Fighting Back & Falling Hard

Representation of the New Woman & Psychological Decline in The Awakening & The House of Mirth

B.A. Essay

Ylfa Hafsteinsdóttir

May 2014
Fighting Back & Falling Hard

*Representation of the New Woman & Psychological Decline in The Awakening & The House of Mirth*

B.A. Essay

Ylfa Hafsteinsdóttir
Kt.: 160789-2479

Supervisor: Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir
May 2014
Abstract

This paper discusses how Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, the protagonists of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, represent the *fin de siècle* phenomena known as the New Woman in fiction. Furthermore, it explores the reasons behind the protagonists’ psychological decline from well-established, upper-class women to “fallen,” and emotionally unstable individuals, culminating in their suicides in both novels. The analysis makes use of feminist and psychoanalytic criticism, to examine the implications of the authors’ representation of this new type of heroine. Through a feminist perspective, I firstly analyze how the protagonists embody the idea of the New Woman, with their display of masculine qualities, rejection of motherhood, and by demanding sexual freedom. Secondly, I consider how the representation of Edna and Lily as New Women ties in with “The Woman Question” of the time, which dealt with women’s rights, and their role in society. There the focus is on how they reject marriage as a woman’s ultimate destiny, and renounce the established patriarchy, as well as how their stories reflect the social castration women had to endure. From a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective, the analysis moves on to how the heroines’ inner conflict, the fact that their psyches are governed by the id, and their apparent fixation at the oral stage, along with their inherent Freudian narcissism, play a vital part in their ultimate demise, leading them to commit suicide. Although very different characters, Edna and Lily both represent women that fight back, and eventually fall from grace. This form of representation demonstrates the authors’ criticism of the status quo, their attempt to accustom society to the change they believed to be eminent, and by making their heroines martyrs for the cause of the women’s movement, they paved the way for coming generations of New Women.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 3

2. The Character of the New Woman ............................................................................................... 6
   1.1 The New Woman, Masculinity and Motherhood ................................................................. 6
   1.2 The New Woman and Sexuality ......................................................................................... 8
   1.3 Edna the Artist and Lily the Art Object ............................................................................. 10
   1.4 Nature vs. Culture .............................................................................................................. 12

3. The New Woman and “The Woman Question” .......................................................................... 13
   2.1 Rejection of Marriage as the Ultimate Destiny ................................................................. 13
   2.2 Rejection of Patriarchy ..................................................................................................... 16
   2.3 Women’s “Social Castration” ........................................................................................... 17

4. Edna and Lily’s Psychological Journey ....................................................................................... 19
   3.1 Eros and Thanatos: Inner conflict within Edna and Lily ............................................... 19
   3.2 The Idea of the Id .............................................................................................................. 20
   3.3 Fixation at the Oral Stage ................................................................................................. 21
   3.4 Freudian Narcissism ......................................................................................................... 22
   3.5 Suicide as a Way Out ......................................................................................................... 23

5. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 25

Works Cited ..................................................................................................................................... 27
1. Introduction

This essay examines the characters of Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, who are the protagonists of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* (1905), respectively, from a feminist and Freudian psychoanalytical viewpoint. The novels were both written around the very end of the nineteenth century, which is commonly referred to as the *fin de siècle*, and thus depict the cultural view of that time. The protagonists of both novels portray a new kind of female character in fiction, which had become recognized as the “New Woman.” The term “New Woman,” is more specifically a feminist ideal that came forth in public discourse during the late nineteenth century, around the time when these novels were published, and represented a woman who pushed the boundaries of her male dominated society (Ledger 1).

Being a female writer, representing the New Woman, as Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton did, was not an easy task at the *fin de siècle*. Chopin and Wharton both met with extreme criticism as they, along with other New Woman writers, “challenged the dominant sexual codes” of their time (Ledger 5). *The Awakening* especially, “provoked significant controversy because of its engagement with the taboo issues of female sexuality and infidelity.” Furthermore, “The censure and moral indignation prompted by the novel was expressed in a rash of outraged reviews; the text quickly went out of print and remained so for almost fifty years, during which time it was essentially unremarked, ignored by critics” (Beer and Nolan 1). Additionally, in an introduction to the Dover edition of *The Awakening* from 1993, is it stated that the novel “aroused a storm of controversy for its then-unprecedented treatment of female independence and sexuality, and for its unromantic portrayal of marriage.” It further states that Chopin was “Socially ostracized for her scandalous frankness” (Smith “Introduction”). Wharton, similarly, had critics against her for most of her career for the sole reason of being of the “inferior sex,” in a society that had not fully accepted women in the writing profession (Killoran 3). In addition, the time in which these two novels were published, was a turbulent one, as “The Woman Question” was becoming increasingly more visible in public discourse, and society was, as Elaine Showalter describes it, in a state of “sexual anarchy” (*Sexual Anarchy* 3). It was not only women who started openly expressing their sexuality, but there was also an ongoing debate regarding the topic of homosexuality, which first came into the open during the *fin de siècle*. 
In this text I explore who this New Woman was, and what she stood for, as well as how both Edna and Lily represent the idea of the New Woman, and how they accordingly, each in their own way, reject established gender roles, and demand greater autonomy, and increased social, as well as economic and sexual freedom as women. Furthermore, I will look at their psychological journey from well-established, upper-class ladies to disgraced and “fallen” women, their inner struggle for self-identification, as well as their inherent narcissism stemming from their unresolved relationships with their mothers, which culminates with the heroines’ suicide in both cases.

One might perceive feminist and Freudian psychoanalytic criticism to be incompatible when it comes to literary criticism, as Freud has often been criticized for upholding patriarchal views on gender relations. However, as Lidoff points out, to read these novels in a “psychological mode is not to deny the destructive effect of social arrangements on women's development, but rather more fully to demonstrate it. The ultimate locus of damage by inadequate social structures is within the individual” (537-8). Thus, as we locate the patriarchal structures that strove to keep women down, and focus our attention on the male dominance the protagonists constantly have to fight, we are also confronted with how both of them are affected by it on a psychological level. Fox-Genovese also emphasizes this point, when she says that both the feminist and the psychological aspect of *The Awakening* “must be read together, for the grounds for choosing one rather than the other do not exist” (262). Other women may have, and do, find a way to exist in such a society and be happy with the little freedom they are allowed, as we see so many of the other female characters of the two novels do. Edna and Lily, however, contrastingly, choose to die rather than to conform to the patriarchal norms of their society.

Therefore, although essentially quite different characters, both Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart are portrayed as prisoners of their own upper-class society. Their surroundings demand of them that they conform to certain feminine ideals, which they however, are not willing to do. In this manner, they both represent an idea of the New Woman of the time, as they reject traditional feminine social roles, and call for a greater sexual, economic, and personal freedom. Edna and Lily both display a desire for a society where they are free to be who they want to be, and not someone who their patriarchal society requires them to be. Moreover, although the protagonists’ revolt against their assigned gender roles plays a vital part in the novels, it is their inner struggle,
trying to find their place and footing in the changing society of the *fin de siècle*, that take the forefront in both narratives.

The essay starts with a general discussion of the concept of the New Woman, her characteristics, and the ideals she represents, as well as how both Edna and Lily establish themselves as versions of this New Woman. It then goes into more detail on how the New Woman fought established gender roles, and the dominant patriarchy of the society at the *fin de siècle*, and how Edna and Lily take part in that conflict by rejecting various forms of male dominance, and the gender norms they are faced with. By the end of the essay, the focus turns toward Freudian psychoanalytic criticism where I attempt to show how both Edna and Lily suffer mentally, having been detached from their mothers at a young age, leading to their severe narcissism, and an inability to adapt to the norms of a society that is not changing rapidly enough to accommodate the protagonists’ changing world-view. Furthermore, I examine how both Edna and Lily display their inner struggle, represent Freud’s idea of the “id,” and demonstrate a fixation at the oral stage, as well as how their failure to resolve any of their psychological issues, or to really achieve freedom from the patriarchy, eventually leads to the heroines’ suicides.
2. The Character of the New Woman

The idea of the New Woman first surfaced at the end of the nineteenth century, and so she is indeed “a fin de siècle phenomena” as Ledger has claimed (1). The concept of the New Woman has been used in a variety of ways. For instance, it has been used to apply to female writers of the late nineteenth century, feminist activists of the same time, as well as the character of the New Women in fiction. The New Woman in fiction was a strong presence at the fin de siècle, as many writers of the time portrayed this strong, independent woman who stood in opposition to established traditions. The New Woman can for example be found in the literary works of the likes of Henry James (e.g. Daisy Miller) and Henrik Ibsen (e.g. The Doll’s House), to name a couple. During the fin de siècle, there was a strong debate on the topic of the New Woman, and she was frequently associated with sexual decadence and masculine traits in women, as well as having strong connections with the women’s movement of the late nineteenth century. In addition to looking at the general characteristics of the New Woman, I will focus on how Edna Pontellier and Lily Bath, fictional constructions, embody the ideal of the New Woman of the period.

1.1 The New Woman, Masculinity and Motherhood

The concept of the New Woman partly represents a “privileged minority,” as she is closely connected to secondary education which was only available for women of some stature and financial means, and in fact some social commentators of the time regarded her as “a regrettable by-product of women’s new ‘passion for learning’” (Ledger 17). As Ledger has pointed out, the New Woman was a thoroughly modern figure, and even though she has not always been regarded as the perfect example for later feminists, as she was often portrayed as being sexually immoral, she was a force for change. In addition, her concerns were largely the same as those of the later women’s movements, with topics such as education and employment opportunities for women, the problem of working for a living, as well as being a mother and a housewife, and sexual freedom, high on her list of topics (Ledger 5-6). As previously mentioned, Elaine Showalter describes the last two decades of the nineteenth century as ones of “sexual anarchy” (Sexual Anarchy 3). In a society where women were supposed to embody the idea of purity and morality, there was an emergence of emancipated women who wished to break down gender
norms, and redefine the meaning of the terms femininity and masculinity (*Sexual Anarchy* 3). These women, instead of being bound by the confines of marriage, hoped for free unions where they could live as equals with their partners (Ledger 14).

The idea of the New Woman as being masculine, that is, portraying attributes that had previously been seen as male, emerged at the *fin de siècle* (Ledger 13). Characteristics and activities such as smoking in public, obtaining a secondary education, taking up employment, being seen alone in public without a man accompanying them, as well as taking part in intellectual conversation, and being politically active, were consequently associated with the New Woman, and most often not in a positive way (Ledger 16-17). For example, Lily Bart, is seen, at the beginning of *The House of Mirth*, standing alone at a train station where Lawrence Selden catches sight of her. He immediately starts wondering what she is doing there alone, and describes her as looking “desultory” (Wharton 3). For a woman to be out in public without a companion, was regarded as unusual at the time, and women doing so would have run the risk of being associated with prostitution (Ledger 101). Furthermore, one of the male characters of *The House of Mirth*, Van Alstyne, vocalizes his displeasure about women’s smoking habit, when he states:

Now that women have taken to tobacco we live in a bath of nicotine. It would be a curious thing to study the effect of cigarettes on the relation of the sexes. Smoke is almost as great a solvent as divorce: both tend to obscure the moral issue. (185)

Edna’s display of masculine qualities are mostly in the form of her eagerness to work on her art, or to work at all, as women’s place was seen to be within the home. She is of the opinion that taking up work as an artist is much more fulfilling than being a mother to her children. This is something that women were not supposed to feel, let alone express publicly, or act upon. Mothers were meant to sacrifice themselves for their children, and this way of thinking, as demonstrated by Edna’s character, was rejected by most men and women at the time. Hence, a woman of the time wrote: “Selfishness and self-seeking is the spirit of the time, and its chilling poison has infected womanhood, and touched even the sacred principle of maternity” (Barr 22). It was believed to be man’s obligation to work and provide for this family, meanwhile the women were meant to stay at home and take care of their children. Women were, as a result, seen as confined within the domestic sphere, and their creativity was seen as limited to creation of new life by birth. Men, on the other hand, being unable to create from within themselves, were
free to explore a different kind of creation in the public sphere, that is, by art or literature. For
any woman to suggest a desire for a role outside the domestic sphere, as more than a mother or
housewife, was perceived as ludicrous.

Moreover, Edna is declared early on in *The Awakening* not to be “a mother-woman.” The
mother-woman was the ideal that all young women were to strive to become, and Edna’s friend
Madame Ratignolle is the embodiment of that ideal. Mother-women “were women who idolized
their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as
individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 8). This idea of giving yourself
completely to serve another, is in stark contrast to what the New Woman advocated. Edna is here
again the perfect example of the character of the New Woman as she declares “that she would
never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one” (Chopin 47).

### 1.2 The New Woman and Sexuality

Adultery was seen as one of the ultimate forms of decadence at the time during which the two
novels were published, and was something that was frequently associated with the New Woman.
This was partly due to the fact that she advocated “free love,” which meant living in a union with
a man without getting married (Ledger 14). For women, who were not meant to receive any
pleasure from sexual activities, aside from the joy of the sometimes following pregnancy and
motherhood, to seek sexual pleasure outside their marital bed was believed to show signs of
moral decay. This view has been confirmed by Wolff, as she stated that “the language of
feminine sexuality became inextricably intertwined with discourse that had to do with child-
bearing and motherhood” (“Un-Utturable Longing” 74). Thus, as quoted in Ledger, women’s
only passion was meant to be for their children, their home, and domestic work, and they were
not expected to desire any sexual gratification whatsoever, and only to partake in sexual
activities to please their husbands (101).

Men, on the other hand, frequently sought sexual gratification with concubines or at brothels,
which allowed for the spread of sexually transmitted decease, but this was believed to be
impossible in the case of women, who were always seen as sexually passive and pure (Ledger
15). Ledger further points out this “double standard” regarding the fact that if men frequented
prostitution establishments, or had mistresses, society would “turn a blind eye,” whereas if a
woman would be found guilty of a liaison with a man who was not her husband, she would be branded as an immoral and “fallen woman” (14).

However, at the fin de siècle, these ideas about female sexuality started to change and women began to identify themselves as sexual beings and demanded increased sexual freedom. In Edna’s case, her extramarital affair coincides with her growing restlessness within her marriage and with the obligations of motherhood. In fact, she strives not only for sexual autonomy, but more importantly, social freedom. This previously mentioned double standard is made evident on a few occasions in The House of Mirth. For example, when Lily thinks that the affair between Bertha Dorset and Ned Silverton is about to be discovered, she reflects that “all the disadvantages of such a situation were for the woman” (Wharton 237), and on the occasion of buying the letters that prove the existence of an affair between Mrs. Dorset and Selden, she admits that “Men do not, at worst, suffer much from such exposure” (Wharton 122).

Moreover, at the fin de siècle, as Showalter mentions, those women who were unable to marry, or chose to remain single, were referred to as “odd women” (Sexual Anarchy 19). Having moved away from the early view of women as being passive, non-sexual beings, people had realized that women could indeed experience sexual pleasure, and physicians of the time maintained that women needed sex just as much as men did for health reasons (Sexual Anarchy 21). However, due to the rigid view regarding the expression of sexuality and sexual relations, anyone who would openly have a sexual relationship that was not bound by marriage, was seen as morally debased. As a consequence, there were no real alternatives of sexual activities for single women who wanted to remain respectable, for heterosexual relationships outside marriage were seen as highly inappropriate, and lesbianism was not widely recognized (Sexual Anarchy 23).

If we look at Edna’s awakening, it can be said to be two-fold. On the one hand, it is a sexual awakening, as the reader experiences when Edna shares her first kiss with Alcée Arobin, which is said to be “the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (Chopin 83). The fact that this sexual awakening occurs outside the marital bed, makes it all the more scandalous. However, her awakening is also a realization of her underprivileged position in a male dominated society, which will be covered in more detail below.
As previously mentioned, women, like Edna Pontellier, who were found guilty of adultery or sexual relations outside marriage were regarded as “fallen women”. Sometimes, in fact, women did not even have to have actually done anything to be considered immoral, as witnessed in *The House of Mirth*. In Lily’s case it is enough that she made herself “conspicuous” (Wharton 145) as her aunt, Mrs. Peniston, remarks that it is “horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made” (Wharton 148). The truth is that Lily never really breaks society’s code of conduct, as such, she simply gets “talked about,” which proves to be her ticket into social exile. Both Edna and Lily are, for these reasons, regarded as “fallen,” but they are only categorized as such by the standards of the society they inhabit, which is dominated by men. In short, it is the men that have the power to define, while the women, who lack any power, are the ones who continuously come to be judged.

1.3 Edna the Artist and Lily the Art Object

The time in which these novels were written was a transitional time for women’s lives, and women’s literature of the era raised questions regarding women’s work, and their ability for creativity. For example, in *The Awakening*, Mlle. Reisz proclaims that “the artist must possess a courageous soul,” and furthermore a “brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 63-64). There certainly was a need for the woman artist to contain a “courageous soul,” as she was going against convention by pursuing a career in the arts. Women’s place of work was the home, and they had few chances of pursuing any sort of occupation outside the domestic sphere. Consequently, Edna is trying to establish herself as an artist in a society where there is no tradition of women as creative beings. This is the same battle that the authors of the two novels, Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, were fighting during their careers as female writers. That is, trying to establish themselves as artists in a world ruled by men. As Wolff proclaims, “the ‘great tradition’ had evolved no conventions designed to render a woman as the maker of beauty, no language of feminine growth and mastery” (*A Feast of Words* 111). Chopin does what Wharton will not, she tells the story of a woman attempting to become an artist despite what her society expects of her. As Virginia Woolf has stated, “it is fairly evident that even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist. On the contrary, she was snubbed, slapped,
 Women were not only considered mentally incapable of becoming artists, but they were simply not allowed even to attempt to pursue it as an occupation.

Wharton, contrary to Chopin’s open defiance, turns to satire, and criticizes her society for having forced women to waste their artistic talents on “a display of self”. As Wolff points out, her heroine Lily Bart is “Not the woman as productive artist, but the woman as self-creating artistic object” (*A Feast of Words* 111). At the *fin de siècle* there was most certainly a tendency to look at women as objects. They were supposed to look beautiful, and they were regarded as possession of their fathers and husbands. Lily is, as follows, coerced to turn herself into an art object by the patriarchal society which she inhabits. Wolff claims that Wharton was of the opinion that “doing” beauty was much more desirable than “being” a beautiful object (*A Feast of Words* 107). Edna can therefore be said to be attempting to “do” beauty, that is, create a work of art, while Lily uses herself as the canvas. The most obvious representation of this, in *The House of Mirth*, is when Lily takes part in the *tableaux vivants* at the Wellington Brys. There Lily tactically presents her beauty in a way that is pleasing to everyone present, and makes her love-interest, Lawrence Shelden, and her friend Gerty Farish, believe that this is the “real Lily” they are laying their eyes on (Wharton 158). However, as Wolff further states:

> The woman who elects to form her nature as a pleasing accommodation to the demands of those around her can do so only by a systematic mutilation of her own identity. Becoming a beautiful object, acquiring a perfect state of compliant passivity, achieving an equanimity that betrays no hint of self-assertion – all of these erode the very heart of character. The woman who manages to satisfy society’s appetite for “feminine” delicacy may find that she has retained no more than a hollow, empty shell of self. (*A Feast of Words* 107)

This is the kind of femininity the reader is confronted with in Lily Bart, when reading *The House of Mirth*. That is, “femininity as the art of ‘being’” (*A Feast of Words* 109). The first title of the novel, “A Moment’s Ornament,” describes this vision of Lily as an art object quite clearly, as well as capturing the fragility of this self she has created (*A Feast of Words* 109). She is nothing to her companions but something pretty to look at, and if they find themselves in trouble, someone to place the blame on.
1.4 Nature vs. Culture

Many feminists have recognized the importance of changing persistent stereotypes regarding gender roles and characteristics, if women are to have a chance of becoming equal to men. This is what the New Woman was trying to do at the fin de siècle. One example of a deep-rooted symbolism regarding gender roles is to view women as inherently connected to nature, while men represent culture in the same way. This has for example been of much interest to feminist anthropologists, who have proceeded to conduct research on the topic in many different societies all over the world, and found it to be the root of women’s universal subordination.

In both *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* the reader is confronted with the protagonists as victims of their emotions and the nature of their sex, while the men tend to be represented as level-headed and logical. This was the dominant view of women’s character at the fin de siècle, as Ledger demonstrates, when she utilizes examples from the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to present this way of thinking about gender characteristics (109). Women were thus believed to be the products of their biology, unable to resist being swept away by their ever changing mood and emotions, while the men in their lives were seen as rational and thoughtful. This was one of the primary arguments which anti-feminist would use against women receiving social and financial autonomy, that is, that they needed male guidance, as they were of a “lower state of civilisation” according to the social Darwinism of the time (Ledger 24). In fact, Peter Barry explains this position perfectly when he claims that “social inequality is being ‘naturalised’, that is, literally, disguised as nature, and viewed as a situation which is ‘god-given’ and inescapable, when actually it is the product of a specific politics and power structure” (244). These “politics and power structure” are indeed what the New Woman was fighting, and they were created by men who wished to control women in every aspect.
3. The New Woman and “The Woman Question”

The social change that was taking place at the fin de siècle regarding women’s nature, place, and role in society, is frequently termed “The Woman Question.” The Woman Question dealt with women’s issues, such as the right to vote, the right to property, and the right to govern their own body (“The Woman Question”). With the changing views on women’s sexuality and their overall place in society, those who campaigned for purity and morality used the family as a way to fight against what they saw as growing sexual decadence. Not only did these moralists worry about the promiscuity of women, but homosexuality also came into the discussion at this time, especially in connection with the trial of Oscar Wilde (Showalter, Sexual Anarchy 3). The New Woman was therefore often considered a threat to the former conventional ways of society, as she called for a dramatic change in established gender roles, and her critics were often harsh. These anti-feminists, whose goal was to undermine the feminist movement, attacked the New Woman, and accused her of being “a threat to the human race...an infanticidal mother and at the very least sexually abnormal” (Ledger 10).

Furthermore, legislative reform in the 1880s in England which followed “The Woman Question,” and involved married women’s right to property and divorce, was seen by many as an attack on society’s established patriarchal system (Showalter, Sexual Anarchy 7). In fact, in many ways the New Woman was a threat to male dominance in society, as she rejected established institutions such as marriage and motherhood, and the patriarchy itself, as being absolute, and also criticized women’s lack of social power.

2.1 Rejection of Marriage as the Ultimate Destiny

For women at the fin de siècle, marriage was seen as the ultimate vocation, while men were free to pursue whatever path in life they chose. This disadvantage women faced at the time was eloquently put forth in an essay by Charlotte Perkins Gilman:

    To the young woman confronting life there is the same world beyond [as for the man], there are the same human energies and human desires and ambition within. But all that she may wish to have, all that she may wish to do, must come through a single channel and a single choice. Wealth, power, social distinction, fame, - not only these, but home and
happiness, reputation, ease and pleasure, her bread and butter, - all, must come to her through a small gold ring. (45)

With this Gilman criticizes women’s inability to achieve anything on their own, as she presents marriage as the golden ticket to wealth, power, happiness, and whatever else a woman might desire. Gilman, hence, joins forces with the New Woman in rejecting the institution of marriage as woman’s ultimate destiny.

Nevertheless, the New Woman was not just one thing, she was sometimes seen as sexually free, while some writers would show her as a pure figure. This is the kind of contrast that can be seen when dealing with the protagonists of the two novels discussed here, Edna and Lily. Edna is the more obvious version of the New Woman, who rejects maternity and marriage, and above all, becomes guilty of adultery, while Lily is portrayed as a true lady, an angelic creature, whose purity is rarely questioned. Lily, however, does indirectly fight the institution of marriage and is furthermore, an example of what happened to those women who were unable to find themselves a husband. The only thing that is certain is that the New Woman was considered a problem by conservatives, as she was believed to endanger the status quo by presenting, and demanding, alternative options for women besides marriage.

As mentioned above, Edna perhaps fits better in with the idea of the New Woman, with her desire for a life of her own, economic autonomy, as well as freedom to work, and be free from her maternal obligations. Her awakening is thusly in part expressed by her dismissal of the traditional gender roles she is expected to play (Fox-Genovese 258). Her character was therefore the perfect target for the critics of the New Woman, and she even realizes this herself, although she is not fully prepared to admit that what she is doing is wrong, when she proclaims: “By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can’t convince myself that I am” (Cho pin 82). These codes that Edna refers to are the cultural codes of the patriarchal society that she inhabits, which the critics of the New Woman wanted to remain unchanged. Edna’s frustration within her marriage is clearly displayed in the scene where she, in a state of frustration, takes off her wedding ring, throws on the floor, and tries to break it by stamping on it. However, the marriage convention is stronger than to be broken by a single woman, and “her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet” (Chopin 52).
Women, at the time, were regarded as little more than possessions of their fathers, and later their husbands, which is something the New Woman strove to change. This way of thinking is articulated early on in *The Awakening*, when Mr. Pontellier expresses his disappointment that his wife let herself be exposed to the sunlight during their stay in Grand Isle, and the narrator remarks that he “[looked] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 2). It was no secret that a woman’s ultimate destiny was considered to be motherhood. So, for Edna’s character to display an obvious lack of enthusiasm for that role was extremely controversial at the time when the novel was published. This dominant view of women’s place in society is further portrayed in *The Awakening* when Mr. Pontellier accuses his wife of neglecting their children, asking who on earth is meant to take care of them if she, their own mother will not, making it clear that he is far too preoccupied to have anything to do with raising his own children (Chopin 5).

Moreover, on the subject of provoking the patriarchy, Lily should not be underestimated. Although all she seems to desire is a continuous place in upper-class New York society, she is not content to abide by society’s rules to get there. She may not publicly reject the social convention, but she is stubborn, and continuously blunders all her opportunities to attach herself to a man that can provide her with the economic security she so desires, and with that a guaranteed place among the high and mighty in New York society of the time. By portraying a woman in her late twenties and early thirties, that has not been yet been married, Wharton displays a lady who is in her own way a force for change, no matter how her life does turn out later on in the novel. Furthermore, by not agreeing to marry anyone, when getting married is what the patriarchy requires of her, is her form of revolt against it. As Carry Fisher points out, “[Lily] works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she oversleeps herself or goes off on a picnic.” Mrs. Fisher’s conclusion is that “at heart, she despises the thing she’s trying for” (Wharton 220).

As Ledger points out in her book on the New Woman in fiction, there was a call for an alternative option for women, besides marriage, at the *fin de siècle* (12). Lily is indeed the perfect example of what would happen to women if they were unable, or chose not to marry. Without any real education or professional training, women were doomed, as Lily most certainly is. Despite trying to become a part of the working class, having had no training in any profession, Lily eventually fails, and finds herself penniless and without anywhere to escape to. Because
obtaining employment would have provided women with an alternative to married life, the New Woman’s demand for educational options, and more freedom for women to engage in employment, was seen as a threat to the institution of marriage, and that became one of the ultimate arguments against the New Woman (Ledger 11).

The previously mentioned odd women posed another problem for traditionalists, besides representing a surplus of single women, because those women who did not have a husband to support them, were forced to seek employment in order to provide for themselves, and would in many cases be competing against men for jobs. Hence, as previously mentioned, women seeking employment was seen by many as a severe problem for the society (Showalter, Sexual Anarchy 19). Lily Bart represents one of these odd women as she fails to find herself a husband, and fulfill woman’s ultimate goal of becoming a wife and mother. She is hence forced to look for some form of employment without any previous training or education. Feminists of the fin de siècle saw this development as proof and testament to the fact that there were other paths that women could go down besides the traditional domestic one, and they therefore called for increased education opportunities for women to prepare them for a life as working women. This overflow of single women also emphasized the need to enfranchise women, since these unmarried women, having no man to represent them, would need to get the vote to be able to represent themselves legally (Showalter, Sexual Anarchy 20-21). Naturally, this frightened those who still wished to enforce the patriarchy, and who saw this surplus of single women as a great threat to male dominance.

2.2 Rejection of Patriarchy

The rejection of marriage as the only possible vocation for women of the time goes hand in hand with the rejection of the established patriarchy. Marriage at the time was not a union of souls, but an economic arrangement. This is evident in both novels, and forms the major part of the plot of The House of Mirth. Thus, Wharton’s criticism focuses largely on the “economic dependency” of women, according to Showalter (“Death of the Lady” 141), who were forced to attach themselves to men in order to survive. At the time, marriage was the foundation on which the patriarchy was built. By having women dependent on men for economic survival, and consequently forcing them to get married, was men’s basis for controlling women. Since women did not have an independent income, they had to rely on their husbands for everything, which
gave men added power over them. Thus, when women started to branch out of the domestic sphere and into the public sphere, which had previously been reserved for men, it was a major threat to men’s domination over women. Now women were no longer forced to marry, but could live an independent existence, and follow whichever path they chose, even art or writing.

In *The Awakening*, Edna is constantly rejecting patriarchal control over her life. First by marrying Léonce Pontellier, despite her father’s disapproval of the union, and later by moving out of the house she shares with her husband, in his absence. The fact that she insists on working on her painting, as well as her disregard for her reception day, are a further testament to her defiance against the traditions imposed on her by society.

Furthermore, Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* is in itself a criticism of the power men had over women, both when it came to marriage, and also in other aspects of their social life. Lily Bart is brutally aware of the position of her gender when she claims: “What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it’s the story that’s easiest to believe” (262). She is also well aware that because she is a single, impoverished woman, she has no power in this world whatsoever. This was the cruel reality of women’s lives that Wharton presented to the reader, and indeed wished to change.

Women of the period were largely a muted group. That is, they had very little to say about their own matters and were accordingly forced to rely on a husband to speak for them, as Showalter has pointed out (“Death of the Lady” 136). This muteness of women is clearly represented in Gilbert and Gubar’s idea of women’s “social castration.”

### 2.3 Women’s “Social Castration”

The term “social castration” was introduced by the feminist literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* where they identify women as “social castrates” (273). The term, as they apply it, denotes the lack of influence women have in society, and is connected to Freud’s notions of penis envy and the castration complex. For a feminist reading, the focus will be on Freud’s idea of penis envy as a metaphor for the power that being a man has on one’s standing in society, rather than women literally desiring the male organ itself (Barry 125). Additionally, the idea of the castration complex in girls is explained by Freud as the point when a girl realizes that she does not have a penis, and with that “acknowledges the fact of
her castration, the consequent superiority of the male and her own inferiority, but she also rebels against these unpleasant facts” (“Female Sexuality” 3).

Women of the fin de siècle were certainly castrated in a sense, as they had no real power over their life or property. Gilbert and Gubar quote Elizabeth Janeway who claimed that women do not miss a penis they never had, but that they have “been deprived of something else that men enjoy: namely, autonomy, freedom, and the power to control [their] destiny” (272). The fact that society was male dominated makes it no surprise that Freud should make this connection of women envying men of the power they had, even though he probably meant it in a more literal way. Edna’s awakening is in fact partially her realization of her disadvantaged situation in society as a woman. This is made clear when the narrator informs us that

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight – perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (Chopin 13)

Lily is also aware of a woman’s standing in society of the fin de siècle, compared to that of a man, as she expresses during one of her conversations with Shelden on the topic of marriage. She points out that when it comes to marrying “a girl must, a man may if he chooses” (Wharton 13). Lily is thus very well aware of the limitations regarding what kind of life she can choose for herself. Although she is constantly looking for a husband, she does so out of necessity, not by choice. She expresses this numerous times in the novel, as when she says: “We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop – and if we can’t keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership” (Wharton 13). On the prospect of such a partnership Lily claims that “It [is] a hateful fate – but how escape from it? What choice [has] she?” (Wharton 29). In truth, the only option she has if she wants to keep up her lifestyle, is to find herself a wealthy husband. Her other option is to take up the lifestyle of a working woman, like Shelden’s cousin Gerty Farish, but as the reader witnesses, Lily Bart is not made for life as a working girl. The heroines of both novels are acutely aware of their social castration and their inability to lead the life they want. To be aware of one’s own powerlessness is enough to affect the mental health of anyone, even characters as willful as Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart.
4. Edna and Lily’s Psychological Journey

Fox-Genovese’s conclusion about *The Awakening*, which I believe also applies to *The House of Mirth*, is that the novel tells both the story of the progress in the protagonist’s character, as well as her mental regression. As both Edna and Lily discover the injustice of their male dominated society, reject its values, and manage to break away from society’s traditional gender roles, while also discovering their own sexuality, their stories furthermore depict their “psychological regression,” as Fox-Genovese has stated about Edna journey in *The Awakening* (262). Both Edna and Lily are depicted as immature, childish individuals on several occasions in the novels, with their constant search for pleasure, and sometimes incredible naivety, although they are both in their late twenties. I aim to demonstrate that the protagonists’ continuous search for immediate pleasure implies that their psyches are predominantly governed by the Freudian notion of the “id”.

Additionally, some critics have pointed out that losing their mothers at an early age causes the characters in the two stories to suffer from extreme narcissism, which as a psychoanalytical term refers to, as developed by Heinz Kohut, and reported by Lidoff, an elaboration of Freud’s formulation, and “[argues] that the infant’s universally shared primary narcissism can be perpetuated in adults as one in a repertory of responses, a residue we retain from the infant’s initial feeling of oneness with the mother” (Lidoff 526). Furthermore, both heroines show signs of being fixated at the oral stage, as I will go on to demonstrate. However, I will start by analyzing the inner conflict that controls the protagonists’ actions, and leads to their downfall, leaving them with seemingly no way out but to commit suicide.

3.1 Eros and Thanatos: Inner Conflict within Edna and Lily

Freud first introduced his idea of the person being controlled by two main instincts, the life instinct and the death instinct, in his essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” There he described the life instinct as the drive for the preservation of life, and of making new life, while he claimed that the death drive, contrastingly, was “the instinct to return to the inanimate state” (38). The life instinct and the death instinct are seen at constantly working against each other. These two instincts introduced by Freud, later became primarily known as Eros and Thanatos.
If Eros represents in Edna and Lily the instinct for life and reproduction, then Thanatos is what drives them to their destruction. Because they both reject the role of wife and mother, which is promoted by the life instincts, Eros, they are doomed for disintegration and death at the hand of Thanatos.

These conflicting instincts take on different forms in our two protagonists. For example, Wolff has argued that Edna has two selves, one that she expresses to the outer world, but also another “hidden self” that “longs for resuscitation and nourishment” (“Thanatos and Eros” 235). Her outer self is her role as wife and mother, while the hidden self, that starts coming out after her stay at Grand Isle, is Edna as an artist and a lover. A similar conflict of selves can be found within Lily as she battles between her need for status and wealth, which would involve marriage and children, and being true to her own self and her idea of morality. Both heroines opt for the choice that is ultimately the cause of their downfall. Edna’s choice to leave her husband for the chance to be with Robert Lebrun, who turns out to be much the same as her husband, wishing her to marry him and thus contain her, leads her to her suicide. The same goes for Lily, who, by holding on to her sense of morality by destroying the letters between Mrs. Dorset and Selden, and refusing to steal Mr. Dorset away from his wife, although given the chance, leads her to become isolated, without hope for anything but poverty and misery.

3.2 The Idea of the Id
Lidoff quoted Freud’s theories when she stated that “Originally, the infant experiences all his needs as being gratified instantaneously and completely by the nurturing mother, whom he perceives as an extension of his own being” (526). This Freud has explained as the “pleasure principle” that governs the id, which is the unconscious part of mind. The id is regarded as being controlled by passions, while the ego is the part of one’s mind which “represents what may be called reason and common sense” (*The Ego and the Id* 15). Hence, the id has often been compared to a demanding child. As stated above, Edna is said to resemble a child on more than one occasion in *The Awakening*. For example, when Madame Ratignolle claims that: “In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life” (Chopin 96), and Madame Ratignolle is right. Edna, indeed, represents in many ways Freud’s idea of the id, desiring all her needs to be met instantly. She, as a result, constantly makes hasty decisions without any forethought, generally expected from a
responsible adult. The purchase of the “pigeon house” is one example of such erratic behavior by Edna, witnessed by the reader. The whole process, from the idea of moving out coming to Edna, until she concludes the business, is a matter of days, and “There was no moment of deliberation, no interval of repose between the thought and its fulfilment” (Chopin 84).

In fact, both Edna and Lily’s psyches seem to be governed by the id. They are both impulsive pleasure seekers who lack the policing effects of the ego. The reason for this inability to mature, that the reader experiences in both Edna and Lily, has been explained by Lidoff, in the case of Lily, which I also believe it rings true in Edna’s case, as the heroine “[acting] out a cultural dilemma: when society provides no adult female role of active responsibility and initiative, women are confined to passive and childlike states and cannot mature” (Lidoff 537).

3.3 Fixation at the Oral Stage

The absence of a female mother-figure has further dramatic influence on both Edna and Lily. Because she loses her mother at an early age, Wolff maintains that Edna’s “libidinal appetite has been fixated at the oral level” due to her obsession with nourishment and food related vocabulary, most notably the word “delicious,” which she uses frequently (“Thanatos and Eros” 232). The reason for this fixation, according to Wolff, is this initial lack of “oneness with a nurturing figure,” which has the effect that the individual is unable to “move onward to more complex satisfactions” than those basic needs for nurture (“Thanatos and Eros” 234). In fact, there is various evidence in the novels examined, that both Edna and Lily suffer from this oral stage fixation. Lily’s smoking habit, for example, can be seen as proof for her retention at the oral stage, as well as her seeming obsession with attaching herself to a man, not to mention her substance abuse at the end of the story, culminating in her death by an overdose.

Moreover, Edna’s constant need to have someone in her life that she can latch on to, normally a man, can also be seen as signs of fixation. Edna’s reminiscing about her former love interests, always seeming to have had someone to focus her attention on, displays her tendency for over dependency. In fact, when her husband goes away, after Robert has left for Mexico, she is devastated, although she has up until then in the novel, not given the reader any indication that she cares for her husband even remotely. Subsequently, she throws herself at the next man to give her the slightest attention, Alcée Arobin, for whom she does not show any genuine affection. This is made clear after her first night with Arobin when Edna experiences “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 84).

3.4 Freudian Narcissism

Lidoff maintains that Lily’s “emotional style” is one of “primary narcissism,” a term she borrows from Freud, where “Difficult aspects of the self are projected onto others so that rather than becoming coherent and realistic, the self-concept remains idealized” (Lidoff 521). Because Lily loses her mother at an early age the “inadequate nurturance and support lead to undeveloped self-esteem and a consequent inability to love or to work” (Lidoff 536). Lidoff also states that Lily “remains fixed in passive dependency and the hungers of the unnurtured childhood state” (536). The same can also be found to apply to Edna, who is often compared to a child, and as Wolff points out, she is unable to come to terms with her “nurturing needs”, like her friend Madame Ratignolle successfully does by “displacing them onto her children and becoming a ‘mother-woman,’” something Chopin establishes early on that Edna is not (“Thanatos and Eros” 237). This primary narcissism that both Edna and Lily suffer from renders them unable to really love, as mentioned by Lidoff, and quoted above. This inability to experience “object-love” is also found in Freud where he maintains that narcissistic women who are unable to love a man, can go on to know “object-love” when they bring their own child into the world (“On Narcissism” 89). However, this does not apply to our heroines as Lily never has children, and Edna is unable to move on from her narcissistic state even after childbirth. The protagonists’ narcissism thus prevents them from feeling real love for anyone besides themselves.

Additionally, Lidoff claims that “The emotional affects of narcissism are either elation or despair, without modulation” (526). This is obvious in Edna’s case, as Chopin repeatedly describes these kind of either/or conditions regarding Edna’s psychological state. For example, when the narrator announces that “There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day.” But also, that “There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why, – when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation” (Chopin 58). This clearly shows the emotional roller coaster that is Edna Pontellier’s life, and
further emphasizes her fragile psychological state. Lily also has similar tendencies where she goes between looking at her future with optimism or frantic despair.

Furthermore, in the first half of the novel, Lily has the habit of looking down at her companions, regarding them as merely means to an end. She is also no stranger to the power of her own beauty, realizing that it is, as her mother saw it, a “weapon” and “the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt” (Wharton 39). Lily is, as displayed, confident in her abilities at the beginning of the novel, and regards herself as superior to her so-called friends. In fact, as Showalter points out, “Lily sees and treats other women as her allies, rivals, or inferiors in the social competition” and so she is no better than her “friends” (“Death of the Lady” 138).

However, the story is not just of Lily’s social regression but also of her realization. One can clearly identify Lily’s self-realization in Lidoff’s statement, when she maintains that narcissism’s “idealized self-image of omnipotence and perfection is preserved only by projecting aggressive feelings onto others, whose helpless, innocent victim the narcissist then becomes” (526). Lidoff also goes on to quote Otto Kernberg where he “explains the need to cling to the narcissistic self-concept” saying that “To accept the breakdown of the illusion of grandiosity means to accept the dangerous lingering awareness of the depreciated self - the hungry, empty, lonely primitive self surrounded by a world of dangerous, sadistically frustrating and revengeful objects” (526-7). Therefore, this aggression that Lily herself feels, is projected onto her companions, such as Bertha Dorset and Gus Trenor. For Lily to have kept the letters between Bertha and Shelden, for no apparent reason other than to have the opportunity to use them later, shows her capability for retaliation and ill-will. She realizes this by the end of the novel, and it further dawns on her that the only way to free herself from this other self is to burn the letters, as she does, after which she has no way out of her dire situation, and opts to take her own life in desperation.

3.5 Suicide as a Way Out

As previously stated, the inner psychological conflict of the two protagonists has only one possible outcome since they fail to live up to their roles as wives and mothers, which is the role the life instinct demands of them, and that is their downfall brought to pass by Thanatos. This downward spiral thus ends in the same way for both characters, with them taking their own life.
Admittedly, it appears to be the fate of so many New Women in fiction to commit suicide and so to conclude their struggles. Does that mean that the battle is lost? Was there indeed no place for such women in the society of the fin de siècle? I believe that is not the case. As women writers of the time, both Chopin and Wharton were attempting to convey a message. To that effect, both Edna and Lily can be seen as martyrs, dying for a worthy cause, the enfranchisement and liberation of future generations of women.

However, it is true that both heroines are desperate by the end, and lack alternative choices. Indeed, Lily does not have many options when she has hit absolute rock bottom, as Wolff has pointed out:

It is not simply that Lily chooses to die. In nineteenth-century theater, heroines did die. If they had been virtuous, they died tragically; if they were no more than fallen women, they died trivially. In either case death was a suitable ending, and Wharton's theatrical heroine had nowhere else to go. (“Lily Bart and the Drama of Femininity” 83)

Furthermore, Showalter states that “the lady must die to make way for the modern woman who will work, love, and give birth” (“Death of the Lady” 136). The time of the perfect lady was over, and the era of the New Woman had dawned. Hence, Lily dies to pave the way for future generations of New Women.

Contrary to Lily, Edna does seem to have some choice regarding which path to go down. One possible way for her could be to return to her husband, who wants nothing more than to save face and reunite his family, but for Edna that would be admitting defeat; like a bird that has been set free, retreating back to its cage. As a consequence, feeling that her chance of happiness with Robert is out of reach, Edna chooses martyrdom, and takes her own life.
5. Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to demonstrate how Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, the protagonists of two influential novels of the fin de siècle, The Awakening and The House of Mirth, represent the idea of the New Woman with their disregard for cultural convention and traditional gender roles. I have furthermore attempted to portray how their stories are not simply ones of displeased women, fighting the established patriarchy, but also of psychological regression caused by inner conflict, intense Freudian narcissism, fixation at the oral stage, as well as their psyches being governed by the Freudian notion of the “id.”

Even though Edna and Lily do not seem to have a lot in common, at first glance, with the first desperately trying to get out of a socially and economically comfortable marriage, while the second is equally desperately trying to get herself into such an arrangement, they both share fundamental goals and characteristics. They both display what was at the time described as male characteristics with their search for independence, and they furthermore reject the traditional version and motive for marriage. Additionally, Edna and Lily break convention by not being particularly motherly, which was regarded as the primary characteristic of the woman of the time. Edna, more so than Lily, also embraces her sexuality, which was seen as scandalous at the time, and takes a lover, which would have categorized her as a “fallen” woman. Even though Lily perhaps holds tighter on to her virtues as a lady, she is also accussed, although falsely, of carrying on a relationship with two married men. Furthermore, they both identify themselves as prisoners of the male dominated society that refuses to allow them to be who they want to be, and to have any kind of voice. Moreover, they have their psychological digression in common, as they leap from their standing as respectable upper-class women, and become fallen and disgraced, be it voluntarily as in Edna’s circumstance, or involuntarily, as is the case with Lily. Finally, the two women also share their fate, as they both commit suicide to end their psychological, social, and economic struggles.

Although the New Woman’s ambitions did not always coincide with the ambitions of the women’s movement of the fin de siècle, she did bring into the forefront many of the issues they had in common. The New Woman, and what she stood for, was a common topic in popular discourse at the time, and even though she had many adversaries, this discussion did help bring her concerns into the mainstream. Thus, even if it was perhaps not the main goal of the novels’
writers, Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, to promote the women’s cause, they did so inadvertently. Furthermore, they were, just like their protagonists, provoking the status quo in their male governed society simply be being female writers at the *fin de siècle*.

As feminist novels, both *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* send a strong message. They were published at a crucial time, when women’s rights were coming into public discourse and the institution of marriage, as well as the extent of patriarchy, were increasingly being questioned. So, although there were some loud critical voices condemning the ideas presented in these stories, there were still women (and men) out there that embraced the New Woman in fiction, and looked at her as a model for what could, and should, be. It was a fact, for example, that the increasing amount of single women without any form of employment or income, was starting to become a problem. Education and training had to become available to more women, so they could successfully earn a living in the absence of a husband.

The protagonists’ psychological struggle also depicts an element of feminism as the writers reveal to the reader that there was no place for the New Woman in the society of the *fin de siècle*. In both cases, after their intense struggles, the novelists were forced to kill off their heroines as they realized that there was no place for them in the then current social climate. However, by presenting the reader with such characters, that represent the New Woman in fiction, they were preparing society for the change that had to come.
Works Cited


