Naturalism and the New Woman: Fated Motherhood in Kate Chopin's The Awakening and Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth

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Proto-feminist novels have garnered great critical attention in recent decades, largely owing to the reclamation efforts of feminist scholars from the 1960s onwards. These feminist scholars have remarked the fin-de-siècle emergence of a recurring narrative archetype: the unabashed New Woman, whose exploits in what were traditionally male-dominated spheres distinguished her from the domesticated matrons and sentimental bachelorettes of past literary paradigms. While the New Woman is now a commonplace among feminist critics, the following thesis uniquely interprets this feministic archetype in conjunction with the concurrent movement of American literary naturalism—a genre that proffers a deterministic worldview and is often regarded as “the most hypermasculine in American literary history” (Fleissner, Women, Compulsion, Modernity 6).

I therefore analyze the seemingly tragic suicides of two prominent, New Woman characters—Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening (1899) and Lily Bart of Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905)—through a naturalistic framework. I contend that these female protagonists are imprisoned by the deterministic force of motherhood, and so are apparently doomed to unfulfilling existences as mothers and homemakers. Their only means to liberate themselves from the clutches of domestic motherhood is through their suicides, which are thus transformed into triumphant acts of self-emancipation rather than tragedies.

Key Words: American literature, twentieth century, feminism, domesticity, gender, determinism
Dedication

To my fiancé, Joshua:

Thanks for being so supportive throughout the writing process, page by page.

Fortunately, I’m not as opposed to marriage as Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart are.
Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Jonathan Barron, whose continual guidance and extensive knowledge contributed greatly to my thesis and undergraduate experience. I might never have encountered Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, had I not taken one of his courses my sophomore year. His insights have made me a better researcher, writer, student, and scholar overall; for these things I am deeply grateful.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The turn of the twentieth century was an era of both tremendous industrial expansion—as is exhibited by the development of monumental inventions like the assembly line and airplane—and dramatic social upheaval. The industrialized 1800s propelled certain privileged Americans into the burgeoning middle class and made the “American Dream” more attainable than ever for these demographics (and Anglo-Saxon men in general) (Archer and Blau 17). In contrast, disenfranchised populations—foremost among these, women and people of color\(^1\)—became increasingly disillusioned about their inability to achieve comparable success within a patriarchal and prejudicial society (Boydston 187-188, Trotter 19-23). Motivated by the very achievement-minded culture they were the unsung captives of, droves of anti-domestic and otherwise nonconformist women sought the representation in politics, academia, the workforce, and the arts that they had previously been denied. It was out of the vacuity in women's artistic representation that an extraordinary narrative figure emerged: the unabashed New Woman, whose exploits in what were traditionally male-dominated spheres\(^2\) distinguished her from the domesticated matrons and sentimental bachelorettes of past literary paradigms. Empowered by artistic ingenuity, social-sexual liberty, a penchant for cigarettes, and an abundance of grit, the New Woman made her American debut by the turn of the twentieth century.

In order to contextualize the fin-de-siècle emergence of the New Woman, we must familiarize ourselves with that school of thought which preceded her, what modern scholarship terms "The Cult of True Womanhood." In her comprehensive article entitled “The Cult of True

\(^1\) While my thesis focuses primarily on the treatment of white motherhood by fin-de-siècle America and so does not extensively address the further struggles of people of color, Trotter's cited article provides an insightful glimpse of how African-Americans' lifeways were affected by industrialization.

\(^2\) See Figures 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, and 15.
Womanhood: 1820-1860," Barbara Welter identifies the “cardinal virtues” of this ideology, which she succinctly lists as “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 152). The quintessential True Woman occupied several roles: she was simultaneously (and in equal measure) the ever-devoted mother of her brood, the ever-amiable wife of her husband, the ever-zealous custodian of her (spouse's) property, the ever-virtuous paragon of Christian morality, and the ever-competent organizer of social affairs in the home. While True Womanhood's legacy remains partially visible in certain pockets of contemporary America, its tenets were hegemonic throughout much of the nineteenth century. Traditionalist American culture so enshrined the social doctrines of True Womanhood that these were often conflated with Protestantism and patriotism alike, so that those who “dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood” were effectively “damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic” (Welter 152).

The unorthodox New Woman's literary emergence is therefore typically understood not in a vacuum, but as a direct reaction against the Victorian Age's hyper-domestic Cult of True Womanhood. The strict polarization between the True and New Womanhoods is reflected in the contemporaneous literature. For example, the clear majority of the "mother-women"—as The Awakening's Edna Pontellier describes maternal-minded Adele Ratignolle—featured in New Woman texts are one-dimensional caricatures of ideal femininity, with few defining characteristics apart from their all-consuming maternal interests; conversely, these same texts proffer far more flattering portrayals of New Woman characters, even minimizing their most egregious faults and transgressions to extol the virtues of self-fulfillment (Chopin 19). For every

3 See Figures 5-17.
New Woman protagonist, there tends to be at least one counterbalancing, True Woman foil—a juxtaposition that these authors employ precisely to underscore the ideological conflict at play.

Of the extensive library of American New Woman texts, this thesis will analyze Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). These narratives boast much in common, including such essential factors as historical period, national origin, plot structure, major themes, and genre. Most consequentially for my purposes, Chopin's and Wharton's novels both incorporate the aforementioned New Woman cultural type and participate in the literary movement of American naturalism. In spite of these profound similarities, I have discovered that much of the critical scholarship examining these texts emphasizes either their relevance to naturalism or their implementation of the New Woman archetype as separate phenomena: scholars do not typically read the New Woman in terms of naturalism (and, in fact, generally view these two concepts as diametrically opposed). In contrast, I argue that the New Woman's liberation on the one hand, and naturalism's interest in the protagonists’ deterministic subjugation on the other hand, are best understood in conjunction. Whereas few existing articles examine the texts' relationship to both issues, I will claim that the New Woman character type and the naturalist movement are inextricably linked.

The literary New Woman highlighted a real-world necessity for the contemporaneous feminist movement by regaling the fictitious narratives of tragic heroines, whose misfortunes culminated in their demises or otherwise wretched fates. For example, in both Chopin's and Wharton's novels, the female protagonists fall prey to a downward-spiral plot structure that culminates in their suicides. How can we explain this pattern of New Woman martyrs’ ultimate

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4 While many scholars debate over the necessary characteristics of American literary naturalism, the primary feature I will emphasize is naturalistic novels' emphasis on deterministic forces—both internal [biological/"nature"] and external [societal/"nurture"]—in shaping the individual's fate.
suppression by death (or a comparably silencing fate, such as the protagonist’s final insanity in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper")? In keeping with literary naturalism, the structural downward-spirals and ultimate deaths of these heroines may be attributed to deterministic forces. Specifically, the biological imperative of motherhood in *The Awakening* and the social construction of domesticity⁵ in *The House of Mirth* are represented as insurmountable obstacles which necessitate Edna Pontellier's and Lily Bart's respective suicides. These inescapable forces—pregnancy as a biological inevitability and the culturally-grounded ideology of domestic motherhood—are the primary factors which signal the heroines' apparent downfalls. It would thus appear that Edna was justified in her observation early in the novel that the "decrees … of Fate" are "immutable" (Chopin 60).

This professed "immutable" notwithstanding, we must remember that Chopin's and Wharton's protagonists are hyper-individualistic New Women. Counter to literary naturalism, participation in New Womanhood is an autonomous choice, a result of each character’s free will and not of fate. As has been discussed, the New Woman defies her prescribed patriarchal roles and expresses general distaste for the domestic lifestyle. Indeed, Chopin's and Wharton's New Women (mis)behave accordingly: Edna commits adultery and spurns her maternal obligations, whereas Lily renounces her pre-domestic status as a high-society bachelorette. In response to each New Woman's stark individualism, the following thesis posits that the protagonists' ostensibly tragic ends should instead be interpreted as decided triumphs over naturalistic maternity and domesticity. For these New Women set adrift in a naturalistic universe, their

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⁵ This thesis will henceforth define the broad concept of 'motherhood' as being comprised of two essential components: maternity (meaning, pregnancy and motherhood as a biological imperative) and domesticity (meaning, the social obligations and expectations ascribed to white, high-society motherhood in fin-de-siècle America). Chopin's *The Awakening* largely explicates the issues of biological maternity, whereas Wharton's *The House of Mirth* primarily challenges domestic norms; however, each novel critiques both facets of motherhood to some extent.
choices to commit suicide constitute the first significant and utterly autonomous decision of their lives. In so choosing, the protagonists finally transcend their naturalistic worldviews to liberate themselves from their patriarchal environments.

Historically, 'female-oriented' novels—meaning, female-authored texts with female protagonists that address female-specific issues like motherhood and domestic convention—have not received due attention in the scholarly discourse surrounding literary naturalism. In past years, the vast majority of scholars expressly barred texts featuring female protagonists from the naturalist movement—Lisa Long cites one such critic who argued for this singularly masculine naturalism as recently as 2004—according to the "traditional gendered premise … that white masculinity is central to the business of literary naturalism" (Long 160). Naturalism's "gendered" connotations have contributed to the genre's popular distinction "as the most hypermasculine in American literary history" (Fleissner, Women, Compulsion, Modernity 6). Such sexism—likely unwitting, but nevertheless potent—has plagued naturalist literary scholarship since the genre's inception.

Despite the longstanding presumption that female characters were exempt from naturalistic perils, a few decades-old sources did, in fact, remark the naturalistic elements of Kate Chopin's The Awakening (1899): one scholar states that "Chopin's book has stood second to only Edith Wharton's House of Mirth as the female-authored text … most nominated as an instance of naturalist fiction" (Fleissner, Women 234). Per Seyersted's 1969 book Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography—widely considered the first scholarly endeavor to interpret The Awakening naturalistically—is a notable example (Pizer, "A Note on Kate Chopin's The Awakening as Naturalistic Fiction" 12). This and other such critical aberrations notwithstanding, twentieth-century scholars who "touched upon the idea" of Chopin's naturalism did so "usually peripherally
or inconclusively” (Pizer, "Note" 12). Moreover—as is the case with Nancy Walker's 1979 article "Feminist or Naturalist: The Social Context of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*”—those sources that did observe naturalistic undercurrents in *The Awakening* disputed the heroine Edna Pontellier's feministic intentions, as if to not wed the "hypermasculine" genre of naturalism with an incompatibly female-oriented worldview.

Despite contemporary scholars' near-consensus concerning Edith Wharton's place in the naturalist canon, her 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*’s reclassification as naturalist (rather than sentimental) fiction is likewise fairly new. In spite of the novel's longtime exclusion from the "typically … hypermasculine" genre, its naturalistic elements are apparent: the protagonist Lily Bart's deterministic victimization by her domestic-minded environment is a glaring indicator of the author's naturalistic influence (*Women* 6). We need look no further than the opening pages for incontrovertible evidence of environmental determinism, where Lily's love interest Selden foresees her fateful end: "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate" (Wharton 10). This and similar passages, among other decisive evidences about Lily's naturalistic condition, prompted Blake Nevius' 1953 statement that the heroine is "as completely and typically the product of her … environment, and the historical moment … as the protagonist of any recognized naturalistic novel" (Nevius 57, qtd. in Pizer, "The Naturalism of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" 241). Notwithstanding this pioneering interpretation, few of Nevius' contemporaries esteemed Wharton's novel the naturalistic masterpiece that it is.

Fortunately, the genre's gendered parameters have finally been challenged in recent years, particularly by Jennifer Fleissner's book *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of"

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6 Walker argues that "There is, in Chopin's novel, no stance about women's liberation or equality," an assertion this thesis will take issue with (103).
In what is arguably a watershed publication for critical treatments of American Naturalism, Jennifer Fleissner asks that naturalism's gender-based criterion be subverted to include female-oriented novels like *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*. Yet more radically, Fleissner contends that female characters—by virtue of their biological susceptibility to pregnancy and limited social autonomy at the hands of patriarchal institutions—are far more vulnerable to naturalistic forces than their male counterparts, and therefore make for more compelling naturalist protagonists. As with naturalist characters in general, both Lily and Edna must succumb to Fate's jurisdiction; as a consequence of their gender, however, their naturalistic doom is uniquely associated with womankind's destiny as mothers, trophy wives, and homemakers. Since the 2004 publication of her book, a number of feminist scholars have reiterated Fleissner's "complain[t] that 'there is little sense of any sort of synthesis of feminist and naturalist-focused approaches' in today's literary criticism" ("The Work of Womanhood in American Naturalism," qtd in Margraf 112). Indeed, half a century after Seyersted's and Nevius' revolutionary readings, finally "it is now common—whether or not the critic employs the terms of naturalistic criticism—to view the work as in the naturalistic camp," even as Long's aforementioned example demonstrates that some dissension remains for interpreting female-focused authors within a naturalist framework (Pizer, "Naturalism" 242).

This thesis will adopt a viewpoint analogous to Fleissner's, albeit with certain substantial modifications. Fleissner perceives "neither the steep arc of decline nor that of triumph" in the plot structures of Chopin's and Wharton's masterpieces, but rather a "stuckness in place" (*Women* 9). In contrast, I propose that each novel concludes with a baffling optimism which, to the casual reader, appears incongruous with the protagonists' self-inflicted deaths. In spite of this ostensible inconsistency, a more in-depth analysis justifies the authors' optimism: according to Chopin and
Wharton, their respective heroine's autonomous choice to commit suicide is in itself a triumph, signifying her ultimate liberation in what is otherwise an oppressively patriarchal and naturalistic society.
Chapter 2: Kate Chopin and New Womanhood: Archival Contexts

Before commencing my in-depth analysis of Chopin’s and Wharton’s novels, I have included the following chapter to further contextualize the social ideology of New Womanhood as well as the authors’ literary contributions to this ideology. Thanks to the wonderful generosity of USM scholarship donors, I was granted the unique opportunity to visit the Newberry Library in Chicago, that I might delve further into Kate Chopin's private papers. The Newberry was a particularly invaluable resource due to the wealth of one-of-a-kind and noncirculating archival materials located there: specifically, the library's special collections boast two handwritten letters and a publicity photograph sent from Kate Chopin to her publisher Herbert S. Stone, as well as a book of caricatural illustrations of New Women dating back to 1897. Furthermore, using the Newberry's far-reaching database, I located another of Chopin's letters at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library in Kansas. I have included these rare materials in the following chapter, along with brief descriptions of each item to explicate how these artifacts might contribute to our understanding of fin-de-siècle authorship and womanhood.

Figure 1

This first image (Fig. 1) is one of the two letters located at the Newberry Library, addressed from Kate Chopin to her publisher Herbert S. Stone. Although the letter is dated "June seventh," we are not provided the year of authorship; nonetheless, from the letter's content we might suppose that it was written shortly after The Awakening's 1899 publication (Chopin, ca. June 1899). For the sake of accessibility—as will become apparent, Chopin's handwriting ranges from somewhat messy to utterly illegible—I have transcribed the letter as follows:

Dear Mr. Stone—
I mailed a photograph this morning before receiving your letter. Will follow it with another today and others as soon as possible. What are the prospects for the book? I enclose a [review?] which you may not have seen, from the Post Dispatch. It seems so able and intelligent—by contrast with some of the drivel I have run across that I thought I should like to have you read it when you have the time.

Very Sincerely,

Kate Chopin

June seventh (Chopin, ca. June 1899)

Both this and the following letter in the Newberry's collection reveal Chopin's growing concern regarding her feminist novel's limited marketability to a patriarchal readership. She articulates this uneasiness with her demure query about the book's "prospects," as well as through her efforts to improve her novel's image by circulating publicity photographs. The author's anxieties were apparently justified: according to Sarah M. Corse's survey of The Awakening's critical reception upon publication, Chopin's novel was "not well received" nor ideologically understood by the "strong majority (61%)" of contemporaneous reviewers, who deemed the novel "morally inappropriate" (139, 142, 146). The novel's initial controversy, while certainly unfortunate for its author, indicates just how progressive Chopin's New Woman heroine was for her historical period.

Like Chopin, Corse too identifies the May 6th review by C. L. Deyo of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch as among the novel's more positive critical receptions (144-147). Interestingly, Deyo also "construct[s] … The nove[l] … as a redemptive tale"—an interpretative strategy which my thesis likewise adopts (and which Corse derides as "quite a stretch")—and it is this very review which the author praises as "so able and intelligent" (Corse 147). Based on this evidence along
with the great balance of my research, I do not consider it such a "stretch" to conjecture that
Chopin herself intended *The Awakening* to be the "redemptive tale" that Deyo describes.

**Figure 2**

Similar in content to the above primary source, the second material (Fig. 2) is a letter
from Kate Chopin to her publisher Herbert S. Stone. Chopin has specified the date of authorship
("May Twenty first; 99") in this slightly earlier document (Chopin, May 1899). The letter's pithy
text is as follows:

Dear Mr. Stone,

I shall have another photograph taken for the critic and send it to you as soon as possible.

Very Sincerely Yours,

Kate Chopin

May Twenty first; 99 (Chopin, May 1899)

Upon first glance, this terse note divulges little about its writer or recipient. Brevity
notwithstanding, we might draw certain conclusions from Chopin's businesslike language: for
instance, that fin-de-siècle authorship was no merely recreational hobby but a commercialized
industry much like today, complete with product marketing (in this case, the publicity
photographs). Furthermore, Chopin's priority that she satisfies "the critic … as soon as possible"
demonstrates that—as counter-culture as her fiction certainly was—the author was not wholly
apathetic to the demands of the marketplace or the opinions of the public.

**Figure 3**
The third archival material (Fig. 3) is not housed in Chicago's Newberry Library, but is instead located at the University of Kansas' Kenneth Spencer Research Library. While again addressed from Kate Chopin to Herbert S. Stone, this letter particularly intrigues me as I have yet to find it mentioned elsewhere in scholarly discourse, despite its highly sensational content. Although the letter is dated October 26th, the year is left unspecified; the archives approximate the letter's year of authorship to circa 1900, or sometime between *The Awakening*'s 1899 publication and Chopin's 1904 death (Chopin, ca. October 1900). With the much-appreciated assistance of a Kenneth Spencer reference librarian, I have extracted the following transcription:

Dear Mr. Stone—

If a man by the name of Christenholm—a lunatic from Philadelphia—who expects soon to be in Chicago—should ask you for my address, pray do not give it to him—or tell him that I have gone to the Klondyke. I have had the most insane letter—the ravings of a maniac who is on his very heart to marry me! after reading *The Awakening*!!

He fills ten pages with assurances that he can make me happy, and intentions of repairing to the lower regions which he calls "hell," in the event of my refusing him.

It makes me quite nervous. The [illegible], loud, Swedish voice of the Ice Man, heard a moment ago down stairs, froze me with terror. I feared the Swede had arrived and affected an entrance.

Very Sincerely Yours,

Kate Chopin

October twenty sixth. (Chopin, ca. October 1900)

This letter's bizarre contents differentiate it from those tamer notes analyzed above. Also of note is Chopin's palpable urgency, indicated through her use of unconventional punctuation: the
succession of appositive phrases demarcated by dashes, underlined words, multiple exclamation marks, and ungrammatical closing period featured in this letter are highly atypical of Chopin's epistolary and novelistic styles. Likewise, we might observe that Chopin's penmanship appears hastier than usual, rendering one word entirely illegible.

Perhaps the greatest applicability of this letter for my research lies in Chopin's utter bewilderment that any man would be "on his very heart to marry [her]! after reading The Awakening!!." The author's statement bears the significant implication that The Awakening is, at its core, an anti-marriage novel—despite that her own marriage to the deceased Oscar Chopin had been, by all accounts, an "ador[ing]" partnership with "unheard of freedom" (Wyatt). Regardless of the ostensible paradox in Chopin's anti-marriage stance, her letter testifies to fin-de-siècle society's marriage "mani[a]": Christenholm's fanatical "assurances that he can make [Chopin] happy" are symptomatic of a patriarchal worldview that constructs marriage as the sole panacea for all unhappiness.

Figure 4

The next image I have attached (Fig. 4) is a publicity photograph of Chopin. As this image was presented alongside the Newberry's two letters, we can approximately date it to circa 1899. The grayscale photograph depicts a modestly-dressed, middle-aged, and even matronly Chopin (Photograph of Kate Chopin). Altogether, the photograph seems highly traditional and not especially remarkable. Although its image was not included in this chapter, the opposite side of the photograph features the author's recognizable signature.

Considering Chopin's anxieties about her novel's critical reception in the preceding letters (Figs. 1, 2), we might feasibly postulate that the author's domestic portrayal is, if not consciously devised, at least unconsciously favorable for her work's marketability. Whether or not this is the
"photograph taken for the critic" of her aforementioned letter (Fig. 2) is unclear. This ambiguity notwithstanding, Chopin's photograph seems especially conservative if we recall that her indecorous protagonist Edna passes her final moments "naked in the open air" (Chopin, The Awakening 301).

Figures 5-17

The remaining images (Figs. 5-17), although retrieved from the Newberry's special collections, are not directly associated with Kate Chopin. Rather, they are a series of illustrations by B. Kay Leach that accompany the text of Herbert E. Brown's 1897 Betsey Jane on the New Woman. An 1897 literature guide succinctly describes the plot of Brown's novella: "A humorous presentation of the 'new woman,' by the author of 'Betsey Jane on wheels.' Betsey Jane Jones and her husband go on a bicycling tour to make observations on the 'new woman': they observe her as physician, lawyer, as a politician, lecturer, etc., and vote her a failure generally" ("Survey of Current Literature" 152). While antithetical to my feminist stance, Brown's unfavorable portrayal of the enterprising New Woman as a "failure generally" is invaluable to my research, in that his commentary reveals the prevailing social attitudes towards "the 'new woman' craze" (Fig. 5) in the late nineteenth century (Brown 63). B. Kay Leach's numerous—for the sake of brevity, I have selected for discussion only the thirteen that I deemed most provocative—caricature drawings which complement Brown's text portray the New Woman in all her stereotyped controversy. Moreover, these illustrations classify the behaviors and aspirations of fin-de-siècle, American women as either acceptable or unacceptable expressions of femaleness; thus, the images will prove a phenomenal asset for understanding how Chopin's and Wharton's New Woman heroines deviate from gendered cultural codes.
Contrary to my expectations (and the above review's dismissal of the New Woman as a "failure generally"), several of these illustrations do not minimize the New Woman's pervasive influence or her threat to hegemonic masculinity. In fact, many of the drawings agonize that New Women are quite liable to endanger the patriarchal powers that be and are poised to displace men in terms of social, intellectual, and occupational dominance. Even the novella's dedication "to 'THE HENPECKED HUSBANDS'" concedes the legitimacy of the New Woman menace (Brown 5). As the illustrations depict, Brown's male characters (and in particular, Betsey Jane's comically unfortunate husband Benjamin) are repeatedly trounced and bested by the New Women they encounter. In one passage (Fig. 6), "the new woman carrie[s] the day" to force an emasculated Sam Gregory to serve himself dinner (Brown 79). Other illustrations (Figs. 11, 12) depict the "deject[ed]" Benjamin being accosted and subsequently detained by female police officers (Brown 167, 171). While Brown's novella in no way glorifies the New Woman—he promotes womankind to such positions of authority not as a message of female empowerment, but as a scare tactic to frighten his male audience with dystopic visions of matriarchal domination—such scenes still ironically subvert fin-de-siècle, patriarchal power dynamics.

Despite Brown's occasional and inadvertent subversion of gender roles, other passages reassign New Women to traditionally male-oriented stations to exhibit their physical, emotional, and psychological inadequacies in 'masculine' contexts. The women's fumbling foray into firefighting (Fig. 7) ends in their frail bodies "all thrown from their feet in an instant"; their attempts at "contorting the [base]ball" (Fig. 8) "ma[ke] a poor out" despite copious "experience in twisting [their] bangs"; their litigation efforts (Figs. 13, 14) culminate in a vicious 'catfight' between the female attorneys; and a venture into medicine (Fig. 15) instigates yet more "hot and
fast" bickering between the woman doctors, even as their patient Benjamin's condition worsens (Brown 115, 129, 177, 185, 201).

Brown yet more vehemently denounces the movements for women's suffrage and political candidacy, effectually declaring all suffragists and women with aspirations for public office "Lunatic[s]" (Fig. 10):

We called at the State Lunatic Asylum … [there] were several women in the woman's ward who had gone off their hooks in the new woman craze … continually expostulating on the beauties and advantages of woman's universal rule. … When they saw Benjamin they made a rush for him … a tall, lank female, with cropped hair and red eyes, threw her long, bony arms around his neck and shrieked at the top of her voice—which was very high toned and exceedingly sharp—"Oh, Charlie! Charlie! You will vote for me, won't you? … I must be elected!" continued the maniac… (Brown 139, 141-142)

The setting of this passage—a mental institution—plainly indicates the author's view that the woman's suffrage movement is utterly deranged, and that its advocates have "gone off their hooks." Brown again hyperbolizes New Womanhood's objectives, inflating early feminists' aim for basic gender equality into a scheme for "woman's universal rule." Moreover, narrator Betsey Jane's characterization of the "tall, lank female with cropped hair and red eyes" reduces the woman described to a subhuman, feral creature. Although (hopefully) alarming to contemporary readers, Brown's treatment of this so-called "maniac" was not unprecedented: in fact, New Woman author Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" addresses this very narrative of progressive females' 'hysteria' which Brown here perpetuates.

The remaining illustrations (Figs. 9, 16, 17) crown husband Benjamin the author's patriarchal champion, who successfully banishes the New Woman menace in the chapter titled
"Our Safe Retreat" (Brown 134, 245, 269). We may remark the tenets of True Womanhood subtly embedded in Benjamin's dialogue: he is not merely expelling his feminist rivals for personal advantage, but for the benefit of all "society" that has been "defaced," all "men" whose "chance[s]" have been pilfered, all "house[s]" that all have been desecrated by the New Woman's "impudent" existence. Crucially, the eponymous narrator Betsey Jane cannot feasibly be the novella's ultimate savior, owing to her own femaleness. As the following thesis will reveal, this is precisely the sort of literary misogyny which New Woman authors contravened in their pioneering fiction.
Dear Mr. Stone,

I enclose a photograph of the mine before receiving your letter. I will follow it with another looking and others as soon as possible.

What are the prospects for the work? I have a note which I may not have been from the first dispute. It seems to me and

[Signature]

Kate Chopin

Figure 1. Chopin, Kate. Letter to Herbert S. Stone. Ca. 7 June 1899.
3317 Wilson St.
St. Louis

dear Mr. Stone,

I shall have another photograph taken for the critic and send it to you as soon as possible.

Very sincerely yours,

Kate Chopin

May Twenty-first, 1899

Figure 2. Chopin, Kate. Letter to Herbert S. Stone. 21 May 1899.
Figure 3. Chopin Kate. Letter to Herbert S. Stone. Ca. 26 October 1900.
Figure 4. Photograph of Kate Chopin. Ca. 1899.
Figure 5. Brown, Herbert E. Betsey Jane on the New Woman. Illustrated by B. Kay Leach. Page 63.

I saw at once that she had been led astray by the “new woman” craze.
—Page 60.
But the new woman carried the day and Sam Gregory had to get the dinner.—Page 82.
Figures 7 (above, page 115) and 8 (below, page 129).
“Get up and get out of here, you impudent thing; you have defaced society long enough.” — Page 134.

Figure 9, page 134.
“Oh, Charlie! Charlie! You will vote for me, won't you?” — Page 141.

Figure 10, page 139.
This woman had a firm grip on Benjamin’s coat collar, and was flourishing a huge billy.—Page 165.

**Figure 11,** page 167.
He was a perfect picture of dejection and despair.—Page 170

Figure 12, page 171.
Figures 13 (above, page 177) and 14 (below, page 185).
Words passed hot and fast between the doctors.—Page 203.
“Come down off your perch and give the men a chance.” — Page 244.
"I don't intend to have any more darn nonsense in my house." —
Page 267.

Figure 17, page 269.
Chapter 2: Pregnancy and Maternity as Biological Naturalism in *The Awakening*

**Procreative Sexuality as a Naturalist Problem**

Perhaps the subtlest—and yet, in some regards, the most inevitable—naturalistic threat that these texts confront is the problem of biological maternity. Chopin's novel proffers what is clearly the more extreme and recurrent denunciation of biological motherhood as a naturalistic force in of itself, in contrast to Wharton's oft-narrowed focus on the social construct of domesticity. This is not to suggest that biological motherhood and domestic culture do not overlap in both novels—they most certainly do, as this chapter will soon reveal—but Chopin's critique of domestic culture crucially hinges upon her distaste for motherhood as a biologically deterministic phenomenon.

Maternity represents an internal rather than societal deterministic agent. If unaided by modern contraception, the heterotypical woman's pursuit of sexual fulfillment will almost inevitably result in her pregnancy. The burden of motherhood was made heavier by this awareness that pregnancy might directly result from the 'liberated' woman's quest for sexual freedom: the one power women leveraged over men seemingly betrayed them. In her collection of critical essays entitled *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form*, Lee R. Edwards explicates this paradox of sexual 'freedom': "the consequences of enacted sexuality are predictable: children. But although indulged sexuality produces children, children inhibit, even destroy, sexuality. … Furthermore, as long as the family is regarded as a necessarily patriarchal institution, children's need for family protection contradicts their mothers' need for self-expression" (113). Because New Woman authors rejected women's prescribed roles in favor of such individualistic "self-expression," they generally viewed motherhood and its obligations as subsuming their identities. Indeed, as Christine Stansell observes in her book *American
Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century, among New Women there was a "rarely articulated but implicit understanding that motherhood all but disqualified most women from an active role in the drama of New Womanhood" (260). According to this common "understanding" held by New Women, maternity and individualistic self-actualization were mutually exclusive experiences.

Chopin likewise echoes this "understanding" of children as parasitic creatures who "contradic[t] their mothers' need for self-expression." In passages that nearly amount to heresy according to the period's domestic doctrines, the protagonist Edna Pontellier twice calls her children "antagonists" (Chopin 138, 300). Chopin thus positions Edna's offspring as the human embodiment of the villainous, patriarchal constructs she struggles against. Also notable is the fact that both children are boys, an authorial choice that dramatically genders these "antagonists who had overcome [Edna]; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (Chopin 300). Chopin's diction evokes a gendered hierarchy ("overcome," "overpowered," "drag," "slavery") and in so doing reminds the audience that Raoul and Etienne assert dominance over Edna not only by virtue of their mother-children relationship but also through the privilege of their maleness. We are prompted to imagine that—as they will benefit from their masculinity "for the rest of [their] days"—Edna's sons will eventually "drag [their future wives] into the soul's slavery" as well.

Chopin does not intend the word "slavery" to come across as hyperbolic in the aforementioned quote: she does indeed characterize the maternal role as a "slavery," one in which every domain of woman's life is presided over by omnipresent, prepubescent overlords. Even a woman's sexual pursuits are considered in light of her children's welfare. Edna's extramarital affairs are represented as particularly objectionable not due to her infidelity toward
her husband Léonce, but rather because these indiscretions signify her evasion of motherly duties. Just pages before her fatal suicide by drowning, Edna reveals a fleeting compunction for her affairs, but this guilt is not directed towards her husband: "To-day it is Arobin [Edna's lover]; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Léonce Pontellier—but Raoul and Etienne!" (Chopin 299). Edna's remorse suggests that her sons, and not merely her husband, are liable to suffer from her romantic and sexual indiscretions. By suggesting that a wife's transgression against her husband also injures her children, Chopin illustrates the inextricable relationship between the roles of mother and wife in her concurrent society. Moreover, Edna's concern for Raoul and Etienne's welfare over that of her husband—whose happiness Edna comments "doesn't matter"—indicates the privileged and even idolized position that children occupy in domestic culture.

Despite Edna's frequently and emphatically negative characterizations of her children, other passages from the novel complicate this usually-transparent contempt for her maternal duties. In place of this contempt, Edna alternatively espouses affection towards her children at various times, albeit these confessions demonstrate an "uneven, impulsive … fond[ness]" that readers would be remiss to interpret as sincere, motherly love (Chopin 47). Edna reluctantly betrays that the "fondness" she sporadically feels for Raoul and Etienne is not evidence of unconditional love but rather of her shame that she does not satisfy the maternal ideal. As will be expounded later in this essay, Wharton's protagonist likewise manifests a spasmodic endearment towards children. This intertextual motif suggests that such contradictory attitudes are not specific to Chopin's heroine but are instead a common reaction to the patriarchy's conceptualization of childlessness as shame. In her chapter on the New Woman, Lois Rudnick

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7 See Figure 3 for a note on The Awakening as an anti-marriage text.
contemplates how the pressures of domestic culture often compromised the New Woman's otherwise straightforward rejection of motherhood: "in reality … she [the New Woman] was a much more conflicted figure. … the conflict between the ideal and the reality was related to Victorian conventions that were not easily let go of" (73). Edna's "conflict" due to her betrayal of these "Victorian conventions" is readily apparent: at first, Edna is unable to "admit … even to herself" that her sons' one-time absence "seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (Chopin 48). Edna inwardly denies her aversion to children because this "admi[ssion]" would demonstrate that not all women are "fitted" with maternal instincts, a treasonous, anti-patriarchal proclamation that Edna is not yet prepared to make. She does however associate childlessness with "free[dom]" and paints motherhood as a "Fate" that so many women have "blindly" wandered into.

Chopin portrays childbirth as a holistically grueling process, the brutality of which is captured in a passage that details domestic Adele Ratignolle's labor. Edna expresses terror in response to what most would consider a heartwarming moment, the birth of her friend's child: "With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene [of] torture" (Chopin 228). Chopin's capitalization of "Nature" crucially mirrors her similar treatment of the word "Fate" at various points throughout the novel (15, 48, 60, 271). By designating these words as proper nouns, Chopin identifies Nature/Fate—two aliases which refer to the same abstract entity—as an active agent that consciously disenfranchises women; it is because of this implied agency that Edna may feasibly blame Nature, as if "Nature" were a person, for women's subjugation and subsequently "revolt against" its hegemony. Edna's conviction that pregnancy is necessarily a snare laid by Nature/Fate leads to the extreme implication that procreation is never an informed and autonomous decision. As
such, this reveals her complete dismissal of womankind's potential for maternal happiness. From this perspective, Adele's contentment in the domestic sphere is then either a façade or a symptom of her indoctrination—and the latter explanation is certainly more convincing. Her sense of self has become so eroded and so tethered to her "mother-woman" label that she "idolize[s]… her precious brood," viewing her children as extensions and realizations of her own insufficient identity (Chopin 19).

Adele's contented (and arguably, borderline obsessive) motherhood is strikingly juxtaposed with Edna's ambivalence. Unlike Adele, Edna is thoroughly exasperated by her society's expectation that she forfeit her ambitions and identity for her sons' benefit. Edna proclaims that she "[doesn't] want anything but [her] own way," a phrase readers would likely attribute to a self-absorbed child rather than a grown woman (Chopin 292). Perhaps Edna asserts her wish for self-autonomy in this infantile manner because she too received preferential treatment as a middle-class child before reaching a marriageable age and has associated such tantrums with the fulfillment of her childlike whims. However, this momentary identification with her distant childhood prompts her empathetic reflection that "still, [she] shouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (Chopin 293). Edna's contradictory attitudes induce her to a tactic of remote separation from her children. She moves into what she affectionately terms the "pigeon-house," a severance which symbolizes her renunciation of maternal duties. Nonetheless, motherhood proves a virtually inescapable fate when the children immediately try to commandeer the new space as their own: "Was there any place to play? Were there any boys next door? … Where would they sleep, and where would papa sleep?" (Chopin 247). Edna quickly apprehends that her intentions to live independently from her husband and children are

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8 In fact, this essay will soon examine Edna's complete transfiguration into a symbolic child, an event which takes place in the novel's concluding passage.
wildly unrealistic. Her realization of this truth is made clear by her fanciful, defeated response:
"She told them the fairies would fix it all right" (Chopin 247). Despite her most determined efforts, there appears to be no practicable means by which Edna may circumvent the problem of motherhood—or, more accurately, none that do not necessitate her physical death.

Chopin also conceptualizes maternity as the naturalistic consequence of female sexuality through the dialogue between Edna and Doctor Mandelet. Dr. Mandelet's scientific background designates him as the novel's voice of reason, as Erik Margraf notes in his article: "The man of science is an important literary device of naturalism, and in The Awakening Dr. Mandelet accordingly serves the usual function of guiding the reader's understanding of the story" (111). As such, his dialogue with Edna is crucial to our understanding of the novel's major themes. In one passage, Dr. Mandelet ponders womankind's quest for a liberated sexuality, and the irony that this quest might be derailed by an unsought pregnancy: "'The trouble is,' sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, 'that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost'" (Chopin 291-292). This quote identifies the "illusions … of youth"—meaning, females' sexual and romantic fantasies—as a naturalistic "decoy" that "Nature [Fate]" has prepared "to secure mothers for the race." Unlike Dr. Mandelet, however, Chopin's perspective differs from his in that she views sexual expression as a potential source of empowerment, at least in hypothetically ideal circumstances. In direct contrast, the male Dr. Mandelet perceives no benefit whatsoever for women who harbor the "illusions" of sexuality. His sex-negative stance may be read as symptomatic of his masculinity, suggesting that even the most enlightened males

9 See Figure 15 for an alternative portrayal, of the female doctor as a ‘voice of unreason.’
of the late nineteenth century contributed to what Rudnick calls "the general denial of white female sexuality" (69).

Nevertheless, Chopin identifies Dr. Mandelet as Edna's foremost male ally. For instance, his empathy for womankind's plight is revealed when he "grasp[s] her meaning [Edna's dissatisfaction with motherhood] intuitively." He is also evidently aware of the pitfalls of the prevailing domestic ideology. Dr. Mandelet recognizes the "arbitrar[iness]" of the "conditions which [society] [has] create[d]," as well as the dilemmas that these "conditions" impose on an individual, ethical level: "[women] feel obligated to maintain" this image of domestic respectability "at any cost." According to Dr. Mandelet's (and Chopin's) estimation, Edna's efforts to escape the constraints of motherhood are futile as a matter of course. Nature, Fate, and nineteenth-century society predetermined Edna's—and all resistant women's—failure long before her awakening began. Our heroine's eventual realization of this awful truth is what ultimately impels her to attain complete autonomy by the one viable course: her bodily demise.

The following sections will analyze the novel's two predominant metaphors that are associated with motherhood and sexuality—manifested through the multi-faceted symbolic vehicles of the Gulf of Mexico and a birdcage—to contextualize why Edna's suicide is, paradoxically enough, a triumph.

*Sexuality, Rebirth, and Death in Chopin's Gulf of Mexico*

It is in her revolt against her predetermined societal role that Edna relinquishes her body to the Gulf of Mexico. Correspondingly, I argue that Edna’s suicide by drowning is deliberate. I make this claim due to the ample foreshadowing in the novel’s fledgling chapters. Moreover, the vehicle for our heroine’s demise, the Gulf itself, is symbolic due to the association it draws
between sexuality and death throughout the novel. Chopin divulges the Gulf’s sexual symbolism early in the novel, when Edna experiences her first pangs of sexual curiosity: “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring” (34). Chopin recycles this sentence in the novel’s denouement, although now the sea’s “seductive” proposition is of a fatal rather than sexual nature, “inviting the soul to wander in the abysses of solitude” (300). The author co-opts this early passage about carnal desire for a more ominous application to demonstrate the intimate relationship between sexuality and mortality in her novel. Sandra M. Gilbert too remarks the twin elements of sexuality and death in Chopin’s Gulf, where Edna is "first 'born'" in the "shape [of] … the powerful goddess of love" Aphrodite, "in whose image she [is] suicidally borne back into the sea at the novel's end" (44). The sea’s sexual and mortal imageries plausibly canvas the patriarchal woman’s patterned transformation from coy girlhood to spiritual-sexual disillusionment; more importantly for my purposes, however, this symbolic duo proffers death as the sole, alternative destiny for the sexually liberated female apart from motherhood. The sea metaphor frames death as a triumphant method to circumvent traditional motherhood and therefore death becomes a means to achieve non-procreative sexual freedom.

The sexual association is reinforced not merely through the Gulf's characterization as a “seductive” force but also through the swimming motif. Gilbert observes the overt sexual and psychospiritual symbolisms of Edna's favorite pastime: "Edna's education in swimming is, of course, obviously symbolic … swimming immerses Edna in an other element—an element, indeed, of otherness—in whose baptismal embrace she is mystically and mythically revitalized, renewed, reborn" (51-52). Chopin maneuvers Edna’s exercises in swimming—an activity which signifies Edna's "baptismal embrace" by "an other"—to represent the equally physical act of intercourse. One passage describing Edna's swimming reads: “A feeling of exultation overtook
her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body … She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (70-71). Edna’s new mastery over “the working of her body” does symbolically transgress the limits of acceptable “woman[hood],” considering that wives were all but regarded as the literal property of their husbands at this time. Crucially, Chopin’s acknowledgement that Edna’s paramour Robert chiefly oversees her progress (he “had pursued a system of [swimming] lessons almost daily”) indicates the symbolic sensuality of this physical activity (69). Given the association Chopin establishes between swimming and Edna's sexual relations with Robert, it comes as no surprise that, in Robert’s absence, Edna clings to swimming as “a diversion which afforded her the only real pleasurable moments she knew” (117). Regardless of whether readers are to read Edna’s self-gratification as masturbation—an interpretation that seems potentially farfetched—it is undeniable that in his absence she endeavors to singlehandedly recreate the physical "pleas[ur]es]" that Robert had previously provided her. If we do grant Chopin’s sexualization of swimming in the novel, we must additionally acknowledge that in swimming Edna happily succumbs not only to the tangible waters but also to the sexual self-actualization that the Gulf symbolizes. Children however haunt these scenes that imbue the sea with sexual meaning, as though to remind Edna that Fate could easily appropriate her sexual awakening “to secure mothers for the race” via unwanted pregnancy. Chopin maintains that even amidst “the seductive odor of the sea,” “Children… [gather] for their games under the oaks” with “high and penetrating… voices” (30). The author thus characterizes the chorus of infantile voices as a

10 See Figure 8 for a caricature of New Women engaged in sports.
11 “Throughout history wives have been the property of their husbands. Only in the past two centuries has this institution broken down in the world's most developed regions. In America and England, the doctrine of coverture restricted women's choices in virtually every aspect of their lives until the beginning of the 20th century” (Geddes and Lueck 1079).
reminder of the unending obligations of motherhood, a nagging reality which "penetrate[s]" and
decimates Edna's sexual fantasies.

Meanwhile, the sea is suffused with yet more symbolic significance, reconfigured as a
womb in which the embryonic heroine herself finds refuge. During her first sojourn at Grand
Isle, Edna is portrayed as still in the fetal stage of her awakening, her "body … enfold[ed] … in
[the Gulf's] soft, close embrace"; therefore, her final immersion in the sea at the novel's end
marks the conclusion of her metaphorical gestation and she emerges as a "new-born creature,
opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (Chopin 34, 301). In contrast to
other literary infantilizations which denote characters' psychological regressions, Edna's self-
delivery at the novel's close is a spiritual and sexual triumph: she is reborn with an enlightened
perspective on the "familiar world" of domesticity that she has so long inhabited. Herself but a
"new-born" who is certainly incapable of nurturing Etienne and Raoul, she is relieved of all
maternal duties to become a true individual. Following this embryonic imagery, our heroine is
transported to her fondest childhood memories, such as that "of the blue-grass meadow that she
had traversed when a little child," in yet another declaration of Edna's newfound sense of
identity—after all, who demonstrates unapologetic individuality if not children (Chopin 302)?
Sexual intercourse thus becomes not a means to procreate but also to, in essence, create oneself.
This scene presents an idealistic, self-sustaining maternal dynamic that radically deviates from
the novel's abounding representations of the child as parasite. John Glendening likewise reads
Edna's immersion and infantilization as triumphant: "she constructs death as a return to her
origins, to her mother embodied in the embrace of the sea. This consummation is possible
because death, in the form of suicide, is the final evasion, one that cannot be challenged. She

12 See Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper."
enters the water naked, a reversion to the environment of the womb" (69). Although this reimagining of self-motherhood is merely hypothetical and hardly represents a practicable solution to the maternal issue within a real-world context, Edna nonetheless reclaims motherhood as a profoundly sensual and autonomous experience on an individual—if not universal—level.

Chopin's sea is, however, a multi-purpose symbolic vehicle. In addition to its significance as an image of sexual fulfillment and self-generative motherhood, the Gulf is also endowed with an ostensibly darker meaning. In addition to sexuality, Edna associates the sea with death as well, thereby suggesting a corollary relationship between sexuality and death. While these concepts make for an unlikely symbolic duo, Edna's intuitive recognition of the sexuality-death link is revealed early in the novel by the "certain ungovernable dread" that "[hangs] about [Edna] when in the water" before her psychological transformation (Chopin 70). Accordingly, our heroine initially refuses to learn to swim, an intractability we may read as her unconscious awareness of promiscuity's perilous (and even mortal) consequences. Despite her early reluctance, Edna's first marginally successful attempt at swimming so "intoxicate[s]" her with "newly conquered power" that she impetuously "sw[ims] out alone" and nearly drowns (Chopin 71). The underlying significance of Edna's impulsive behavior becomes apparent if we consider the episode through a sexual lens, a reading that is substantiated by sensual diction like "intoxicated." This first swim symbolizes our heroine's surrender of her psychological virginity, as her hitherto sexual encounters with her husband were physical but not emotional transactions. Arguably, it is not until this passage—when the protagonist realizes all "'of the time [she] ha[s] lost splashing around like a baby'"—that Edna develops into a spiritually and sexually mature woman (Chopin 71). She therefore "conquer[s]" the "power" of female sexuality, but
unfortunately wields this "new" faculty in an imprudent manner due to her inexperience and endangers her life. We see this sexual-mortal omen reenacted in Edna's reckless affair with Robert. Crucially, the same passage about Edna's first swim not only foreshadows her sexual exploits but also her physical death:

… the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome. A quick vision of death smote her soul, and … appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land. She made no mention of her encounter with death and her flash of terror, except to say to her husband, "I thought I should have perished out there alone." (Chopin 72)

This passage of self-discovery is haunted by "A quick vision of death" which reveals Edna's awareness of her own mortality. Admittedly, the episode is distinguished by a profoundly negative tone which, upon first glance, appears to undermine my argument that Edna's later suicide is a triumphant event rather than a "flash of terror." However, this early passage's artful use of gendered language demonstrates that this fledgling Edna is as of yet ill-equipped to envision a future independent of her proprietorial husband. At this stage in her character arc, Edna still fundamentally depends upon Léonce for her salvation: she distrusts "her unaided strength" to convey her to the safety of the shore, and immediately divulges her anxieties that she might "have perished out there alone" to the man crucially identified only as "her husband." The words "unaided" and "alone" betray Edna's societally-induced helplessness when isolated from her masculine protector. Léonce assures Edna she was in no genuine danger because he "was

13 This apparent 'hole' in my argument proves difficult to navigate: none of the few, likeminded scholarly interpretations I located—likeminded, in that they concurred that Edna's suicide by drowning signals her triumph—attempted to reconcile their arguments with this problematic passage.

14 See Figure 17 for a concurrent illustration of the 'masculine champion/knight in shining armor' convention.
watching [her]" throughout her experiment, and our heroine's subsequent embarrassment reveals that she credits her safe return more to her husband than to her own successful "effort [to] rall[y] her staggering faculties" (Chopin 72). At this moment in her psychosexual development, Edna has not yet awakened to the injustices of her patriarchal marriage and cannot conceive of a self-liberated future, much less of the possibility that this liberation may only be attainable through her bodily demise. In short, I uniquely explain the protagonist's shifting views toward drowning—what she initially regards an "appall[ing] and enfeebl[ing]" incident becomes a voluntary and empowering action by the novel's close—in terms of her psychological 'awakening' to gender inequities. Edna's positive conceptualization of death as sexual freedom cannot occur until she is conscious of the domestic fetters which render drowning an appealing alternative to her limited existence.

Avian Imagery and the Cage of Motherhood

If Chopin's Gulf metaphor was not sufficient proof that Edna purposefully drowns herself to escape deterministic motherhood, the author incorporates yet another enigmatic image of death that complements that of the sea, just pages before Edna's suicide: "A bird with a broken wing … beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (301). When removed from its ensconcing plot context, this isolated sentence becomes one of superficial foreboding. However, juxtaposing this scene alongside the text's ample images of birds facilitates a far more optimistic (and relevant) reading. The novel actually begins with a very different, yet still avian, symbol: "A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the [Lebruns' cottage] door, kept repeating over and over: 'Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en!"

15 See Figure 3 for a note on The Awakening as an anti-marriage text.
Sapristi!" (Chopin 1). We may therefore hazard the claim that the novel symbolically charts the bird's—Edna's—progression from its initial "cage" to a final free flight in the "air." The former bird's designation as a parrot—an exotic species domesticated for its popularity and fashionableness—and its rallying cry for freedom—a French phrase which may be roughly translated as "Get away, for God's sake!"—further buttresses that bird's symbolic portrayal of domestic entrapment. Glendening's article corroborates my interpretation of the caged parrot: "[Chopin's novel] connects … captive birds to humans caught in social cages that restrict individual choice" (51). Through this scheme of imagery, then, Chopin’s birds become symbolic cues for Edna's evolution: as the bird imagery progresses from scenes of bondage to those of liberation, so too does our protagonist experience this transformation. Admittedly, the final bird's flight is constrained and culminates in the downward-spiraling plunge. Nonetheless, although this latter bird is "disabled" by its "broken wing" and faces certain death, it fares better than its predecessors in that it had at least the opportunity for flight. Its descent, of course, blatantly foreshadows Edna's suicide in the next few pages, if we are to read her "broken wing" as her female anatomy and domestic environment. Chopin maintains that, despite this image's seeming tragedy, such an end is still preferable to a life squandered in the cage of motherhood.

*Edna's Triumphant Suicide and Self-Actualization*

When read in the interpretative contexts offered above, Edna's final immersion in the Gulf is made triumphant, and so casts her earlier and less successful venture in dramatic relief. From this perspective, she brazenly conquers her aforementioned fear of drowning and of death itself: "She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on … She
looked into the distance, and the old terror flared up for an instant, and sank again" (Chopin 302-303). Chopin here demonstrates the conflict between the interests of Edna's body and mind. We may read her "old terror" which "flared up for an instant" as a symptom of her survival instinct, her body's mechanical recoil from its impending, self-inflicted destruction. This transient hesitation notwithstanding, Edna's mind finally subdues her body's mutiny by a conscious effort, that she may carry out her suicide ("She did not look back now, but went on and on").

Aside from this short-lived "instant" of instinctive "terror," Edna's emotional state in the moments leading up to her death is bizarrely euphoric: despite her impending demise, our heroine perceives the sea as not menacing but "inviting," a beautiful spectacle "gleaming with the million lights of the sun" (Chopin 300). Edna's exultation reaches a climax when she removes her bathing suit, with only the billowy waves for company:

Edna had found her old bathing suit still hanging, faded, upon its accustomed peg. … But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! (Chopin 301)

This scene serves as incontrovertible evidence that Edna's suicide signifies her triumph over both her own body and societal expectations. The diction Chopin employs to describe Edna's bathing suit reveals its symbolic import: the "old … faded … pricking garments" represent the "unpleasant" yet "accustomed" burden of domestic politesse, even in as non-human an environment as the open ocean. It is also worth mentioning that today's bikinis are far more revealing than those multilayered contraptions of the late nineteenth century. Deidre Clemente references a 1937 issue of *Life* magazine that featured beachside photographs from 1921, in
which "The women … wore long-sleeved shirts and knee-length bloomers … [with] Black stockings" as swimming gear (130). The many components and limited mobility of nineteenth-century bathing suits make Edna's sudden disrobing all the more significant. In renouncing her bathing suit (a constrictive garment representative of constrictive fin-de-siècle conventions), Edna finally and audaciously proclaims the anti-domestic sentiments she has privately harbored for much of the novel. The momentousness of this shift is signaled first by Chopin's language, particularly by her phrase "for the first time in [Edna's] life." Chopin then engages with animalistic imagery, positioning her protagonist "naked in the open air" and utterly exposed to the elements, and it appears that Edna herself is vaguely conscious of a "strange and awful" and "delicious" viscerality in her nakedness. Exonerated from the confines of domestic propriety, Edna "for the first time" senses a primal connection to the body which—due to its constant susceptibility to unsought pregnancies—she had hitherto regarded a terrible adversary. Edna's newly-positive conceptualization of her body, as an extension of her psychological identity rather than a tragic, biological vulnerability, indicates the self-actualization she attains in the moments preceding her death—and therefore renders her demise a decided victory.

We have thus concluded that Edna's death is not some meaningless tragedy, but instead powerfully asserts her claim to her body and defiance of societal and biological naturalistic forces. Nor is our heroine's suicide a subliminal or involuntary reaction to her circumstances (as is repeatedly implied by Walker's essay cited previously), but is rather a conscious rebellion against her maternal fate, with "Fate" embodied in the unassuming forms of her children. In a passage already referenced at the beginning of this chapter, Edna explicitly conceptualizes her suicide as deliverance from her children's hegemony: "The children … sought to drag her into

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16 See Figure 4.
the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way [suicide] to elude them" (Chopin 300). Suicide is a conscious decision Edna makes as a means of liberation, "a way … she knew … to elude" her children's demands. The word "knew" here insinuates Edna's cognitive awareness of what she is doing. Edna's intentionality is further reflected in her proclamation that "she would never sacrifice herself for her children" even as she prepares to kill herself: for our heroine, the spiritual-psychological death of maternal entrapment is a "sacrifice" far greater than physical death. In the words of Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Edna's final act of destruction … is her answer to the inadequacies of life … If life cannot offer fulfillment of her dream of fusion, then the ecstasy of death is preferable to the relinquishing of that dream" (471). Clearly, Edna's suicide is not the devastating loss it is too often misconstrued as, but instead a glittering triumph of female individualism.
Chapter 3: Domestic Culture as Social Naturalism in *The House of Mirth*

In contrast to Kate Chopin's transparent repulsion for the biological imperative of motherhood, Edith Wharton presents a more ambivalent and less pronounced rejection of maternity itself. *The House of Mirth* divulges the patterned life of the fin-de-siècle, high-society bachelorette, and therefore offers few explicit references to the problems of pregnancy and maternity. Nevertheless, both Wharton and her protagonist Lily acknowledge that Lily's superficial and glamorous lifestyle is engineered expressly to attract a husband, with the ultimate, implicit goal of motherhood. In order that she might continue enjoying her luxurious lifestyle, the once-liberated bachelorette must inevitably succumb to the drudgery and bondage of domestic culture. If we grant that Chopin's biological motherhood (maternity) is an internally-focused naturalistic device, then Wharton's social motherhood (domesticity) is its externally-driven deterministic counterpart. Subsequently, if Lily's bachelorette identity is a mere precursor to her eventual motherhood and wifehood, we may then interpret her obsessive fear of the future to come—particularly evidenced by her repugnance towards the abstract threats of age and "dinginess"—as a revolt against her domestic fate. Furthermore, Lily's prospective future as wife and mother is established not only through implicit references; Wharton's novel does, on occasion, also provide explicit examples of domesticity. In these instances, the author articulates her view—an argument similar to that which we previously encountered in Chopin's work—that motherhood necessarily subsumes woman's identity.

To illustrate that Wharton’s novel represents fin-de-siècle domestic culture as the socially deterministic counterpart to biological maternity, I will first demonstrate how fashionable bachelorettes' financial reliance on the 'marriage market' might be read as a naturalistic
phenomenon. I will then grapple with Wharton's enigmatic and seemingly contradictory portrayals of the motherhood experience—which alternatively view motherhood as a utopian, maternal idyll or a despotic, domestic obligation—before submitting that heroine Lily commits suicide precisely to emancipate herself from the unappealing, domestic life which awaits her.

**Naturalism in the Fin-de-Siècle Marriage Market**

The novel tracks its protagonist's struggle to reconcile her uniquely privileged lifestyle with patriarchal expectations. Wharton therefore interrogates the financial obstacles to female independence, a capitalistic and pragmatic concern largely absent from Chopin's novel. According to Wharton, fin-de-siècle society renders futile the single woman's efforts to live comfortably without a male champion. While he incorporates a Marxist critical framework and so does not phrase Lily's death in naturalistic terms, Patrick Mullen contends that Lily's eventual demise is a direct "consequen[ce]" of her financial shortcomings: "Lily is not able to manage the [economic] forces in her life, and consequently she dies" (56). Money—or rather, Lily's lack thereof—thus represents to our protagonist a compulsory incentive for marriage and domestication.

Lily's pecuniary anxieties primarily emerge in her disgust for what she terms "dinginess," a pejorative word she employs to indicate poverty (at least, what Lily Bart might consider 'poverty,' relative to her elite position). The heroine's own mother is an illustration of the power of dinginess to overwhelm a once-vibrant woman: "Mrs. Bart had died—died of a deep disgust. She had hated dinginess, and it was her fate to be dingy ... and her last adjuration to her daughter was to escape dinginess if she could" (Wharton 55). The incident of her mother's death educates

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17 See Figures 7, 11, 13, and 15 for caricatures of New Women pioneering male-dominated careers.
young Lily that fashionable women of modest means might only "escape" their dingy "fate[s]" through advantageous marriages. As in *The Awakening*, Wharton's novel attributes the social need to become a wife and mother to that amorphous entity Fate, who robs female characters of their agency and happiness. What these novels symbolically attribute to "fate" we readers may recognize are the consequences of a patriarchal social superstructure. That the protagonist's mother struggled financially much as Lily does suggests the universality of their lot: all women are "fate[d]" for economic ruin if not championed by wealthy men. Lily's worsening fear of the encroaching dinginess as the storyline progresses is actually consternation regarding Fate's sovereignty in her life; she is convinced that she must lead a domestic existence—consumed with the expectations of mother- and wifehood—if she is not to be overwhelmed by poverty. The novel therefore presents two alternative strategies for such fin-de-siècle women: to marry 'well' and enter the domestic milieu, or to succumb to a penniless, "dingy" existence and ultimate death. Of course, Lily does not consider the latter a viable choice in the novel's early pages: "a girl must [marry for money] … Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership!" (Wharton 17-18). The protagonist's matter-of-fact dialogue (evidenced by "must" and "have to") reveals that—despite her uncanny awareness of womankind's wretched condition—Lily cannot initially fathom any alternatives to her circumscribed modus operandi as "pretty and well-dressed" bachelorette well due for "partnership." She certainly does not foresee her ultimate choice to indeed "drop" dead rather than abide by this "expected" lifestyle.

Lily perpetually oscillates between different perspectives on marriage, viewing it as either her salvation or the final surrender of what limited autonomy she possesses. As with Edna Pontellier, "the vacillating, terminally indecisive behavior of Edith Wharton's Lily Bart" has been
the subject of extensive critical speculation\(^1\) (Fleissner, *Women* 9). My own interpretation of Lily's "terminally indecisive behavior" is as follows: in spite of her continual quest for a husband who might provide financial stability—and the off-and-on appeal of such a financial 'windfall'—our contradictory heroine is aware that marriage proffers no true "escape." Lily deplores her prospective, domestic future as she trudges through her homemaking aunt Mrs. Peniston's mansion: "The house, in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order, was as dreary as a tomb, and as Lily, turning from her brief repast between shrouded sideboards, wandered into the newly-uncovered glare of the drawing-room she felt as though she were buried alive in the stifling limits of Mrs. Peniston's existence" (Wharton 160). This passage characterizes the "stifling" and "limit[ing]" domestic experience as a form of death, in which homes are transformed into "shrouded … tomb[s]" where housewives are "buried alive." Lily thereby insinuates that marriage, itself fatal to women's identity, offers housewives little salvation from even mortally 'dingy' conditions. Accordingly, Mrs. Peniston is herself a mere caricature of domestic womanhood not unlike Adele Ratignolle of *The Awakening*, bereft of any substantive individuality: "Mrs. Peniston was one of the episodical persons who form the padding of life" (Wharton 57). The character of Mrs. Peniston presents a dreary image of what little opportunity awaits the domestic woman: an unexemplary and fated "existence" that can hardly be called a "life" whatsoever.

Her early twentieth-century society would have esteemed the twenty-nine-year-old, bachelorette Lily Bart as having exhausted the limits of her singlehood, soon to be an unmarriageable spinster. Kay Heath reports, "the marriage market … relegated single women

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\(^1\) As has been mentioned in the introduction, Fleissner interprets New Woman heroines' "vacillating, terminally indecisive behavior" as evidence of their "stuckness in place," without definitively positive or negative outcomes. As such, Fleissner's interpretation insinuates that Edna Pontellier's and Lily Bart's deaths are neutral events in their unique plot contexts; she does not grant that their suicides signify their ultimate triumphs, as I contend in this thesis.
into the category of spinsterhood at age thirty" (30). Thus, as her fertility dwindles, so does Lily's candidacy for wife- and motherhood. Lily is well aware of her waning marketability: "As she sat before the mirror … she was frightened by two little lines near her mouth … She returned wearily to the thought of Percy Gryce" (Wharton 43-44). Our heroine is "frightened" by her emerging wrinkles, but not for fear of the blemishes themselves. The progression of her thoughts—from the wrinkles immediately, and "wearily," to her prospective suitor—reveals that these "two little lines" primarily "fright[en]" her as portents that she must soon marry and thereby forfeit her individuality. The passage of time only betokens to our protagonist her inevitable and unfulfilling future as a domestic; therefore, aging itself acts as an antagonistic force within the novel, a harbinger of the unappetizing future which awaits our heroine.

Lily envisages her prospective domesticity—again while pacing through her aunt's "tomb"-like home, symbolically configured as the superstructure of domesticity itself—specifically in relationship to her maturing age: "Seated under the cheerless blaze of the drawing-room chandelier … Lily seemed to watch her own figure retreating down vistas of neutral-tinted dulness to a middle age like Grace Stepney's. … whichever way she looked she saw only a future of servitude to the whims of others, never the possibility of asserting her own eager individuality" (Wharton 162). This passage both demonstrates how Lily equates her advancing age with an inevitably domestic future, and how she subsequently associates this domestic role with gendered subjugation. The passage immediately "Seat[s]" Lily's dismal prophecy of "servitude" within the domestic milieu, with the undisguised symbol of the "cheerless … drawing-room chandelier." Lily refers to the domestic lifestyle in correspondingly hopeless terms, as "vistas of neutral-tinted dullness." She also associates such domesticity with aging, thus suggesting that only "a middle age like [her domestic-minded cousin] Grace Stepney's" is
possible for women destined to become wives. At this stage of her character's development, Lily apparently regards her prospective surrender to domesticity as inevitable. Her language deems motherhood an inescapable fact of womanhood. For instance, in phrases like "whichever way she looked" and "never the possibility" readers are reminded that, try as our heroine might to defy this circumscribed lifestyle, it has all the dynamism of irresistible fate. Perhaps most profound is the image of Lily disembodied and deprived of autonomy, able only to "watch her own figure" capitulate to domesticity. This distinctive image, among innumerable others which dispute our protagonist's sovereignty over her own life, locates Wharton's novel in the naturalistic literary tradition. As the following sections will attest, domesticity in the form of motherhood asserts itself as a powerful deterministic force against which Lily must struggle.

**A Mother's Burden: Maternal Perpetuation of Domestic Culture**

Although Lily's revulsion for the domestic sphere—specifically, her distastes for marriage and homemaking—is transparent enough, her sentiments regarding maternity itself appear far more nuanced if not altogether paradoxical. Just as Edna Pontellier reimagines a chimerical, self-generative version of childbirth in the final pages of *The Awakening*, so too does Lily seek an idyllic if impracticable motherhood completely severed from early twentieth-century domestic culture. Lily's visualizations of motherhood throughout the novel thus vacillate from utopian to disillusioned according to her circumstances.

Prominent amidst her pessimistic visions of motherhood is Lily's portrayal of her own mother. Mrs. Bart is cast as a tragic phantom of sorts, perpetually haunting Lily's consciousness with her wails of 'dinginess' and complaints of an unfulfilled life. Mrs. Bart—crucially identified only by her husband's surname—represents the darker, domestic aspects of fin-de-siècle
motherhood. Her character particularly embodies mothers' obligation to secure advantageous marriages for their daughters, as is revealed by her "last adjuration" that Lily marry well (55). For all of Mrs. Bart's deathbed concern for her daughter's marriageability, hers is a burdensome role: her efforts to ensure Lily's financial stability render her complicit in the same patriarchal domesticity she herself fell victim to as a bachelorette. On her deathbed, then, Lily's mother inadvertently perpetuates womankind's domestic plight. Wharton underscores the multi-generational span and cyclical pattern of the 'marriage market' by repeatedly describing Lily as patterned after her mother. Mrs. Peniston attributes Lily's disreputable behavior to her mother's example: "'I suppose it's your foreign bringing-up—no one knew where your mother picked up her friends. And her Sundays were a scandal—that I know'" (Wharton 278). Lily's charge to land an advantageous marriage—accomplished by amusing moneyed "friends" and participating in "scandal[ous]" card games, and so maintaining her socialite status—is apparently a universal burden among such fashionable bachelorettes.

Lily ponders mothers' obligation to marry off their daughters in one revelatory passage: "Ah, lucky girls who grow up in the shelter of a mother's love—a mother who knows how to contrive opportunities without conceding favours, how to take advantage of propinquity without allowing appetite to be dulled by habit! … it takes a mother's unerring vigilance and foresight to land her daughters safely in the arms of wealth and suitability" (Wharton 146). Lily's statement brims with irony as she juxtaposes the warm ideal of "a mother's love" with language ("contrive opportunities," "take advantage," "vigilance and foresight") that bespeaks these mothers' crafty schemes, connived for their daughters' financial interests. This image of calculating, materialistic motherhood deviates dramatically from traditional notions of maternal tenderness, a contrast Lily highlights with her sarcastic remark that mothers conspire so merely "to land [their] daughters
safely in the arms of wealth and suitability." By bracketing the traditionally maternal concern for "safe[ty]" amidst petty conveniences such as "wealth and suitability," Lily suggests that the consumerist 'marriage market' has desecrated the mother-child relationship. Patriarchal, capitalistic definitions of motherhood have so distorted the maternal bond that it might be regarded a simple transaction. Furthermore, these mothers' well-intended efforts to "land [their] daughters safely in the arms of wealth and suitability" virtually guarantee that their daughters will in turn become mothers—perhaps also to darling, soon-to-be-marriageable girls—and thereby, the cycle of the marriage market is perpetuated ad infinitum. It therefore appears that the un tarnished, ideal "mother's love" Lily sneeringly alludes to apparently cannot exist in her wealth-fixated, fin-de-siècle society.

Wharton does not express the dilemmas of motherhood solely through implication and flashback, however: the following sections analyze the protagonist's two most substantial, utterly tangible encounters with the motherhood experience.

The Motherhood Experience: Expectation versus Reality

Although less frequently than Chopin, Wharton does implement more tangible images of parent-child relationships as commentaries on motherhood and domesticity. One passage in particular describes Mr. Rosedale—who, according to Lily's estimation, is her least appealing prospective suitor¹⁹—in his interactions with an acquaintance's child:

¹⁹ A number of scholars have argued that a marriage to Rosedale truly is, as Hutchinson scathingly phrases, "the best deal Lily, who hardly merits more, is offered" (436). Indeed, Rosedale is ultimately demonstrated to be a sympathetic and even admirable character, in at least one critic's estimation the lone man who is "genuinely concerned about Lily," by the novel's final chapters (Lidoff 532). Lidoff even contends that "Structurally, Wharton suggests that Rosedale would be a proper mate for Lily"—an argument buttressed by Kassanoff's mention that "The novel's working title" was curiously "'The Year of the Rose'" (68). Ammons asserts that racist Lily prefers any alternative—even death—to a marriage to Rosedale; thus, Wharton's novel becomes a tale of "the flower of Anglo-Saxon womanhood … not ending up married to the invading Jew" (80). Whether or not we are to "read characters
she found … Mr. Rosedale kneeling domestically on the drawing-room hearth before his hostess's little girl. Rosedale in the paternal rôle was hardly a figure to soften Lily; yet she could not but notice a quality of homely goodness in his advances to the child. …

Yes, he would be kind—Lily, from the threshold, had time to feel—kind in his gross, unscrupulous, rapacious way, the way of the predatory creature with his mate. She had but a moment in which to consider whether this glimpse of the fireside man mitigated her repugnance, or gave it, rather, a more concrete and intimate form. (Wharton 401-402)

Wharton makes no effort to obscure the symbolism of the above passage: Mr. Rosedale is transformed into the "paternal rôle," with Lily herself reconfigured as his wife. That Wharton intended this passage to be read in terms of their hypothetical marriage is cemented by Lily's contemplation that "Yes, [Rosedale] would be kind … with his mate [her]." Correspondingly, we are to understand the child depicted as metaphorically Rosedale's and Lily's offspring. In spite of her profound aversion for Rosedale, Lily does acknowledge that the notion of him reimagined as a doting father is vaguely endearing, if only on a theoretical basis "from the threshold": "she could not but notice a quality of homely goodness in his advances to the child." Nevertheless, this morsel of "homely goodness" is profaned by Rosedale's toxic masculinity; even in Lily's family-themed reverie, Rosedale retains his "gross, unscrupulous, rapacious … predatory" demeanor. Our heroine's conflicting feelings toward marriage and motherhood are expounded, as she "consider[s] whether" this fatherly image of Rosedale "mitigate[s] her repugnance" or otherwise. Here, Wharton's decisive sentence structure betrays Lily's answer: the author concludes with Lily's verdict that this tangible image of the domesticity awaiting her "g[i]ve[s] [her repugnance], rather, a more concrete and intimate form." Lily's disjointed sentiments about

[Lily's apparent anti-Semitism] as the embodiment of an author's [Wharton's] attitude"—does Wharton espouse anti-Semitism through Lily's rejection of Rosedale?—remains contested (Bauer 682).
motherhood notwithstanding, she ultimately decides that the patriarchal father's intercession in parenting would tarnish an otherwise idyllic mother-child relationship. According to Lily, motherhood will never be a gratifying experience for her in such a patriarchal society. The truth of Lily's realization is made particularly evident through the oft-overlooked subplot involving Nettie Struther, which is the subject of the following section.

**The Problematic Case of Nettie Struther**

In addition to the imagined child with Rosedale, Wharton presents Lily with another example of a potential child, facilitated by her interactions with the minor character Nettie Struther. We might argue that Lily finally achieves profound self-actualization upon holding Nettie's infant in the novel’s penultimate chapter. Besides the cursory, nondescript allusions to Gerty Farish's 'working-girls' early in the novel, Nettie materializes out of nowhere thirty pages from the book's end, seemingly a facile 'deus ex machina' plot device contrived to tidily convert Lily into a 'mother-woman.' The author conveniently invents an association between the two women: apparently Lily had "helped [Nettie] to go to the country that time [she] had lung-trouble," an event we readers were not privy to despite that it "had been one of the most satisfying incidents of [Lily's] connection with Gerty's charitable work" (Wharton 504-505). Nettie informs Lily that she is now a wife and mother, and that she is entirely gratified by these stations. It would thus appear that Wharton has furnished for her audience the standard, domestic heroine, poised to exalt the virtues of 'True Womanhood' and inveigh against the improprieties of 'New Womanhood.'\(^{20}\) In accordance with this interpretation, Lily is transformed into a surrogate mother of sorts when she holds Nettie's child. Indeed, the infant is named "Marry Anto'nette"\(^{21}\)

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\(^{20}\) See Figures 5-17.

\(^{21}\) We would be remiss not to highlight the marital-domestic symbolism of the name 'Marry,' glaring as it may be.
expressly after Lily, because "the actress reminded [Nettie] of [Lily], and that made [Nettie] fancy the name” (Wharton 508). Lily's metaphorical surrogacy is further emphasized by Nettie's wish that "Wouldn't it be too lovely for anything if [Marry] could grow up to be just like [Lily]?” (Wharton 511). Upon holding Marry—an action which signifies Lily's vicarious motherhood—Lily is reinvigorated and experiences a feeling of new purpose: "As she held Nettie Struther's child in her arms … the old life-hunger possessed [Lily]" and "thrilled her with a sense of warmth and returning life" (Wharton 518, 510).

A cursory reading might suggest Wharton therefore proclaims that the domestic milieu is womankind's appropriate setting, that woman is in fact a creature expressly engineered for and solely fulfilled by the mother-wife role. In response to the novel's apparently idealized depiction of motherhood, "some feminist critics" have deemed these final scenes "sentimental and regressive," if not altogether poorly executed (Showalter 144). While I will grant that the passage is somewhat crudely 'thrown together,' I do not believe Wharton's aims are so simple and "sentimental" as they appear; such a tidy resolution is drastically at odds with the anti-domestic currents found elsewhere in the novel and in Wharton's personal life. As Fleissner draws from R. W. B. Lewis' definitive biography of Edith Wharton, "Whereas Lily might seem just to need a supportive husband and a baby, Wharton's own view of children … was ambivalent at best (she never had any of her own)—and often 'scathin[g]'' (Lewis 134, qtd. in Women 199). Wharton likewise found that her "own divorce was instrumental in enabling her to live the … life she preferred": Lewis writes that "she felt propelled out of her metaphorical prison and really had begun to exercise … a fantastic freedom" (Lewis 339, qtd. in Fleissner, Women 199). This biographical information disputes superficial interpretations which suggest Wharton's belief in

22 Showalter cites Patricia M. Spacks and Cynthia Griffin Wolff as examples.
the preeminence of traditional domesticity. The claim that enthusiastic divorcee and non-mother Wharton had authored a novel in which her protagonist finds her one true purpose in homemaking seems all too farfetched.

We must nonetheless grant that Lily's fulfillment when holding the child intimates the centrality of the mother-child bond, with one essential qualification: this portrayal of triumphant motherhood diverges drastically from the images of domestic servitude found elsewhere in the novel. Nettie Struther is not, in actuality, the 'Cult of True Womanhood' disciple that she appears to be, as her variant of wife- and motherhood is anti-patriarchal and does not endeavor to suppress her individuality. Promptly introduced as "a poorly-dressed young woman with a bundle under her arm," Nettie is excluded from the realm of domestic politesse by her utter poverty (Wharton 504). Unlike the covetous homemakers of the privileged sector, who are endlessly concerned with decorative trifles, Nettie beams with "pardonable pride" at her "extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean" kitchen, and at the modest accomplishment of having "got a parlour too" (Wharton 507). She further contravenes traditional domesticity by working outside of the home\(^\text{23}\) to supplement her husband George's income: "Her face had the air of unwholesome refinement which … overwork may produce" (Wharton 504). In what is perhaps the most flagrant of her transgressions, Nettie's employment necessitates that she and George watch Marry in alternate shifts and even "leave the baby with … [a] friend" at times, a schedule of tag-team parenting that would be deemed unorthodox if not altogether inappropriate by 'polite' society\(^\text{24}\) (Wharton 506).

\(^\text{23}\) See Figures 7, 11, 13, and 15.

\(^\text{24}\) By the turn of the twentieth century, large populations of lower-class women sought employment outside of the home. As such, working mothers required childcare services, whether informal (much like the arrangement Nettie has with her friend) or institutional (i.e. daycare centers). While society generally regarded assisted childcare a necessary evil amongst the working classes, unemployed and upper-class women were, in unexceptional cases, expected to personally tend to their children. Sanger explicates this "ideal of the ever-present mother": "by the end of the century maternal presence had become the mark of good mothering ... To be sure, the ideal was never
In addition to this cooperative approach to parenting, George's non-possessive attitude towards Nettie's sexual past characterizes their union as anti-patriarchal. Prior to her marriage, Nettie encouraged the flirtations of an upper-class "gentleman" from her workplace; the text even subtly insinuates that Nettie pursued an outright sexual relationship with him (Wharton 509). Despite George's—and in fact, their entire community's—awareness of Nettie's sexual past, he nevertheless proposes they marry. Nettie recalls "At first I thought I couldn't [marry George], because … I knew he knew about me [my sexual history]. … I never could have told another man … but if George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn't see why I shouldn't begin over again—and I did" (Wharton 509). Nettie's remark reveals how consequential the early twentieth-century woman's virginity was for her social standing and marital prospects. As Robert M. Ireland elucidates in his study of Victorian sexual mores in the United States, "Young, unmarried women attempting to cope with a society that almost required them to marry in order to succeed socially and to survive economically, needed to demonstrate their virginity as proof of their virtue and as an indispensable pre-condition of their marriageability" (Ireland 28). The taboo of (specifically, women's) premarital intercourse in fin-de-siècle America explains the veiled, embarrassed language Nettie employs to describe her sexual history. Her intriguing statement "I knew he knew about me"—the "me" in reference to her previous sexual encounters—demonstrates that Nettie's public image as a promiscuous woman was universally applied or encouraged: expectations of domestic presence were never wholly extended to black or immigrant mothers. Yet ... by the end of the century, the aspiration for at least some poor mothers to stay home became embodied in the movement for mothers' pensions" (399). Burger's study, though it primarily discusses social reactions to institutional childcare centers, reveals the discrepancy in expectations for mothers of different social classes: "as American day nurseries were offered mostly to and used by families whose fathers were unemployed or whose parents were separated, sick, in debt, or deceased--that is, by families considered to be 'pathological'--they widely fell into disrepute as being for distressed families, a last resort for children who were not cared for properly at home. Around the turn of the century, the typical charitable day nursery was 'a place to which no middle-class mother would consider sending her children'" (1010).
undifferentiated from her identity, so that the two might be referred to interchangeably.

According to patriarchal measures, woman's value necessarily hinged on her viability as a sexual commodity; so, effectively 'spent,' the unvirginal Nettie believed no man would "have [her] as [she] was." George's proposal to Nettie, despite his knowledge of her forfeited chastity, exhibits his rejection of patriarchal, toxic masculinity: he does not gauge Nettie's worthiness as an individual in terms of her sexual mileage, like "another man" might.

Furthermore, many scholars posit that Wharton intended Nettie's professed "lung-trouble" to be read as a pregnancy from her earlier, unpropitious love affair, a plot point perhaps too controversial for the early twentieth-century author to discuss explicitly. 25 Nettie's remark that her 'illness' immediately coincided with her lover's abandonment of her buttresses this theory: "it pretty near killed me when he went away … It was then I came down sick … it would have been [the end of everything] if you hadn’t sent me off" (Wharton 509). We may conjecture that this dignified, upper-class "gentleman" abandoned Nettie precisely to exonerate himself from the onus of a lower-class, 'bastard' child. Whether or not this potential, illegitimate pregnancy was terminated during Nettie's stay at the "sanitorium in the mountains"—an abortion which Lily herself would have funded—is left unanswered (Wharton 505). In her article "Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *House of Mirth*," Elaine Showalter argues that George does not merely pardon Nettie's sexual history but even raises the illegitimate daughter produced thereby (Marry) as his own. She postulates that "There is … an ambiguity about the paternity of the child; Nettie may have been pregnant when George married her," a hypothetical that Showalter esteems a "testament of male faith and female courage" (13). If we are to read Nettie's 'illness' as an extramarital pregnancy—particularly, if we conjecture that Nettie carried this plausible

25 See Figure 2 for a note on how the reading market may affect authorial choices.
pregnancy to term—then Nettie's marriage and motherhood are even less grounded in conventional, patriarchal definitions of domesticity. George's rearing of Marry acknowledges Nettie's sexual history and therefore affirms female, extramarital sexuality as legitimate and acceptable. Unlike most fin-de-siècle husbands—who demand their wives be virginal, as a means to claim lifelong control over their wives' sexual natures—George exhibits in his marriage to the unvirginal Nettie that he presumes no ownership of his wife's sexual past. His non-possessive attitude towards his wife's sexuality exemplifies that their marriage and family unit largely subverts patriarchal customs.

For all of the apparent virtues of Nettie's idealized, feminist revision of the family unit, Wharton describes Lily's pseudo-maternal experience when holding Marry with equivocal—if not faintly negative—language: "At first the burden in her arms seemed as light as a pink cloud or a heap of down, but as she continued to hold it the weight increased, sinking deeper, and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became a part of herself" (Wharton 510). This sentence, with its pessimistic comments about the maternal experience, tarnishes what otherwise seems a profoundly optimistic passage and thus further obfuscates the author's personal stance toward the motherhood question. The quote describes mothers' disillusionment as a gradual transformation from their domestic naïveté "At first," a romanticization which so glamorizes motherhood that children appear placid "pink cloud[s]." In resolute juxtaposition with this utopic image, Wharton pronounces the reality of motherhood an onerous responsibility and even brazenly refers to the infant itself as a "burden," an "it," whose "weight increase[s]" metaphorically "as [Lily] continue[s] to hold it." Lily encounters a parasitic motherhood, an experience radically at variance with the idyllic "pink cloud" image of maternity espoused by Nettie.
How, then, might we explain the gulf between Nettie's and Lily's perceptions of motherhood? In order to comprehend the discrepancy between Nettie's and Lily's motherhoods, we must consider their experiences in terms of their class statuses. The relative multitude of privileges boasted by upper-class women notwithstanding, Wharton capitalizes the principal drawback to Lily's once-extravagant lifestyle: the stringent conventions of high society render Nettie's anti-patriarchal, counter-domestic version of motherhood inaccessible to upper-class strivers like Lily. In Lily's social circles, motherhood necessarily entails patriarchal domesticity, typified by a dominant, breadwinner husband and subservient, homemaker wife. Nettie's reconfiguration of early twentieth-century marriage into a dual-earning partnership is not uncommon for those of her social station, as the novel's many droves of working-class women attest; nevertheless, Lily's 'privileged' worldview—if not her "lack of early training" for the workplace—prevents her from pursuing an egalitarian marriage and motherhood (Wharton 460). Lily's brief, maternal experience in holding Marry is so debilitating due to the restrictions her social class leverages on its mothers. Indeed, the infant so graphically dominates Lily's identity ("the child enter[s] into her and bec[omes] a part of herself") that this symbolic event imparts a concretely unpleasant sensation (Marry "penetrat[es] her with a strange sense of weakness"). Wharton's utilization of the word "weakness" is highly acute, as it refers to both the strength necessary to support an infant's physical weight and—more consequentially—how upper-class Lily's contact with fin-de-siècle domesticity disempowers her. While Nettie's ideal of anti-patriarchal motherhood is enticing, with its promises of feminine self-actualization and interhuman intimacy, this abstraction cannot be realized in her convention-ruled, domesticity-minded world; thus, the motherhood which initially seemed to Lily "a pink cloud or a heap of down" finally proves itself to be a parasitic "burden." In short, Wharton does not denounce all
instances of motherhood as aggressively, or with as broad of a brush, as does Chopin. Wharton professes that fin-de-siècle motherhood is not, in every of its manifestations, necessarily a convention-rulled, domestic nightmare—unless, that is, the prospective mother in question is a member of polite society, as is Lily Bart. James Tuttleton emphasizes the divergence in familial ideologies across social classes in the following quote: "It is not from [the novel's] socialites that Lily learns the meaning of life. It is from a poor working girl, Nettie Struther, who risks an uncertain future for the continuity of a family" (126). Lily's sudden realization that she cannot attain "the meaning of life" found only in such a female-positive motherhood triggers her "reaction of a deeper loneliness" upon departing the Struthers' home, and ultimately emboldens her to commit suicide (Wharton 511).

*Lily's Optimistic Suicide and Emancipation*

Immediately upon attaining a passing glimpse of "the meaning of life" revealed by Nettie Struther, and ascertaining that this "central truth of existence" is beyond her high-society grasp, Lily determines to take her own life (Wharton 517). Counter-intuitive as it may seem, Wharton would have us esteem Lily's suicide her final triumph, the best possible outcome available to our heroine. Lily's deliberate choice to commit suicide—rather than abide the latest whims of her oppressors Fate and society—is the first uninhibited, wholly autonomous decision of her life. In her final moments, Lily expresses an otherworldly awareness of the naturalistic forces that encircle and threaten to overwhelm her ("she could feel the countless hands of habit dragging her back into some fresh compromise with fate") (Wharton 519). She then proposes the single, effective panacea for Fate's "dragging," grip-like imprisonment: "If only life could end now—end on this tragic yet sweet vision of lost possibilities" (Wharton 519). Our protagonist's
sequent actions reveal that her death wish is no mere hypothetical. Wharton engages with generic deathbed conventions to confirm the intentionality of Lily's suicide by overdose: Lily immediately 'gets her affairs in order' ("She reached out suddenly and, drawing the cheque from her writing-desk ... wrote out a check for Trenor") as her life literally 'flashes before her eyes' ("her whole past was reënacting itself at a hundred different points of consciousness") (519-520). In fact, the whole of creation seems primed for Lily's death: "the house, the street, the world were all empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe" (Wharton 519). If further evidence of Lily's suicidal resolve was needed, her internal dialogue as she doses and ingests the chloral eliminates any remaining skepticism: "She had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it. She knew she took a slight risk in doing so—she remembered the chemist's warning. If sleep came at all, it might be a sleep without waking. ... darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost. ... Tomorrow would not be so difficult after all" (Wharton 521-522). While Lily never explicitly voices her suicidal intentions—her doing so would constitute a dramatic departure from the author's invariably delicate prose—we are provided myriad indications that her death is no coincidence.

In spite of Lily's suicide—what most would typically regard a bleak subject matter—Wharton's word choice becomes markedly optimistic in this final passage, a dramatic transformation from the pessimistic diction mere pages prior. Examples of this shift in word choice abound. Just before the chloral extinguishes her, Lily realizes "She had been unhappy, and now she was happy" (Wharton 522). Our heroine is even granted a hallucination of Nettie's infant to embrace in her dying moments, so that "central truth of existence" which society precluded her from in life is finally attainable: "It was odd—but Nettie Struther's child was lying on her arm ... She did not know how it had come there, but she felt no great surprise at the fact,
only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure" (Wharton 522). Lily's deathbed feelings of “happ[iness],” self-actualization, "warmth and pleasure" render her final minutes less tragic than might be expected. The first sentences immediately following her self-inflicted demise maintain this paradoxically cheerful tone: "The next morning rose mild and bright, with a promise of summer in the air. The sunlight slanted joyously down Lily's street" (Wharton 523). The optimistic "sunlight" imagery prevails, even when Lily's love interest Selden discovers her corpse in a shaded room: "Though the blind was down, the irresistible sunlight poured a tempered golden flood into the room, and in its light Selden saw … the semblance of Lily Bart" (Wharton 526).

But why does Wharton insist we view Lily's suicide in a positive light? A nondescript "some one else"—in effect, a conduit for Wharton's own voice—furnishes an explanation for the novel's strange optimism: Lily's emancipatory death "was the greatest mercy" available to her (Wharton 525). Selden's corroborates the stranger's disembodied remark with his realization that Lily's expiry "saved [her] whole out of the ruin of their lives," a "ruin" guaranteed by society and enacted through naturalistic forces (Wharton 532). Further buttressing this triumphant interpretation, the author incorporates anti-naturalistic imagery earlier in the chapter, as if to confirm Lily's liberation in death. For example, before realizing his beloved's decease, Selden ruminates that "all the old tests and measures were left behind, and his [and Lily's] course was to be shaped by new stars" (Wharton 523). Thus, with its buoyant diction and unfettered imagery, Wharton's characterization of Lily's suicide is distinctively positive. The author thereby proclaims the unfortunate reality that the fin-de-siècle woman of literature, shackled by forces both human and celestial, may enjoy greater autonomy in death than in life.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

This concludes my analysis of two New Woman novels, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, as naturalist commentaries on fin-de-siècle motherhood. Chopin demonstrates her novel’s naturalist bent via the deterministic symbols of the Gulf of Mexico and birdcage, while Wharton does so through the rich interactions between her characters. Moreover, each novel critiques a separate component of the complex of ideals and behaviors we term 'motherhood': Chopin denounces maternity as a parasitic, biological inevitability for the sexually liberated female, but Wharton on the other hand laments that domestic culture has tarnished the motherhood experience. Chopin views motherhood, in all of its forms, as a biological 'Achilles' heel'; Wharton, by contrast, regards nonpatriarchal motherhood an attractive but generally unattainable ideal, particularly for social elites.

Regardless of the specific aspect of, and stance toward, motherhood that each author explicates, however, both novels characterize motherhood as a naturalistic force which confines their literary heroines to a downward-spiraling plot structure. To emancipate themselves from their compulsory existences as mothers and housewives, both Wharton's and Chopin's protagonists make the ultimate, autonomous decision to commit suicide; as such, these heroines' deaths paradoxically signify their final triumphs. Indeed, as I read I could not help but remark the staggering similarities between these novels—in terms of literary and cultural movements, national setting, historical period, plot structure, themes, and even intertextual motifs. Though I confined this research project to two primary novels (for the sake of sheer feasibility if nothing else), I would be interested to read comparable texts through the interpretative lens proffered by
this thesis, to ascertain whether Chopin's and Wharton's 'naturalistic yet triumphant death' plot might represent a larger trend in fin-de-siècle, New Woman literature.
Works Cited


Chopin Kate. Letter to Herbert S. Stone. Ca. 26 October 1900. Special Collections. Department of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Kansas.


