AWKWARD ILLUMINATION:
IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY IN FIN DE SIÈCLE AMERICA

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By

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The research and writing of this thesis
is dedicated to Katie, Kristin, Robbie, and Trisha
who kept me out of the smug cloud.

Best [insert qualifier here],
Melissa Nohelani Parrish
This study will address the lure of individuality in Harold Frederic’s *The Damnation of Theron Ware* and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. As Bert Bender suggests in *The Descent of Love*, there were significant tensions in the late nineteenth century in America between Darwin’s beliefs about natural desire and sexual selection on one hand, and the sustained effort to create a stable, values-based culture amid a growing commodity-centric America on the other. But where does the element of choice figure in these “failed” transformations? As William Bartley argues in “The future of *The Awakening*,” imagined futures are neither predetermined nor wholly independent from social constraint. In this thesis, I discuss some of the emotional, psychological, and ideological factors that influence the desire to act boldly outside of the cultural spectrum and the American mantra of “liberal obedience.” Is the creation of a tortured nonconformist—an unfortunate visionary at best, a dangerous narcissist at worst—an inevitable product in a stratified cultural dynamic in America and if so, is it a productive indicator of change or a grotesque, abject impurity? What roles did such uncomfortable protagonists play in the re-evaluation and re-shaping of American culture—and what role does the apparent collapsing of categories play in redefining turn-of-the-century American-ness?
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INTRODUCTION

The Age of Obedience

In *Willing Obedience: Citizens, Soldiers, and the Progress of Consent in America, 1776-1898*, Elizabeth Samet explains that lengthy “constructs of force” led to a “cultural motif” of obedience in nineteenth-century American culture—particularly through the constructs of religion, the nuclear family, and polite society (8). In the words of Edmund Burke, a quality of “liberal obedience” bonded the American people to their love of nation and the perpetuation of its institutions. The liberal, freedom-loving spirit of Transcendental America evolved through the solicitation of discipline and regulation in a Union that still remembered the fratricide of the Civil War and the tenuous phase of Reconstruction that followed it. This new life became less about self-reliance and more about homogeneity cohesion. As Cynthia Eagle Russett explains in *Darwin in America*, many citizens blamed “the dangerous American love of freedom and undermining the notion of government by consent” for the inflammation of the Civil War (87). As the phantom of combat faded, implicit constructs of social obedience became both “too strong and too beneficial to relinquish.”

But by the turn of the century, the growing American landscape—in terms of science, sexuality, commerce, urbanization, geography and the arts—still experienced a ripple of unrest in the practice of reconciling obedience and unity with uncertainty and expansion. A social rubric sustained by structure and stability was thrown in flux at the tail of a Gilded Age and the head of a Lost Generation. Within the frames of obedience
that held together post-bellum America, a need to re-create “the ordered space of ‘Culture’ grew from the chaotic and heterogeneous mix of *fin de siècle* America” (Gaskill 163).

Through the proliferation of scientific knowledge, aesthetics, and creative expression, ideological stagnation became more easily identified and rebelled against for those who actively endeavored to “see” them. For Harold Frederic, then a jaded New York Times correspondent in London, *fin de siècle* culture represented an “intellectual barbarism” that left humanity static destined to decline within the illusion of progress (Frederic Papers). *The Damnation of Theron Ware* caricatured the tension between modernity and antiquity, solitude and community, and freedom and abandonment in small-town America. Three years later in 1899, Kate Chopin, a rising “local colorist” and widowed mother of six, shocked readers with *The Awakening*; while this novel spoke from a distinctly feminine perspective, it struck the same tone of desired escape from a web of domestic requirement. Both novels put on display the gulf between traditional morality and a “radically antinomian personal freedom” (Wilkie 66).

These fictional models of “unholy passions” received vastly different public reactions; while *Theron Ware* was positively reviewed as a cautionary tale (perhaps in part by virtue of the word *Damnation* in its title), *The Awakening*, while praised for its beauty, was overwhelmingly declared a story unfit for proper telling. The only common thread in their receptions was a vague distaste for the rebellious, unclean dispositions of the two main characters. Public discomfort with Theron Ware and Edna Pontellier
reflected more than just displeasure with the unconventional and immoral aspects of their character: it revealed an “uneasy conscience” in a growing culture that continued to evolve in spite of its carefully built foundations. In the face of constraint, Theron and Edna charted an imperfect transcendence that became both a seductive necessity and a painful practice.

The study that follows will examine the imagined citizen’s path toward social and intellectual practices in this firmly unstable period in American life. My interest is in the struggle between freedom and abandonment, exploration and discipline, frivolity and necessary fiction. Historically, I wish to situate the urgency of awkward illuminations in late 19th-century American literature and culture. On a broad scale, I want to discuss dogma and its effects on selfhood and community. Is the creation of a tortured nonconformist—an unfortunate visionary at best, a dangerous narcissist at worst—an inevitable product in a stratified cultural dynamic, and if so, is it a productive indicator of change, or a grotesque, abject impurity? I am interested in the lure of individuality within cultural ideology, and the paths of consideration that it offers in the course of failed human endeavor—as arguably would be the case for both Theron Ware and Edna Pontellier.

In Chapter 1, I will discuss the idealism of romantic ideals versus the practicality of “willing” obedience and the norms that follow that practice. Specifically, I want to look at the influence (or lack thereof) of self-reliance, and scholastic idealism, and love of nature and the “Body Electric.” Theron and Edna, both idealistic figures in a sea of
realism, escape through immersion into a “sea of moral uncertainty” (Lears 46). How does the art of the romantic in these characters affect their interaction and progression in an age of naturalism—does it attack, or become engulfed by dogma and determinism?

Chapter 2 will address Darwinism and the shaping of doubt, secularism, and uncertainty in American culture. The rise of scientific theories and developments in the late nineteenth century contradicted the strict traditions that shaped Protestant America. Charles Darwin’s studies about natural desire and sexual selection stood in direct contradiction to a church striving to cultivate stability. According to Bert Bender, “the cumulative effect of the biological and social analysis of sex” created “a heightened sense of disillusionment about the very meaning of love” in marriage and courtship novels (16). What role, then, did Darwinian selection play in the evolution of Theron Ware and Edna Pontellier—is human desire simply, as Dr. Mandalet suggests in The Awakening, a misplaced “decoy to secure mothers for the race,”—or is it merely a needling side effect of a psychological need to break from the maddening herd?

In Chapter 3, I will look at how standards of limited agency are both understood and negotiated within the social networks of this study, as a kind of post-Darwinian herding together and an individual’s reaction to it. Does the perpetuation of the ideological “machine” simply re-create the standards of reproduction in a way that is both relatively stable and inevitable, or does it instead establish a bitter template for individual curiosity, dissent, and drama?
Chapter 4 will address the psychological and physical factors that influence the desire to act boldly outside of the cultural spectrum. As William Bartley argues in “The Future of the Awakening,” it is possible for imagined futures to be neither predetermined nor wholly independent from social constraint. How does Theron’s religious disillusionment, for example, differ from Edna’s eschewing of traditional femininity? What are the implications of gendered interaction in the novel—and how to they contribute or detract from their demise?

Finally, while it is useful to understand the general underpinnings of disillusionment, I want to frame the discussion in terms of this particular moment in America. Are these departures necessary symptoms of deep dissatisfaction with a culture of that glues together in post-bellum uncertainty, or does something else—the legacy of Darwin, the advent of capitalism, or a generic sense of cultural gravity, for instance—initiate and sustain a change from obedience to disobedience?

Theoretically, I will approach these moments in terms of Louis Althusser, Julia Kristeva, and Jane Thrailkill. While Althusser’s study of ideological state apparatuses demonstrates the inevitability of “ritual practices” according to “correct principles” as a “clique” perceives it, Kristeva’s concept of abjection addresses the actions of the private individual within the uncertainties of public life. Thrailkill, on the other hand, argues in defense of an “affective fallacy”: in Affecting Fictions, she looks at the authenticity of feeling and affect in American realist fiction. Together, these criticisms provide multiple lenses with which to approach this moment in the context of cultural ideology,
psychological impulse, and finally, the physical and emotional aspects of instinct and cognition.

I want to avoid an analysis that is based on the morality or religiosity of damnation. I do not wish to determine whether Theron Ware and Edna Pontellier were right, wrong, martyrs or rogues. What I do want to understand is the nature of the phenomenon: I am interested in what shaped the forces, both internally and externally, that ignited their transformations. As William Bartley suggests, the critical question at hand is not a moral one—instead, it “puzzles out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live” (722). I believe that these interactions outline the flow of desire, discomfort, adherence and disarray in post-bellum America, and that an examination of the topic in utilitarian terms may reveal more about the development of American character than a study colored by the “rightness” or “wrongness” of these actions might prove.

This topic interests me most because of the applicability of lost identity and the muddiness of potential ideological answers in cultures of expansion and uncertainty, both then and now. The complexities of the topic are not entirely dissimilar from the detached turmoil of President Obama’s newly-dubbed “Age of Responsibility.” While there are no parallels between periods to be drawn from directly, the intricacies of Americanness that I am interested in evolve in a similar fashion: it is a conflict, again, between the loosening of constraint and the shaping of ideals, and the “nervous herding together” that follows them (Ziff 12).
CHAPTER I

Willing Obedience and the Romantic Tradition

The American 1890s were categorized by foundations and alterations that wove, tore apart, remade, and expanded its fabric. The nineteenth century, a period “sometimes cloaked in conservative nostalgia” in America, came to a close just as a heightened awareness of its presence emerged. The issues at the forefront were the clash of religion and science, the hodgepodge of the Romantic tradition altered by Realist pragmatism, new standards of education and equality, industrial production, economic depression, and the culmination of widespread expansion. T.J. Jackson Lears claims that during this time of loosening “evangelical orthodoxy,” the “emerging image of the overcivilized modern character” in America was troubled by “a wilderness of moral uncertainty” that was marked by both “ethical and spiritual dislocation” (46). For Lears, the center cannot hold in the fin de siècle, and the resulting cacophony leaves room for neither nostalgia nor cultivation.

Winfried Fluck takes a different tack on historicizing this period of dislocation: she considers the fragmentation of American literature and culture an extension of the American romantic tradition and its corresponding imagination. According to Fluck, romance in America is symbolized by a departure from polite society, from civil disobedience to the second-hand glorification of the “dark-skinned outsider living on the fringes of society” (416). The literature of romance, then, is “a literature of rebels and outcasts who elude the iron grip of middle-class conformity,” and who thereby achieve
agency through their idealism. The moral uncertainty that accompanies it is not a loss in the sea of confusion; instead, it initiates a willing abandonment in favor of an amoral, “abstract” view of independent man on the outskirts of social responsibility (417). By this logic, Theron and Edna exercised their rights to romantic self-reliance and their willingness to push the boundaries of realism with it. In an overcivilized working toward community and the protection of the liberal spirits, such an individualistic mantra seems doomed to fail—but as Richard Chase suggests, it also opens new avenues for defining Americanness, which is stirred most vigorously by “radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder” (2). In this chapter, I will explore failed Romanticism and the dynamics that affect the American melodrama within.

Walter Benn Michaels concisely explains the cultural moment in terms of the anchors and tensions the Romantic tradition afforded:

This desire was, in a certain sense, traditional in American life and literature, expressed often in Emerson and made most spectacularly manifest in Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, where the impulse to ‘incorporate’ everything outside the self (‘I find I incorporate gneiss, goal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots’) commits the writer to a logic of all or nothing that understands the very ideal of externality as a limit and hence a threat to the self; anything unincorporated by the self is a potential incorporator of the self.

... Where the “development” of other nations had taken place within ‘a limited area,’ the development of the United States had thus far consisted in expansion beyond its established limits; that ‘new product,’ the ‘American,’ was the result of this continual transgression (379).

The fabric of the American, then, is marked by its predilection for the unmarked. In a dream-state, the ideal America is a space without limits. Despite the luxury of freedom and self-incorporation, the person and the state who are free from limits also run the risk
of shapelessness and non-definition, which becomes both shiny new product and a messy web of transgression beyond known limits.

Yet at the same time, the remnants of Victorian restraint, combined with post-bellum practices of obedient homogeneity, were still very much in place. On one hand, the Romantic culture of self-reliance and Nature as God prevailed in the attitude of individual desire for “no limits” in America, which teased out new forms of distortion in light of the advent of consumerism. But as those limits continued to expand, methods of control, even aesthetic ones, emerged in order to maintain ties with tradition and to quell the advent of hedonism and instability. These desires were still there, however—they simply were dressed in particularly restrictive clothing. Sex, for instance, “operates on the underside of religion in nineteenth-century fiction, undercutting religious action, but never fully revealed because of the conventions of reticence guarding public expression of private matters” (Morey 46). These underlying tensions were not new; they were consistent staples of Victorian culture that translated in America as a “dialectical ambiguity” that never fully revealed itself, and therefore maintained its potency as an experience “both desired and feared,” like an elicit, carefully shrouded impulse that honored self-reliance as much as it adhered to a policy of public restraint.

What could hold “these centrifugal elements” together (Ziff 12)? Pragmatism, William James’s answer to the religious dilemma, did not come into fashion until the tail end of the decade. Lears suggests that through the practice of religious aestheticism, “fin de siècle primitivism” came back full circle; it “revalued ritual for its enlargement of
sensual experience and its aid in cultivating nonrational mental processes” (196). In this chapter, I am interested in charting the movement of Romanticism and its antitheses through the transformations and transgressions that occur in The Damnation of Theron Ware and The Awakening.

In an 1884 letter to Grover Cleveland, Frederic expresses hope for the triumph of Transcendental “radiance” over the modern tendencies of society:

But, as in a burst of sunlight, the pride of country, of race, yes, of State, comes to me now, and I am almost intoxicated by its radiance and power. It is true, after all, that nobody who through the years behind us has worked for the right has wrought in vain. It is true that in the end, corruption wins not more than honesty, that there is a public conscience—that all the greed and scoundrelism and prejudice and folly of our political, race and business sides, massed into one grand desperate effort for control, were not able to stand before the simple weight of an honest man and an upright cause (Correspondence 37).

Frederic’s love of “the simple weight of an honest man and an upright cause” demonstrates an admiration for the pre-damnation Theron Ware. Theron is a simple man, honest at his core, even in the throes of his downfall—but does his quest ever become a sincerely “upright” one? If we are to believe that Mr. Frederic’s beliefs stayed true between 1884 and 1896, the time of the novel’s publication, then perhaps the element missing from Theron’s imperfect illumination is not pragmatism, but rather the strength of innocence and moral purpose.

Materially speaking, Theron Ware exhibits an innocence that aspires to Emersonian romance: he has “thoughtful eyes” and possesses “features moulded into that regularity of strength which used to characterize the American Senatorial type in those
far-away days of clean-shaven faces and moderate incomes before the War” (6). This description of Theron serves two purposes: first, it marks him as a good and likeable character, and second, it pinpoints his simple, inexperienced goodness as his strength. Theron starts out as a simple man; in the words of his wife, he is “a good, earnest, simple young servant of the Lord.” His presence is marked by its steadfast absence of artifice which, in the culture he immerses himself in, cannot last for long.

Larzer Ziff claims that Ware’s story “symbolizes the loss of innocent purpose in America”—as if the Romantic spirit carried both transcendence and a sense of ignorance in its character (214). Theron, who longed for intellectual curiosity and creative fervor, wanted to exceed that limit of innocence. This desire is what propels him forward not into Emerson’s world, but rather into an uncharted territory without precedent or guide. Theron strives for the aesthetic pleasure of intellectualism: he wonders not at the fitness of his soul, but rather how “well-furnished” his mind is. But even in the traditional religious sect that Loren Pierce espouses, innocence is already gone. They want the blunt trauma of “straight-out, flat-footed hell—the burnin’ lake o’ fire an’ brimstone”—because this is what “fills the anxious seat an’ brings in souls hand over fist!” (27-28). With that hell-ridden overture advising the submission of the audience, one can hardly blame Ware for developing an intense curiosity to venture elsewhere.

His quest in the direction of enlightened religion leads him to an overzealous attempt at Emersonian cerebralism: while Emerson advocates “in every man a logic,” Theron takes a watered-down, almost comical version of scholarly endeavor. Combined,
the perusal of books, the affection of a woman, and the seduction by music gently lure him away from intellectualism and more toward a kind of narcissism that temporarily poses as class distinction. As Cynthia Eagle Russert explains, “the dominant mind of nineteenth-century America, romantic, transcendental, individualist, was . . . in the process of undergoing that slow dissolution that would make it vulnerable to later caricature as a bloodless, prudish, elaborately hypocritical ‘Genteel Tradition’” (2). Theron embodies a sense of this dissolution, which starts as a meaningless array of optimism that is quickly disassembled by the skepticism and secularism of the people around him.

As Theron and his wife arrive at their new home in Octavius, for example, they are dismayed to find a dirty array of “nameless debris” and “general rubbish” in the yard. But Theron quickly dispels this vision by turning his gaze to the landscape beyond the house:

How lofty and beautiful [the elms] were in the morning sunlight, and with what matchless charm came the song of the robins, freshly installed in their haunts among the new pale-green leaves! Above them, in the fresh, scented air, glowed the great blue dome, radiant with light and the purification of spring. (13)

He concludes this encomium by exclaiming that “we never feel quite so sure of God’s goodness at other times as we do in these wonderful new mornings of spring” (13). In a glance down the street, Theron turns an unpleasant vision of his new home into a hymn to nature and God. But as Tom Perrin discusses in “Beauty and the Priest,” Theron ‘feels,’ rather than reasons his way to, God’s goodness.” Theron’s copy of “Paley’s Evidences,” a pre-Darwinian study that relies on the logic of the natural world to prove God’s
existence, is too “costly and oversized” to the minister—the book remains “unopened on his knee,” demonstrating that Theron plans to feel rather than reason his way through his new surroundings and his general approach to life (14).

Theron’s first rude awakening, however, occurs quickly as he is faced with the reality that he is ill-equipped to write a book about his chosen religious subject, Abraham. In Frederic’s manuscript for Theron Ware, he writes: “Abraham- great difficulty about him- he makes turning point- everything before him clearly mythical” (Frederic Papers). Once Theron determines that the book should be about Abraham, he marvels in the innovation of the idea:”the book,” he declares as he considers the many complexities of Abraham’s life, “was to be blessed from its very inception” (38). There is a jocoserious tone to Theron’s hyperbolic choice: as he considers the topic further, he realizes that his “pretensions to intellectual authority” get him nowhere when it comes to writing a book (59). In the cold light of re-reading, he finds the poetry of Genesis spoiled for him; instead, he concludes that Abraham and his people were “untutored and unwashed barbarians, filled with animal lusts and ferocities, struggling by violence and foul chicanery to secure a foothold in a country which did not belong to them.--all rude tramps and robbers of the uncivilized plain” (60). It is here that the illumination begins, unaided so far by the wisdom and pedantry of others and propelled by his own desire to become anything but a barbarian.

In a more refined version of the “uncivilized plain” that Theron discovers in his reflection on Abraham, the church represents a version of Methodism that may be
“primitive” in its ideas, but has developed sophisticated tools in homogeneity nonetheless. The church seeks to bar “growth in material prosperity” even to the point that the flowers in Alice’s “bunnit” are forbidden—yet at the same time, it hires the Soulsbys to serenade the congregation with a variation of Chopin, all for the purpose of monetary gain. And on the opposite side stands a Catholic “world of culture and grace” that, to Theron, represents both the threads of Greek antiquity and the excesses of material civilization that the Methodists in the novel find so repulsive. As Theron compares the views of the Catholics in the novel to those of his Methodists, he acknowledges that he grew up in “bitter days when social, political and blood prejudices were fused at white head together in the crucible of war,” and that the Irish Catholics in Octavius seem to represent an open-mindedness that he has never dealt with before (48). As Walter Benn Michaels suggests, it is this “encounter with the ‘world of Culture’ that Theron Ware understands as . . . a turning-point that offers what evangelical Protestantism seems to deny—the possibility of what will be a career instead of a ‘calling’” (393). Exposed for the first time to a group of people who live by independent pragmatism rather than dogma, Theron is entranced.

In his manuscript notes for Theron Ware, Frederic describes Catholicism’s “universality” in contrast to the “incessant self-consciousness” of the Methodist faith (Frederic Papers). In “Morality and its Alternatives,” Brian Wilkie calls this “universality” the ability to merge “doctrine” and “aesthetic effect” in religion. In Theron Ware, both the Methodists and the Catholics engage in aesthetic techniques to mold the will of the people—Theron’s focus, however, is undoubtedly on the ritualism
and the borderline paganism featured in the practices offered up by Father Forbes and Celia. In their version of Irish Catholicism, religion and pleasure intermingle through the enjoyment of art, myth, science, and celebration. At the picnic, for instance, Theron, Celia and Forbes joke about religion, pragmatism, revolution and beer. “Let us have some more lager at once,” Celia jokes—because “this revolution can’t be hurried forward too rapidly” (241). Father Forbes, on the other hand, explains the enjoyment of faith in terms of its inner logic:

> When people have grown tired of their absurd and fruitless wrangling over texts and creeds which, humanly speaking, are all barbaric nonsense, they will come back to repose pleasantly under the Catholic roof, in that restful house where things are taken for granted. There the manners are charming, the service excellent, the decoration and upholstery most acceptable to the eye, and the music . . . is divine (243).

As Father Forbes demonstrates, it is the comfortable homogeneity of the church that envelops the masses, rather than divine knowledge and fervent worship. It is repose, as Emerson would caution against, that keeps the Church a staple among those who need respite from their own “barbaric nonsense.” And the clergyman’s role, he implies, is to facilitate that role—to “make the best of it” (244).

As Theron attempts to adopt religious strategy instead of pious idealism, he misses the point of what it means to “make the best of it”: the first thing he does is stare unabashedly at the underwear of the girls on the swings. Furthermore, an association of enlightenment with class status and even superiority becomes apparent during his transformation: “He was conscious of having moved along—was it, after all, an advance?—to a point where it was unpleasant to sit at table with the unfragrant hired
man” (15). His transformation sets him not only on a more transcendental plane that only he can see, but it also seems to make him feel as if he is now part of a higher class—one that is permitted beer, a bit of unashamed perversity, and an air of superiority. Given that the influence of Catholicism did not improve or even re-shape the remnants of Theron’s tightly constructed life, it seems that the novel does not actually point to the success of the Catholic ways; instead, faith hosts new and equally divisive traps for Theron to invest in emotionally rather than intellectually.

Robert Myers explains that the barbarism that Frederic referred to in manuscripts and newspaper articles indicated a profound concern “that America had become overcivilized and that the homogeneous American spirit was being torn apart” (119). Theron’s Catholic romance, then, offers an easy, alternative to the throng of overcivilization and staged homogeneity designed to combat it: exclusion. Theron’s alternative is a dream-state about the loveliness of nature, God, and the “well-furnished” nature of his own mind. He reads Renan (at the doctor’s suggestion), indulges himself in speculation and gossip, and falls into a strange musical seduction—but this seduction is incurred on an individual level rather than for the sake of the church, or any other social structure. It seems that no matter which way Theron turns, he returns to the same place—to overcivilization and seduction. As Celia tells him, his “naïveté” as so pleasing to others that they felt the need to coach and cajole him, never realizing in the process that the adulteration of Theron’s romantic ideal made for the breaking down of categories and the loss of the very “unsophisticated and “delightfully fresh” attitude people seemed to find so entertaining about him (322).
In *The Awakening*, the breaking down of social categories and the end of an innocence occurs in a less heart-breaking fashion; instead, it favors a sense of richness of the natural body and mind, and suggests their connections both with each other and with the environment around them. Chopin’s fiction is more Whitmanesque than it is Emersonian; she embodies the Body Electric more than she does the inconvenience of suspense. And by presenting a Romantic ideal through Edna, Chopin does not suggest anything close to a practice of obedience in Edna—instead, it is through the imaginative discourse of romance that Edna is able to eschew the “mantle of reserve” that she has clung to so tightly, for so long.

Edna’s story also raises the question of “whether a mother may be the hero of romance” (Schweitzer 158). Unlike another Romantic heroine, Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, Edna’s predicament is further complicated by her familial obligation as a mother to two young boys. Ivy Schweitzer points out that Edna’s oppression as a wife and mother is almost completely unprompted; she becomes her own antagonist. Edna’s children do not feature themselves prominently as a presence, let alone a nuisance, in her life. She even has household attendants to help her in caring for them. Edna’s grievance and subsequent transformation, then, is one of the self—of a desire for self-reliance that is so strong that she can no longer tolerate the slightest sense of impingement upon her own self-possession.

Mrs. Pontellier, who is of “solid Kentucky Presbyterian stock,” is a disappointment in all aspects of her breeding: in her maternal instinct, in her obedience to
her husband, and even in allegiance to her culture and her faith. But the biggest problem that Edna faces is the stark realism (and inherent lack of imagination) in the personalities of the people around her, particularly with regard to the men in her life. Leonce views Edna as a piece of property, while Robert considers his flirtation with Edna a innocuous habit until he realizes the force of her sentiments. Edna is not in love with Robert (or Leonce, for that matter)—but she is, as Patricia Yaeger claims, “involve[d] in an obsesssional valorization of the masculine” and the art of agency- as she gives herself to men, or in her final instance, the sea, she does so by her own choice and desire (198).

As a child, Edna “had been passionately enamored of a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer who visited her father in Kentucky. She could not leave his presence when he was there, nor remove her eyes from his face, which was something like Napoleon’s” (897). Edna, who is still infatuated with the intoxication of the male romantic figure, cannot reconcile the fact that none of the men in her life come close to resembling this fictional figure—and that as women, none of them in her “brood” voice those same kinds of Romantic desires to own and be owned by such a man. As William Bartley points out, Edna’s ability to act according to her “metaphysical desire[s]” marks her ability to create a “hypothetical” self in the “Romantic mode”—specifically, through the creation of herself as actor and aspiring artist (728).

The longer Edna is denied her fanciful conception of love, courtship and independence, the concrete her fantasies become. Marking her self-authorship in contrast
to the doctor’s “many little human documents,” for example, Edna tells a story that
projects the primacy of hypothetical lovers:

They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or
found trace of them from that day to this. It was pure invention . . . But every
glowing word seemed real to those who listened. They could feel the hot breath
of the Southern night; they could hear the long sweep of the pirogue through the
glistening moonlit water, the beating of the bird’s wings, rising startled from
among the reeds in the salt-water pools; they could see the faces of the lovers,
pale, close together, rapt in oblivious forgetfulness, drifting into the unknown
(953).

Her story is so intoxicatingly tactile that even her dinner guests become a part of the
romance—and the doctor’s deterministic observations, told so authoritatively before, are
forgotten.

As Winfried Fluck explains, Edna’s awakening “leads to a radical assertion and
expansion of the self at the cost of all remaining social ties” (434). The driving forces of
this hyperbole are sensuality and corporeality in a very singular sense, rather than in
terms of religion or even the surrounding culture. It is not Robert, or Arobin, or even
Adele Ratignolle who awakens Edna: instead, it is her own awareness of the self as an
uninhibited appreciator and lust and beauty:

That summer at Grand Isle she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that
had always enveloped her. There may have been—there must have been—influences, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways to induce her
to do this; but the most obvious was the influence of Adele Ratignolle. The
excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a
sensuous susceptibility to beauty (893–894).

Mademoiselle Ratignolle is a beautiful “thing” in Edna’s catalog of artistry that opens her
senses to the world around her, and in the process, helps loosen the garments of social
constraint. It is also interesting that Edna takes her inspiration for freedom from the image of a model mother-woman who would take great satisfaction in guiding Edna into conformity instead. But the novel presents Edna’s seduction not by man and not by God, but simply by nature itself—specifically, the sea. The narrator echoes variations of the same line several times to emphasize the lure of the sea, both in terms of hearing and touch: “the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (999).

What is also apparent is a kind of pleasant paralysis—if not of mind, then at the very least of expression. Edna is forever in the grip of an “acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable” (972). There are moments like these throughout the novel in which Edna cannot shake a sense of impossibility of her own desires. Nevertheless, she still finds rapture in the presence of things that require no voice in the traditional sense: the sea, a piece of music, a painting. As Mademoiselle Reisz plays a particular piece for Edna, the music penetrates passions within the soul and allows her to experience without physical senses—in fact, the music was so powerful that it disabled her senses: “she trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her” (906).

In *American Renaissance*, F.O. Matthiessen notes that in Whitman, the excitement of his words carry weight “because he realized that a man cannot use words . . . unless he has experienced the facts that they express, unless he has grasped them with his senses. This kind of realization was generally obscured in the nineteenth century,
partly by its tendency to divorce education of the mind from the body” (518). Edna prized both mind and body in the transformation of her being—while she does not embody experience in the same rough, natural way that Whitman does, the “experience” of the aesthetic has allowed her to “bring this cup of life to her lips” in a way she has never realized before. Perhaps it is disjointed to say, then, that Edna was Whitmanesque if the premise of her freedom is contingent upon artistic experience and sentiment rather than physical experience itself. Nevertheless, it is precisely the building of that fiction that equips Edna to enjoy the experience and the beauty of the corporeal. As Edna passes into the ocean one last time, one of her final images of recollection is that of “the spurs of the cavalry officer . . . as he walked across the porch” (1000). Here in death, Edna can re-grasp the far-off ideals of her childhood and her feminine desires.

By creating a conscious fiction, Edna is able to cast “aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which we appear before the world” (57). The garment of taste and propriety is cast aside for the fantasies of cavalry officers and voluptuous mothers, elaborate dinners, oceanside lovers and womanizers at horse races. In “Romantic Electricity,” Paul Gilmore explains that “reading or listening or seeing itself” could bound the individual to a “new identity” that is “marked by porous boundaries” (487). In order to sing the “Body Electric,” Edna must first create it. Theron faces a similar quest, but his attempt is presented as more of a “sick-souled damnation” than a final liberation (Thrailkill 170). Theron’s personality and demeanor oscillate in what Jane Thrailkill calls a “doubleness of experience,” and what Emerson calls “the two lives of the understanding and the soul” (Mathiessen 1). The Transcendental soul lives
and awakens to both surrealism and new realities, but that kind of illumination—limited, and alone—eventually fades.
CHAPTER II

Barbarism and Selection

If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself.

--William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

The influence of Charles Darwin in America was “immediate, profound, and long-lasting” (Bender 1). Darwinism confronted Protestant ideals and transcendentalist foundations of natural divinity with a presentation of “biological determinism” based on natural and sexual selection. As Larzer Ziff explains, the pragmatic “trick” in the 1890s “was to hoist Darwin up on one side . . . and the Bible on the other” in order to maintain balance between the science of selection and the romance of religion (11). The war between Darwin and the Protestants, often described in military metaphor with Darwin and Huxley at the forefront as “‘gladiator-general[s]’ of the evolutionary troops,” left fundamentalist Protestants defenseless to their discoveries and claims (Moore 1). Novelists like Harold Frederic and Kate Chopin, all of whom had at least some familiarity with Darwin in relation to human development and the formation of social relationships, were constantly in the process of either “resisting or appropriating” his ideas in their fictions (Bender 5).
Darwin’s ideas situated a “reality of natural desire” squarely against the backdrop of a culture of consent: it offered a clear-cut, amoral antithesis to Victorian culture and the build-up of strict religion around it. His followers and successors, particularly English scholar Herbert Spencer, put Darwinism on the map in social conversation; Spencer’s *First Principles*, for instance, brought Social Darwinism to the forefront of nonscientific culture in England and later America. In the process, an opening up of new alternatives to religion and social comprehension paved the way in part for the “modern uncertainty” that followed in the twentieth century. On the whole, Bender suggests that “our culture’s resistance to the biological in favor of the social explanation of the taboo” reveals “a kind of repression” on a psychosocial level that is difficult to pin down.

In keeping with the evolution of birds and other species, Darwin asserts in *The Descent of Man* that humans divide into two sexes in order to define and reproduce: the males operate based on competition, while the females are characterized by choice, and then later, abject submission to the object of attraction that they select. The power of beauty, a combination of aestheticism and sexual lure, is a main catalyst for propagating the species. Nineteenth-century novelists often depicted the “animalistic elements of the courtship drama” and accompanying “awakening to new senses of human nature;” at the same time, however, they sought to defend a more complex, more sensitive way of life than Darwin’s theories of selection and “social instinct” accounted for (Darwin 19).
Just as Darwin supports the dividing and subsequent characterization of genders to fulfill their programmed roles, I believe that in the “interior drama” of the human being, a necessary unraveling of those roles, not sexually but socially, must occur. In *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, Darwin suggests that “in every female all the secondary male characters, and in every male all the secondary female characters, apparently exist in a latent state, ready to be evolved under certain conditions” (qtd in Bender 16). In this chapter, I will explore the use of Darwinian thought in both novels, both in terms of their congruence and their departures from ideas of sexual selection and deterministic social instinct. Bert Bender claims that Edna inverts sexual selection as the actor rather than the acted-upon, while Theron simply fails at sexual selection. This analysis does not, however, take Darwinism into its social context; it analyzes the characters primarily through a scientific lens, thereby revealing only half of the problem. Through Edna’s conscious transformation as a “New Woman,” and Theron Ware’s subconscious inversion of almost feminine passivity, the social blurring of gender lines creates a space for movement outside of the dynamic that envelops them.

Both Chopin and Frederic thought and read about Darwin. In an interview in *The Writer*, for example, William Schuyler notes that Chopin kept the works of Darwin, Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer near her because “the study of the human species, both general and particular, has always been her constant delight” (116). Chopin also remarks in the interview that “a well-directed course of scientific study might help to make clearer” the vision of other women writers, who had “gone wrong” in their ideas about contemporary women (117). Frederic, on the other hand, scribbled a handful of
notes about scientific discovery and hybridization in his manuscripts for *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, most of which contributed greatly toward the development Dr. Ledsmar and the latent suggestion that the barbarism of humanity is in some way related to the trilling of birds and hermaphroditism in plants.

In *Theron Ware*, a desire for homogeneity among an uncertain throng appears as the theme from the onset:

People were wedged together most uncomfortably upon the seats; they stood packed in the aisles and overflowed the galleries; at the back, in the shadows underneath these galleries, they formed broad, dense masses about the doors, through which it would be hopeless to attempt a passage.

The light . . . fell full upon a thousand uplifted faces . . . all alike under the spell of a dominant emotion which held features in abstracted suspense and focussed every eye upon a common objective point (1).

The narrator notes that despite the uncomfortable, unnatural clustering of people in the galleries, the attitude is one of hypnotism. Theron wants nothing to do with the rapt, homogeneous masses. In him there is an almost scientific desire to experiment with something different—he dabbles in the learning of paganism, scientific experimentation, and the more easily enjoyable aspects of Catholicism. In short, he is searching for a hybrid of ministerial thought that will allow him to be both good and lofty.

In Darwin and in *Theron Ware*, the issue of hybridization is one that is ever-present, both in terms of social structures and woven within the fabric of life and death. Under the category “Fear of Death” in the manuscript for *Theron Ware*, Harold Frederic writes: “Darwin wrong, I think, in not regarding all plants as aboriginally hermaphroditic” (Frederic Papers). This assertion, a seemingly random one next to the
rest of the manuscript notes, is brought to bear in the novel through the words of Dr. Ledsmar, who is testing theories of hermaphroditism in plants, and thereby becomes the fictionalized voice of Darwin at his most scientific. In response, Theron seems to absorb the importance of nature is the formation of his own transformation: he claims that he wants to cultivate “his mind till it should blossom like a garden” (59).

Another Darwinian reflection made through Ledsmar is a distaste for all music. In his “Autobiography,” Darwin writes: “I have . . . almost lost any taste for pictures or music.—Music in general sets me thinking too energetically on what I have been at work on, instead of giving me pleasure” (633). Ledsmar voices a similar distaste, but takes it a step further by comparing it to the music of birds:

. . . the only animals who make the noises we call music are of the bird family—a debased offshoot of the reptilian creation—the very lowest types of the Vertebrata now in existence. I insist upon the parallel among humans . . . I am convinced that musicians stand on the very bottom rung of the ladder in the sub-cellar of human intelligence—even lower than painters and actors (79-80).

Ledsmar’s diatribe on music and art—he goes on to later call “so-called” art “decay”—falls both in line with Darwin and at odds with Celia’s appreciation for art, music, and the Greek aesthetic. What is even more interesting is his comparison of music to the low noises among birds—which, as Darwin notes, are prominent among his models for sexual selection in *The Descent of Man* and a number of his other studies. Even more telling is the notion that the birds, the lowest type of creature on par with the musician, is quite obviously held in comparison to Celia, the musical seductress who Ledsmar (and Frederic in his own manuscripts, too) calls a “mad ass.”
As John Gatta suggests in *American Madonna*, in selecting Celia, Theron’s criteria seems to be for a pre-oedipal mother rather than for an explicit mate. What he experiences as a “new birth” in reaction to the restrictive piety of Octavius (and on a larger scale, his life), he mistakes for inspiration from his new Muse. As Father Forbes points out, she appears as the “fair young ancestral mother of them all,” and that loosely maternal, sensual drive about her draws Theron to her as if she is part-mother, part-lover to the newly born version of himself. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4, Theron experiences a child-like regression in his infatuation with Celia—the “undulating radiance” of her chamber seduces him like a womb—and an effeminate sublimation in his interactions with Father Forbes and his “erect and substantial form” (310).

But this spell cannot last long—Celia remains a mystery to Theron, and as she keeps him in some degree of suspense, he and as Theron slowly becomes more aware of what is unraveling in front of him. All is not quite as ethereal as he would have hoped—the more mundane details of animal instinct reveal themselves to him, and the idea that as a man and minister, a married one at that, his ability to perform sexual selection is now limited, if not cut away from him entirely. Bert Bender suggests that the fact that he cannot be “like a sensible man,” he experiences a trauma that alternately conceals the folly of his illumination and reveals some naked truths of mankind around him. As he discovers early on in the novel but seems later to forget, all humans, to some extent, are the “unwashed barbarians” he has been trying to hard to avoid for so long.
As Theron is on his way to New York, he notices a family on the train that enacts a seemingly animalistic ritual:

He recalled now having noticed this poor woman last night, . . .—how she fed her brood from one of the numerous baskets of water . . . Watching her, Theron had felt curiously interested in the performance. In one sense, it was scarcely more human than the spectacle of a cat licking her kittens, or a cow giving suck to her calf. Yet, in another, was there anything more human? (304)

The description of the mother and her “brood” is reminiscent of the concept of natural selection; despite the complexities of their activities, humans still return to the archaic “performance” of animalism and human survival.

In the margins of his manuscript for Theron Ware,, Harold Frederic writes, “everything degenerates—reaches the top, goes down, immutable law,” restating Father Forbes’s declaration that regardless of what religion or extended allegory a society pursues, a cycle of decline is inevitable. This kind of determinism, it seems, is inescapable for Reverend Ware. He is not Hellenized, or even enlightened—instead, he is reduced to the lowest version anyone can conceive of him. His face changes from that of an angel to that of a bartender.

In The Awakening, caged birds become part of an overwhelmingly prevalent motif of broken wings and gilded cages. The first character that appears is a squawking parrot, who speaks in several languages, and then “a language that nobody understood.” The creature’s apparent unintelligibility irks Leonce Pontellier, who immediately moves away from it. The parrot is both an annoying and inarticulate creature:
A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: ‘Allez vous-en! Allez-vous-en! Sapristi!1 That’s all right!’

He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language with nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence.

Mr. Pontellier, unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and an exclamation of disgust. (3)

Despite its imprisoned state, the caged bird is loudly attempting to communicate—for itself, if for no one else. The “maddening persistence” of his song suggests the urgency of his task—he must be heard, even if it makes no sense. This blend of language—French, Creole, Spanish, and English—“coexist alongside a language that is incomprehensible to everyone but . . . the bird who mindlessly imitates it” (Schweitzer 167).

While the bird is imitative and even a little mechanical in its playful diatribe, an instinctive, decision-making animal still lives alone and within its cage. As a proponent of culture, a human typically strives to be anything but a caged bird; instead, we seek the comfort of the social. Through that process, we define values, norms and language that illuminate the community, or ISA, that we are a part of. According to Matthew Arnold, culture draws “toward a knowledge of the universal order which seems to be intended and aimed at the world” that created us by design (Carroll 83). This idea, as Joseph Carroll points out in Literary Darwinism, is pre-Darwinian. For Darwin, culture derives from “the collective adaptation of a set of social animals operating within specific

1 According to A. Elizabeth Elz in “The Awakening and A Lost Lady,” there are two widely acknowledged translations for these phrases: Margo Culley translates it to read “Go Away! Go Away! For God’s sake!”, while Caroline K. Hall reads the same phrases to mean “Get out! Get out! Damn it!”
historical circumstances” (3). This notion is markedly similar to process of interpellation, and the reproduction of the conditions of production that Althusser so vigorously espouses, and which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. The subtle but critical difference is that while ideology can be a form of “willing” obedience, Darwinism is primarily intended to mark the by-design workings of natural order that happen in a pre-ideological state. As Carroll also points out, another critical difference in Darwinism is that in the animal world, social values can and do change depending on the situation, and not necessarily through the contained movement of communities.

Within the community in *The Awakening*, the de-facto leader of mother-women, Adele Ratignolle, appears willingly immobile in her mold of motherhood and sensuality; according to Barbara Ewell, she “embodies the social definitions of womanhood” (150). Mademoiselle Ratignolle’s view of marriage is one of ideal hybridization: it is, in her own words, the “fusion of two human beings into one.” Edna’s description of the mother-women as a community paints them as a flock:

> It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels (888).

Unlike the lone parrot in a gilded cage; these women “flutter” within their own broods; and while they are not caged, they appear to be automatically joined to the community that it protects, and very concretely assigned to their social tasks. Assigned as “ministering angel,” the bird in this case becomes more of a referee and a caretaker than an animal free to fly.
Edna’s own refusal to take part in this process begins slowly, with no certain marker. Mr. Pontellier, who looks at her “as one looks upon a valuable piece of personal property,” takes for granted his pre-eminence as head of the household and owner of his wife (882). But Edna is not like the flock of mother-women that her husband assumes her to be a natural part of; even her appearance belies the natural tendencies and features of the voluptuous Creole women on Grand Isle. Edna has “thick and almost horizontal” brows, and she is “rather handsome than beautiful,” with a “certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features” (883). As I will discuss in Chapter 4, nothing about Edna quite fit the automatic, evolutionary mold of what is womanly and what is feminine—and she, of course, does not want it to be so, anyhow.

When her behavior is finally a cause for alarm, Dr. Mandalet, summoned to assess her, finds her in a state that is independent, but uncomfortably so—painting alone, refusing callers in the home, and about to move into her little “pigeon house.” Mandalet offers her an insight that is both Darwinian and Althusserian in its determinism: “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” (996). His speech comes immediately after Edna uncharacteristically asserts that she is “not going to be forced into doing things” anymore. Mandalet’s words, however, offer no solution for Edna—no happy medium between domestic requirement and illusory independence, and no hope of recovery in its presentation of arbitrariness. While at dinner, Mandalet tries a different tack: he tells “the old, ever new and curious story of the waning of a woman’s
love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after days of fierce unrest” (953). This story is, he proudly asserts, “one of the many little human documents which had been unfolded to him during his long career as a physician.” Not surprisingly, Edna is not impressed by the predictability and banality of the story’s progression.

Edna does, however, agree that the machine cannot be fought entirely—nevertheless, she still resists: “Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life.” In this moment, Edna articulates the value of her turmoil: even in pain, being vaguely awake is preferable to breathing the close, groggy comfort of instinct and ideology. In “The Light Which, Showing the Way, Forbids It,” Nicholas Gaskill describes Adele’s and Mandalet’s observations as efforts to “bring out the cultural stakes involved;” gently, they caution Edna to heed her biological station as mother-woman. Gaskill claims that “Nature, no less than Reisz’s music, can reconfigure that which Edna values in her experience”—and this is what her friends hope to remind her of (177). But even Adele’s final caution—“Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children!” bears no weight upon Edna’s state of being (995).

Mademoiselle Reisz articulates the difficulty of the artist’s quest for the undadulterated aesthetic: “The bird that would soar about the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (966). Edna, the failed artist, cannot seem to find the wings she would need to become a free bird. She finds some freedom by moving to her
own home—but this house is called the “pigeon house,” indicating that the bird has simply moved to a more comfortable cage (and one that is still controlled by the finances of her husband, Leonce).

Bender concludes his speculation by stating that while nineteenth-century novelists were interested in the “animalistic elements of the courtship drama” and accompanying “awakenings to new senses of human nature,” they sought to defend a higher level of love, and therefore a more complex way to live, than what the deterministic models of selection accounted for. While Edna’s concepts of love and sex evolve away from the Darwinian ideal, she seems to disregard rather than enhance a vision of romantic love. As she takes Arobin up to her room, she thinks to herself: “Alcee Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glances, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her” (77). Here, Edna adopts a surrender to hedonism rather than love; her decision to sleep with Arobin is based on pure lust—there is no love or even hope of love in her interactions with men, even with Robert as she begins to extricate herself from him, too.

Edna cannot assimilate into the version of feminine culture presented to her any more than she can fit the standard model of human love and reproduction. The process of childbirth itself is a “scene of torture” to her—and as she explores its alternative, the wing-trodden field of music and art, she realizes that she cannot become this fanciful rendition of self, either. Caught in the middle, she takes part in the only apparent, or perhaps natural, option left. Even as she hosts her own dinner with her friends, there is a
sense of inevitability of purpose in extricating oneself from, rather than simply changing one’s role in, society: “she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition” (972).

Like the parrot in the opening lines of The Awakening, there is an incomprehensibility (or rather, an absence of a need for comprehensibility) in the rote imitation of evolutionary tasks. These ideas, while not incorrect, are incomplete in fashioning an understanding of the interactions and rebellions that inevitably occur on the cusp of modernity. An understanding of social instincts and their pull is necessary, and understood- but it is only the beginning of an answer to the question of resistance and transgression in the fin de siècle. Both Theron and Edna felt a pull toward understanding what could not be understood, and what could be seen just under the surface of the social instinct and development of the worlds that surrounded them. In Darwin in America, Cynthia Eagle Russert quotes a softer, pragmatic view of Darwinism, through the words of Henry Demarest Lloyd: “We can become individual only by submitting to be bound to others. We extend our freedom only by finding new laws to obey” (97). This view is one that Frederic and Chopin may have found particularly relevant, and one that will be discussed in more detail in terms of ideology in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER III
The “Soul’s Slavery”: Desire and Ideology

Social life, when uniform, creates a transparency that we call familiarity, and it is this feeling of familiarity that lets us move from place to place without much effort.

--Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*

If our selves are all bound together by common ownership, the question naturally arises as to what sort of thing or self owns them.

--Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard*

By the turn of the century, America was a nation of large-scale capitalism, consumerism and growth. Western expansion, combined with the machinery of capitalism and the industrial evolution, made money “the new god” (Clark 321). How do we reconcile the Darwinian code of natural desire with the consumer-driven, ideological code of manufactured desire? Althusserian ideology intermixes with the rubric of social instinct—and in so doing, an equally deterministic model is offered here in social rather than biological terms.

Althusser’s vision can be, as Terry Eagleton suggests in *Literary Theory*, “little more than an oppressive force which subjugates us, without allowing sufficient space for the realities of ideological struggle” (150). Environment (and the community implicit in that environment) affects animals both individually and socially. Animals rely on instincts to guide them toward and around environmental change—which again, brings the mechanical, interpellated behavior of the Althusserian citizen into question.
Althusser does not suggest that instinct cannot play a part in creating ideology—instead, he simply addresses the system that ensures the mechanical reproduction of church, school, state, and the family. He maintains that individuals are never socially independent: everyone, whether consciously or sub-consciously, falls “into the realm of some form of ideology” (Gray 55). When individuals find commodity culture repressive, they seek independence in a way that, while transcendent to a point, can also descend into a materiality of its own. Theron, for instance, plunges back into industrial expansion by becoming a real estate agent out West. Edna, on the other hand, envelops herself in the solitude of the sea. The forces at work do not simply involve lifestyle choices: on a larger level, they compose the management of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), which preserve custom and ensure the “reproduction of the conditions of production” (1483). In light of this schematic, the ISA is “the site of class struggle” and is therefore essential to the workings of society (1491). The descent of the individual who seeks escape from this rubric, then, is inevitable.

Through this lens, Edna’s suicide is understandable and even predictable—stuck between ideologies with no viable alternative, her only choice is to disappear entirely. Theron, on the other hand, does not disappear but instead descends under the pressure of a magnetic power not entirely his own. This explanation, however, reduces life to a deterministic process of elimination. In this chapter, I will argue that while Althusser’s ideas are useful in understanding describe socio-political structure in these novels, it fails to zoom in beyond a birds-eye view of the masses, and thereby misses the nuances of emotion, psyche, and the body that mark the art of the individual.
Ideology is ever-present both in the fiction and in the writing of the novel; Kate Chopin, for instance, playfully alludes to the uncontrollability of Edna’s actions in a short response to her critics in *Book News*:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (*Private Papers* 296).

In this wry commentary, Chopin treats Edna like an old friend who behaves poorly at a dinner party. She does not apologize for Edna’s actions (or for her actions in making them up)—but she does hint at their inevitability, and her lack of control over them. Even as an aesthetic figure of Chopin’s imagination, Mrs. Pontellier still has a mind of her own.

Adele Ratignolle, the “faultless Madonna,” is the model that Edna knows she should follow (890). Adele, who has some affection for Edna, counsels her on the right way to be a woman: “a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so. I’m sure I couldn’t do more than that” (929). In response to Adele, Edna finds it difficult to articulate her disagreement with her; she responds only with a flippant “Oh, yes you could!.” As Per Seyersted argues in *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, Edna “cannot meaningfully relate herself to the people around her;” because of this predicament, she cannot “integrate her demands with those of society” even if she decided to try (149). Like the singing parrot, she seems to speak too infrequently in a language that everyone else can understand; in order to find an
intelligible voice in this space, she needs distance from ideological constraints—as a sensual woman, as an artist, and even as an occupant in her own home.

By desiring such “internal distance” from the environment, Edna stakes claim to a similar, but more radical version of Althusser’s “Letter on Art in Reply to Andre Daspre” (1481). In this letter, Althusser expresses his belief that art illuminates ideology without uncovering scientific knowledge itself. By itself, plain knowledge is too unknowable and undefined, and to support “the language of ideological spontaneity” and creativity (1482). Edna, an aspiring artist herself, finds critical distance not necessarily through the production of art, but in the appreciation of it. As she paints in the light of the sun, which “mellow[s] and temper[s] her mood to the sticking point,” she is detached from even life itself: “it seemed to her as if life were passing by, leaving its promise broken and unfulfilled” (956). She becomes aware of her surroundings to the point that she can feel it moving past her. She thinks so often and so intensely of the “outward life which conforms, the inward life which questions” that little else retains its importance. Desire moves Edna into a space of Otherness that allows her to imagine, predict, and consume on her own. This process, even if temporary, is critical in her self-discovery and self-preservation away from the standards of the mother-women she is expected to emulate.

Besides the loneliness of her “position in the universe,” there is something else that is a little stilted about the presentation of Edna’s path toward freedom: her movement, even from house to house is not entirely free from restraint. Edna’s new house, which is called a pigeon house “because it’s so small and looks like a pigeon house,” (968), is yet another gilded cage, financed and explained away by Leonce, that
keeps her within the society that she wants to elude. As A. Elizabeth Elz discusses in “The Awakening and A Lost Lady, “Edna has always revolted against being both domesticated and displayed; yet in selecting this house she achieves both” (22). It seems that no matter how free Edna is, she is still within parameters that are owned and determined by someone else.

Edna’s role as mother, however, is her most bittersweet and problematic mechanism of conformity. Caught in a circle of women “defined by their reproductive capacity and social caretaking role,” Edna is forced to play a part in which desire and individuality are no longer applicable (Schweitzer 169). She must negotiate her love for and responsibility to her children with her overwhelming urge to flee from everything. But as she becomes more detached from the world, those concerns matter less to her; she begins to resent even their presence in her life. The permanent insistence of her obligation is precisely why Edna determines that escape from them is crucial to her survival as a person. In an exaggeration of epic proportions, Edna’s psyche turns the children inside out: “the children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew how to elude them” (999). In this final sentiment toward her children and the apparent trap they lay for her, Edna demonstrates that in the process of eschewing all considerations for ideology, she also strips away all consideration for people, and perhaps a layer of her own rationality in the process.
Althusser’s ideas, then, may speak too categorically to fully address some of the emotional aspects of womanhood and motherhood that affect and transform even Edna’s psychological makeup. Nevertheless, he does explain the complexities in place that prohibit her from creating a space outside of ideology, despite her wildly imaginative attempts to escape. Edna does not survive, after all. While it will always be up for debate whether her death is more triumph than tragedy—it epitomizes the ability to both “die laughing” and “laugh at dying,” as Anna Parvulescu suggests—the path is nevertheless still one of escape. Edna does not possess the strong wings of the artist that she had hoped she would. Without them, she calmly views the seduction of the sea as the only way left. Just as Leonce, exasperated and tired, temporarily “quit the society” of the obnoxious parrot in the beginning of the novel, Edna gazes upon the path of an uncaged, but critically injured bird as she walks with anticipated finality toward the sea:

The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water (999).

Convinced that this is the only path to follow, Edna joins the solitary seduction of the sea and the battered flight of a bird with broken wing. The death is both celebratory (joining the sea while putting the old Darwinian bird to rest) and sad (slow, disabled, broken death). While it is still symbolic of a joyful defiance, it also reinforces the finality of ideological reproduction. Edna’s suicide is the ultimate rejection of every facet of bourgeois culture that she previously held obligation to, but it does not erase it, nor the gap she leaves within it.
In “‘A Language Nobody Understood’: Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening,*” Patricia Yaeger articulates one of the greatest problems in considering ideology and *The Awakening:* even as casual readers, we must question our own critical methods in imagining what Edna’s fate might mean. According to Yaeger, “participating in the bourgeois family is one expression of the romantic obsession that shapes and destroys the bourgeois heroine. Participating in licentious desire for a man other than her husband,” as Edna does throughout the novel, “is simply another” (198). In other words, what appears as a deviation is in some ways relative. The tension that Edna experiences is mirrored as our own: as she contemplates art versus life, her readership must also wonder whether to acknowledge her story as a freeing narrative, a naturalistic demise, or a regular occurrence in the sphere that shrouds our willing obedience. But despite this “vague anguish” and its uncomfortable distance from knowledge, Edna’s audacity survives. Her inability to speak, or even understand—“she felt that her speech was voicing the incoherency of her thoughts, and stopped abruptly”—is precisely what gives her the ability to become a momentary semblance of what she is not (998).

The ability to “see” within ideology is amoral by nature and purpose; it is distancing, not focusing. Perhaps in the scheme of human endeavor, then, the expediency, relevance, and rightness of Edna’ Pontellier’s actions are immaterial. Whether she truly plays out the Althusserian model can hardly be known—but what can be known, or at least given as a representation of knowledge, is the validity of her an attempt to create something beyond self. As Edna reaches into the sea, her thoughts are
not agitated; she is not in turmoil or fear because she adopts a more simplistic state of being. What is left for her is the beauty of natural origin: “there was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (1000).

In *A Community of Inquiry*, Patrick Dooley maintains that the issue is not the perpetuation of ideology at the expense of individuals, but rather the pragmatic application of it; ideological parameters must be applied rationally and deliberately in order for “religion to accommodate, rather than capitulate to, Darwin and science” (106). In *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Dooley notes that “none of the central religious figures . . .—neither Celia, Forbes, nor the Soulsbys—believe in God in the ordinary literal sense. Yet each is skilled in the manufacture of the beneficial effects of religion and belief in God.” Theron, who is an odd mix of innocence and indulgence, cannot identify with the manufactured forms of religion and conformity offered to him. As Fritz Oeschlaeger points out, each of the characters in the novel present themselves as potential authority figures for ideological points of view that Theron could easily ally himself with. The implication here is that ideology requires authority, and Theron does not fit with any of the models for authority that are presented to him in the novel.

Sister Soulsby, for instance, reinforces what she feels is a need for “machinery” to govern both religious callings and professional careers. According to Walter Benn Michaels, the Soulsbys eliminate “the opposition between belief and business . . . indeed, religious enthusiasm is understood as crucial to doing ‘good work’” (394). The management of religion, according to Sister Soulsby, is a “voluntary system” of convincing and conversion—or is it? While the constituents of the church willingly
profess their religion and willingly enter the service, the Soulsbys wield far more agency than the constituency in their ability to play upon communal faith to achieve their monetary goals. And their methods of persuasion also have a well-meaning, but manipulative effect on Theron, too. Once Sister Soulsby counsels Theron to become a “good fraud,” he half-heartedly attempts to follow her instructions—but as Dooley points out, the “less [he] believes, the more effectively he preaches.” Soulsby’s utility works, even in the face of Theron’s doubt. This exercise of pragmatism makes him a reluctant, if not willing, participant in the ideology of the revival-happy Methodist church. Nevertheless, he still determines this participation by choice—and he cannot sustain this dubious practice due to his own disgust with it.

Determined to manage an existence outside of strict Methodism, Theron continues to search in vain for an authority that he can rely on. Fritz Oehlschlaeger points out that “the self which lacks anything to shape or confirm is very likely to become a void.” None of the possibilities (or, as Oehlschlaeger discusses, potential authority figures) offered to him are even slightly beneficial to his development as a scholar, man of God, or even as a husband. Ware’s encounters with Father Forbes and Dr. Ledsmar for example, are didactic on the surface, but present little in the way of earnest guidance or productive support. Father Forbes chuckles at Theron’s enthusiasm for “this Christ-myth of ours,” and insists that his infatuation with Abraham is futile (71). While this guidance is enlightening to a point, Forbes still leaves the highly impressionable Theron without even a hint of what values system he might look to in place of the set that Forbes just destroyed for him. Forbes’s only point of wisdom for
him is that the truths of religions are copies upon copies: “Everything is built on the ruins of something else. Just as the material earth is made up of countless billions of dead men’s bones, so the mental world is all alive with the ghosts of dead men’s thoughts and beliefs, the wraiths of dead races’ faiths and imaginings” (71). While it is an insightful thought, it provides no anchor for the bewildered Reverend Ware, who now determines to become as enlightened as the holy man before him, now his only example of the “true” clergy, seems to be.

Meanwhile, Ledsmar encourages Ware to consider science and mysticism through the work of Renan, but offers no solution that would replace the value, not the knowledge, that the innocent minister has subconsciously placed layer upon layer, copy upon copy of his staunchly Methodist conscience. Later, Theron considers the shapelessness of book learning and religious and philosophical thought:

Somehow, the fact that the priest and the Doctor were not religious men, and that this book which had so impressed and stirred him was nothing more than Renan’s recital of how he, too, ceased to be a religious man, did not take a form which Theron could look squarely in the face. It wore the shape, instead, of a vague premise that there were a great many different kinds of religions—the past and dead races had multiplied these in their time literally into thousands—and that each no doubt had its central support of truth somewhere for the good men who were in it, and that to call one of these divine and condemn all the others was a part fit only for untutored bigots (131).

In a surprising admission of the relativity of shared knowledge, Theron pauses to note that it is impossible to firmly grasp the “truth” of past races, and that knowledge and belief recycle in strange, shapeless ways. But as quickly as he uncovers that insight, he returns again to his imaginative quest to rise to the ranks of the intellectuals:

Evidently there was an intellectual world, a world of culture and grace, of lofty thoughts and the inspiring communion of real knowledge, where creeds were not
of importance, and where men asked one another, not ‘Is your soul saved?’ but ‘Is your mind well furnished?’ Theron had the sensation of having been invited to become a citizen of this world. The thought so dazzled him that his impulses were dragging him forward to take the new oath of allegiance before he had time to reflect upon what it was he was abandoning (132).

Just as soon as Theron uncovers the machinery behind the book, he wades back into another form of the same kind of ideological blindness. The fact that he is so “dazzled” by the prospect of enlightenment and scholarly pursuit of secular religion overwhelms him; he is convinced that soon he will join the ranks of the well-furnished minds of men.

Sister Soulsby, who presents herself as a “good fraud,” explains the Althusserian machinery and its particular need to quietly hold up the fabric of the Methodists: “We who are responsible for the thing, and raising the money and so on—we have to put on a spurt every once in a while, and work up a general state of excitement, and while it’s going, don’t you see that is the authority, the motive power, whatever you like to call it, by which things are done? Other denominations don’t need it. We do, and that’s why we’ve got it” (174). Theron’s skepticism not just toward Soulsby’s idea but toward all of his authority figures—even Forbes, who he adores but misunderstands—leaves him vulnerable and without an authority figure. As a result, he seems to grow increasingly dependent on the increasingly unresponsive people around him.

Perhaps some of this ideological muddling is also due to Theron’s own inability to digest the wisdom (or lack thereof) from neither his prospective mentors nor the scholarly books that Dr. Ledsmar equips him with. As Susan Stewart suggests in *On Longing*, “whenever we speak of the context of reading, we see at work a doubling with undermines the authority of both the reading situation and the situation or locus of the
depiction: the reader is not in either world, but rather moves between them, and thereby moves between varieties of partial and transcendent vision” (44-45). Is Theron, then, stuck between worlds? Given that he does not know what to do with anyone’s advice, this is plausible—but the instability of such a situation harkens back to the idea that nothing can, at least not permanently, exist outside of the boundaries we create for ourselves as a society.

Finally, Theron is never one to take responsibility for his folly: even at the end, when the appropriate response might be one of contrition or sadness, he hisses at Celia: “This is what you have done to me, then!” (323). But perhaps some of Theron’s indignation is justified; he did not create the person he became on his own, after all. As Bridget Bennett points out, in the corrupting influence of Theron’s supposed friends, “Frederic shows that authority itself may be a corrupting influence that is void of the “moral bugbears” that may have, in a different situation, kept Theron’s ‘illumination’ under control. Although lack of true authority may lead to degeneration and damnation, power has its own capacity to corrupt” (Bennett 190). Bennett, in my view, is partially right: Theron falls victim in part because there is a corrupting power over him, but the problem is not entirely due to the power of another, nor an entire absence of authority: the problem lies in incomplete, sloppy, irresponsible authority at the hands of those who sought to plant the seeds of wisdom in Theron’s untutored and unwashed mind.

This conclusion leaves the “problem,” so to speak, of deterministic ideology ever-present and strong in the interactions of those who seek to act outside of it. Should there not be an Other that challenges the practices of implicit obedience that perpetuate
ideology? As Chopin both cautions and celebrates in *The Awakening*, she exclaims: “How few of us ever emerge from such a beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult! (893). Nicholas Gaskill considers the inevitable limits of ideology in literature: even as individual breakthroughs are made away from the prevailing apparatus, the process of re-identification simply brings one either back in the fold of another ideological structure, or forces a kind of capitulation that is inevitably destructive. Ware and Edna, for example, seek to pursue a process that is liberating in its ability to eschew traditional morality and develop their own notions of selectivity and “taste,” whether through the venue of music or simply through the enjoyment of reading, writing, and speaking as they pleased. They fail, but the mechanical reproduction that Althusser espouses cannot be *all* right; the paths of human interactions that are involved in the functioning of ideology may be reductive in a sense, but they are not quite so simple, either. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the transformations and transgressions of Edna and Theron in more individualistic terms.
CHAPTER IV

Independence and the Abject Imagination

If we give up the dimensions of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality.

--Carolyn Forche, Introduction, *Against Forgetting*

In making these discussions about sexual selection, human complexity, and determinism, it is also important to consider the role of the psyche and the element of choice. If we are to accurately assess the reproduction of human culture, we must consider the inner lives that compose and enrich it. Through Edna’s conscious transformation and Theron’s oddly misplaced social roles, social blurring creates movement, albeit temporarily, outside of the social drama. As I discussed briefly in Chapter 2, an unmistakable piece of the unraveling of social roles is gender. By undoing and re-making the self, do Edna and Theron necessarily toy with the idea of inverting their gendered identities as social beings? In this chapter I will argue that they do as a part of a necessary adaptation in reaction to their restricted stations and their personal discoveries that those stations are no longer acceptable to them.

This process of adaptation occurs in two ways: first, through the self-encapsulating process of abjection as it is depicted in Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, and second, through a “mindless” pull toward the aesthetic and the sublime through the culminating release of abjection itself. Abjection deflects, at least in part, both Darwinian
and Althusserian determinism, and explains some of the idiosyncrasies of Theron and Edna’s actions over the course of their transformations. The power of the aesthetic, a mode of expressing the contaminated passion of abjection, supports a viable pursuit of repose and willing surrender in lieu of willing obedience and social restraint.

Transformation is not just about moving outside of ideology: it is also about the possibility of movement outside the self, and the implications that movement makes for the construction and re-construction of personal identity. In *The Gold Standard*, Walter Benn Michaels writes that “the possibility of being oneself . . . depends on the possibility of not being oneself, which alone enables the project of ‘self-control’ to emerge” (25). The moment of intoxication is freeing and, as Michaels suggests, a way to facilitate a “project” of self-control—but it is also muddling, and dangerously so. This unintelligible middle ground is best explained as abjection.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva addresses the possibility that the alteration of a being is a product of both possession and continuity of being:

…The heterogeneous flow, which portions the abject and sends back abjection, already dwells within a human animal that has been highly altered. I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be “me.” Not at all an other which whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be (10).

The interaction between Other and “me” is what both possesses and enables identities to alternately change and preserve themselves. In times of trauma, possession and preservation are arguably necessary as subconscious maneuvers in which to protect a portion of the psyche. In the case of Edna’s disappearance, such a method of alteration of the spirit through possession explains the inevitability of her own transformation of will
and subsequent departure from society. And for Theron Ware, what is at stake in the course of liberation is “not the value of morality in itself but how morality can be redeemed (my emphasis) from false versions of it” (Wilkie 66). In short, the result is an awareness of becoming a new person overnight, not as planned course of action, but as a symptom of psychological survival.

Side by side, the internal dialogues of Theron and Edna tend to be similar in language, tone and concept:

Both he and the world had changed overnight. The metamorphosis, in the harsh toils of which he had been blindly laboring so long, was accomplished. He stood forth, so to speak, in a new skin, and looked about him, with perceptions of quite an altered kind, upon what seemed in every way a fresh existence (Frederic 204).

She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known (Chopin 109)

Immersed in a wave of excitement, both Theron and Edna notice changes both in themselves and in the world around them—as if they are re-born in a world that either appears different because they are infants again, or in one that may have actually changed along with them. As Anna Parvulescu suggests, this kind of “oscillation or flickering” between the empirical self and the reflective self is, despite its sense of change and transformation, painful, vulnerable, and hyperaware of the perceived barbarity of the landscape that exists outside of it (478). While Theron’s transformation is a seeming product of metamorphosis and toil, Edna’s is a simpler process of waking up to be reborn.
Both examples show the subtle breaking down of a system in which something traditional must give. For Theron Ware, a subconscious inversion is clear not through action, but through language—as he actualizes his transformation, he becomes childlike—and, I would argue, more effeminate as he becomes more confused about his own identity. While Theron manages to convince himself most of the time that he is enhancing his mind and his status, moments of doubt shroud him in self-revulsion and fear:

It was at this psychological instant that the wave of self-condemnation suddenly burst upon and submerged the young clergyman. It passed again, leaving him staring fixedly at the pile of books he had taken down from the shelves, and gasped a little, as if for breath. Then the humorous side of the thing, perversely enough, appealed to him, and he grinned feebly to himself at the joke of his having imagined that he could write learnedly about the Chaldeans, or anything else (61).

In a rare moment of “truth” as he considers his ability and the shallow uncertainty of his path, Theron experiences a range of emotion from the grotesque to the carnivalesque. Kristeva calls humor in the face of abjection a necessary form of metaphorical excretion; it is, in her words, “apocalyptic laughter.” And it is here, in this first wave of self-revulsion and bitter-tasting truths, that Theron’s child-like regression and self-discovery begins.

During Celia’s strange seduction by piano, for example, Theron becomes like a small child holding allegiance to Celia’s nurturing aura. The room, adorned in soft light, naked men and women, and variations of “the Virgin Mary and the Child,” presents itself as a mystical womb in which Theron might surrender himself to Celia, Chopin, and a
Hellenized version of the Virgin Mary (191). From there, his relationship with Celia becomes strained: he whispers childishly about the affairs of Frederic Chopin and George Sand as she buys him a piano—then later, at the Catholic picnic, he voices his longing to have a beer: “Perhaps someone would bring him out a glass, as if he were a pretty girl” (236). It is as if Theron is so uncomfortable in his own skin that he must escape it, even if only for a moment, to try on new identities to see how they fit.

This state of abject transformation is one that hints at a desire for the sublime—in this “violent, clumsy breaking away,” there is an almost Oedipal desire and potential for pleasure under the “swaying of a power as securing as it is stifling” (Powers of Horror 13). Theron thinks even of Father Forbes in an obliquely erotic fashion that suggests a confused desire to either possess or become this figure of holy virility:

He looked at the priest, and had a quaint sensation of feeling as a romantic woman must feel in the presence of a specifically impressive masculine personality. It was indeed strange that this soft-voice, portly creature in a gown with his white, fat hands and his feline suavity of manner, should produce such a commanding and unique effect of virility (281).

The priest, who is supposed represent a chaste, almost asexual figure in the Catholic regime, establishes himself in Theron’s mind as a powerful mix of both masculine and feminine “virility.” Theron no longer feels like a child—this time, he is momentarily a woman in love with a figure that is indistinct in every way but in its impressiveness, strange beauty, and “virility.”

In a desire not to own but be owned—to seek authority, as discussed in the previous chapter—Theron desires “some restful human contact, which should exact
nothing from him in return, but just take charge of him” (184). Fritz Oehlschlaeger mentions that Theron, who seems alternately entranced and troubled by the female figures in his life, seeks “unqualified maternal acceptance” from them. Kristeva also notes that the maternal figure is “a trustee of the self’s clean and proper body,” thereby modeling an idealistic, pre-abjection version of the self that Theron longs to be close to, if not passively possess himself (71). He wants to “get as close to [Celia]—to [her] ideal, that is, as [he] can” (202).

One of the most telling outbursts of Theron’s undoings occurs after the picnic, when Theron and Celia are in the woods. Theron, caught up in the prospect of self-sacrifice versus the freedom to love and enjoy without pressure, becomes overwhelmed:

The thing that came uppermost in his mind, as it swayed and rocked in the tempest of emotion, was the strange reminiscence of early childhood in it all. It was like being a little boy again, nestling in an innocent, unthinking transport of affection against his mother’s skirts. The tears he felt scalding his eyes were the spontaneous, unashamed tears of a child; the tremulous and exquisite joy which spread, wave-like, over him, at once reposeful and yearning, was full of infantile purity and sweetness. He had not comprehended at all before what wellsprings of spiritual beauty, what limpid depths of idealism, his nature contained (257).

Despite his aspirations to be an intellectual, a part of Theron wants desperately to submit to a maternal figure that he feels is lacking in his life. And as he gives in to this moment of unashamed suffering, he finds in that moment a “wellspring” of beauty and simplicity.

Theron again voices his wish for Celia to become mother to his inner child: “It was absolutely as if I were a boy again—a good, pure-minded, fond little child, and you
were the mother that I idolized” (259). Yet as soon as the errand boy appears in the woods and clearly notices them together, Theron reverts back to the status-minded, uncertain, serious minister who understands the social meaning of his transgression: he exclaims, “Oh! What shall I do? It may easily mean my ruin!” and then quickly tries to cover it up with an explanation that the scandal would bury him; “I am a thousand times more defenseless than any woman—just a single whisper, and I am done for!” (260). As Theron continues to apologize for his sudden fear of social repercussion, he attempts to explain that these feelings, so new in his “lonely life,” have “unstrung” him to the point that he is unclear about his own existence and place in the world (261). Theron is undone, and in the process, so are his relationships with the people around him.

As Celia reveals her harsh perception of Theron’s folly, his tone about the nature of his transformation changes:

Everything in the world has been altered for me—torn up by the roots. I was a new being, plunged into a new existence. The kiss had done that. But until I saw you again, I could not tell whether this vast change in me and my life was for good or for bad—whether the kiss had come to me as a blessing or a curse (321). Three major changes are evident in this conclusion: first, the acknowledgement that Theron’s altered state is “torn up by the roots” rather than illuminated scholastically; second, the established marker that the kiss from Celia—or perhaps more accurately, the flirtation that led up to the kiss—initiated the epic drama of the fall; and third, the uncertainty of the goodness or badness of the conclusion of that kiss. The mind, thrown in trauma by the empty lure of sensuality and idealism, must react in response—to reject and preserve, repel and concede, illuminate and conceal—all to an ambivalent end.
According to Kristeva, “abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse . . . It takes on the form of the exclusion of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up” (17). Theron’s undoing, then, is at once a collapse both the sacred and the sensual. Without a guidepost for living, he seems to try on new identities—the child and the lover, both male and female. And the space in which he occupies becomes abject in its meaninglessness and its loneliness. Without the ability to fully deconstruct that site of trauma, Theron is doomed to be “torn up by the roots” with the help of the very people who helped him step outside of himself.

In *The Awakening*, an obfuscation of gender roles does not manifest itself directly through image and language—instead, Chopin demonstrates subtle change in Edna through altered sensations and perceptions controlled primarily by Edna herself. Edna does not wonder out loud about others as Theron does; she does, however, articulate the ambivalent loosening of her tightly-bound “mantle of reserve.” A “certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it” (893). In quiet defiance to polite society, she assembles a strong, “new” woman who falls asleep reading Emerson, speaks frankly and rebelliously to her husband, and actively chooses her mates not through physical beauty or a desire to reproduce, but simply through desire itself: through the open decadence to own herself and act as she pleases. It is the process of loosening oneself in order to lose oneself.
Nevertheless, Edna is never in the thrall of exultation; through abjection, she experiences a muted and final joy, so that she can softly and deliberately escape from her tightly-wound, but loosely gendered identity. In “Arachnologies,” Nancy Miller explains that “only the subject who is both self-possessed and possesses across the library of the already read has the luxury of flirting with the escape from identity—like the loss of Arachne’s ‘head’—promised by an aesthetics of the decentered (decapitated, really) body” (274). As Edna observes her station on Grand Isle, she becomes increasingly aware of a “self-censorship” she had not noticed before: “She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself” (47-48).

Abandoning her most repetitive standards of life, Edna returns to the “romantic fictions” she enjoyed as a child, only this time they are inwardly focused in lieu of the “conventional infatuations” that we learn as children (Schweitzer 168). Edna realizes that she must shake “an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness”—and while it was a self-admitted “mood,” it filled her with a “vague anguish” that incited her to action rather than an unproductive lamentation toward the wiles of “Fate” (886). Ivy Schweitzer points out that Edna’s discovery is an eschewing not just of the cultural norms she learns as a wife and mother—in the process, she also rejects the standard of “female self-censorship and self-
containment” (168). This individualistic endeavor is, according to Schweitzer, a distinctly masculine pursuit.

But Edna is involved primarily in the aesthetics of being, in general—she is not deliberately engaged in subverting gender or gendered identity, and she does not question her “place” as much as the Reverend Ware does. While Edna is painted as a “handsome” woman with big, strong hands and teeth, her focus is not on becoming male or masculine; more specifically, she wants to become herself, and on her own terms. According to Nicholas Gaskill, Chopin “expresses the paradoxical way in which the aesthetic, like sex, uses the rhythmical movements of corporeal experience to produce an ecstasy imagined to move beyond the boundaries of the self” (171). Because abjection is as much about the sublime as it is about the grotesque:

When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass windy shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, here or think. The ‘sublime’ object dissolves into the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory . . . in which I stray in order to be (Powers of Horror 12).

The sublime is a space for the aesthetic and the profound, but it also “expands us” and “overstrains us” and “causes us to be both here, as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling.” Gaskill compares Chopin’s descriptions of the sea, for instance, with its “seductive” voice, “sensuous” touch, and natural rhythms to that of “sexual rhythms and their concomitant pleasures.” The sea is the actor, in this case—and Edna is both shrouded and freed by it. Edna’s sudden ability to swim, for example, is a small awakening in and of itself—in being willing to let her body explore the ocean on her
own, she fashions a utopia that is simultaneously manipulating and being controlled by
the forces of nature.

This sensual personal freedom extends not only to her relationship with nature,
but with people as well, both male and female. A hint of the homoerotic occurs between
Edna and the quintessential mother-figure, Adele Ratignolle, but those moments are
innocuous and fleeting. As Mary Biggs suggests in “Si tu savais,” Edna is a
“metaphorical lesbian” who experiments with the masculine and admires the feminine.
Her description of Mrs. Ratignolle, for example, is laid out as if one were gazing at a
voluptuous painting:

There was nothing subtle or hidden about her charms; her beauty was all there,
flaming and apparent: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could
restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted,
that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson
fruit in looking at them . . . One would not have wanted her white neck a mite less
full or her beautiful arms more slender. Never were hands more exquisite than
hers, and it was a joy to look at them . . . (888).

Edna does not desire Adele explicitly, but her admiration of her appearance and form
goes beyond the purely aesthetic; by gazing at her, she devours the image as if she were a
man enjoying the bounty of “some other delicious crimson fruit.” Yet unlike Theron,
Edna is simply trying on this kind of social blurring for the enjoyment of it. Her desire is
reserved for moments of release, like this one, when she is able to appreciate beauty
undeterred and without obligation.

Edna’s final position before to her suicide is one of complete independence and
agency, at least as she perceives it. She tells Robert: ‘You have been a very, very foolish
boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both” (106-7). Edna abandons all Romantic dialogue; here, she is the epitome of self-reliance, but in a way that is subversive rather than transcendental. But when Edna adopts this aggressive, traditionally male “language of ownership,” she also mimics the very language used to undermine her, thereby creating an odd “minstrelsy” that both subverts and submits to authority (Schweitzer 177). The paradigm of male ownership and feminine disadvantage is present, always—and as this predicament becomes more obvious, as with the case of the “pigeon house” that is liberating, but does not make her happy, Edna realizes that disengagement is the only way for her to safely rediscover and re-assert her own identity.

In the beginning of the process of her spiritual awakening, Edna felt “like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (912). Now, those realities demand release, and the sea beckons. Kristeva would agree; in *Powers of Horror*, she describes the breaking down of a world into nothing and the subsequent corpse that epitomizes abjection and the finality of borders broken down in non-existence:

Deprived of the world, therefore, I fall into a faint. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue’s full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection . . . Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us (4).
Despite the escape of physical boundaries that is quintessence of abjection, the corpse itself becomes an engulfing thing. The harshness of its reality renders any of its “imaginary uncanniness” irrelevant. Like the sea, the idea of the corpse also beckons to Edna and presents itself as the only way to erase the borders that continue to re-erect themselves for her.

William Bartley notes that Edna “chooses the immediate and perfect deliverance of death over the hectic improvisation of a succession of partial deliverances, the process bearing fruit only in a future beyond her generation. Noting this, we are now in a position to understand that if the well-lived life is a measure of artistic success, we owe a profound debt of sympathy to those who, in a moral and artistic crisis, do not ‘possess the courageous soul’ (742). But is it fair to say that Edna was first of all, truly in crisis mode, and second, that she did not at all possess a “courageous soul”? Third, while the Reverend Ware would have been grateful for a bit of sympathy from someone besides just Sister Soulsby, Ms. Pontellier, I think, would not have been satisfied with the same kind of sentiment.

Here,—in terms of both novels, that is—Kristeva’s analysis of one in exile, or a deject, is useful:

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself) separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter—since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. Necessarily dichotomous, . . . he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes
himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations (8).

Kristeva goes on to suggest that the more the deject “strays, the more he is saved.” Chopin “allowed herself the freedom to explore the difficulties faced by a heroine caught between the Dionysian and Appollonian forces of her existence” (Boren 189). That ability to explore is made available through the mobility of self—which would involve an abject, transitory, preservation of self exactly as Kristeva would describe it. Likewise, Theron’s desire for change puts him in a predicament where on a more overtly traumatic level, he attempts to “include himself among them” in a way that is so uncomfortable, so ill-fitting that it becomes, as Kristeva points out, “the scalpel that carries out his separations.”

The sense of beauty, security, and pleasure that the transgressor feels is external, temporary, self-constructed and even fake. But it is enjoyable—and perhaps even necessary in the practice of self-expression and personal discovery in relation to the grip of ideology and what the protagonist perceives as a necessary departure or transgression outside of it. Although the pursuit of the material can be a ideological construct in itself, it is the process of a willing pursuit of the material—not for gain, not for collecting, simply for the subversive pleasure and inherent “illumination” within it—that perhaps retains at least some of the transgressor’s ability to attain freedom—and with that frame, a bout of abject instability, too.
CONCLUSION

Heterogeneity and Homogeneity: Turning the Circle Square

. . . desire expresses itself most fully where only those absorbed in its delights and torments are present, that it triumphs most completely over other human preoccupations in places sheltered from view. Thus it is paradoxically in hiding, that the secrets of desire come to light, that hegemonic impositions and their reversals, evasions, and subversions are at their most honest and active, and that the identities and dysjunctures between felt passion and established culture place themselves on most vivid display.

–Joan Cocks, The Oppositional Imagination

The primary tensions involved in this study can be broadly generalized as that between heterogeneity, which carries with it instability and even loneliness, and homogeneity, which offers a safe but restrictive, and in some cases, illusory, sense of rules and community. Michael Madden’s deathbed revelation to Theron is one that I think broadly applies to this study: “You do not realize that [Celia and Father Forbes] are held up by the power of the true Church, as a little child learning to walk is held up with a belt by its nurse. They can say and do things, and no harm at all come to them, which would mean destruction to you, because they have help, and you are walking alone” (298). Michael foreshadows Theron’s failure: he falls not because his intellectual passions are evil, but rather because they are without meaning, purpose or support—and without the structure of an ideological mold, they remain vulnerable. Where Theron errs is not in his idealism, but rather in the fact that he took the words of the Catholics in with “pure Protestant seriousness” (Oehlschlaeger 252). Edna, on the other hand, gets advice from both Adele and her doctor that she would do well to remember the evolutionary
ideals that govern her station and her outcome—which she clearly ignores. Edna cannot accept the role of mother-woman, nor can she develop the wings of the truly “courageous” artist; she, too, is walking alone, but on a path that is far more conscious—although no less destructive.

In sum, an ambiguous treatment of identity and authority leaves room for slippage within ideology. What is interesting within this dynamic is the way in which beauty, art, rest and repose work in conjunction with each other to counter ideology: rather than further the parade of hard “truths” in Theron’s case, or turn the key to the gilded cage in Edna’s case, the ability of an individual to temporarily escape social consciousness may also catalyze the construction of a pleasant, protective coat over unpleasant and unprotected patches of desire and resistance. In lieu of the comfort of homogeneity, the individual creates his or her own imaginary space of comfort.

As Joseph Carroll tells us, “people need to understand the world around them, and they thus construct religions, philosophies, sciences, and the arts. But they also need resources, sex, and status, so they use their cognitive activities, like their other capacities, as means for obtaining the ‘good things’ in life (xviii-xix).” His ordering of activities (particularly the grouping of resources, sex and status) raise important questions about the needs and desires of the individual. Are material resources and social status on par with the instinctual need for sex? Perhaps it did not originate that way, at least not in the Darwinian sense, but it is fair to suggest that through the development of culture, all three have become equally powerful as detractors from institutions of willing obedience.
One of the most awkward nuances of these transformations is that of gendered identity. The shifting of socially assigned gender roles as a way to at least “see,” if not put into effect, change and transformation, is an interesting one. And in typical Victorian style, the prevalence of sex and sexual identification is more of a suggestion than an admission throughout. What is left is a hybrid of traditional masculinity and femininity poked with holes for breathing room—more often than not, through an illicit object of admiration. In this way, the impulses that Darwin describes so thoroughly actually play against his own described processes of instinctual inevitability and social instinct.

Likewise—like unguided missiles, Theron and Edna push boundaries without target; this insistence, while it may be inevitable, is by too arbitrarily destructive to safely survive. Thrailkill calls their methods of escape a form of social terrorism, or “voodoo death” - “the fatal power of the imagination working through unmitigated terror” (14). This outlook is fatalistically depressing, however, in the transformations of Theron and Edna, I would argue, such a zero-sum interpretation is shallow at best. So what is at stake at the heart of these novels, besides the fatalistic tendency of these fin de siècle attempts at disillusionment? Whether we discuss the attempt to change or transform in Darwinian, Althusserian, psychological, or aesthetic terms, questions of corporeality and human emotion still linger: What governs the “feeling” body? And what element of control is there in beauty, instinct, culture, and feeling?

As Jane Thrailkill suggests, our attempts to understand physicality and feeling in art and life are often futile because of our refusal as readers to acknowledge the corporeal
and the sublime in the same way our protagonists have. The best way to account for them, she tells us, is through the word “wonder.” Wonder is a way to imagine desire without limits, and therefore to create new realities in the process. Then is this state part of a feeling beyond pleasure—something that reaches beyond what is already known (and is made possible, or rather available, through feeling instead of cognition, as Theron and Edna arguably demonstrate?). Furthermore, does this oddity of feeling and imagination become the starting point for pathology, hysteria, or the like? Are wonder and social terrorism two sides of the same coin?

Throughout this study, I have focused on an a broad roadmap to the issues at hand rather than hone in on a moral assessment of the situation; to me, too much time in criticism has been spent trying to cast a decisive brushstroke across the morality, immorality, goodness and badness of Theron’s and Edna’s acts. But as Tom Perrin states in “Beauty and the Priest,” if aestheticism and instinct are pragmatic—if there is “no connection between the beautiful and the good,” then where can the connection be between a moral center, which is arguably necessary, and the practice toward utility, or what Sister Soulsby calls “horse-sense”?

Perhaps this disconnect between the feeling body, the moral, and the psychosocial aspects of these “awkward illuminations” is also a reason why figures like Sister Soulsby, Mr. Mandalet, or Dr. Ledsmar do not figure into the stories as deeply sympathetic individuals: they are more like immovable furniture that adorn this space that Edna and Theron seek to navigate, alone, and without the kind of tearful evocation one might
experience in a novel of explicit courtship or marriage instead. As Nicholas Gaskill reminds us, in the balance of art and ideology, and the pleasurable and the abject, success and failure are rooted in a careful balance of “willing and letting go” (171). In other words, the “best way to live,” to echo William Bartley again, is more about willing disobedience and deliberate surrender than it is about romantic sentiment, willing obedience, natural selection, or ideological reproduction. Gaskill argues that Edna, at least on the corporeal level, deliberately releases herself from all constraint. It is not a moral choice. Theron, on the other hand, presents a more clear-cut case for a muddling that is nightmarish rather than intoxicating, and a creeping doom that is more sly than it is natural or didactic.

Perhaps if Edna and Theron had more time to distance themselves from their paths of progression, it would have given them the agency to take possession of the abject—to chart their own transformations, or at the very least, to move away from the downward pull of their impending damnations. The inevitability of these downfalls demonstrates a blurred vision that is arguably made more clear through the aesthetic,—but does it not also take time, and a kind of settling, to see the abject and to understand what it means in an aesthetic landscape? Finally, the failure of categories in these stories illustrate an acknowledgement of the utility of ideological manipulation in order to live both pleasurably and peacefully. Shall we all, then, become Mandalets and Soulsbys?

But all of these questions hinge upon the assumption that there is agency in daily affairs—that there is a such thing as willing obedience not only in the process of
interpellation, but in general—that throughout our lives, our ability to act independently is always (or at least nearly always) an option. Whether this is the case or not is the unanswered question that hinges upon the knowability of everything that rests upon the heads of Mrs. Pontellier and Mr. Ware. But the common thread in this network of perspectives seems to be that there is no agency to be had for the bearers of revolt—revolt from evolution, revolt from social reproduction, and in its more individual and explosive form, revolt from the ruptured point of abjection. So if the answer to the question of agency is no, then the answer to all of other questions are sadly irrelevant.

It seems that if we were to model these rebellions in the face of restraint, we would make concentric circles around the ideological culture of fin de siècle America. As we evade obedience, we succeed temporarily—and then we are thrust back into another, larger circle of conformity, followed by the abject process of that likely takes us back to another version of revolt that sent the transgressor awash in the first place. But as Richard Chase explains, “the imagination that has produced much of the best and most characteristic American fiction has been shaped by the contradictions and not by the unities and harmonies of our culture” (1). Perhaps the “point,” then, is simply perpetuation for self-definition and cultural entertainment; as our culture expands, so do the methods we use to keep them in place, and on its underside, the notion that perpetually exists to challenge and overthrow it—to alternately preserve and eject uncategorized ideals of Americanness, in this case, in the abject space that shares both the grotesque and the sublime that define and refine it.
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