marriage, coupled with a definite feeling that the woman has too much of herself leftover; not only she feels that she isn't getting enough, she has also to look for it outside the marriage relationship. The fact that the Victorian marriage prevented husbands from meeting their wives' personal needs demonstrated a problem in the system of marriage itself. De Beauvoir sees that the wife sought an extramarital lover as a "compensation for the barbarism of the official mores", and the carelessness and negligence of her husband (*De Beauvoir* 93).

As we notice in these stories, marriage in Wharton's narration becomes a locus for broken identity, problems of communication, and loss of meaning of life. Yet when it comes to choose between their happiness and marriage, Wharton's female characters seem to face the same dilemma: they seldom broke conventions with foolish choices. Wharton's understanding of herself as a woman also complicates her understanding of herself as a professional writer. Her upper class upbringing in the second half of the nineteenth century within the traditions of Old New York society inculcated in her many of the values of Victorian womanhood. Like female protagonists in her stories, Wharton's understands what her culture expected of women, and the obligation to do it regardless its consequences. In "The Fullness of Life", ironically, when the protagonist finally finds her soul mate, she could not imagine her life complete without her husband: "but, don't you see, home would not be like home to me, unless [...] you slammed the door and wore creaking boots" (Wharton, *TFOL* 3849). Although the spirit warned her that her husband "will not understand [her sacrifices] here any better than he did on earth" (Wharton, *TFOL* 3849), the woman prefers to sacrifice because she believes that women should be the one who suffer.

In "The Pretext", it is clear that Margaret Ransom had no real choices for many reasons. At first, although she was very happy with Dawnish's love and not knowing how to deal with the possibilities

between them, she urges him not to name or reveal his feelings, but to preserve their unspoken understanding of each other as a potential to help her face the future. She had been loved — extraordinarily loved, but she “had chosen that she should know of it by his silence rather than by his speech” (Wharton, *TP* 3619), because she really wants to believe that everything was true. Also at the end when Dawnish’s aunt arrives in search of the person who has caused young nephew rejection of engagement with the young girl, Margaret confesses that she is the one, but she was no more than a pretext for him. She bravely accepts her fate because she knows that she has no chances. Margaret McDowell, writing in 1991 about Wharton’s stories, notes that women in the early 1900s had little power or opportunity to change their lives: “only painful disillusionment and resigned acceptance result from enlightenment” (McDowell 82).

Margaret knows that she had no escape from the life she is stuck in, because while she was protected by her age, she was also bounded by it, if younger probably she could find a solution to be with her lover. She feels the pressure to conform to the Puritan traditions of the town she is living in and its social norms. Her life was uninteresting and hopeless, and so were the lives of other women around her and all the people about her had the same life. Couples were living in passionless marriages, and that “Wentworth was the kind of place where husbands and wives gradually grew to resemble each other” (Wharton, *TP* 3620). Besides, a woman in her position and status must “collect herself,” must keep her emotions from being “widely scattered,” must return them to “neatly sorted and easily accessible bundles on the high shelves of a perfectly ordered moral consciousness” (Wharton, *TP* 3621). Women in her society lead loveless marriages as her comment about blushing indicates, “she was sure that none of her grandmothers had ever simulated a curl or encouraged a blush. A blush, indeed! What had any of them ever had to blush for in all their frozen lives?” (Wharton, *TP* 3617). Now Margaret thinks she must clear her eyes of all illusions and to deal with things objectively. As Barbara White, in her discussion of Wharton’s

marriage stories, asserts: “Their loss of illusions and adjustment to reality will presumably lead to personal growth” (White 79).

In “The Choice”, although Isabel Stilling was economically independent, and was the one who provides her husband, and have all the reasons to get divorced, she refuses such a decision for her son and her mother-in-law. When her lover, Wrayford asked her to put an end to her relationship with her husband and “*Save what’s left of [her] life.*” She answered:

No; no. I’ve thought of everything. There’s the boy — the boy’s fond of him. He’s not a bad father[...] And there’s his poor old mother. He’s a good son, at any rate; he’d never hurt her. And I know her. If I left him, she’d never take a penny of my money. What she has of her own is not enough to live on; and how could he provide for her? If I put him out of doors, I should be putting his mother out too [...] She’s proud. And then she believes in him. Lots of people believe in him, you know. It would kill her if she ever found out (Wharton, *TC* 4059).

The simple answer is that Isabel, like women in the previous stories, wants to fit into the mold available to women in patriarchal societies; that women do not believe in their ability to choose. Although her choice was surprising for readers, Bert Bender argues that, whatever Isabel’s preferences, her brave sense of the free act entailing a suffering of its consequences, however unpleasant, is the awesome measure of Isabel’s moral grandeur (Churchwell and Preston 61). Linda Wagner-Martin points out that “in Wharton’s works, the sanctity of the family is often pitted against the demands of passion, and part of her narrative method is finding ways to make characters struggle with these intensely private decisions vivid” (Wagner-Martin 52). Wharton, as seen in many of her works, objects happiness bought by disloyalty and cruelty and indifference.

Donna Campbell, in *The Unpublished Writings of Edith Wharton*, claims that these stories examine how women are affected by being limited to either the realm of Culture by a patriarchal society. The protagonists' choices raise a question central to all of Wharton's fiction, which is "the degree to which characters are shaped by heredity and upbringing, and the degree to which they have a genuine freedom of choice" (Wharton, *The Unpublished* 122). As seen in "The Fullness of Life", when the woman speaks to 'The Spirit of life' with irony about choices: "Choosing! Do you still keep up here that old fiction about choosing? I should have thought that YOU knew better than that. How can I help myself? He will expect to find me here when he comes, and he would never believe you if you told him that I had gone away with someone else — never, never" (Wharton TFOL 3851). In the world of patriarchy, the woman has always occupied a secondary role in relation to man, being relegated to the position of the "other", as De Beauvoir famously puts it. De Beauvoir points out that female "otherness" involves a sense of inferiority, and that the woman feels inferior because, "the requirements of femininity *do* belittle her" (De Beauvoir 97). Men are expected to have qualities such as control, strength, competitiveness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, in contrast, qualities such as compassion, caring, vulnerability, sacrifices and compromise, are not only associated with women but expected from them. So if the women in these stories choose to follow their emotions, they will be socially punished by exclusion.

In her writings, Wharton apparently accepts these 'traditional clichés' about the nature, the function, and status of women. She knows that choosing another man will never be easy for a married woman, even if legally this becomes more acceptable, yet, the society will never forgive these women for their behaviour. These protagonists in fact, and Wharton herself and women in her time, accept their place as the others, because of they are oppressed from the society they are

living in. The American society, to which Edith Wharton herself belonged, did not give equality to women in legal, economic and sexual matters. Every aspect of American culture combined to nurture such unequal treatment. Wharton wasn't cruel to her female characters, Elizabeth Ammons argued, she was simply depicting with accuracy the lives of women in her time (Ammons 99). Most importantly, Wharton insists on the stabilizing function of marriage by associating separation and divorce with images of collapse and destruction. Edith Wharton's writings suggest that the increasing rate of divorce and a more tolerant attitude to it add to the pervasive feelings of fractured identity and emptiness in human relationships present in modernist writing. This change in emphasis enables Wharton to paint a picture of the positive maturation of a woman, painful though such a process is, to the point where she can acknowledge and live by a sense of personal responsibility for her own actions.

Critics commonly view the protagonists of "The Pretext" and "The Choice" sympathetically, they consider them displacement of Wharton's unsuitable marriage. the biographical elements have shown her struggling with the idea of divorce (Wright 61). Wharton, by the summer of 1908 when these stories were written, was confronting choices beyond those selection in her personal life. Although she was more financially independent than her husband, like the Protagonist of "The Choice", she did not wish to be ridiculed for leaving him. Even if it suggests that she was unhappy in her marriage almost its entire duration of twenty-eight years, but divorce was not a respectable option for a woman of her social class. Through her narratives, we can see that Wharton is showing a clear critique of divorce and its consequences on women. For her, divorced women were not respected regardless of the circumstances causing their divorces. Simply, even if legally permitted, society is much too busy to revise its own judgments, and, as Wharton believes, "traditions that have lost their meaning are the hardest of all to destroy" (qtd. in

Lewis 36). Besides, Wharton was too conventional to exercise a truly freedom of will, her refusal to divorce is partly based on her unwillingness, as she told her friend, Henrietta Stackpole, to “publish” her mistake to the world (Bloom 119). Ammons' observation that Wharton chooses her incomplete marriage instead of love, although she desperately wants to break away from the restrictiveness of Old New York, yet she believes in “the dignity of a duty,” that is, one’s social duty toward society (Ammons 119).

Some readers would agree with women that to be locked in the family is to be buried alive, but Wharton’s narratives and her life choices as well, also suggests, conversely, that loss of social being is a form of death. Focusing on the importance of social is one feminist strategy for combating these traditions of thought and for elevating social esteem for women. As seen, in Wharton’s fictional world, autonomy is formed within social consciousness. In her book *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, Marilyn Friedman claims that autonomy is socially grounded and she presents a powerful defense of that our individual identities, and the values and concerns that we regard as expressive of who we are, are shaped by our social situation and by significant social relationships. Friedman also argues that women's moral concerns tend to focus more intensely than those of men on sustaining and enhancing personal ties and that women are more concerned than men to create and preserve just the sorts of relationships, such as marriage (Friedman 40). Friedman like Wharton, believe in ‘moral autonomy’, something as morally required or permissible, as seen in Wharton’s protagonists choices.

On the other hand, apart from whether or not women want to devote their lives to maintaining close personal ties, gender norms have required it of them. Women have been expected to make the preservation of certain interpersonal relationships such as those of family their highest concern regardless of the costs to themselves, as seen with Isabel in “The Choice”.

Women who have had important commitments other than those of taking care of family members were nevertheless supposed to subordinate such commitments to the task of caring for loved ones. A woman might choose not to *exercise* autonomy under certain conditions, she might, for example, devote herself loyally to an ideal that she believes to be morally more valuable. To reflect on the standards or values according to which one will behave or live one's life, Friedman believes, is already to exercise a degree of autonomy.

Therefore, in Wharton's vision, women's autonomy should not disturb the stability of society. While divorce may liberate women from some unjust restrictions, it weakens social relations. In fact, in "The Pretext", the choice of the setting, which is the society of Wentworth, has a positive purpose. In her published autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton describes the society in which she was raised as fiercely resistant to change and difference, yet, she also credits this community with "the concerted living up to long-established standards of honor and conduct, of education and manners" (Wharton, *A Backward* 5). Wharton would note with disappointment in *The Custom of the Country* what America was turning into, and Wentworth represents what is being lost: "In a world without traditions, without reverence, without stability, such little expiring centers of prejudice and precedent make an irresistible appeal to those instincts for which a democracy has neglected to provide" (qtd. in Wharton, *A Backward* 7). In other words, for Wharton, Wentworth is an island of stability "preserved intact against a whirling background of experiment", rigid, possibly doomed, but a refuge for threatened values" (Wharton, *A Backward* 7). Therefore, such societies, while limiting women's lives, preserve also their status.

Although divorce was common at the turn of the century, and that some marriages need to end, but many conservative writers, like Wharton, felt that divorce posed a threat to the family and to the larger society. As the divorce rate surged at the turn of the century, many early family

scholars also discourage divorce. Developmental theories of the time, such as Freudian theory, assumed that children need to grow up with two parents to develop normally. For this reason, most social scientists in the first half of the 20th century saw a rising level of divorce as a serious social problem. Sociologists were concerned that one of the fundamental institutions of society—the family—was being undermined (Gavin and Oulton 161). Avril Horner and Janet Beer argue that Wharton insists on the roles of women in maintaining social order (Beer 9), as the endings of her stories indicate. As seen, the wife in "The Fullness of Life" cannot even escape her husband in the next world; because Wharton believes that marriage has been defined as a lifelong relationship between spouses.

Therefore, Wharton was so careful to make divorce as a choice, this is quite adequately told against Edith Wharton's own hereditary background, "the world of 'Old New York'" during the last decades of 19th-century America, a "complex and profoundly imperfect social system" with its 'Victorian' morality in which divorce was considered shameful for women (Wharton, *A Backward* 9). Once we understand the juridical tradition within which Wharton deliberately places her stories, we can better appreciate the social value she ascribes to marriage and her desire to rehabilitate the institution in America. Marriage was seen not only in terms of service but as an increase in authority for women. Divorced women should not expect to have access to the same privileges they enjoyed when she was married. Many people of higher classes were generally opposed to divorce like the protagonist of "The Pretext" because it threatened to remove a significant portion of their property or inheritances and thus produced a decline in their social position.

In her article "Edith Wharton and the Fiction of Marital Unity", Laura K. Johnson notes that Edith Wharton shared the naturalists' despair over the possibility of social reform, but she

retained the hope of individual reform and never entirely gave up "the search for immanence through transcendence; therein lie the spiritual and moral dimensions of her work" (Johnson 82). Likewise, Allen Stein, in *After the Vows Were Spoken*, argues that although Wharton believes women are unlikely to find perfect happiness in marriage, as revealed in her stories, she does see some compensations: "a stabilizing and solacing routine in a shifting moral world, moral growth through committing oneself to another's well-being, and a sense of social responsibility through learning to see oneself as a significant part of a functioning society" (Wharton, *A Backward* 259). Others, like Barbara White, do not believe that Wharton was opposed to divorce, but rather that was convinced that the context of a particular situation should weigh heavily in the decision (White 80).

Noting that, Wharton never allowed her fictional heroines the freedom of movement she had in her own life as some critics note. Although she herself desired to escape from the restrictions placed on women, especially intellectual women, in Old New York society, and she was able to find that escape in her move to Paris where she attached herself to a new community of thinkers and writers. Yet, she tends to adopt a relativistic view on these subjects. She considers not only the nature of love and the emotions of its central characters but also her time social conditions and rigid conventions that operate so powerfully in their private lives. Women's roles were beginning to change, the doctrine of their subordination was being more widely questioned, and there was a growing consciousness of the way in which social and economic forces offset individuals. Wharton's creation of female characters who "dares" suggests that women modernists were deeply engaged in questions about identity, relationships, and their literary representation.

In short, Wharton, although acknowledging limitations of female choices in these societies, gives her characters some moral freedom. In other words, Wharton does not depict her protagonists

“victimized” but “self-sacrificing” females, which makes them morally accountable. Wharton celebrated her protagonists choices instead of victimizing them, they become new women because they choose their autonomy with reason not emotions. If they choose otherwise, things might go wrong, probably will be worst, as we will see in the stories of the coming section.

2- Unconventional ‘Liaison’ in "Souls Belated"(1898) and "The Reckoning" (1902):

In this section, I will explore the theme of female autonomy in the selected narratives “Souls Belated” (1898) and "The Reckoning" (1902), in which Edith Wharton explores failed marriages full of unfulfilled expectations, and the protagonists’ experience with the possibilities of “free love” and modern marriage. While Wharton embraced some popular radical ideas of the day, a marriage based on passion and companionship rather than convenience and necessity, yet unlike many modernists, she did not abandon the necessity of commitment in the institution of marriage. In “Souls Belated,” one of her best early stories, she illustrates the struggle of duty and fulfillment. “Souls Belated,” written in 1898 and collected in 1899 in Wharton’s first volume of short stories, *The Greater Inclination*, is a story that deals with free love against repressive bourgeois society. The story represents a prime example of disillusionment with love, and examines the dynamics of a relationship occurring outside of marriage and the consequences of such union.

Lydia Tillotson, the protagonist of "Souls Belated", with the help of her lover, Gannett, decides to leave her husband., because her marriage with Tillotson “was so poor and incomplete a business” (Wharton, *SB* 3273). Before she met Gannett “her life had seemed merely dull: his coming made it appear like one of those dismal Cruikshank prints in which the people are all ugly

and all engaged in occupations that are either vulgar or stupid” (Wharton, *SB* 3273). However, after obtaining her divorce, she finds the courage to break free from social constraints and determined to remain unmarried. Written during a time when divorce was far less common and accepted in America, marriage was a covenant that was viewed as sacred by many of Lydia’s contemporaries. By choosing to reject the institution of marriage while preserving her relation with Gannett, Lydia is making a strong commentary on the very idea of marriage. Lydia does not want to be with Gannett because she is forced to do so by a piece of paper. Her behavior and values in fact reflect the author's criticism of the established American upper class which, in Wharton's view, sets the standards for all of the American culture and symbolizes persistent American attitudes toward women.

Like several of Wharton’s female protagonists, Lydia find herself trapped in an unhappy marriage and constricted by the “sacred institutions” of the aristocracy. The society that Lydia run from was described as following:

The moral atmosphere of the Tillotson interior was as carefully screened and curtained as the house itself: Mrs. Tillotson senior dreaded ideas as much as a draught in her back. Prudent people liked an even temperature; and to do anything unexpected was as foolish as going out in the rain. One of the chief advantages of being rich was that one need not be exposed to unforeseen contingencies: by the use of ordinary firmness and common sense one could make sure of doing exactly the same thing every day at the same hour. These doctrines, reverentially imbibed with his mother’s milk, Tillotson (a model son who had never given his parents an hour’s anxiety) complacently expounded to his wife, testifying to his sense of their importance by the regularity with which he wore goloshes on damp days, his punctuality at meals, and his elaborate precautions against burglars and contagious diseases [...] All the people who came to the house revolved in the same small circle of prejudices. It was the kind of society in which, after dinner, the ladies compared the exorbitant charges of their children’s teachers, and agreed that, even with the new duties

on French clothes, it was cheaper in the end to get everything from Worth; while the husbands, over their cigars, lamented municipal corruption, and decided that the men to start a reform were those who had no private interests at stake (Wharton, *SB* 3273).

All these comments represent a criticism on the restrictions of the bourgeois married woman's dependence, and they suggest that the bourgeois family-household has been resisted with some strength by organizations of its female members.

In her book *French Ways and Their Meanings* (1919), Wharton writes about the restrictions posed on Anglo-Saxon women comparing to French women. She attacks the "immaturity" of American wives, arguing that the American married woman existed in a kind of Montessori kindergarten where she must superficially develop her individuality within a limited environment (Wharton and Pavans 64). The limited possibilities open to the American wife had become a constant theme in her short stories written at the turn of the century. The fact that the couple takes a train through Europe (Italy), is itself an image of escape and challenge the ideology of domesticity and the constraint of society. In her book *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (1998), Joan B. Landes argues that female writers challenging and extending the meaning of home through representations of travel (Landes and Ortner 144). Deborah Clarke also maintains that Wharton's presentation of domesticity raises questions central to modernism: how can identity be defined if the home does not function as a space for self-definition. By refiguring domesticity as a space of absence – of warmth, of conjugal love, of comfort – Clarke explains, Wharton uncovers the disadvantages of upper-class society domesticity to women (Clarke 194).

Lydia, at the beginning of her marriage to Tillotson, she tried to adapt with her new life. However, she starts to feel limited, and her rejection of Tillotson is due to the deep-seated conventionality embodied in Mrs. Tillotson senior, who “dreaded ideas as much as a draught in

her back” stake (Wharton, *SB* 3274). Thus, Lydia takes action so as to win her freedom even before her husband’s divorce is granted. She emerges as a woman with “the capacities of reason, consciousness and action”, who decides upon her future without referring to anyone’s opinions, the fact of which further evidence her identity as a New Woman. When Garnett asked her, when she got her paper of divorce “Aren’t you glad to be free?” she answered “I was free before,” which implies her disbelief in a paper of marriage or divorce to make a union or break it. The idea of personal freedom had obviously been the basic agreement of Lydia and Garnett’s mutual understanding and their love from the beginning. Garnett also, a writer who has never been married, an anti-conventional artist, an anti-social critic, independent and self-reliant individual. So their social identity as lovers has so far been a living declaration of personal and individual independence.

Lydia rejects marriage from Garnett, because she fears this marriage will land her in exactly the same place she had just escaped from, which is an unhappy marriage and a boring life. She rejects the idea that “their voluntary fellowship should be transformed into a bondage the more wearing that it was based on none of those common obligations which make the most imperfect marriage in some sort a center of gravity” (Wharton, *SB* 3277). She is a modern female character, who is able to choose the life she wants and discards it when she does not want it anymore. In *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy* (2014), Allan Johnson explains that this choice of celibacy became possible in the face of what feminists saw as the failure of marriage. At a time when more and more women authors and public figures were rejecting the traditional household in favor of a free union, aimed in fact to reform the institution of the marriage (Johnson 100). Lydia rejection to marry Garnett as a protest against the existent form of marriage, to say that “if they are right — if marriage is sacred in itself and the individual must always be sacrificed to the family

— then there can be no real marriage between us, since our — our being together is a protest against the sacrifice of the individual to the family” (Wharton, *SB* 3279).

Indeed, what matters most for Wharton in this text appears to be Lydia's interest in viewing sentiment itself as a problem. Wharton herself believes in that, she objected, for instance, to the ways in which women in fin de siècle America were educated to accept what she viewed as "the double bondage of expediency and unreality". In her article "*it's Painful to See Them Think*": Wharton, Fin De Siècle Science, and the Authentication of Female Intelligence", Sheila Liming argues that Wharton saw women's education - which differed in almost all ways from men's - as "corrupting [women's] bodies with luxury and their brains with sentiment". This is in spite of the fact that education was, for her, a means of satisfying a "greater inclination," the title of the collection in which the story is published- and a phrase referring to man's ability to dictate and define the meaning of life for himself by virtue of his cognitive efforts. "Because," Wharton explains, "if the man can create his greater inclination, then he is not the slave but the master of it" (qtd. in Liming 144).

From the other hand, Lydia is afraid to put herself in a position where Gannett “owed her something; where, as a gentleman, he was bound to "stand the damage"” (Wharton, *SB* 3279). Beside her sensitiveness on this point was aggravated by another fear, the fear of unwillingly involving Gannett in the limitations of her dependence. To look upon him as the instrument of her liberation; to resist in herself the least tendency of a wifely taking possession of his future; had seemed to Lydia the one way of maintaining the dignity of their relation. She believes that marriage will cheapen their relationship, as seen in her speech with him:

We neither of us believe in the abstract ‘sacredness’ of marriage; we both know that no ceremony is needed to consecrate our love for each other; what object can we have in

marrying, except the secret fear of each that the other may escape, or the secret longing to work our way back gradually — oh, very gradually — into the esteem of the people whose conventional morality we have always ridiculed and hated? And the very fact that, after a decent interval, these same people would come and dine with us — the women who talk about the indissolubility of marriage, and who would let me die in a gutter to-day because I am ‘leading a life of sin’ — doesn’t that disgust you more than their turning their backs on us now? I can stand being cut by them, but I couldn’t stand their coming to call and asking what I meant to do about visiting that unfortunate Mrs. So-and-so! (Wharton, *SB* 3281).

Lydia openly and deliberately proclaims her unconventional life within and against society and its imposed gender roles. Their being together, Lydia believes, summarizing their mutual agreement, as a protest against the sacrifice of the individual to the family. She believes that it may be necessary that the world should be ruled by conventions, “but if we believed in them, why did we break through them? And if we don’t believe in them, is it honest to take advantage of the protection they afford?” (Wharton, *SB* 3281).

The irony in the story starts when the couple, Lydia and Garnett, decide to spend the night in a hotel, where Lydia signed her name as Mrs. Gannett, because she discovers that the hotel is occupied by several high-profile couples. As we are going to see it, the individual, in Wharton’s stories, is never completely free of his society. Elizabeth Ammons argues that Wharton may be looking with irony at old New York society, but she is also looking with nostalgia, she will never go so far as to suggest that one can live without social forms (Ammons 138). Lydia soon will understand that social relation as well as the community that she inhabits shape her identity. In the Hotel, she learns that Lady Susan Condit, who runs the place, is so difficult, especially about new people, that “one might almost say that she disapproves of them beforehand, on principle” (Wharton, *SB* 3281). Lady Susan will decide whether or not the Gannetts are worthy of the others’ company. When Mrs. Cope comes to see Lydia in the garden, to ask her to find out if Trevenna still intends on divorcing his wife, otherwise Mrs. Cope will reveal to the others that the Gannetts

are unmarried, Lydia becomes confused and feared about her social image. She would like to believe she is "unconventional", as she said to Garnett "I who used to fancy myself unconventional! I must have been born with a card-case in my hand. I hated the woman — my one thought was not to be seen with her — [...] The one thing that mattered to me at that moment was my standing with Lady Susan!" (Wharton, *SB* 3287), but since her arrival at the hotel, she has basked in the approval of the other women, and especially Lady Susan, who symbolizes the social norms.

Indeed, here Wharton illustrates both the meaning of individual freedom and the price that society will extract for it. At first, Lydia refuses to act as part of the community; who cannot be regarded as a statue for 'Civic Virtue'; as a fashionable and intelligent woman, not to be confined by a label like "nice" or "representative" woman. Once Lydia and Gannett settle in the hotel, both of them slowly begin to conform to society's ideals, as Lydia reveals to Garnett: "You've enjoyed being with these people as much as I have; you've let the chaplain talk to you by the hour about 'The Reign of Law' and Professor Drummond. When they asked you to hand the plate in church I was watching you — you wanted to accept" (Wharton, *SB* 3287). This myth can be understood in the context of Wharton's belief that people are creatures of their environment; they are formed by it and cannot escape it. Lydia's transformation, however, is much more striking than Garnett's. She enters in gossips of women and pretends to be Mrs. Gannett, and refuses to help another divorcee. Mrs. Cope was in the same situation as Lydia, but she does not hide her longing to conform to society's expectations. According to critic Sevinc Elaman-Garner, Lydia is a social creature and "the inconsistent practices of her principles is predictable" (Elaman-Garner 14). Therefore, despite her determined declarations of autonomy, Lydia cannot live outside the

conventions she loves to break, and the group led by Lady Susan and Miss Pinsent acts as significant others who establish moral values and punish those deviant ones.

This story, in fact, demonstrates the problem that all Wharton's serious, reflective women face when they attempt to renegotiate alienating patriarchal systems of thought and belief. Donna Campbell claims that this way of thinking also posed a threat to women themselves. The loss of the Victorian ideal of true womanhood went hand in hand with the loss of the secure sense of identity that was already being questioned in the Victorian era. The supposed happy ending of the story (Paris and marriage), is itself a confession of defeat for Lydia and her idealism (Wharton, *The Unpublished* 122). Critic Abby Werlock describes Lydia as an enlightenment subject who left her first husband by her own volition, she has her own strong opinions and beliefs about society, and she forms her thoughts in her mind and speaks them out loud. However, Werlock notes, "such idealized existence fails to materialize in action" (*The Letters* 144). So, while Lydia may appear to be a woman who liberates herself, the uncertainty of her future points to her inability to reconcile the theory with the reality.

Once again, and as seen in the previous stories, Wharton promotes social order and suggests that autonomy should not disturb social bonds. In her article *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, Diana T. Meyers maintains that Maximal or full autonomy is an unrealistic goal for all people, not speaking about women in conventional societies. Autonomous individuals, as Charles Taylor defines them, are persons who do what they really want, still, Taylor argues, that regardless of the social standing of human beings, the need to belong is important to the individual autonomy (Taylor 97). As seen in Lydia's behavior, being autonomous concerning some tradition, authority, view, or value in her life does not stop depending on other persons or relationships. A shift in social relationships or commitments is not equivalent to, nor need it betoken, wholesale social

detachment, and unlike what Lydia thought, autonomy does not require self-creation or the creation of new law of ethics.

By the same token, philosopher Marilyn Friedman maintains that autonomy has to be understood as embedded in social relationships. It's about self-determination—living a life that reflects your values and wants and needs, yet, the sources of self-determination include socially available options and socialization that enable us to be self-reflective about what matters most to us (Friedman 174). “If that means being in a committed relationship, or having children, it is still autonomy”, Friedman adds (Friedman 174). Friedman argues that our individual identities, and the values and concerns that we regard as expressive of who we are, are shaped by our social situation and by significant social relationships. She claims that social relationships are necessary to promote personal autonomy, and that acknowledging the social grounding of identity is not inconsistent with valuing personal autonomy (170). However, she claims that more demanding accounts of autonomy may risk treating others who do not meet the requirements for autonomy as unworthy of respect, like what happens to Lydia. So, if autonomy is a matter of degree, there may be a good reason to accept a low threshold for autonomy when it comes to preserving social ethics. In short, and as Wharton's stories suggest, the concept of autonomy should be compatible with the social development and maturation that human beings experience, and most importantly is that autonomy should include making reasonable choices.

Gannett seems to suggest the only possible compromise for them is to get married; in order to establish and to affirm his independence from the Real, from "the world," from society he would have to propose marriage. besides, he feels an immense pity for Lydia, and he considered himself guilty, in detaching her from the normal conditions of life which was the real cause of their suffering. Although he propose marriage because he believes he could have his peace with society

regarding their illicit love and then dedicates himself quietly to his mission as artist and writer, Gannett defends his argument with ethics, claiming that “life is made up of compromises”. His speech with Lydia; "One may believe in them [conventions] or not; but as long as they do rule the world it is only by taking advantage of their protection that one can find a *modus vivendi*" (Wharton, *SB* 3289), means that he also reaches the moral growth by believing that autonomy does not mean always to break all the rules of society.

This expectation "to be quiet after marriage", of course arouses Lydia's immediate suspicion, because it suggests two things, as critic Laura Johnson suggests; placating a hostile society by conformity through marriage, and "acquiescence" after marriage; in other words, Gannett asks for Lydia's civil obedience toward society and her personal obedience to him as a man and artist (Johnson 97). Paradoxically, and in a remarkable reversal of nineteenth century gender norms, the man become the conservative guardians of culture and home, while the woman rejects domesticity; “they had reached that memorable point in every heart-history when, for the first time, the man seems obtuse and the woman irrational” (Wharton, *SB* 3291).

Following Lydia's argument about marriage the reader would certainly not expect her to come back in order to get married in Paris, “I begin to see what marriage is for. It’s to keep people away from each other. Sometimes I think that two people who love each other can be saved from madness only by the things that come between them — children, duties, visits, bores, relations — the things that protect married people from each other” (Wharton, *SB* 3293). Then, Lydia moves toward greater awareness of these constricting standards; now she believes that in order to protect herself against this conventional world, there is no other way but to join it. She herself confesses that she is confused; “respectability! It was the one thing in life that I was sure I didn’t care about, and it’s grown so precious to me that I’ve stolen it because I couldn’t get it in any other way”

(Wharton, *SB* 3293). As she admits her defeat that she is a woman and that alone was enough to deprive her of freedom. Critics who interpret that ending as a mutual surrender to marriage consistently follow the theme of imprisonment. Blake Nevius says that Gannett speaks for Edith Wharton when he insists on the conventionality of marriage (Nevius 18). This may be true to some extent, but Lydia also voices that side of Wharton that wanted to escape the traditional bounds of society. Blake Nevius claims that this story in particular, summarizes Wharton's philosophy about marriage and society. "No other early story marks out so precisely the ground on which the moral question in Edith Wharton's work will be debated", Nevius states, "because Lydia's decision sets the precedent for her fictional successors, for all those rebellious women, who sooner or later heed the voice of respectability, bow to the conventions, accept the compromise" (Nevius 19). This is true, as seen in the narratives of this chapter, many of Wharton's female characters, remain in their marriages because, like Lydia, they are aware of the limitations of their choices.

By the end of the story, Wharton indicates that Gannett and Lydia will get married, but raises questions in the reader's mind of whether or not they still love one another. While Lydia tries to believe that the love that she and Gannett share does not need legal recognition to be real, Wharton reveals that society does not approve such an unconventional relationship. At the beginning of the story, Gannett reminds Lydia that they cannot travel forever. Noting that, as early mentioned, travel was a symbol of their attempts to abandon the responsibility of marriage and society. Wharton shows that the decision was so hard for Lydia, she attempts to stick to her philosophies, yet, she certainly notices her restrictions: she was economically dependent and cannot live alone, probably if she leaves him she will face other hard choices and compromises that will make her marry at the end. Their escape from society feels romantic and passionate; yet, the decision to marry seems more like a relief. Maybe the end of the story emphasis Wharton's

idea that women must compromise their ideals to gain respect. Cynthia G. Wolff and other critics suggest that the general message of the story that love is the only fundamental dependence you cannot escape, and the only way to enjoy love is by compromising to the conventions society (Wolff et al. 77).

However, if marriage is the solution for "people," it cannot possibly be the solution for those who have conceived their relationship as "a protest against the sacrifice of the individual to the family", as we will see in the second story of this section "The Reckoning". In this story, Wharton presents a new kind of unconventional liaison, which is marriage but based on free choices; whenever one couple feels uncomfortable in the relation, he can dissolve it easily and with the approval of his partner. Julia marries Clement Westall, a man who, to her surprise, shares all of her opinions, especially her faith that individual freedom is the most important component of marriage. Julia and Clement predicate their marriage on one law: "the marriage law of the new dispensation will be: Thou shalt not be unfaithful — to thyself: the new adultery was unfaithfulness to self" (Wharton, *TR* 3503). The couple believe in their concept of marriage, to the point they make talks to explain their doctrine to the others.

In her first marriage, Julia Westall felt imprisoned. Her marriage had been unhappy for complex reasons, and her "unhappiness was as real as though it had been uncomplicated" (Wharton, *TR* 3504). The tone as she recalls her first difficult marriage is not wry and satiric as in other parts of the story. Julia remembers the pain she felt as the wife of a selfish man. Again, for Julia like the previous protagonists, marriage was an undesirable entrapment, a prison-like, a bondage of body and soul, as she describes it:

Her husband's personality seemed to be closing gradually in on her, obscuring the sky and cutting off the air, till she felt herself shut up among the decaying bodies of her starved

hopes. A sense of having been decoyed by some world-old conspiracy into this bondage of body and soul filled her with despair. If marriage was the slow lifelong acquittal of a debt contracted in ignorance, then marriage was a crime against human nature. She, for one, would have no share in maintaining the pretense of which she had been a victim: the pretense that a man and a woman, forced into the narrowest of personal relations, must remain there till the end [...] By an unconscious process of elimination he had excluded from the world everything of which he did not feel a personal need: had become, as it were, a climate in which only his own requirements survived. This might seem to imply a deliberate selfishness; but there was nothing deliberate about Arment. He was as instinctive as an animal or a child. It was this childish element in his nature which sometimes for a moment unsettled his wife's estimate of him (Wharton, *TR* 3506).

When she decide to leave him, no one blamed her, every one was ready to excuse and even to defend her, because everyone knows that her husband was "impossible", and there had been no scandal connected with the divorce.

Although Wharton believes in the life-long bond of marriage and love, she supports divorce under some circumstances; when two people could and would be better people if they were no longer tied as seen in Julia's case. She did not pretend that divorce was an easy step, and admitted that it could leave scars, but, for some people, she does not only admit divorce, she actively supports it. During the first half of the 20th century, demand for divorce increased, as Judge Ben Lindsey and Wainwright Evans in *The Companionate Marriage*, a 1927 study of new trends in marriage, demonstrates that more and more unions were based on sexual desire. Besides, In the 1920s trial marriages were established that allowed a couple to try a marriage without actually being married; not having kids or any lifelong financial commitments. In a way it was simply two people of the opposite sex living in the same quarters however for the time, it was a new concept and was one of the first ways in which the law tried to accommodate prenuptial contracts (Jacob 143). Historian Linda Gordon notes that love, sex, and marriage became more entangled and

simultaneously more separable, as marital unions were more easily dissolved by less stringent divorce laws and social attitudes toward divorce (Davis 33).

“The Reckoning” was written in 1902, and the society to which the couple belongs, where people “offer their friends whiskey-and-soda instead of tea”, is emancipated and accepts new ideas concerning marriage and free love. As we noted earlier, at the turn of the century, religion, community expectations, and patriarchal traditions exerted less control over individuals, and marriage becomes mainly a path toward self-fulfillment. People were no longer willing to remain married through a difficult time. Instead, marital commitment lasts only as long as people are happy and feel that their own needs are being met. What was remarkable, as women gained greater access to employment by the turn of the century, that wives initiate divorce more often than husbands do, because society becomes more open to divorce and women support themselves. The feminist perspective, which argues that marriage provides substantially greater benefits to husbands than to wives, provides another explanation for the tendency for wives to initiate divorce. “True Womanhood” as no longer valuable, at the same time, advocates for the “New Woman” rejected social and religious arguments that accorded women subordinate status. The New Woman symbolized the personal freedom trumpeted by the emerging mass culture, including a freer approach to relationships with the opposite sex. Sarah Grand argues that the ‘New Woman’ was a newly ‘awakened’ Eve whose innate superiority in all ways placed her ‘a little above’ men (Gavin and Oulton 271).

Like Lydia, Wharton depicted Julia as a New Woman, who rebel against the conventional institution of marriage, she had her own views on the immorality of marriage; she might indeed have claimed her husband as a disciple. Julia, like Lydia, believes also that in marriage, one must be true to the self and not the institution itself., which means marriage should no longer require an

unhappy couple to cling together for so long. She had confessed this and was part of the reason she married Clements after divorcing her previous husband. When she met her second husband, she wanted to make things clear from the beginning of their relation. She was attracted by the frankness of him, because he admitted that he did not believe in marriage, and “her worst audacities did not seem to surprise him: he had thought out all that she had felt, and they had reached the same conclusion” (Wharton, *TR* 3513). So, they celebrated their love and together they placed a new doctrine, that they will no longer suffer from the failure of marriage, and the exchange of these vows seemed to make them “champions of the new law, pioneers in the forbidden realm of individual freedom” (Wharton, *TR* 3513).

That what divorce was for, Julia believes, for ‘the readjustment of personal relations’(Wharton, *TR* 3516) . Her new life should be, with “no farther need of the ignoble concessions and connivances, the perpetual sacrifice of personal delicacy and moral pride, by means of which imperfect marriages were now held together” (Wharton, *TR* 3517). Lydia and Julia hold similar beliefs concerning marriage; for them, the ceremony of marriage was “an unimportant concession to social prejudice” (Wharton, *TR* 3517). If the door of divorce stood open, Julia believes; “no marriage need be an imprisonment, and the contract therefore no longer involved any diminution of self-respect” (Wharton, *TR* 3519). The nature of their attachment, as Julia sees it, placed them so far beyond the reach of such contingencies that it was easy to discuss them with an open mind; and Julia’s sense of security made her dwell with a tender insistence on Westall’s promise to claim his release when he should stop loving her.

Yet, Julia like Lydia in “Souls Belted”, finds herself unable to overcome all the conventions of society when they serve her interest. When Julia saw the young girl attending their speech, she found herself “slipping back into the old feminine vocabulary” (Wharton, *TR* 3520), and said

simply “horrid” to think of a young girl being allowed to listen to such talk. She was also disturbed that this young girl smoking cigarettes and sipping an occasional cocktail, a truth that makes her parents, in Julia’s eyes ‘vulgarians’. Besides, she, who rebelled against her first marriage and founded new ethic for marital relationships, starts to change her theoretical attitude toward marriage. Her ten years of happiness with Westall, makes her develop “another conception of the tie; a reversion, rather, to the old instinct of passionate dependency and possessorship that now made her blood revolt at the mere hint of change” (Wharton, *TR* 3521). When her husband reminds her with her philosophy, she desperately answered him that she can’t bear to have him speak as if — as if — “[their] marriage — were like the other kind — the wrong kind” (Wharton, *TR* 3521).

Her husband, who hesitated before to speak about their doctrine, is now proud of it because it will serve him and his intentions to leave her to marry the young girl. Elizabeth Ammons claims that Wharton’s intelligent woman falls in the trap of “negative heroes”; the kind of men they tried to escape (Ammons 114). It soon becomes apparent to Julia that her husband is losing interest in her and wishing to pursue the young woman. In the ten years of their marriage, “how often had either of them stopped to consider the ideas on which it was founded?” (Wharton, *TR* 3523), but now, he seems excited to remind her with their doctrine on every occasion. Now Clements strongly claims for his right; as he often repeats: “I thought it was a fundamental article of our creed that the special circumstances produced by marriage were not to interfere with the full assertion of individual liberty” (Wharton, *TR* 3524). When she objects he accuses her that she was faithful to the doctrine that served her purpose when she needs it, but now she repudiates it.

When her husband insists on his right, she tries as possible to keep her words. There had been no crying out, no vain appeal to the past, no attempt at temporizing or evasion. Yet, she felt desperately sad: she sickened to find herself alive, and tried to recover her hold on reality. At the

beginning it was she who had insisted on reviewing the situation, from time to time, her adherence to the religion of personal independence; but then she stops to feel the need of any such ideal standards, and “had accepted her marriage as frankly and naturally as though it had been based on the primitive needs of the heart” (Wharton, *TR* 3526). In an ironic inversion of the marriage myth, Julia comes to believe that two individuals can and do unify. After Westall announces his desire for a divorce, Julia has trouble understanding words that once seemed basic, such as “husband” and “her”. These words are signifiers of relationship and identity, and with the destruction of her marriage, Julia finds she no longer understands herself or the man to whom she is married. She has subjected her marriage to individual notions without realizing that with her marriage stands or falls her sense of herself. Wharton indicates that Julia would feel herself a hypocrite for seeking legal recourse when she has so often spoken out against laws that perpetuate unhappy marriages.

More importantly, she realizes that the law cannot give her what she wants: “The law she had despised was still there, might still be invoked . . . invoked, but to what end? Could she ask it to chain Westall to her side?” (Wharton, *TR* 3526). Legally she could refuse to give her husband a divorce, but the law cannot force him to love her. Marriage and divorce have become solely private, personal choices. Ironically, the only solution she can think of is also based on individual choice rather than on an external structure, “If we don’t recognize an inner law . . . the obligation that love creates . . . being loved as well as loving . . . there is nothing to prevent our spreading ruin unhindered” (Wharton, *TR* 3533). Without this individual commitment to an “inner law,” new divorce laws and new attitudes toward marriage almost ensure that Julia will end up being left alone.

It is strange how Julia starts to understand the sacrifice of marriage now, and that such strong bonds and life “could not be broken off short like this, for a whim, a fancy” (Wharton, *TR*

3536). Like Lydia, she becomes the prisoner of her own choice: she had been her own legislator, and she was the predestined victim of the code she had devised and the theories she renounced. Nonetheless, with new clarity, Julia now feels she may have been wrong, especially when she remembers leaving her ex-husband, without trying to explain to him the reason, an explanation Westall also has not given to her. Through her new vision and perception, she may now understand that escape is not the answer; she certainly regrets how she treated Arment. Still, the final sentence covers her lonely fate, when “she found herself outside in the darkness” (Wharton, *TR* 3543).

Like in the previous section and although Wharton permitted her characters some freedom to choose free love and unconventional marriage, she insists again that autonomy must conform society conventions too. Margaret B. McDowell argues that “compromise with conventions may undergird love more satisfactorily than the troublesome seeking of freedom from conventions” (McDowell 83). According to Stuart Hall, there can be three different ways of conceptualizing identity, the Enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the postmodern subject. The Enlightenment subject “was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose ‘center’ consisted of an inner core. . . . The essential center of the self was a person’s identity” (Hall 275). While Hall acknowledges the individual’s unified nature, he observes that the individual, however, was “formed in relation to ‘significant others,’ who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols—the culture—of the worlds he/she inhabited” (Hall 276). Hall writes, “The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self.’ Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions so that our identifications are continually being shifted about” (Hall 276), which explains Julia’s behaviour and understanding of her own identity.

Julia's theoretical view of marriage and her philosophy allows her to leave her first husband without considering his feelings or even whether he understands what her reasons are. Only after she is blindsided by her second husband's request for a divorce does she realize the pain and confusion of the one who is left. In 1909, an editorial in the magazine *Harper's Bazaar* asserted this ideal of marriage: "Marriage means self-discipline. Marriage is not for the individual, but for the race. . . . Marriage is the slow growth of two persons into one—one person with one pursuit, one mind, one heart, one interest . . . one ideal" (qtd. in Werlock 673). She also discovers, too late, that a marriage does not consist of two people: she had developed another conception of the marriage tie: the commitment that should not be destroyed for fancy or whim; "change? Renewal? Was that what they had called it, in their foolish jargon? Destruction, extermination rather—this rending of a myriad fibres interwoven with another's being!" (Wharton, *TR* 3543).

In her article "Contradictory Depictions of the New Woman" (2016), Sevinc Elaman-Garner claims: "it is the women in Wharton who have to suffer betrayal and social punishment" (Elaman-Garner 186). Women were experiencing a new level of sexual freedom and were in greater control of their reproductive activity—yet, as both Lydia and Julia demonstrate, even as women were seen to subvert tradition, they remained subject to the laws of the patriarchy. Barbara White makes another critical point about Wharton's protagonists: that the woman is an object of exchange in marriage, and divorce is not the answer to the marriage problem, and that Wharton does not criticize divorce because she is conservative or has "faith in matrimony" (White 276), but because it fails to provide a solution to use of women as exchange objects. The divorced woman remains a commodity whether she remarries or not. If she does not remarry, she loses her worth and is relegated to life as a discarded object on the borders of society, like Lydia of "Souls Belated". This is not the same as saying . . . that a person should never get divorced, White claims,

or that Wharton is “against divorce,” but merely that divorce does not always solve the marriage problem as seen in the first section of this chapter (White 277).

In addition to these concerns about marriage and divorce, Edith Wharton also considers the role of disillusion and despair and how perceptions affect her characters. As seen in Julia’s and Lydia’s cases, they begin their relationships with certain illusions about their lives or their lovers only to be disappointed; expectations go unmet. Usually the awareness becomes the turning point of the story, and the defeat the character experiences becomes a sort of personal victory, when one of her characters attains clarity of vision, he or she achieves the kind of victory Edith Wharton values. Notably, from the beginning of her career, Wharton consciously followed her own prescription that art has a moral dimension. She stresses not only fiction’s “ethical sense,” which refers to society’s standards, but a deeper “relation with the eternal laws,” from which ethics are derived, as critic Frederick Wegener, who has usefully compiled Wharton’s uncollected essays on writing and art, notes (Wharton, *A Backward* 212). The governing theme seems clear: social convention triumphs over individual will. That even when she disapproves of free love and unconventional marriage in these stories as options for the woman, it is never simply in terms of religious or social opposition to it. Rather she explores in human terms: the injury to other people, the harshness of society to the unmarried woman, and the exploitation of a woman by a man who is not committed to her. Wharton simply does not believe that a woman, committed herself to a relationship such as marriage, she does not actually give up autonomy; instead she shows a significant degree of it. Thus a woman who values her relationships more than she values autonomy, and who acts to maintain her romantic relationship, becomes autonomous after all.

Noting that these two stories, “Souls Belated” and “The Reckoning” were collected in the collection entitled *The great Inclination*. “Advocate of free will,” as Hermione Lee explains the

expression, "A brain to know, a heart to love, and a soul to choose - these constitute the equipment of a man; and with this equipment he need not fear to go out to battle with the world" (Lee 98). Wharton wants to tell us by Lydia's situation that autonomy does not necessarily lead someone to reject her prior commitments. Someone else's increasing autonomy might instead enhance her appreciation of her close relationships. Even if she comes to regard a relationship as seriously damaged, she might work to improve it rather than abandoning it. These possibilities suggest that alongside autonomy as a cultural ideal, we should also idealize the values and responsibilities that make relationships and communities worthwhile. This balanced pursuit of the values of the community along with the ideal of autonomy is a partial response to the concern that the realistic social disruptiveness of autonomy lessens the value of autonomy for women.

Conclusion

In her book *The Writing of Fiction* (1924), Wharton rhetorically asks, "what does 'human nature' thus denuded consist in and how much of it is left when it is separated from the web of customs, manners, and culture it has elaborately spun about itself? Only the hollow unreality, 'Man'" (Wharton, *The Writing* 652). One of Wharton's primary complaints about modern society was its tendency, in her view, to discourage the development of the "inner life" that to her was so precious. It was clear from her narratives that Wharton objected to the modernist movement, in particular, she bemoaned what she saw as its disregard of order and its abandonment of morality and social order (Wharton, *A Backward* 117).

This does not mean, however, that Wharton did not provide criticism of marriage and how it undermines women's status under certain conditions. In the selected narratives of this chapter, the woman is revealed through a series of contrasts between traditional conceptions and the dynamic changes, which she endures as a result of her crucial unexpected experiences or her reactions to them. Wharton in effect condemns the rigid patterns into which society tries to fit women by dramatizing the woman's revolt against them and her growth beyond them. Their exaggerated characteristics grant her the ability to avoid treatment of them as extremely realistic people, which allows her to overcome many personal events that authors like Chopin emphasized. In so doing, she is able to posit a critique on a social class rather than on specific characters. She often depicts even a strong woman sometimes fails to break out of the artificial molds that convention imposes on her. These contradictions in her fiction are certainly reflected in the major ideological conflicts about gender at the turn of the century, because she lived and wrote during a period when gender differences were the topic of dynamic debate.

In "The Fullness of Life," Wharton explores the theme of being tied to an inferior partner. Wharton saw marriage as the cornerstone of social order, yet, she asserts that any partnerships need emotional passion to remain healthy and functional, adding another dimension to her vision of modern marriage. Depicting a woman's life like "a great house full of rooms," most of which remain unseen: "and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes" (Wharton, TFOF 3857), she illustrates the superficially rebellious wife welcomes death as a possible escape from a dull marriage. In the end, the protagonist of the story discovers that a peaceful and happy marriage must be based, in part, on a wife's sacrifices, and willingness to be ignorant of many of her husband's activities, yet she was not rewarded for her sacrifices.

In "The Pretext" as well, Wharton expresses sympathy for her character; Margaret Ransom, who faces the conflict between her emotional awakening and the forces surrounding her, forces that come from her social and cultural sphere. By this sympathy with her women characters and her insight into their lives, she reveals implicit feminism as they relate, to individual men or to a society in which men control and dominate. Wharton's fiction furnishes repeated confrontations with women who face hard choices. It is noteworthy to say that the story Wharton tells is already available to her, she never did fit the culturally constructed tale of female success and happiness. In her society, how much more vulnerable are women, constantly articulated as ornamental and desirable only so long as they keep silent.

In "The Choice," Wharton examines also the complex nature of early twentieth-century New York society and its attitudes toward divorce. Particularly, Wharton focuses her intense moral examination on the problem of the right to individual "freedom" as measured against the necessary sacredness of the commitment to the institution of marriage. At the time that Wharton wrote this

story, the taboo surrounding divorce was beginning to lessen its hold, yet, society had not yet adapted itself to the consequences of it. In her treatment of divorce and broken marriage Wharton shows an awareness of the pressures of society and the facts of human weakness and compromise. So Wharton's women were careful to choose such a hard path, instead, they achieve liberation sometimes either through courageous, independent responses to a challenge, but most of time, they often find peace or happiness through conformity and compromise.

In "Souls Belated", Wharton examines the specific pressure on men and women who seek to operate outside the prescribed social norms, particularly concerning marriage. This story of love, gossip, and scandal paints a troubling picture of upper-class society, where Lydia must choose between her social status and her idea of freedom. Like many women writers of her time, Wharton struggled to find a tolerant ending for the story, at a time when choosing the role of mistress for a New Woman heroine was still probably too daring for readers of the fin-de-siècle. While marriage sometimes offered a way out of presenting successful, self-sufficient woman, it was becoming more acceptable to allow heroines to maintain their position as celibate women, or to leave their husbands in order to regain their lost freedom. Still, the desire to break away from marriage altogether, was seen as radical, despite the growing number of single women in society; and the fear of the 'nightmare' of old age and an uncertain future. As Wharton addressed the problems of marriage and their solutions she did not ignore the fact that not all marriages could be saved. She also suggested the possibility of divorce and its merits in certain situations. In this way, Wharton provided even more alternatives to the unhappy Victorian marriage. Still, Wharton disapproves free love openly by choosing to relate it to habits generally scorned by society. One of the dark sides of this attitude, the stories suggests, is that characters fail to develop a strong sense of identity.

As central to Wharton's work as her consideration of divorce and of female repression in marriage is the complex situation resulting when women live with men in unconventional liaison. Again Wharton's views on the subject are contradictory. She is aware that love can be destroyed when outsiders condemn the partners in a liaison. Though the story reflects the universal hostility felt toward the divorcee at the turn of the century, Wharton does not, herself, subscribe to such a narrow view in her story "The Reckoning". Her sympathy with the protagonist is strong; and she saw both the need for her to regain freedom. While she is aware of the importance of marriage in preserving the social fabric, she is also aware of the need for individuals to escape an intolerable union. Wharton commented incisively on female suffering and deprivation in those works that dramatize resignation to marital disappointment. The woman in these stories can envision no alternative to her lot or else the alternative is too costly. Nonetheless, Wharton emphasizes that these women are defined by their social roles. Wharton was ever aware of society's propensity to make and mutilate the human subject according to its own codes, standards, and desires. That is what life is like, she tells us. Perhaps we are even meant to feel that there is some value for the soul in not getting what you want.

For Wharton, marriage provided a focused forum for investigating the nature of the individual and of relationships. In every period of her career, other stories appear in which the extramarital affair is presented as a destructive arrangement that exploits and weakens women. These propositions make marriage a slippery and even dangerous undertaking: if the self can change and if marriage is a powerful force, married characters find their lives altering beyond their control. Her narrative control over these characters, her construction of the fictional space in which they live their lives, and her creation of storylines that poignantly and angrily reveal the lack of female power over the story are the strategies of a writer who has found the authority to write. In

the end, Wharton clearly reveals the artificiality and insufficiency of such stories in explaining the complex behavior of women. In short, Wharton tended to celebrate the woman's accepted freedom to dissolve a marriage, and she applauded, rather than pity, the woman who liberated herself from a life-wasting alliance. Without choice, women exist without hope; but women who choose carelessly injure themselves and others.

Notes:

- (1) A short stories collection by Edith Wharton, entitled *The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems*, first published in *Century Magazine* (1896)
- (2) “The Fullness of Life” (written in 1891 and first published in December 1893), is one of early short stories first appeared in various magazines, but were not collected into a single volume during Wharton’s lifetime.
- (3) “The Pretext” first appeared in Scribner’s Magazine number 44 for August 1908. It was then reprinted in a collection of Edith Wharton’s stories *The Hermit and the Wild Woman* which was published by Charles Scribner’s later the same year.
- (4) First published in the collection *Xingu and Other Stories* (1916)

General Conclusion

In 1893, women's activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper said in a speech: "If the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth is discovering woman to herself. Not the opportunity of discovering new worlds, but that of filling this old world with fairer and higher aims than the greed of gold and the lust of power, is hers" (qtd. in Crumbley). Many historians still consider the period 1870s-1930s a real 'golden age' of women, some called it the "woman's century", which sets the stage for women's modern involvement in American society. Women's lives today would be unrecognizable to those of their great-grandmothers. Although the ideal of "true womanhood" persisted until the late 19th century, and the change extended to marriage and family concepts. Many courageous women who, at risk of being called "unladylike," have participated in the reform movements such as temperance, abolition and women's rights, and have the notion of women's moral superiority to justify their demands for women's suffrage, equal education, and more equal legal status. All these efforts helped to introduce women to a new century, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, a new concept came to define women called the "New Woman", which changed the image of a fragile, stereotyped woman of the Victorian Era to a passive "Angel in the House".

Women by then, started to vindicate new positions and abilities never performed before. Female figures started to be recognized in cultural and literary aspects that distinguished them from the male ones. The image of "True Woman" was not their ambition, because they realize the need for a new model of a woman, who is a mother and a wife, but also able to develop their artistic skills and other abilities women as men have. The economic independence and the education were the main features of the new model of woman. Women have definitely advanced their status and

have demonstrated that they are able to be economically self-sufficient, a gain which promotes an attitude of independence in other relations between the sexes.

While women as a group have not seized power, have not overthrown any particular government or nation state, do not control any particular national economy, or for that matter dominate any national political government, they have, nonetheless, challenged the traditional belief that women's work and lives are of lesser value. Feminist consciousness have changed the way in which women and men work, play, think, dress, worship, vote, reproduce, make love, and make war. These popular feminist ideologies grew in reaction to the fundamental changes in social life, the same changes that motivated the transformations of the domestic ideal for women. Rather than adapting women's domesticity to the new social conditions, they proposed ideas that put women's place outside the home.

The literature of the "New Woman" was also a kind of rebellion in which early feminist ideas appeared, as a response to the literature of male domesticity. The idea that fiction secretly permitted rebellion against patriarchy became so attractive that female writers create revolts even in heroines who seem submissive. From the rise of the periodical in the sixteenth century to the rise of literary criticism in the twentieth century, American women writers made significant contributions to literature in general, and fiction in particular. Women's refusals to accept assigned roles have filled American literature for centuries. Of course, by means of literature, women have developed those ideas of freedom, independence and self-esteem against the ideals of their relegation and submission defended by the True Woman model. Women writers use literature to claim their autonomy against double standard, as seen in the writings of Chopin, Gilman, and Wharton.

By the end of the century, the struggle for female self-determination and the rejection of the so-called “Cult of Domesticity” became more and more visible. The expression of female desire for independence, self-realization and freedom, began to emerge in works by Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, these literary texts present women’s attempts to free themselves from their dictated traditional role. That literature produced by women writers frequently illustrated the battle for a new concept of femininity and a revised perception of women’s roles in society. They insisted on culture, the one that value autonomy for women, not just for men, that women should prepare women to take care of themselves, to earn their living and be independent. Unlike the Domestic fiction, which praised marriage as happy ending, the “New Woman’s Fiction” generally portrays the dilemma of a middle-class woman trapped in an unhappy marriage, and goes so far as to suggest that perhaps even the best marriage may be bad for women because it destroy their creative spirit. These stories are fictionalized in the works of Chopin, Gilman and Wharton and offer powerful examples of marriage as a disaster, leading to imprisonment, insanity, or even death as we have seen in the analysis.

In her writing, Kate Chopin reveals a strong hidden message against the traditional roles of women. More recently, scholars have seen her use of local color techniques as a strategy to gain a position in the literary marketplace and to participate in contemporary debates about gender, race. Her lack of interest in feminism and suffrage does not reveal a lack of confidence in women, nor does it have to do with a lack of any desire for freedom. She simply had a different understanding of freedom. Her short stories are indeed feminist in their portrayals of women struggling for freedom and individuality in a patriarchal Victorian America. She herself wasn’t a conventional housewife, but exhibited a strong personality and had an unconventional view on the rights of a woman in her contemporary society.

Chopin was known to be persistent in her depiction of women who deviate, in different ways, from dominant pictures of women in her era. However, her importance as a writer is particularly notable for its exploration of how women transgress conventions and how they struggle with the society that prescribes such mores. In so doing, Chopin's fiction has been engaged with the concept of the New Woman, a newly emancipated, progressive female ideal arising in the 1890s that challenged Victorian notions of the domestic, submissive True Woman. Yet, Chopin's fiction does not provide a prescriptive answer to the Woman Question of her time. Instead, reserving judgment of her characters, Chopin depicts various modes of fulfillment for women, both conventional and unconventional, throughout the portrayal of characters in her stories.

Chopin did not have an optimistic view of the future, but neither was hers a hard deterministic outlook concerning women's lives. Even in her bleak tales of loss, Chopin intimates a new structure of feeling in which women's rights to self-determination and fulfillment are unquestionable. She frequently expresses in her stories women's dissatisfaction in a conventional marriage and her desire for independence. Certainly, she totally disagrees with the myth that marriage is a woman's only '*raison d'être*', and an institution which she ought lovingly give up her identity. Her stories examined the destruction of women who lived within traditional society, and many of these stories depicted women—and men—struggling to assert their autonomy and their own identities.

As previously mentioned, women in this period had reason to feel isolated from their own minds and bodies. After marriage, they may have felt a sense of uncertainty as to who they were and how they were expected to change in order to fit into fairly strict cultural ideals. Chopin was aware that marriage was the focus of female choice during the nineteenth century and accepted her

social obligation to marry and have children. Aware of the restrictions placed on women, Chopin's marriage stories question society's concept of marriage and the implicit lack of freedom within this institution. These stories rarely touch on social or moral implications of marriage. Instead, they deal with whether characters are able to find happiness within the institution, whether marriage constrains them or not. Rarely arguing against marriage, she centers her themes on personal dignity.

Chopin saw and understood all aspects of the female psyche, and her particular interest was woman's awakening to her true nature, whether traditional, emancipated, or a mixture of the two. Her married protagonists often find themselves entrapped in a miserable life, that they can neither cope with nor leave or change. She frequently focuses on themes of independence and autonomy, and the inner conflicts faced by her protagonists is their attempts to gain or regain an aspect of control in their lives. Most notably, in "The Story of an Hour," Louise Mallard recognizes that the death of her husband and the subsequent breaking of the marriage tie will allow her to be an independent woman who is beholden to no one in her actions. It is obvious that Chopin wanted women to become aware of their status and of the fact that they could control their own lives, and moved from their traditional gender roles towards a model of 'New Woman's.

Other stories such as 'Madame Célestin's Divorce' reveal the theme that repressive relationship can be unhealthy. That is, because women have only grown up with the habit of being dependent, they simply react so passively to whatever outside influences. Chopin wished her characters to go beyond the narrow and simple lives, so her characters often show that they recognize the customs of their society while searching for self-fulfillment, respect, and love. Yet, these stories of women who return to their husbands, having experienced difficulties, do not simply confirm the 'happy-ever-after' scenario that the reader perhaps desires, affirming marriage as the

only proper arrangement of life between adult men and women. All of the other wives in her stories return to their spouses, never succeeding in their attempts to free themselves from the patriarchal chains of marriage, which give the power to men, both economically and socially.

Chopin also openly confronts the problems of marriage and shows that oppressive marriage is unethical in stories like “A Visit to Avoyelles” and “Désirée’s Baby”. She reveals how overmuch love can blind one to the loss of his own autonomy and personal dignity. Unfortunately, women had no control over their lives; they were slaves whose only main priority was to live for their husband (owner) rather than themselves, which brought an unhealthy balance between them both in society and marriage. Marriage is one such experience, with its necessary and potentially destructive relinquishment of personal freedom—affection and replenishment balanced always against the threat of pain. These stories show that blind love offers the illusion that the individual has become complete, yet, this illusion is easily shattered when the individual discovers that the unified whole, i.e, the couple, does not exist. Chopin also draw attention to many important issues related to the Woman Question in these stories; like the economic dependence of the woman, the lack of the appropriate education which allow women to have better jobs, which are all some of the reasons why women stay simply in the bondage of marriage. She draw attention to risk of a life in which women are not prepared for.

In Kate Chopin’s short fiction, we have seen that women revealed against their husbands, claiming not to be their properties anymore; they were in search of their own self-determination to control their bodies halfway the traditional moral and sexual rules and the innovative ones proposed by, above all, feminist writers. The unnamed, dying wife in ‘Her Letters’ had been unhappy in her marriage and resorted to an affair, but had obviously decided to remain married. These fictional characters took new paths in their ordinary lives; they chose the freedom to

consider adultery or to reject love and other enforced obligations, always by deciding themselves as women with a real female identity. Chopin consciously included the claim that women who seek personal gratification and independence will be doomed to failure and self-destruction.

As suggested earlier, Chopin finds that power of one person over another is often manifested in the institution of marriage. Yet, as even her earliest stories suggest, she does not always find that marriage necessarily requires that a wife be dominated by her husband, and many good examples of growth of both couples were provided as seen in *Athénaïse*. Her women are learning about how to engage with the world rather than simply impose themselves as autonomous, self-driven individuals within that world, a journey shared by many of Chopin's heroines, albeit in different ways. These examples of characters who adhere to Victorian ideas of femininity rather than to the progressive ideals of the New Woman, particularly in their selflessness, illustrate the tendency of Chopin's fiction not to suggest a single model of fulfillment for women. Those little but important victories achieved by Chopin's heroines made the difference and encouraged other women to do the same for themselves. Their intentions regarded the improvement of social rights and further laws in order to encourage women to strongly oppose against what they consider barriers, in favor of performing new roles.

From her part, Charlotte Perkins Gilman offered a new perspective in her short stories, on major issues of gender primarily the origins of women's subjugation, the struggle to achieve both autonomy and intimacy in human relationships and the central role of work as a definition of self. Gilman writing turned on a few dominant themes: the transformations of marriage, the family, and the home, which all returned insistently to her central argument, "the economic independence and specialization of women as essential to the improvement of marriage, motherhood, domestic industry, and racial improvement." The liberation of women and of children and of men, for that

matter required getting women out of the house, both practically and ideologically. Gilman believed economic independence is the only thing that could really bring freedom for women, and make them equal to men. For Gilman, career meant more than job. It seemed to mean doing something, being somebody yourself, not just existing in and through others.

Gilman believes that “women’s oppression lay at the core of American culture” and that more “fundamental change would be necessary for women to achieve equality.” Gilman created a new female character, which is autonomous, independent and happy satisfied with her own life, even with a strong character and a heavy disappointment, can do a great deal. Her writings signaled the birth of modern feminism with its emphasis on women’s intellectual and spiritual independence. The new woman of Gilman could be a wife and a mother as well. She argues, yes, it was best for individual women and for the species if mothers pursued intellectual and professional tasks outside the home. After all, such an arrangement would surely improve the health and intellect of women. Encouraging mothers to pursue professional work would also require that husbands, the home, and the workplace be reconfigured. Gilman’s outlook is optimistic in that she presents both women and men as capable of change.

Gilman was writing in response to cultural attitudes toward marriage at the turn of the century and to the legal framework of the marriage contract which, at that time, determined women's role in the social structure. She was personally trapped in an unhappy early marriage which caused her to question the fact that a woman's existence was circumscribed by the relationship she had in her married life. She considered that she was not alone in her experiences and believed that she and other women were victims of socioeconomic traditions which had evolved over the centuries but which could be challenged by sound economic reasoning. Gilman exploits the brevity of the short story genre to press home her agenda for social change and above

all to galvanize her fellow women into active, personal reform, concerns ordinary women who deflect the traditional trajectories of their lives to create better situations for themselves and, in so doing, improve the lives of those around them.

Gilman viewed women's inability to provide for themselves and establish economic independence as central to their subjugation within the home and their continued state of ignorance once placed there. Gilman believed that through intellectual and financial independence the new woman could attain social equality. At its inception, the marriage plot provided, by far, the most pervasive theme in her short fiction focusing instead upon the problematic situations in marriage that she assures her readers are usually reparable. What she also suggested, is that woman is alienated from herself as a whole person in a culture that values her in parts: as mother, wife, sexual being, but not as a fully formed autonomous person. Gilman irritated and provoked. She poked fun at pieties and repudiated the most sacred institutions of her time and ours: marriage, motherhood, home, religion. The result of being placed in a subordinate position is that men's work is in general more important than women's work. Thus, economic dependence was closely related to women's domestic prison, which caused fatal symptoms in terms of women's psychological conditions. When women are working outside the home, the market for marriage, according to Gilman, should take on a different hue. No longer would a woman seek the economic protection of a man, but more equal marital relationship.

Education as well was of the main concerns of Gilman's short fiction. She believes that only the education would help to develop autonomous individuals, for rational behavior was possible only if self-governing men and women could connect knowledge with action and could judge others' opinions in relation to their own. Gilman's feminist ideas clearly have a place within educational history and the long tradition of female authors who wrote in order to transform society

by educating other women. “The problem with patriarchy”; Gilman notes, “is not only that women are not able to do as they please, the even more profound problem is that women are not encouraged to think”. She emphasized the need to offer an intellectually challenging higher education for women that was on par with the collegiate liberal arts education, one that would train women in critical and analytical thought. She desires that women throw off the bonds men place upon them in terms of rendering them only beautiful, foolish, and useless; she wants them to attain a rational education, develop their reason, perfect their virtue, and embody true modesty that arises from purity of mind and rationality. They should endeavor to attain education, financial independence, some political participation, and autonomy.

Alongside with her criticism to double standard, sex distinction and patriarchy is stories such as ‘According to Solomon’ , ‘If I Were a Man’ and ‘Deserted’, she explores the available opportunities of old women. Old women in Gilman fiction are depicted wise, daring to claim for fulfillment. These women are entirely committed to their work and become truly effective; and no longer seeking to occupy their time; they have goals in view; producers in their own right. Gilman view on marriage and motherhood goes beyond the traditional way, and she often criticizes a society in which women could only achieve any kind of wealth, influence or self-fulfillment through marriage, so that they were entirely dependent on attracting a husband. She believes that society had to accept the idea of women, even married women and mothers, having careers.

One of the most important points that Gilman warned against in her stories, is forcing women into domesticity. Like Chopin, Gilman insisted here on the danger of imprisonment of women inside house. ‘Making a Change’ and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, portrays a true-to-life picture of a Victorian marriage and the relationship between husband and wife. These stories portray the social practices leading to the nervous breakdown of a middle-class woman, and

provide a harsh criticism of a culture that undermined a woman's right to intellectual freedom and intellectual development, rights Gilman saw as instrumental to the well-being and progress of the individual and the society. Gilman believed that woman's progress would lead to the progress of the human species, and woman's degeneration would, conversely, lead to its decline. Gilman thought that women's talents could be cultivated, compensated, and provided with a useful social outlet. Her short fiction emphasizes that women can succeed in many roles — as wives, mothers, and career women, and such multiple lives become possible when flexible domestic arrangements and a sound choice of the proper mate prevail.

She encouraged women to work outside the home and maintained that men and women should share housework. But she went further, arguing that marriage itself had to be modernized to meet new realities. As much as possible, she believed, housekeeping, cooking, and childcare should be done by professionals, not by biological parents. Children, she believed, should be raised in communal nurseries and fed in communal kitchens rather than in individual homes. Her fiction, which tends to end happily, shows an optimism that women can change the existing system through collective action and an exercise of the will. In this, Gilman contrasts sharply with her contemporary Kate Chopin, with whom she is often bracketed: rather than searching for sexual happiness in defiance of respectability, Gilman's heroines find autonomy through work and married life. With these reforms, Gilman sought to change the perception of woman from object to subject; where "new woman" would play a leading role. The prototype of this "new woman" that she was no less female than the old woman she was wholesome, healthy and physically emancipated, a companion to men rather than a dependent.

For Edith Wharton, her topics of are clearly different from those of Chopin's and Gilman's, and although she depreciated higher education for women and cared little about women's suffrage,

two cornerstones of feminism, but still her stories represent a feminist standpoint unlikely to be the commonly accepted opinion of the time, which also include a negative portrayal of marriage. Unlike writers who celebrated domesticity, Wharton presented the bonds or restrictions imposed on the individual; and unlike romancers who celebrated escape, she depicted the inevitable bond or covenant between the two and the impossibility of getting beyond the community. For her, the subject of marriage was more than a means of studying social behavior. Her central theme is surely one that concerns individuals like herself who have been cheated of fulfilment by convention, by 'received ideas', by their family training, so that an emptiness remains at the heart of their being.

Wharton wanted to show that the disintegration of marriage both reflects and causes this breakdown. For instance, at a time when divorce was scarcely condoned in American life, let alone in American literature, Wharton recorded with sympathy the disadvantaged position of the divorced woman. She portrays a marriage that forms a lasting tie between a man and a woman. It now becomes obvious that Wharton's purpose in such stories is to inform her audience of the importance of more constructive relations between the sexes, and that the transformation of society a possibility if two people share these ideals. Wharton's stories suggest that the increasing incidence of and more tolerant attitudes toward divorce add to the pervasive feelings of fractured identity and emptiness in human relationships that characterize modernist writing.

Characters in her stories differentiate in problems, but the problems they face in their human relationships are universal. Wharton's woman like in "The Pretext" and "The Choice" are not allowed to leave the past behind, they must confront it, come to terms with their part in it and, eventually, live by it. Wharton's heroines and heroes are locked into such tightly closed psychological, social, and economic systems that they either destroy themselves by beating their heads against the walls of their prison or suffer a living death by resigning themselves to it. Yet,

women in Wharton's work are portrayed not as passive victims of structured inequalities that favor males, but as active thinking beings who can and do challenge some aspects of male domination through leisure. In stories like "Souls Belated" and "The Reckoning" As her characters grow into lifelike women, they, in turn, destroy the authority of the simplistic and traditional formulations through which society had defined their acceptable roles. In a typical short story her heroine's rejection of traditional expectations at some point results in a dramatic shift in the central situation and precipitates an ending in which the woman is-if not victorious-at least aware of her situation and able to be decisive about it.

Wharton looks at marriage from many different angles. Rarely settling on one answer or viewpoint for a particular issue or situation, she prefers to leave a problem unresolved, often presenting different perspectives. Wharton's characters confronting the expectations of the society in which they live usually find their choices are limited. There may be no other options available as she details the loneliness and isolation that result from their newfound awareness. In fact, she has been criticized for her pessimism and her generally unhappy endings, where her characters become disillusioned and despairing. For her, the most triumphant of human powers is therefore not the defiance of fate, but the control of self. Her philosophical conclusions: namely, that an individual's character is inextricably bound up in the society that nourishes, forms, and reforms that individual; and, in turn, when one changes society, that person simultaneously and inescapably changes who he is.

Wharton uses her bad experience in marriage to show that women must have the good choice. In Wharton's stories about old New York, marriage, satisfactory or not, is treated by characters as a permanent condition; despite adultery, financial impropriety, or boredom, one remained married to one's spouse. Wharton confronts the ever burning issue of sexual inequality

by showing how the influence between men and women in marriage can be complete union of the sexes both mentally and physically, rather than a destructive force which leads to divorce. Wharton argues that better marriages exist in a society where women have satisfying emotional relationships with men. Because Wharton finally had no answer to the Woman Question; as she explained to Wilbur Cross as late as 1912, she was not prepared to deal with its possible answers. She understood, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin did, that the woman's dependence on her society, specifically on men, left her vulnerable to the power of a frivolous, if not evil, society.

To sum up, escaping gender norms is difficult and often impossible due to the pervasive and repressive nature of cultural expectations, but many societies include people who desire change. Chopin, Gilman and Wharton created their protagonists to represent the many people who attempt to break out of their prescribed roles and live more freely, following their personal wishes rather than the forces of an institution they cannot control. Some may describe such adventurers as selfish or amoral, but these terms do not adequately define those who risk their lives to find personal contentment. In their time, their novels were daring and important efforts in the fight for more privileges; and in our recent times, we can appreciate and applaud their courageous dreams that have become realities and believe in the possibility of better things to come for women and society.

As human beings have always used history in order to find their direction toward the future. The stories discussed in this thesis conveyed the roles of women who went beyond the mere domestic and traditional female obligations as proof for real women to achieve the purposes; fictional women encouraged real women to be women following a new ideal of woman. They all embodied the new characteristics of the New woman as independent souls able to manage their lives while looking for their own interests and desires. Some of them wished to accomplish their

goals; others changed radically their lives; even, there were some of these women who stayed by the side of their families, but as well indicating they had their own willingness and determination to decide what kind of life was better for them.

Their stories push the boundaries of reality in their time and further, making women question what is right and what is wrong about their lives. Important issues related to autonomy were discussed and tested in such stories. They all agree that reason coming from the accurate education will provides women with strength of views and character and a freedom of mind, skills that are necessary for women to perform any duty properly. Denying women an education beyond domestic skills therefore meant trapping them further in the home and consequently also making them more vulnerable. Besides, can they expect women to make good mothers when they prevent them from sharpening their judgment and developing their minds when they're younger? The education will also open new opportunities for women to become economically independence, and this liberation would help to 'readjust' male–female relations and woman's place in society.

The new model of marriage that these stories introduced is one that copes with social norms, and the one that allows women's self-expression and personal development. A marriage characterized by equal gender roles rather than patriarchal relationships between spouses, and it held together not by bonds of social obligation but by ties of love, friendship, and common interest. Before a true union can occur, each person must be an individual and self-dependent unit. For women to become such individuals, men need to remove their dominating influence, but women also need to claim themselves as self-dependent and remove themselves from man's influence.

In conclusion, we can say that in every age, whenever an opportunity has afforded itself, women have proved themselves to be fully men's equals in intellectual capacity as anyone of the opposite sex, under the same, or similar, circumstances. This thesis has attempted to recognize the

different factors that prevent women from fulfilling their autonomy, when combined with marriage as depicted in American short fiction of the period from 1870s to 1930s. The work is part of a small but growing literature that revisit the women's status and its depiction in the literary narratives.

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