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Creating Female Space: The Feminine Sublime in The Awakening and The House of Mirth

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Creating Female Space:
The Feminine Sublime in *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*

by
Emily Faye Faison

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Creating Female Space:
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Emily Faye Faison

Southeastern University, 2013

This thesis examines the Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, the respective protagonists of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, integrating the theoretical concept of the sublime, particularly engaging Barbara Freemans's idea of a feminine sublime, as discussed in her book, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. In three chapters, the thesis provides an overview and brief history of the theory of the sublime, contextualizing Freeman's argument, and measures the success of both Edna's and Lily's attempts to engage the sublime as they each struggle to find their place as women in early twentieth-century society.

PREFACE

I would like to thank my Thesis Advisor, Professor Alisa M. DeBorde. Not only did she help me to develop my thesis, but she truly nurtured and developed my research and writing skills. Thank for you for giving me space to explore, encouragement to write more, and for cooking some delicious meals along the way.

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INTRODUCTION

“These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.”

Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

From a long and dark history of silence, women have emerged with voices, both loud and soft, strong and distinctive, mournful and exuberant. In art and literature, women are no longer invisible as they once were, but the wounds of caged silence do not heal quickly. Though traditionally marginalized because they have been understood on masculine terms, women have never been invisible, regardless of imposed silence, and now, emerging from history, women artists and writers are reclaiming histories: as Alice Walker searches for her mother’s garden among centuries of hushed-up foremothers, as Virginia Woolf writes Judith Shakespeare’s stories, these almost-lost voices make even more powerful the voices of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, the two writers whose novels I will be engaging in this essay. Chopin and Wharton, through their literature, are creating spaces for women in the past, present and future. Though Audre Lorde isn’t the focus of my paper’s subject, she beautifully captures the essence of the topic: the deepness of the reserve of woman’s creativity, hidden for so long, a place of power

that may be discovered within oneself – a discovery that is joyous and sublime... the deepness, the sublimity, the mystery, of femininity in art and literature.

Author Kate Chopin is one of these women who dared tap into this “incredible reserve of creativity and power” (Lorde 223) and tapped so deeply that the creativity proved too powerful for her time (1900) – she was hushed. Edith Wharton, of the same time period, also tapped into her reserve of creativity, and though her art was not silenced like Chopin’s, her personal life and marriage suffered. The backlash against these women that took place as a result of their cultural context is precisely the reason they deserve thoughtful examination and analysis both critical and sympathetic. In this paper, I will explore the female protagonists of two novels: Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, and Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, by Edith Wharton.

Edna and Lily each sought to create spaces for themselves despite rigid cultural constructs that determined the boundaries of their femininities and social statuses. In her search for a feminine space, Edna attempts to forge her own femininity, outside of those allowed for women in her cultural context. Lily seeks a feminine space by attempting social mobility, desiring to rise above her current social standing. While both women are othered in their societies, Edna seeks to *understand* her otherness and transcend societal constraints, while Lily seeks to *dissolve* her otherness and simply rise to a new level in the social hierarchy. Art and the aesthetic of the sublime are woven into each of these women’s stories as they encounter and engage the sublime in their respective attempts to create a uniquely feminine space. Part of my project is measuring Edna’s and Lily’s success in engaging the sublime as a means to or byproduct of achieving their goals of creating space. Both women use art as a component of their respective interactions with the sublime, a concept I will explore at length in chapter 1 of this essay.

An understanding of the theoretical concept of the sublime is crucial because it provides a foundation for my discourse. Longinus, the first to write a treatise on the sublime in the first century A.D., provides a foundational look at the concept of the sublime. Edmund Burke later wrote *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), which is crucial for its distinction between the aesthetic categories of sublime and beautiful, a distinction that Emmanuel Kant also focuses on in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant also introduces the idea of excess as a critical element of the sublime, an idea later discussed by Luce Irigaray, one of the few females to enter the discussion of the sublime with *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985). Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror* (1982), discusses the transcendence of sublimity in relation to the abject. Most notably, I introduce Barbara Freeman and her *Feminine Sublime* (1997) as a new exploration of and response to this primarily patriarchal concept.

Freeman's groundbreaking book in the arena of the sublime theory is just one part of a growing discourse of feminine inclusiveness. As a part of this trend, Freeman forges a path for women in theory and criticism, where women are severely underrepresented. Though representation of women in art has increased substantially throughout the past few decades, theory has continues to lack a representation of women or feminine. Particularly in the area of the sublime, which has primarily been discussed from a patriarchal perspective, theory needs women's voices. In the same way that Chopin and Wharton created spaces for themselves as female writers in the literary world, Freeman is creating a space for women in theory with her book, and creating a space within the theory of the sublime for a feminine perspective.

The feminine perspective, as a rather broad ideology, encompasses quite a lot of history and social background. Margaret Ferguson's concept of non-linear feminism provides a

foundational understanding of feminism and feminist history that shaped my understanding of the importance of Chopin's, Wharton's, and even Freeman's work. "Feminism in Time" provides a brief overview of the history of feminism, including a list of important feminists and their works, affirming the idea that feminism is not merely a historical fact or political topic, but encompasses who women are and where women have been, without confining feminism to a linear and therefore restrictive, progression.

"The Woman Question" headnote in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* is primarily focused on the role of women in multiple levels of Victorian Era culture, effectively illustrating feminine ideals and the oppression of women leading up to the nineteenth century from a literary point of view, providing a stable background of women's roles that contextualize Chopin's and Wharton's views of women that were still relatively revolutionary for late-nineteenth to early twentieth century. The essay also includes a catalogue of literature that pushed back from that social tradition. As a rebuff towards the Victorian era of "The Woman Question," the trend of the "New Woman" rose in popularity in the 1890's, a concept clearly explained in A. R. Cunningham's "The 'New Woman Fiction' of the 1890's" as a heroine who rejects major features of the feminine role as defined in Victorian England, especially the socially accepted structure of marriage, which New Woman novelists of the time agreed was discriminant towards women. Chopin and Wharton follow close on the heels of the New Woman characters, their emancipated and intelligent female protagonists taking on many characteristics of the New Woman. Though many of the works of these New Woman novelists did not gain entry into the literary canon, Cunningham claims that their contributions have led to more realistic characterization of females in literature, and indeed, this genre of women's literature has influenced the literature of the early 1900's, including the two novels of focused analysis, *The*

Awakening and *The House of Mirth*. Each of these essays demonstrates feminism's impact on literature and culture studies, and provides foundations for understanding feminism in cultural context in order to examine Chopin and Wharton.

CHAPTER I: SUBLIME'S PATRIARCHAL ORIGINS AND THE FEMININE RESPONSE

With a long and somewhat slippery history of terminology, the concept of the sublime carries the baggage of many varying definitions, but remains constantly connected to the way humans experience and produce art. From philosophers arguing for an aesthetic by which to judge art and writing, including Longinus, Immanuel Kant, and Edmund Burke, to the Romantics of the 1800's who characterized the sublime as a supernatural transcendental experience, the sublime is deeply entrenched in art and literary history. Artists who experienced profound moments of sublimity translated them into poetry, often involving elements of nature and language of overwhelming strength, terror, and untamed magnificence.

A goal shared by these artists and thinkers is the hope of reaching beyond mere human experience, a central aim for art and literature. Human condition, however, is not limited to a male experience or view of the world, but in the long history of the theory of the sublime, there has been little female perspective, restricting a sublime experience of art only to those who view the sublime through the lens of patriarchy. Patriarchy characterizes much of history and art; indeed, the majority of the world's population experiences art, history, politics, and culture from the perspective of just half of the world's population. Until recently, the sublime has been applied and discussed only from a patriarchal perspective, making it an exclusively male experience. The artistic discrimination present throughout history has caused women like Mary Shelley to fight for a vindication of the rights of woman, forced authors like George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) to write under male pseudonyms, and killed the careers of otherwise talented females like Kate Chopin. Even when women writers in history were finally accepted as artists, they still were not "genius" enough to experience or write a sublime aesthetic.

It is this exclusively patriarchal aesthetic of the sublime that Harvard literature professor Barbara Freeman enters, determined to carve out a desperately needed place for femininity among the many essays on the sublime. From deeply gendered definitions to exclusively male discussion of the sublime, women have been excluded from this portion of literary experience and tradition. Barbara Freeman's *The Feminine Sublime* is a project set out to rectify this problem in the literary tradition by fashioning a treatise for a specifically feminine sublime. Freeman attempts to trace that feminine sublime throughout history and in literature that has already been written. In her treatment of both Kate Chopin's *Edna Pontellier* and Edith Wharton's *Lily Bart*, Barbara Freeman carves a space that allows a discussion of these female characters from a new, distinctly feminine sublime.

The traditional definitions of the sublime expressed prior to Freeman's are primarily patriarchal, but with the lengthy histories of discourse, manifestoes and treatises, they are overwhelmingly varied in their definitions of the concept. This wide variety is why I will only be presenting a few major defenses of the sublime here, particularly as they pertain to Barbara Freeman, the primary theorist I will engage throughout my argument. Many of these are concerned with "unrepresentable excess," a concept Freeman explores in relation to femininity. Specifically, Barbara Freeman's theory provides a rich field for analysis because of her specifically female treatment of the sublime. Just as Chopin and Wharton carved out spaces for themselves within existing literary worlds, Freeman carves out a space for the feminine within an existing patriarchally dominated theory.

Following is a synopsis of the sublime tradition, featuring Barbara Freeman, along with Longinus, Immanuel Kant, and Edmund Burke, upon whose work she builds her own definition. I will also employ the ideas of Julia Kristeva and her work on the abject in my third chapter,

juxtaposing a socially abject state with sublimity. For the purposes of this thesis, the definition of the sublime is an integration of Freeman's feminine sublime together with more traditional theories of the sublime, including Longinus, Kant and Burke, for a well-rounded understanding of the sublime that will inform my discussion of *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*.

All of these writers commonly agree that the sublime is more than mere beauty. Edmund Burke argues that "While the beautiful is well-formed and aesthetically pleasing, the sublime has the power to compel and destroy us," noting a firm distinction between the characterization of beauty versus sublimity. Longinus also addresses the power of the sublime, noting that sublimity, "a certain distinction and excellence in expression," manifests itself in elevation (76), causing ecstasy in the reader. According to Kant and Longinus, the sublime is a heightened and lucid sense of wonder, awe, and terror, provoked in the mind of the audience or the artist, by nature or something equally separate from the human mind that perceives the "other" object, leading the artist experiencing the sublime to share subsequent emotions or thoughts with an audience through art¹. While Burke and Kant are more focused on the audience's sublime experience in relation to the art the audience sees, hears, or reads, Longinus focuses on sublimity as it relates to the author or artist and the process of producing his work. So, while some treatises explain the sublime as a transcendental encounter with a supernatural element expressed in the form of art, other theorists describe the sublime as a powerful emotion experienced as the viewer sees, reads, or hears a work of art that provokes that sublime atmosphere. Thus, not only may an artist experience sublimity, but so too can the audience.

In his partially recovered treatise, *On the Sublime*, Longinus primarily focuses on rhetoric, asking how poetic inspiration can be best employed or how the author can invoke

¹ Going forward in this paper, the term "art" will be broadened to include music, painting, drawing, or any other kind of artistic expression, not limited to literature.

sublimity in his or her work. Though the text only exists in part, it is one of the oldest and most foundational discussions of the sublime. While the majority of Longinus' treatise describes how an author might best invoke the sublime in his or her work, for Longinus, the sublime remains a source of inspiration or a gifting that not all writers can produce.

Early in *On the Sublime*, Longinus argues for a sublimity that “flashes forth at the right moment, scattering everything before it like a thunderbolt” (76). With a foundational “whole texture” (76) of solid writing, the author creates a work that is susceptible to the momentary and fantastic lightning-strike of the sublime. As a thunderbolt is brief and illuminating, the sublime is temporary, inspired, and magnificent. Longinus claims that there is more to writing than can be conventionally learned: though good writers can have skill in invention and ordering parts of the whole, only those who are truly “superhuman writers” can write the sublime. However, even these talented artists must adhere to certain elements of elevated language – that is, writing in such a way that inspires or conveys greatness, beauty, truth, or even terror. According to Longinus, the effects of this kind of sublime writing include ecstasy, loss of rationality, alienation leading to identification with the creative process of the artist, deep emotion with mixed pleasure and exaltation. The sublime, moreover, manifests itself in nature or in art that is amply distressing to cause wonder and fear.

Advocating a balance of “inspiration and rhetorical mastery,” Longinus provides five elements that can help create elevated language. According to Longinus, the sublime is the “echo of a great soul,” meaning that the author must, above all, possess a certain genius or talent that cannot be acquired or practiced. The male artist capable of creating sublime works must first have the “power of forming great conceptions,” or a brilliant mind. Secondly, this brilliant artist must also possess a vehement and inspired passion in order to invoke the sublime. Finally, the

brilliant and passionate artist must be able to write in an orderly, elevated way. Unlike the softness and supposed chaos of femininity, orderly writing follows a rigid structure, closely mirroring the orderly authoritarianism of patriarchy. According to Longinus, while “unordered sublimity is ineffective,” if the work is truly great, sublimity will “flash forth at the right moment, scattering everything before it like a thunderbolt” (Longinus 76). These flashing moments of sublimity are twofold: the sublime can only occur in this way as a result of carefully ordered and brilliant art, essentially, following Longinus’ ‘tips and tricks’ for sublime writing. If the writer indeed adheres to Longinus’ method of producing elevated and dignified language, the writing will not seem stiff or mechanical because the sublime will “burst forth,” shadowing over mere mechanics. If the writer is passionate and already capable of producing the sublime in his works, the artist must still utilize figures of speech and noble diction, as well as dignified and elevated composition. With this understanding, Longinus implies that the style of writing, over the object of rapture that inspires the writing, is from where the sublime is summoned.

Yet, each of these “rules” for creating the sublime, from the passionate and brilliant soul to the orderly, elevated language of the sublime writing, leave little room for a female passion, womanly brilliance, or feminine language. Being consistent with his time, Longinus does not explicitly reject women from the sublime aesthetic, but neither does he include nor advocate for any feminine sense of sublimity. Thus, the first true treatise of the sublime is one in which women are not included. The “echo of the great soul,” therefore refers exclusively to a masculine soul, tying up the concept of sublimity with masculinity and patriarchy.

Likewise, Kant and Burke both distinguish between mere beauty and the higher order of the sublime, discussing the best ways to judge taste, according to quality, quantity, and other concepts of empirical beauty. Kant argues that the beautiful might even be purposeless, and he

leans in favor of sublimity as a preferred method of aesthetic code, maintaining that “the sublime does not lead to disinterested contemplation, as does the beautiful, but to deep feeling” (375).

For Kant, while beauty is connected to form and boundary, “the sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it the boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought” (386). Beauty is beautiful because it fits with empirical standards of form and presentation, while the sublime is the very concept of formlessness, boundlessness, having no boundaries or limits: “the excess that is beyond form or boundary, that is the sublime” (386). Kant claims that along with the object of rapture causing the sublime, there is an excess that can’t be understood or comprehended, prefiguring Freeman’s later concept that this otherness might even be feminine. The object of rapture is too much to comprehend, blocking the mind, but after this blockage comes heightened clarity. Thus, the sublime is connected to an excess that expands beyond comprehension: transcendence. The sublime is not just a higher ‘level’ of beautiful, but a totally different experience altogether. The sublime is separate and above beauty, or terror, or quality – reaching a kind of extreme that might combine all of these.

The most important aspect of the sublime might be this theme of “excess:” an extreme ‘too-much-ness’ that categorizes an experience or an object as too much to represent or recreate. Beauty can be beheld, terror can incite fear, but the sublime goes beyond because it *is* beyond. Excess is what makes the object of rapture *sublime* rather than merely beautiful. Yet, Longinus, Kant and Burke, along with the majority of (male) theorists who treat the sublime throughout its history, tend to other that excess, attempting to dominate the very thing that makes sublimity sublime.

Barbara Freeman identifies the superiority and supremacy of those who dominate the

discourse of the sublime aesthetic as a perfect example of patriarchy, and so argues that the traditional sublime theory is a patriarchal one. Patriarchal sublimity has traditionally designated the excess otherness to a feminine label; just as patriarchy attempts to control femininity, so a patriarchal understanding of sublimity seeks to control the excess or otherness. This gendering of the sublime that divides the components of the sublime assigns gender to each component, leaving no place for femininity on the “dominant” side of sublimity. Freeman’s project is to create a feminine sublime, to find a place for femininity in the sublime theory that is not merely other. Because Freeman’s definition of “feminine” is a “formulation of an alternative position” (10) and that which contests binaries (9), her feminine sublime does not seek to dominate or control the excess that is othered by a traditional sublime theory, instead embracing the excess that characterizes the sublime.

According to Freeman, the traditional sublime is a construction of the patriarchal subject, which maintains its borders by subordinating difference. If otherness characterizes the sublime, then the sublime is also characterized by a domestication of otherness that is designated as feminine. In her discussion, Freeman references Luce Irigaray’s definition of excess, meaning an “unrepresentable difference” (9), implying limitless and unknowable otherness. While those who wrote discourses on the traditional sublime (Kant; Burke; Longinus) try to master the object of rapture, the feminine sublime is a reconfiguring of the sublime that tries to find otherness without mastering or domesticating it. What is hidden and repressed by traditional means of sublimity, the feminine sublime allows to remain excess, therefore remaining truly sublime.

According to Freeman, feminine has a twofold meaning, comprised of the socially constructed category of woman that has endured universal and transhistorical oppression, which underscores the reality of women’s suffering, as well as indicates a position of resistance with

respect to patriarchal order (Freeman 10). This means that femininity is the woman side of the man/woman binary, but femininity is also the position that opposes patriarchal order. Freeman defines feminine as that which opposes binary, thus, Freeman's femininity is more concerned with "moving boundaries," as Judith Butler phrases, than with sexual difference. Freeman contends that "what is specifically feminine about the feminine sublime is not an assertion of innate sexual difference, but a radical rearticulation of the role gender plays" (10). In this paper, femininity takes on a theoretical role when discussing the femininity of Edna and Lily, as they attempt to resist patriarchal order and move boundaries. However, a practical understanding of sexual femininity (the feminine side of the male/female binary) is also important to the discussion of Edna's and Lily's feminine roles. What makes Edna and Lily truly feminine, in the eyes of Freeman, are their respective attempts, and potential successes, at resisting patriarchal order and moving boundaries. My paper will examine whether or not Edna and Lily succeed in moving boundaries of femininity, and how they each encounter or use the sublime while doing so.

Freeman cites Patricia Yaeger, who defines a female sublime as a particular mode of women's writing, a mode of empowerment through which the woman writer can "invent, for women, a vocab of ecstasy and empowerment, a new way of reading female experience" (Freeman 150). However, Freeman argues against this, claiming that Yaeger, by viewing the sublime exclusively as a mode of writing or a narrative strategy, actually domesticates it – by making the sublime an arena for "subjective bliss" and "pleasures" – the sublime becomes kinder, gentler, another version of beautiful, which is not sublime at all. The feminine sublime then is not merely a mode of writing, but a "uniqueness and commonality of women's oppression" that affects woman's articulation of sublimity (6). The feminine sublime is therefore

a woman's experience, including both beauty and oppression, resisting categorization because of the broadness of women's experience. This resistance makes the feminine sublime a slippery definition, but ever more important to appreciate.

The following two chapters examine Edna's and Lily's search for personal femininity, viewed from the perspective of Freeman's feminine sublime – a concept that characterizes their individual searches. The feminine sublime, unlike a traditional, patriarchal understanding of the sublime, is experienced, rather than achieved, making it a component of story, not a trophy. Though the feminine sublime resists definite measurement, Edna's and Lily's stories may be understood via the feminine sublime.

CHAPTER II: A SUBLIME AWAKENING: EDNA'S FOURTH FEMININITY

Despite *The Awakening*'s fairly popular reception among women readers, critics deemed it a "novel of adultery" (Toth, "Introduction" 10). The negative criticism and scandal that surrounded *The Awakening* caused publishers to reject Kate Chopin's next novel, effectively ending her writing career. *The Awakening*'s rejection and Chopin's subsequent withdrawal from the literary community of the 1890's led to the novel's burial; however, in the 1970's, *The Awakening* had an awakening of its own. As Chopin's text resurfaced, her life and work received popular and critical attention, and she became something of a trend, hailed as an emblem of the feminist literary movement. Kate Chopin was admired as a lost sister and a martyr of feminist social criticism by critics like Emily Toth, among others, who devoted research to Chopin's novel in the '70's. Though these critics hold high *The Awakening* as a parable in favor of women's artistic and social freedom, Chopin's "case study" of nineteenth-century feminism was as much social criticism as it was a work of art (Toth, "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Feminist Criticism" 294). Though Chopin attempted to create a free woman, she found the task impossible, both in Chopin's world and in the fictional world of Edna Pontellier.

Though American women were free to create and publish at the turn of the century, many women still published under pseudonyms and few published with as much success as Chopin enjoyed. Even so, after *The Awakening*, Chopin's literary career suffered, proving that even the popular Chopin was not free to design her own femininity. *The Awakening* was a "critical failure" (Toth, "Introduction" 10), and Chopin's career died with Edna. Even the ending of the novel reflects Chopin's lack of freedom: Edna, who has experienced the freedom of personal femininity, could not survive in Chopin's fictional world and succumbed to the deadly embrace

of the ocean.

Emily Toth, and Kathleen Streater all explore Edna's "awakening" as a sexual one, while Peggy Skaggs, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, and Jennifer Gray view it as a primarily psychological awakening. However, Edna's awakening is not *exclusively* psychological or sexual, and I would add yet another face to the many-sided die that is Edna Pontellier's elusive awakening. Edna's awakening is not merely concurrent with the feminine sublime, but it is in fact the same experience, achieved through a series of interactions with women, nature, and music. Edna experiences brush with the sublime as she tries on various types of femininity: the powerful sensuality of the natural "mother woman" and swimming; the artistic sensitivity of the alternative role of "artist woman;" the oppositional, sexual, non-maternal "free woman." Yet Edna resists each of these versions of the feminine, instead claiming a fourth type of femininity: the feminine sublime. Though unsustainable, Edna does finally claim the feminine sublime as her own kind of femininity, and this revelation is her awakening.

Jennifer Gray, in an article in *Southern Literary Journal*, uses the three main female characters in *The Awakening* to explain the two types of feminine ideologies allowed to exist at the turn of the century: the ideal female is incarnate in Madame Ratignolle, the "mother-woman," while Mademoiselle Reisz, the "artist-woman," is the alternative version of female. Edna, the third female character, attempts a "free-woman" female type, which is oppositional to the hegemonic feminine ideology and consequently fails. In the course of the novel, Edna determines that she cannot exist within any of these three limiting feminine frames (Gray 71). Rather than focus solely on society's male-prescribed version of femininity, which leads to Edna's suicide, our task is to examine femininity through Edna's eyes as she attempts to define it.

At its most basic level, femininity in Chopin's – and also Edna's – world was dependent not on a woman's characteristics, but on her status and position. Jennifer Gray concisely explains the crux of Edna's problem: "the role of women prescribed by the dominant patriarchal ideology is defined in relation only to marriage and to motherhood" (57). When Edna no longer wants to define her self and her femininity by her husband and children, she enters into a journey of sublime experiences known as her awakening. Edna, locked into a marriage and a maternal lifestyle, begins the novel as a reluctantly devoted wife and mother, evidenced by her lack of passion for her husband and lack of care and concern for her children.

From the beginning of the novel, the reader is aware of unspoken tension between Edna and her husband. Though Léonce sends her flowers and candy when he leaves Grand Isle for business in New Orleans, their relationship is characterized by a lack of communication and a marked distance, which even Mademoiselle Reisz, the unfriendly pianist, points out. In Chapter XXIII, when Mademoiselle Reisz suggests that Edna and Léonce might be more "united" if he spent more time with her in the evenings, Edna replies, "Oh! Dear, no! What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn't have anything to say to each other" (66). Their distance is both physical and emotional, and is especially vivid at the end of Chapter XVII, when Edna, in a fit, throws her wedding band on the floor after her husband leaves her to eat dinner alone. Though Edna does not cry, her eyes are "flamed with some inward fire that lighted them" (50). Edna's passion takes the form of fire within her, creating a striking inversion of the nineteenth-century image of the angel at the hearth. Edna is passionate, but not for her husband or family. Her position as wife and mother precludes the nursing of her non-domestic passions.

Rather, it is in solitude that Edna has the opportunity to respond to her passion. In solitude, Edna is "seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet, half-darkness which met

her moods. But the voices were not soothing that came to her from the darkness and the sky above. They jeered and sounded mournful, without promise” (50). That passionate fire in her eyes is externalized as Edna yanks her wedding band off her finger, stamping it into the ground, and then throws a glass vase on the tiles of the bedroom hearth because she “wanted to destroy something” (51). Edna’s passion becomes tangible as it overtakes her, becoming an external passion that takes the form of destruction. Rather than become the angel at the literal hearth, sweeping up the mess of shattered glass, Edna, having already removed her wedding band, the symbol of marital duty, resists the role, allowing the maid to clean up. However, when the maid picks up Edna’s wedding band from the floor, Edna quietly slips it back on finger. Though she is beginning to resist her marital role, Edna cannot yet fully embody a womanhood that lacks matrimony.

In this jarring scene, Edna temporarily resists her own concept of woman and re-assumes the role of wife, but Edna also begins to step out of her self, examining herself from an exterior perspective. Edna is “seeking herself” in the same “mystery and witchery of the night” that Burke described as sublime. Language that starts out tender shifts into a more disturbed tone, utilizing vocabulary characteristic of sublime description: Edna is looking towards nature, the darkened and gloomy night sky, while she is simultaneously looking within herself. Nature others Edna, “jeering” at her, which causes Edna to fling her wedding band away from herself. Edna is othered by the dark sublimity of nature that causes her to confront further ways in which she is othered – by her own husband, and as a substandard version of mother-woman and wife. Edna’s desire to destroy is a signal that she is beginning to experience the terror of the sublime in a physical way, foreshadowing the destruction that will take place later in Edna’s story. Indeed, Edna’s attempted destruction of her wedding band is an explicit example of her decaying

marriage.

Edna's marriage, however, is only half of "feminine" existence: Edna's womanhood is defined in relation to her matrimony *and* maternity (57). As Edna begins to explore herself apart from her husband, she must also confront the two children who define her as mother, a role she is reluctant to fill. Edna's lack of concern for her children is evidenced throughout the novel, as the narrator explicitly shares that "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman" (Chopin 9). The Pontellier sons are vague, distant figures in the setting of Edna's life, by no means central, as children are to most mothers. While Edna does not dislike her sons, she is "fond of her children in an even, impulsive way...she would sometimes forget them" (Chopin 19). Edna does not maintain a close or devoted relationship towards her sons, which earns her Léonce's disapproval. Léonce wants his wife to be a mother-woman, a role "she at times accepts but continually begins to resist" (Gray 60). This resistance is evident in Chapter III: Léonce wakes Edna up late at night to inform her that their son has a fever and needs to be taken care of. While most mothers would embrace the opportunity to care for a sick child, Edna reluctantly checks on her son while Léonce reproaches her. Though Léonce pushes her towards more maternal actions, Edna continues to resist the maternal role.

Edna is contrasted by Madame Adèle Ratignolle, the pregnant and beautiful mother vacationing with her family along with the Pontelliers, the perfect example of a woman: a role model wife and mother, and her character serves as both a figure of perfect femininity as well as a contrast to Edna's lacking maternal instincts. In Chapter V while Adèle is sewing, Edna attempts to sketch Adèle, the "sensuous Madonna" (Chopin 12). Once completed, Edna's picture "bears no resemblance" to Adèle. Though Adèle is satisfied with the product, Edna "crumples the paper between her hands" (13), signifying Edna's failure to imitate Adèle, as well as her

rejection of Adèle's mother-woman status. In her own artistic way, Edna attempts to imitate Adèle, yet Edna finds that she fails in her own eyes.

Chopin places Edna and Adèle together in many scenes, serving to foil the two women and further illustrate Edna's incongruities as a mother woman. As the two women are walking along the beach one evening, the narrator describes the "rich, luxuriant beauty" of Madame Ratignolle, who possesses "the more feminine and matronly figure." By contrast, Edna has "noble beauty," but her "graceful severity of poise and movement" makes Edna "different from the crowd" (15). Adèle, dressed in "pure white" is plainly an angelic, perfect mother-woman, possessing voluptuous and "matronly" curves that serve to highlight both the leanness of Edna's frame as well as the "sensuous embrace" of the nearby sea. Chopin continually uses the beach as the setting of Adèle and Edna's intimacy, offering a visual connection between Adèle and the sea.

With the help of Adèle and Robert, Edna finally learns to swim in the ocean that had previously presented itself with "ungovernable dread" (Chopin 27) to Edna. Burke's musings on the sublime include discussion of that ungovernable dread that Edna felt, in terms of terror and delight, claiming that "when danger or pain press too nearly, they are simply terrible; but at certain distances, they are delightful..." (Burke 305). Edna's own terror dissolves into a fascination with the power of her own body, and the thrill compels her to "swim far out, where no woman has swum before" (Chopin 27). Where Edna had previously experienced terror, she is able to find delight in the boundlessness and power of both nature and herself, as she swims past boundaries and explores the limitless sublimity (Kant 386) the ocean has to offer. Edna's newfound ability to swim feeds a sense of power and "the freedom of her body enlarges her vision of herself," despite the vastness of the sea around her (Toth, "Kate Chopin's The

Awakening as Feminist Criticism” 248). Yet, after Edna swims far out, she experiences *ekstasis*, “flash of terror” (Chopin 28), reminiscent of Longinus’ lighting bolt. When Edna tells Léonce, he immediately re-assumes control over his wife with the simple response, “You were not so very far, my dear, I was watching you” (Chopin 28), both countering and dismissing the brief taste of independence and power she felt while she was alone in the sea.

Edna’s sublime experience in the boundless ocean, beyond the boundaries of her society, affords her agency in her marriage, leading her to exercise personal freedom to disobey Léonce. Immediately following Edna’s first time swimming without assistance, Léonce arrives home and asks Edna to come inside but she stubbornly denies his request, an out-of-character response for Edna, suggesting a serious change in her relationship dynamic with her husband. Typically, Edna “would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire, not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly...” (Chopin 30). Edna previously would have submitted to Léonce, though not out of love. However, after her experience in the ocean, Edna comes home refreshed, revived, and with a new perspective on her own life; though Edna once simply performed her daily duties without question, her oceanic experience leads her to reexamine and find a distaste for the matronly role she has been cast in life. The freedom of the ocean, which “enlarges Edna’s vision” (Toth, “Kate Chopin’s The Awakening as Feminist Criticism” 248) causes her to be in awe of herself, a breakthrough for Edna that allows her to delve deeper into self-understanding. Edna, awakened to her lifestyle and new options during her experience in the sea, begins to implement changes immediately, starting with a newfound freedom to follow her own desires rather than the desires of her husband. Her freedom and power in the ocean leads Edna to take ownership of freedom and power in her own body and home.

The ocean acts as physical location, a symbolic location, and as a character in its interactions with Edna. In its personification, the sea is given a seductive voice that speaks to Edna, gently insisting that she examine her inner self closely. However inviting, the voice of the sea is as dangerous as it is comforting. “The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul” (Chopin 14). It is in this maze of inward contemplation that Edna does indeed lose herself. Before her death in the sensuous embrace of the ocean, however, the ocean “functions as a mode of address” (Freeman 29) speaking to the susceptible Edna.

Just as Edna is impacted by the sound of beautiful music, similarly, she allows the sea to speak to her like music, filling her mind with thoughts and images. Longinus notes that “nature hits the mark when she contains art hidden within her” (88), arguing in favor of the sublimity of finding art in nature, as Edna does. After Léonce reproaches Edna for not checking on her son’s hypothetical fever, Edna cries on the porch alone, except for the sea: “There was no sound abroad except...the everlasting voice of the sea. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night” (Chopin 7). As Edna contemplates her “indescribable oppression” (8), the sea offers its present voice, “speaking to the soul” (14) and filling Edna with passion and empowerment. Freeman argues that Edna’s listening to the passionate voice of the sea precedes her awakening (29), implying that the sea itself is prompting Edna to reexamine the passion within herself. The ocean’s voice fills Edna with passion and power, fueling an awakening that causes Edna to participate in the details of her life differently.

The ocean is a physical place where Edna can feel the power of her own body, but it is also a symbolic place where Edna is embraced and accepted as feminine and empowered to act

as a free woman. Edna, for the first time, experiences a lack of boundaries and it exhilarates her, allowing her to come into shameless contact with the alterity that exists within her. For the first time, Edna is able to look within herself at the otherness that exists there without being forced to suppress herself and she finds power in that action. Edna's confrontation in the sea changes her, and the sea is now the site of Edna's awakening and a source of Edna's sublimity.

The ocean, moreover, in its similarities to Adèle, represents a kind of mother-woman to Edna. The ocean is certainly feminine, described in the same terms that are used to describe Adèle, including terms like "seductive" and "sensuous," and the ocean, like a mother-woman, "enfolds the body in a soft, close embrace" (Chopin 14). Although the sea is described in feminine language, it is nevertheless more powerful than a mother-woman because like the sublime, the sea knows no boundaries and has no restraints. Where the mother-woman is bound to her husband, children, and a societal ideology of maternity and matrimony (Gray), the ocean is limitless and boundless, and yet remains feminine in its embrace – the ocean represents a powerful femininity that entices Edna, causing her to resist the mother-woman femininity she is expected to uphold.

After her ocean awakening, Edna begins "to do as she liked, and feel as she liked" (Chopin 54). No longer is Léonce controlling either her actions, or more importantly, her emotional life. Edna, though still required by society to submit to her husband's wishes, no longer practices restraint or submission to her husband. Edna's doing and feeling "as she likes" manifests itself in her practical resistance to everyday chores, as she makes "no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household as a good housewife" (54). Léonce, noticing a change in his wife, accuses Edna of shirking her duties and letting "the family go to the devil" (54). Though Léonce brings up the subject of Edna's art as a possible culprit, he still largely places the blame

for Edna's inattentiveness on Edna herself, contrasting his wife with the ideal Adèle, claiming that though Madame Ratignolle continues to play music for her family, she "doesn't let everything go to chaos" (54) in the way Edna has. Though Léonce is concerned that Edna is "growing unbalanced mentally" (55), both he and Edna recognize that Edna's art isn't the cause of the problem, but a byproduct of Edna's awakening. By blaming Edna more than he blames her activities, Léonce demonstrates awareness that Edna's inner attitude has shifted and that Edna's outer carelessness reveals her inner change.

As Edna seeks a way to implement the freedom and power she felt in the ocean in her daily life as a woman, she ignores her family and focuses on her art, resisting the role of attentive mother-woman, instead focusing on her own desires and the personal enjoyment she receives from painting. Edna's resistance involves conscious choices that lead her away from a mother-woman status and closer to experiencing her own version of femininity. Gray links Edna's concept of her mother-woman identity to her awakening, arguing that Edna's "awakening makes visible her position in patriarchal society and gives her the desire to seek alternative roles" (61). Edna no longer desires to submit to her husband, as society requires, and she seeks out other roles besides that of the mother-woman embodied in Adèle, beginning with the artist-woman role represented by the unmarried musician Mademoiselle Reisz.

If Adèle is the ideal woman, Mademoiselle Reisz, "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young," with a "self-assertive temper" represents the opposite end of the feminine spectrum (Chopin 25). Reisz is described as homely and lacking taste in dress (26), a woman who "has a strong sense of self, but a life lacking in love and connection with others" (Gray 63), allowing the reader to assume she exists outside the boundaries of femininity. Because of "societal labeling" and "the stigma of unconventionality, eccentricity, and homeliness," Mademoiselle

Reisz' contemporaries know her as the "artist-woman" (Gray 64). These labels place her in the "alternative role of female artist," (64) implying that if a woman remains unmarried, she may continue to function as a woman, as long as she contributes to society. Mademoiselle Reisz creates beautiful music and brilliant artistry, but the cost is a solitary lifestyle, void of friendship or any sexual desires. Though Mademoiselle Reisz is an independent woman in the 18th century, her "role does not threaten the rule of patriarchy" because "divorce from community" is the price Reisz pays for her individuality (63).

Despite Mademoiselle Reisz' single lifestyle, she is a true artist, unlike the many "mother-women" who practice piano, echoing Longinus' belief that only artists who possess certain innate talent can truly produce the sublime in their work (Longinus 76). While Edna sees images when she hears Adèle play the piano, by contrast, she feels "a keen tremor down her spinal column" (Chopin 26) upon hearing Mademoiselle Reisz. Indeed, when Mademoiselle Reisz plays the piano, Edna's "very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (26). The language Chopin uses to describe the effect Mademoiselle Reisz' artistry on Edna is very similar to Edna's oceanic awakening, both beautiful and terrible: Edna's reaction to hearing Mademoiselle Reisz' playing is as if she were drowning.

Edna's aroused passions within her soul reflect the sublime transcendence Edna feels when the music "raises [her] energies of the soul above their accustomed height" (Kant 390). The music that produces a sublime effect on Edna does not deliver a similar experience for Edna's social counterparts. The narrator describes a "prevailing air of expectancy" (Chopin 25) while Mademoiselle Reisz played, indicating the party's respect for her skill, yet only Edna experiences a transcendent "vibration" (Kant 390) in her soul. Edna felt a similar "vibration" of

power, delight, and terror when she first swam alone in the ocean, which led her to confront her own alterity. When swimming, the power within her own body made visible to her by the power of the sea. Here, the language that so closely resembles drowning draws a parallel to the sea where Edna first experiences the otherness of her own soul. Edna is othered because she is unable to fulfill her given role as mother and wife as defined by society, and in this scene, because of her extreme reaction to art.

Edna's experience with music sets her apart because of her inner emotional reaction that manifests itself powerfully in a bodily way through bodily tremors and at times, tears. Kant argued that "the sublime resides in the mind...everything that excites this feeling in us is called then the sublime" (391). Edna's physical expressions of excitement are rooted in her inner experience of the sublime that marks her as other. Edna, noticing the excitement and tremors that Mademoiselle Reisz' music create within herself, begins to explore these inner reactions. The experience of sublime music enables Edna to explore her inner self, which is in fact the other, therefore experiencing the feminine sublime.

After hearing Mademoiselle Reisz play, Edna begins to build a relationship with the grouchy artist, despite Reisz' "offensive" personality (Chopin 75). Edna frequents Mademoiselle Reisz' home in order to hear her play, rather than spending time with her husband or sons, shying away from her duties as a mother and wife. As she spends more time with Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna "resists the hailings of the mother-woman role [by] engaging in the practices of the alternative artist-woman identity" (Gray 64). This identity includes a lack of concern for others, focus on self, and of course, involvement with art.

In the duration of her relationship with Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna experiences moments of sublimity while listening to music. Chopin explicitly demonstrates the effect great artistry has

on Edna: “There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna’s senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free” (75). Finding both the music and her inner self to be boundless, Edna begins to realize that she cannot fit within society’s constraints of the idea of feminine. Edna’s awakening is her process of finding her own femininity, and music, like the sublime boundlessness of the ocean, is another part of that journey.

Edna’s own artistry continues throughout her relationship with Reisz, and she even tells Mademoiselle Reisz that she longs to be an artist (Chopin 61). Edna’s experience with art is linked to her very core – her artistic output increases simultaneously with her independence. Edna neglects housekeeping, one of the many symbols of society’s version of femininity, as she begins selling her art in order to afford living apart from her husband in a blatant rejection of society’s version of femininity. Through frequent exposure to music, art, coupled with lack of passion for her children and husband, Edna turns further inward, where she experiences sublimity. Because Edna is the other in society, by confronting that alterity within herself, she is able to experience the sublime. However, sublimity, like a note of music, is momentary. Though Edna encounters sublimity as a result of her art and independence, that sublimity does not offer a sustainable femininity because of its temporal quality.

Edna experiences freedom through Mademoiselle Reisz’ music and once she has experienced the sublimity of female freedom through art, she can no longer face reality. Through her time spent in the presence of an artist who brings her to experience sublime moments, Edna experiences a “new consciousness” (Gray 54). However, while Edna possesses the “courageous soul” (Chopin 61) of an artist, she cannot survive the self-imposed isolation of an artist (Gray

64). Edna continues to paint, but she does so in her secondary home where she also spends time with Alcee. While Mademoiselle Reisz fits completely into the androgynous, loveless “artist woman” identity, Edna cannot exist without love or connection (Gray 64), evidenced by her desire for Robert and her physically intimate relationship with Alcee. Edna wants to be an artist like Mademoiselle Reisz, but Edna is foiled by Mademoiselle Reisz as much as she is by Adèle because both women hold identities Edna cannot have (Gray 71). Her repeated encounters with her own alterity, which leads her into sublimity, provide Edna the profound realization that she does not want to live up to either woman’s standard, represented by Adèle’s maternal femininity and Mademoiselle Reisz’ relative androgyny. Through her previous two attempted roles, Edna experiences elements of the sublime – she experiences a feminine power and freedom in the ocean and a keen boundless sensibility in art – but she also discovers that she cannot fit into the pre-molded feminine types, mother-woman and artist-woman. Moving from the elevated mother-woman that is Adèle and the alternative artist-woman that is Reisz, Edna illustrates a third “highly oppositional role, the “free woman”” (Gray 56), which, significantly, is not embodied by any character in the text other than Edna, implying the nonexistence of such a woman. From Chapter XXV until the end of the novel, Edna’s bold moves, including moving out of her husband’s home and conducting an affair with Alcee Arobin, exhibit her experimentation with the free-woman identity.

Edna’s need for connection and relationship drives her away from the artist-woman model. Though Edna paints, she cannot be an artist-woman in her society that expects the loveless, sexless, isolated female that exists in Mademoiselle Reisz. Thus, it is her need for relationship that pushes Edna towards experimentation with the third feminine type, the “free-woman” (Gray). Edna’s need for emotional and physical connection is seen in her romantic

relationships with Robert and Alcee. Where both physical and emotional intimacy are lacking in her marriage, Edna attempts to find both in the arms of other men, beginning with the young and flirtatious Robert.

On the same night that Edna first swims on her own and realizes the power within her own body, Robert sits with Edna on the porch late at night after her swim. Though they share little conversation, Edna afterwards felt that “no multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire” (30). To feel desire so keenly is a new experience for Edna because of the lack of passion in her marriage. Despite the silence of their moment on the porch, Edna’s attraction to Robert is made explicit, marking the beginning of Edna’s sexual independence.

While Edna’s relationship with Robert was emotionally intimate, her relationship with Alcee is physically intimate, though lacking in emotional connection or affection. Though Edna’s time with Robert was “pregnant with desire,” (30) that desire was not birthed with Robert. Ironically, the language of pregnancy described a promising fullness, but just as Edna could not fulfill the mother role, neither could Robert follow through with an adulterous affair. Where Edna’s passion proved too intense for Robert, her physical desire does come to fruition with Alcee. Despite Edna’s passionate sexual encounters with Alcee, after the first time they have sex, Edna reflects on their night together and realizes she does not love him: “There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips” (Chopin 80). Though physical intimacy offers Edna a “cup of life,” it is not intimacy with Alcee specifically that Edna craves. Through physical passion, Edna discovers yet another piece of her femininity: her need for relationship.

After intimacy, Edna “felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look

upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality” (Chopin 80). Edna’s sexual experience with Alcee opens her eyes to see herself more clearly. Until Alcee, Edna had never been physically passionate, and the sexual experience reveals to Edna that passion is a part of her identity. Though Robert and Alcee reveal her emotional and physical need for passion, Edna remains unable to reconcile that need for passion with other versions of femininity. Adèle’s mother-woman femininity that fully relies on the male counterpart’s satisfaction, and Mademoiselle Reisz’ artist-woman femininity of isolation both seem to ignore the possibility of feminine passion. These few types of femininity Edna is allowed to explore leave no room for her passion. As she begins to awaken sexually, Edna feels with increased clarity, describing her life in sublime language of “beauty and brutality,” as she observes both the beauty and terror of the world around her. Through her relationship with Alcee, Edna’s eyes are opened to the society around her. Once she recognizes that “brutality,” she is able to move beyond society’s restrictive requirements and boundaries.

At the highest peak of intimacy with Alcee and companionship with both Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna decides to break free from social bonds of marriage. Unlike Madame Ratignolle, who has a perfectly harmonious marriage with her husband, Edna observes that their relationship “is not a condition of life that fit[s] her” (54). After spending time with Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna decides that she must “soar above tradition” (79). The layering of these two observations leads Edna to the profound decision that she no longer owes Léonce her “allegiance,” despite their legally and socially binding marriage (76). Setting up a small “pigeon house,” as Edna calls her small cottage around the corner from Léonce’s home, Edna lives on her own because she wants to belong to no one but herself. Paying for the cottage by selling art, living on her own provides Edna with the “feeling of freedom and independence”

(76). With no sense of obligation towards her husband, nor her children, Edna is able to assert independence sexually and financially by conducting an extramarital affair and moving out of Léonce's home, pragmatic means of testing the waters of the inner sense of freedom she felt while swimming in the ocean and listening to Reisz' music.

As a free woman, Edna becomes completely inwardly focused, only desiring to understand her inner otherness, rather than caring for the needs of her husband or children. She attends to the needs and desires of herself, which include sexual and financial independence from her husband, a room of her own to create art, and an identity not rooted in her husband and children. Though Edna's free-woman role provides her with "individuality and sexual freedom" and "a more fulfilling, developed sense of identity," it does so at a high cost. According to Gray, the free woman role "is far too threatening to dominant societal norms for Edna to sustain it against vehement ideological pressure" (56). Robert is one character who upholds this ideology and cannot view Edna as a free woman. Robert constantly views Edna as a property, meant to belong to a husband: though Robert desires Edna, he does not want to pursue a relationship with her until she is "free to belong to him" (77). Even Robert, whom Edna desires, does not want her to be free, but to belong, as a woman should, to himself. Unrepresented by any woman, the free woman is a threat to the "hegemonic patriarchal ideology" (Gray 60) which paints woman as either "mother women" or the alternative artist woman, and cannot exist. As illustrated by Robert's rejection of Edna, the free woman cannot maintain that type of femininity and remain a part of her society.

Even Edna cannot exist as "free woman," inside or outside the free-woman ideology, because regardless of her desire for it, she retains some maternal feelings: in a surge of happiness at her decision to move out of her husband's home, she sends a box of bon-bons to her children

at their grandparents' house (78). Even in the midst of Edna's free-woman experimentation, she cannot reconcile the truth of her maternity and her own desire to be free from motherhood. Though she still has maternal moods, Edna is not a mother woman and "cannot exist in the limited role sanctioned by ideology" (Gray 71), yet neither can she be the rejected free woman. After experimenting with all three roles given by Jennifer Gray, Edna finds that she fits in none of them, but because Edna remains "both freely sexual and autonomous," the "only escape is suicide" (Gray 54). Each of these types of femininity –mother woman, artist woman, and even free woman – is not created by Edna, but by society. Each offers her a taste of the nonexistent category of femininity she seeks. The oceanic sensuality of the mother-woman, the artistic inclination and creativity of the artist-woman, and the sexual passion and lack of borders of the free-woman all hint at the woman Edna longs to be, and each offers her a unique, but partial, brush with the sublime. However, Edna fits into none of types these fully, and must therefore create her own brand of femininity. This fourth, created type of femininity is embodied by the feminine sublime, which Edna ultimately encounters in her final sublime swim in the ocean. The ocean offers Edna an alternative to the three woman types she experiments with, however, because this alternative does not yet exist as a part of humanity, Edna must transcend social categories. The ocean provides that transcendence and becomes sublime as Edna enters a fourth category for the last moments of her life.

CHAPTER III: SUBLIMITY AS SOCIAL ABJECTION: LILY'S EPHEMERAL VICTORY

It can be easy to consider Edna a more emotionally self-aware and nuanced character than Lily is; however, Lily too has keen and complex desires, and both Edna and Lily envision new categories for female existence. Each woman, in the course of her story, attempts to create a space for herself in society. Edna desires a space where she can freely exist as her own type of woman, and Lily craves a place among the upper class that she spends so much time with, despite her precarious financial status. While Edna possesses money, a husband, and a home – everything Lily desires – she is emotionally and mentally far from fitting in society. Lily's lack of these material signifiers of wealth signify what she needs in order to be accepted by society. As both women seek to alter their situations, the sublime permeates their stories in vastly different expressions, yet Edna and Lily meet the same end. Where Edna finds a singular, personal femininity in the sublime that she encounters by looking inward and confronting her own otherness, Lily attempts to use her femininity to create a sublime effect on others in order to remove the otherness of herself and dissolve her socially abject state. Each of their personal femininities is bound together with the sublime and its power to create a space for feminist identity, yet their moments of sublimity are distinctive. Edna's sublime is rooted in an outer experience, encountered at the ocean; however, it directs her inwardly to her own otherness, an alterity within herself that helps her to experience her sublime femininity. By contrast, Lily's sublime is put-on, with herself as the central object – a sublime projected toward others.

Unlike Edna, who, in order to fulfill her inner desires, dismisses even her closest companions' perception of her, including her husband, Lily depends on the perceptions of others. In Lily's society, the cultural construct of female beauty gives it measurable value, making

female beauty worth bartering. Lily, understanding that her beauty is an asset, creates a version of herself that she uses to manipulate those around her into perceiving her in a particular light: not only does Lily care about others' perception of her, but also she will go to any length to ensure it is the proper perception, a perception able to transport the viewer beyond the constraints of society. She hides behind the façade of her conventionally beautiful body, projecting herself as she would like to be viewed. In her novel of manners, Edith Wharton meant to engage the reader in a commentary on this "frivolous society [that] makes narcissists of women" (Dwight 195) and the price a young girl pays in order to maintain her position in that society. The game of high society revolves around outer image. Through Lily's obsession with self-image, Wharton explores the "relationship of the inner self to the outward image" in *The House of Mirth* (Dwight 190).

When Lily projects herself as a perfect work of art, she is attempting to effect the sublime on those viewing her: she wants others to enter a state of sublimity as a reaction to viewing the perfection that is Lily. Because Lily represents the abject to the society that she surrounds herself with, she must undergo a process of abjection. She employs the sublime to counteract her own abject state and purify herself, in order to find a wealthy husband, maintain and improve her position in society, and continue her lifestyle among the affluent. In the process of manipulating the sublime and those around her, Lily experiences moments of Freeman's feminine sublime. Yet, the temporary, lightning-quick impact of the sublime (Longinus 76) renders it an experience unable to shape her in a permanent way and instead, she returns to the abject state. Lily cannot sustain this position as art. For Kristeva, the abject is a pure state, undefiled by the male, symbolic order, a place where a woman's identity can be defined in the feminist terms of the mother. For most of the novel, Lily races toward the symbolic and resists the abject. Yet, this

position is foisted upon her by her poverty.

Thus, to New York society, Lily represents the other and the abject². As such, she reminds the genteel class that systems can disintegrate, that each person returns to a state of decomposition (Kristeva 3). As the skin on the surface on milk reminds one of the breakdown of the human body (Kristeva 2), so Lily's presence reminds the upper classes of the system's potential for breakdown. Lily's poverty matches the abject's definition as "that which disturbs identity, system order" (Kristeva 4). Angela Kay Green, in her essay on social abjection, argues that "Kristeva applies 'abject' to describe those who are marginalized...who elicit reactions of horror and disgust within surrounding culture..." (17). Society's disgust of Lily's poverty translates into disdain and condescension. Thus, Lily's project is to bleach herself of the abject. Rather than look inwardly towards self-examination of her own otherness to achieve this aim, Lily reaches outward, manipulating those viewing her to see her body as a work of art, an object that enacts the sublime and lifts Lily beyond social systems. This outward focus is the very orientation that renders her incapable of completing the abjection process: she fails to inwardly engage the other and consequently fails to fully experience the sublime herself – but, this never appears to be Lily's goal. She never seeks the sublime for herself, but rather to use it by bringing sublimity to others.

Furthermore, by portraying herself as an object of art, Lily renders it nearly impossible to know herself or to be known by others; to chip away the created marble exterior or to tear through the painted canvas to find and know the inner Lily is a herculean task. Lily's self-

² Although genteel New York society would have found the abject undesirable because of its inherent repulsiveness, for Kristeva, the abject is actually a pure state, and is therefore may even be a positive state, rather than undesirable. While most of society gravitates towards order (the symbolic), Kristeva opposes symbolic order with the abject – a return to the womb. The womb (the mother) reminds humans where they came from and where most people do not want to return. Thus, Kristeva's own attitude towards the abject state she communicates may not match the reader's.

objectification as art is a major thematic element, often leading the reader to believe that Lily's character is flat or shallow, a woman bowing to societal pressures; however, that reading leaves little room for the possibility that Lily is intelligently and intentionally creating an objectified version of herself. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Wharton biographer, claims that *The House of Mirth* is the first novel to truly treat the objectification of women, and that Wharton does so by creating a female character who accepts her own idealized body as a mere image. Wharton claims that Lily is an image of beauty, trained from infancy to be an object of decoration, much like the floral image her name emblemizes. As a child, when Lily's family lost its wealth, Lily's mother desperately fawned over Lily's face and body, convinced that Lily's beauty would be the key for her reentry into society (Wharton 31). It is with this assurance that Lily emerges into society, confident not in her intelligence or heritage, but in her ability to use her appearance to her benefit. Though Wolff's reading focuses on Lily's acceptance of her body as a one-dimensional image or object, Frances Restuccia makes the nearly opposite claim that Lily is actually a multi-dimensional complex character who possesses the agency necessary for full control of herself, including her body. Considering these two arguments, I would argue that Lily is both complex and objectified: Lily's complexity as a character lies in her ability to intelligently and intentionally portray herself as an object. She at once conforms to society's conventions while she circumvents them. If Lily is destined to be an object, she will control the kind of object she becomes.

Because Lily chooses the status of beautiful object, her circumstances are the result of her choices. Like a flower, Lily likes to be admired for her beauty. When attending Carrie Fisher's party at the Adirondacks, though Lily feels that she has sunk to a lower circle of society, she cannot help but soak in the "admiration" of the women around her; "the sense of being of

importance among the insignificant was enough to restore to Miss Bart the gratifying consciousness of power” (Wharton 89). Lily uses her beauty as a means to gain power and influence in multiple levels of society. Shrewd with her few assets and lacking money, Lily must use her body and charm to advance, or at the minimum, maintain her position in society. Her body as art creates a sublime experience for the viewer; maintaining this places Lily in a suspended state of abjection. She is constantly seeking to cleanse herself. Though she spends her time with wealthy friends, Lily does not actually have the funding to support her continued self-creation. Parties and dresses are costly. Wharton drops hints throughout the text to remind the reader that Lily exists on the fringes of her society: she participates in an affluent circle, but at a price. For example, early in Book I, in Chapter IV, Lily’s hostess sends her a note asking that she “help with tiresome things.” Mrs. Trenor employs a secretary, and no other guests are required to fulfill the same types of chores that Lily performs: it is implied that Lily frequently performs such “tiresome things,” in exchange for not only her stay at Bellomont, but even her wardrobe and other elements of finery that help Lily look the part while staying with society at Bellomont. Later, Lily offhandedly mentions wearing a dress from the previous season that Mrs. Trenor had sent her (38). Lily both performs chores for Mrs. Trenor and wears her hand-me-downs, hardly elements of society that most women would participate in, yet Lily maintains her charm. Judy’s ignorance of the reality of Lily’s debt makes even more impressive Lily’s stay at Bellomont. Judy believes Lily simply can’t afford “real lace on her petticoats,” and is totally oblivious to Lily’s rock-bottom financial despair. For Lily to manage hanging around the Bellomont crowd with not only borrowed dresses, but absolutely lacking in any funds, is an impressive testament to Lily’s cunning and maneuvering that she maintains her physical appearance well enough to mostly fit in with this circle of society. Therefore, Lily is both clever *and* beautiful – she could

not exist at Bellomont without both qualities.

Lily may appear to be a silly girl, merely existing for the purpose of being looked at. However, even her most trivial actions are actually carefully calculated for her advantage. Lily is intelligent about using her best asset: her body, her beauty, her youth. Wharton juxtaposes Judy Trenor's frustration with her husband's, Gus Trenor's, delight, as they each interact with Lily, highlighting Lily's conscious use of her body. While Judy is frustrated with Lily, rather than enamored, Judy's frustration arises from a friendly concern for Lily and for Lily's financial struggles. Judy's solution to Lily's financial woes is a good marital match, which is only possible with Lily's good looks. Judy is frustrated with Lily because she believes Lily can use her body to make her way in life but fails to do so conclusively. Judy maintains a friendship with Lily because she believes Lily *will* gain a marriage and rise to the social standard Judy expects. Thus, Judy's friendship with Lily is based on what Lily makes Judy believe about Lily's body, her work of art.

Following Judy's show of impatience with Lily in Chapter VII, Book I, Lily demonstrates keen insight into the use of her assets as a means for gain, when Gus encounters Lily. Again, Lily proves that she does not allow herself to be idly viewed, but actually controls the way her physical beauty affects those around her. When Mrs. Trenor asks Lily to pick up her husband at the train station, Lily does not waste the opportunity. From the time Gus spots Lily in the car, he is instantly enamored with Lily. Though they have long been acquainted, their sudden intimacy is fresh and unexpected, and Gus is caught off-guard with Lily's beauty. Lily is "aware, from the look in his small dull eyes, that the contact with her freshness and slenderness was as agreeable to him as the sight of a cooling beverage" (64), and she plays up her cool, refreshing, and appealing appearance. Like a "cooling beverage" provides only temporary relief from thirst,

the sublime too is fleeting: Lily's effect on Trenor can only be temporary. The sublime effect that overwhelms Trenor positions Lily into a place of power over him. While he views her as a beverage – an object to be devoured – she in turn devours him, manipulating his image of her as a “trustful child” to elicit sympathy, followed by financial support. Lily's display makes “him feel that her appeal had been an uncalculated impulse” (Wharton 68), conjuring images of the same uncalculated, impulsive thunderbolt-style sublime that Longinus describes. Gus imagines that Lily's charm is sudden and involuntary, a flash of sublimity that causes him to give in to her power, which she forges via her controlled appearance.

When Gus sees Lily, he “felt himself wishing his wife could see how other women treated him...a girl most men would have given their boots to get such a look from” (66). In a calculated turn, Lily's beauty directs Gus' attentions back to himself; she uses her body to focus Gus on how her beauty affects him. Lily's beauty is off-putting, leading the viewer to ponder as he or she gazes. Lily doesn't let others view her body in order to boost her self-esteem, but she actually allows her body to serve as a source of self-esteem for those viewing it, creating a place where she is in control of herself and the viewer. When Lily's body is on exhibit, she may manipulate the emotions and will of the viewer to her advantage. As illustrated with Gus, Lily's subtle power and cunning lie in her ability to not fully rely on her physical appearance. Lily makes full use of her femininity, employing both an attractive figure and a warm, inviting attitude. Lily creates a warm intimacy with Gus that combines with her “refreshing” appearance to make Gus feel important and wanted, leaving him vulnerable to her persuasions. Lily is depending upon her performance art to enact the sublime and in so doing to lead her through abjection and position in her in and above society.

As Gus tells Lily all about his day's work on Wall Street, Lily realizes that this may be a

chance to pay off her debts and please Judy, and she quickly formulates a plan. Though Lily cannot “stoop” to ask for a Wall Street “tip,” she can, however, ask Gus to do so for her (65). Gus willingly decides to help the “plaintively lovely” Lily after she brings her gambling debt troubles “to him with the trustfulness of a child” (67). Trenor views Lily as a “picture of loveliness in distress” (67): not a woman, but a picture. Even in her distress, Lily puts on an artistic show, prompting “a murmur of indignant sympathy” from Trenor (67). Unable to witness Lily’s “loveliness” ruined, which would involve Lily’s withdrawal from society – including his company – Gus agrees to “make a handsome sum of money for her without endangering the small amount she possessed” (68). Through artful conversation and careful positioning of her physical beauty, Lily gains Gus’ favor and financial help, which Lily intends to use to raise her position in society.

In the above example, I showed how Lily is complex and intelligent, rather than a mere object. Her character has depth, as she uses her status as object to manipulate those around her. The following example serves a subtly different purpose. Lily is capable of manipulating Gus, but she is not a mere object. Indeed, she wanted to manipulate Gus.

Lily will use Gus for her own gain at any cost, even if that cost – a slight one to Lily – is to flirt and flounce and make her body “agreeable as the sight of a cooling beverage.” Lily’s goal with Gus is not to woo, unlike her encounters with so many other men, or even just to gain financially. Lily doesn’t want money so much as what money can buy. After Lily believes she gains in the stock market, “The first thousand dollar cheque Lily received with a blotted scrawl from Gus Trenor strengthened her self-confidence in the exact degree to which it effaced her debts” (68). Lily wanted the money to sooth her fears that were merely getting in the way of her confidence. Actual money is of little importance to Lily, in fact, she doesn’t want to think of it at

all, which she tells Selden in Book I: “the only way to not think about money is to have a great deal of it” (Wharton 55) Selden responds that “the rich may not be thinking of money, but they’re breathing it all the while; take them into another element and see how they squirm and gasp” (55), reinforcing the notion that Lily requires a great deal of money in order to maintain her standard of living. Lily currently exists as that squirming, gasping creature on the edge of society, emphasizing her abject state. Lily does not want money for money’s sake, but desires what money buys – reputation, society, and her abjection. Money enables her to keep up her costumes and appearances; thus, money allows her to sustain her position as art object.

The *tableaux vivants*, the height of Lily’s sublimity, is the prime example of Lily’s attempt to use the sublime as a purification agent in her process of abjection. Though it appears early in the novel, Lily’s reenactment of Reynolds’s “Mrs. Lloyd” in Book I, Chapter XII, reveals Lily’s intentional use of the traditional (patriarchal) sublime and subsequent failure to remove herself from her socially abject state. In “Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death,” Wolff provides insight to the art of the 1890’s and its effect on the audience’s understanding of Lily as an art object. Women portrayed in art of the 1890’s were “gilded American goddesses,” representing the perfect blend of purity and virtue, as well as sexuality, seen in their clingy, draped clothing and full hair and lips. These images penetrated the public and private spheres, as demonstrated by Lily’s performance. When Lily takes on the persona of “Mrs. Lloyd” in the *tableaux vivants* and indeed, even when she takes on her own carefully crafted “Lily” persona, she is essentially putting on the white marble robes and flawlessly smooth lips and cheekbones of these statuesque goddesses. In the *tableaux*, Lily is simply reprising a role she has played a million times before: ‘Lily as art object.’ Lily is accustomed to wearing the persona of statuesque goddess in everyday situations, allowing her plenty of practice before the *tableaux*, in which she

performs flawlessly.

Completely familiar with the concept of becoming art, Lily “shows her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself” (Wharton 106). At the height of her literal ‘becoming a work of art,’ Lily is less “Mrs. Lloyd” than “Mrs. Lloyd” is merely an outlet for Lily to reveal onstage her “beams of living grace” (106). In choosing to rely on “the truer instinct of...her unassisted beauty,” Lily performs herself, an effective way of using her beauty to its highest advantage – to create the sublime in front of the best possible audience: an expectant and recipient audience.

While Burke would argue that the audience’s reaction to Lily’s beauty is one of mere appreciation, perhaps based on lust, I argue that Lily’s beauty makes her a sublime object in that moment. From the “noble buoyancy of her attitude” to Lily’s “soaring grace,” sublime language throughout the *tableaux vivants* scene is unmistakable. The “eternal harmony” of the scene imbibes a sense of poetry on the audience, leading them to a transcendent admiration of Lily. Lily’s beauty, which creates a “thrill of contrast” (Wharton 106) in comparison to the other performers, far outshines all who have performed before her, a realization of Longinus’ prophetic claim that sublimity “scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt” (Longinus 76). When the curtain is drawn back to reveal Lily, “there could be no mistaking the predominance of [her] personality” (Wharton 106). While the personalities of all the other performers are “subdued to the scenes they figured in,” Lily’s performance of “Mrs. Lloyd” is “simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart,” proving her heightened authority over her own scene and the room. That authority and sublime sense lingers, as Trenor notes the next day, “...and there was everybody talking about you, and asking me if I’d ever seen anything so stunning” (110). Lily’s personality commands the room, as she claims for herself power that Longinus says

comes as a result of the “influence of the sublime.”

Though Burke argues that the sublime and beautiful are discrete, Lily’s performance in this passage disproves that claim. The sublime sense that pervades the room during Lily’s performance is conveyed *through* Lily’s beauty. Like Gus Trenor when Lily asks him for help in the stock market, those around Lily cannot help but be enraptured by “the portrait of Miss Bart” (106), proven by the audience’s unanimous gasp of approval of Lily’s loveliness. Burke argues that a “beauty of sex” that “inspires sentiments of tenderness and affection” opposes the sublime, just as natural appreciation for sweet flavors opposes the acquired palate for bitter tastes. According to Burke, because Lily’s loveliness is easily appreciated, it must be beautiful rather than sublime. Burke concedes that beauty and sublimity may be present in the same object – but maintains his contention that though they may blend together, they remain separate and opposite.

I argue then, adding to Burke’s description, that Lily is beautiful according to his definition, but that through this beauty, she becomes sublime. She produces sublimity through her artistic intelligence and beauty. Barbara Freeman critiques Burke’s distinction between beautiful and sublime because Burke uses gender to “lay the foundation for the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime” (Freeman 48), which Freeman argues is unstable because of Burke’s flawed understanding of sexual difference. Therefore, in his distinction between beautiful and sublime, Burke inadvertently genders the two terms, linking sublime to masculine ideals of strength, darkness, and terror, while linking beautiful to feminine ideals of frailty, conventional delicacy, and weakness. In the *tableaux vivants*, Wharton creates a scene in which sublimity is present in the beautiful, resisting Burke’s distinction (even his privileging of one term over another) between the two with phrases like “the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart” (106). The juxtaposition of “flesh and blood” with “loveliness” places violent, naked

images of masculinity alongside the fair feminine delicacy that “loveliness” evokes. Wharton uses both masculine and feminine descriptive language to describe the sublime beauty of Lily Bart in her performance.

Claiming the status of sublime object, Lily “reigns supreme” (Longinus 76) over the “thrilled” (Wharton 106) audience. An element of the sublime is the use of elevated language, its “effect upon an audience is transport” (Longinus 76): though Lily isn’t using verbal language, her body has become a script. The elevated language of her body has the same effect as a “spell,” binding the audience together in communal judgment of her physical body with their unanimous “Oh!” at the moment of her entrance, and their continued discussion of her “stunning” performance. In this moment of affected sublimity, Lily hopes to transport her audience to a place where she is accepted among them. Lily constantly attempts to create a space for herself in upper society, at any cost. The *tableaux vivants* performance is yet another attempt to create a space where she belongs among them. The sublimity of her beauty offers the opportunity to transport her audience to a place of exclusive inclusion or above class codes and forms. In their transport and collective judgment, it seems that the audience has accepted Lily into their sphere, as they mill about after the scenes, discussing among themselves her “stunning” performance (110). Yet the sublime is a temporal, unsustainable state – ultimately, Lily’s acceptance is merely temporary, because her means of becoming accepted provided a temporary solution to her abject state, and a short-term moment of *ekstasis*. As the novel continues, despite Lily’s sublime moment in the *tableaux vivants*, she continues to fall from the upper society in which she desires to belong.

Lily uses her beauty in this moment to reverse her socially abject state – though everyone is enraptured, it is only for the moment. Selden continues to be in awe of Lily – but he was all

along, and therefore it was not her *intentional* sublime-affecting-performance art that affected him, but Lily as she is without artifice or adornment. Selden's interfacing with the true Lily may also have enacted the sublime; however, neither of these sublimities are sustainable or long-term and therefore Lily fails to come up with a long-term solution for her abject state and so she remains abject in the eyes of that society – leading to the continued chain of negative events throughout the novel that occur because Lily is socially abject.

Throughout the rest of the novel, evidence of her remaining socially abject continues to plague Lily. Even in the next chapter, when Gus deceives Lily by cornering her alone in his home (111), he is still affected by her performance, but he is affected in a negative, rather than glorious way. Just as Lily projects a sense of the sublime via her beauty in the *tableaux vivants*, this encounter is also an example of the result of Lily being both beautiful and sublime.

In manipulating Gus through her use of an affective sublime, Lily has exerted power over Gus. By this point, Gus recognizes her power over him, but he remains visibly attracted to her beauty, evidenced by his “heated” face (111), “unusual excitability” (112), and forward attentions (113). Though Burke would argue that this lust towards Lily is an indication of her *beauty* rather than sublimity (306), Gus' terror is in response to the sense of sublime Lily projects on him. Burke also claims, “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications...they are delightful...” (305). When Lily was more distant, her beauty was delightful to Gus, but as he draws closer to Lily, her power over him increases, inducing terror in Gus. As noted in Chapter I, the feminine sublime views mastery of a subject differently than proponents of traditional sublime: Rather than mastering the object of rapture, the feminine sublime seeks to experience otherness without mastering or domesticating it. In this scene, Gus visibly attempts to master the other, embodied

in Lily. His exertion of power over her reveals his Burkean sublime-induced terror of Lily.

In Gus' attempt to master Lily, both his fear and his desires are revealed. Lily's sublimity produces alarm in him because it presents an otherness, an excess he fears not being able to dominate. In this, he communicates his desire for Lily to be only beautiful and not sublime. Gus wants Lily to be real, flesh and blood – concrete manifestations falling outside the parameters of the sublime. She has affected him through the sublime, yet she remains socially abject, and thus, Gus does not feel dishonorable about his deceit – Lily, as abject, is exempt from normal codes of moral and ethical conduct in Gus' eyes.

Lily's lack of money and subsequent lower status render her socially abject. Though she manages to hang around the upper circle, it is with the condition that she is of a somewhat lower status, shown in her servant-like chores for Judy Trenor, borrowed gowns, and well-known constant hunt for a wealthy husband. Kristeva's abject is a mixture of disgust and horror, yet somewhat simultaneously attractive. As the repulsiveness of the abject serves as a reminder of what humans could be, so Lily reminds the upper class of the possibility of less wealth and lower social standing. For Lily, she sees Gerty Farish as the abject, a reminder of how low she might sink, and a motivation to rise ever higher socially. An outsider and other, Lily wants to ride through the ranks to the highest level of wealth, therefore able to exert the most social influence. Not quite a member of affluent society but desperately reaching for it, Lily actively places her body in the position of an object to be viewed and appreciated for its beauty, and so attempts to dissolve her abject state by affecting the sublime on her audience. Lily effectively blurs the reality between her inner self and her outer identity, allowing herself to exist in a middle-ground state between upper society and a lower class of "dinginess."

The *tableaux vivants*, while inducing a temporal sublimity, do not totally dissolve Lily's

abject state. In the *tableaux*, Lily invokes elements of Longinus' thunderbolt *ekstasis* and beauty, avoiding the otherness within herself, rather than engage the other, as Freeman argues is a more appropriate sublime. While Freeman argues for a feminine sublime that engages the other, rather than attempting to dominate the other, Lily desires to rid herself of the otherness that makes her abject. Thus, Lily invokes a patriarchal sublime, which invokes a history of domination over excess, rather than a feminine sublime that seeks to understand marginalized excess.

Understanding that Lily is purposely creating a version of her that is meant to be viewed objectively, it is plausible that others can experience the sublime simply by gazing at Lily. Lily, as a piece of art, is no longer a woman or a person, but a supernatural object capable of inducing a sublime state. Lily's goal in inducing the sublime on her audience is to dissolve her abject state, thereby creating a space for herself among the upper class. However, her use of the sublime is an unsustainable method for social mobility, because of its inherent brevity. Though the sublime creates a way for Lily to climb up the social ladder, the temporal and unstable nature of the sublime makes it a dangerous way to climb. Lily does manage to create a sublime moment, but as it is temporal, she is unable to sustain that sublimity and therefore remains abject and unaccepted by the upper social class.

CONCLUSION

From this examination of Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, it is striking that both women engage with the sublime as they attempt to transition into new roles they fashion for themselves, and in the end, both women die. Both art and literature of the nineteenth century reinforced the objectification of women, evidenced in Lily's art object status and Edna's lack of freedom to choose her own femininity. Art becomes important in each of these novels, most notably in Edna's freeing artistry, and Lily's participation in the *tableaux vivants*, in which she literally becomes a work of art. Though their experiences with the sublime greatly differed, each woman took part in the feminine sublime, as they each entered into a "domain of experience" that entailed a "crisis in relation to language and representation" and an "encounter with the gendered mechanisms of power" (3). Each woman entered into a crisis related to her representation as female, as Edna struggled with the concept of feminine as her society expected her to exist, and as Lily struggled with her representation as a sub-level in society. Both struggled with language as they sought to change their labels. Edna wavered between mother-woman, artist-woman, and free-woman labels while Lily fought to remove the culturally implied label of abject and wanted to attain the language of the upper-crust of society she wanted to join. All of their struggles with language and representation were based on their encounters with gendered mechanisms of power, from Edna's society's strict guidelines of femininity and Lily's society's guidelines of wealth.

Both Lily and Edna engaged with more traditional concepts of the sublime, too, encountering and engaging in Longinus' "thunderbolt" of inspiration or experience, Burke's simultaneous delight and terror, and Kant's excitement and energy that comes along with the

lack of boundaries and limits. Edna encounters the sublime through several stages as she tries on various femininities, from mother-woman and artist-woman, to free-woman, ultimately settling on the freedom, terror, and delight she felt in the ocean. Her experiences with her female companions, art, music, and nature lead her to her sublime awakening in the ocean. While Edna's liberation points to her death because Edna cannot exist in her society as a free woman, I argue that her experiences with sublimity took her to that moment. Edna searched for a place to shape her own femininity in her society, and found that place through sublimity, and ultimately death in the ocean – because that place could not exist in her society. --- Edna finds her “space” for femininity in the sublimity of the ocean

While Lily engages with the sublime by exploiting the sublime, Edna's experience involves occupying the sublime space. Rather than finding a space for her femininity to exist in a sublime moment, Lily attempts to use the sublime to her advantage, attempting to create the sublime and project its experience on others. Lily aims to absolve her socially abject state and move up in the social hierarchy. While Lily's sublime erases, Edna's creates: Lily desires to erase her abject state to obtain her ideal feminine place, while Edna finds her feminine space within the sublime.

The study of women in literature remains pertinent in the 21st century, politically and socially. As social issues continue to gain recognition in political and academic spheres, it becomes necessary to be retrospective, looking to history and literature of the past in order to gain insight in the present and future. By looking at Edna and Lily, readers of today gain a sense of where women have come, and where we are going. By recognizing the influence of the sublime and its implications – a greater depth and breadth of understanding of women's circumstances – the modern reader can continue to shape places of female identity.

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