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Female freedom fighters: The impact of Kate Chopin's *The awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The house of mirth* on the American suicide discourse from 1870-1900

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FEMALE FREEDOM FIGHTERS: THE IMPACT OF KATE
CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING AND EDITH WHARTON'S THE
HOUSE OF MIRTH ON THE AMERICAN SUICIDE
DISCOURSE FROM 1870-1900

CORTEZ

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Female Freedom Fighters: The Impact of Kate Chopin's The Awakening and Edith

Wharton's The House of Mirth on the American Suicide Discourse from 1870-1900

(TITLE)

BY

Jenny Cortez

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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YEAR

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Abstract

Chapter one traces the discussion of suicide that was taking place in America between the years 1870-1900. Some psychologists attributed suicide to insanity and imitation, while others ascribed the act of suicide to those individuals with an intelligent disposition. Other theorists, however, saw the act itself as being in direct connection with social consciousness and the plight of women. Chapter two takes up Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, published in 1899, as a response to this conversation over women who take their own lives, contending that a woman commits the act of suicide not because, as American society suggested between 1870 and 1900, she is insane or imitating others, but for reasons that apply to her female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, an individual woman trapped in a confining culture. Chapter three demonstrates the extent to which Edith Wharton, in 1905, further adds to Chopin's foray into the discourse on suicide. Lily Bart, in *The House of Mirth*, like Edna, establishes herself as a woman who refuses to fit the mold in which New York society would place her. Through this rejection, Lily, like Edna, establishes herself throughout the novel as an independent woman, and, in the end, Lily, too, commits suicide in an act of free will and sound mind to escape the misery her society forces on her.

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents.

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Chapter One

Because it is the twenty-first century, we have come to regard at least some cases of suicide as voluntary acts by persons of sound mind. But the perception of suicide today is considerably different than it was a century ago. The discourse on suicide that was taking place more than a hundred years ago, between the years 1870 and 1900, neglects and refuses to mention suicide as “voluntary” or an act of someone “of sound mind,” especially when that discussion includes women. In fact, during the span of these thirty years in the late nineteenth century, writers were participating in an ongoing discussion concerning female suicide where differing and, at times, contradictory ideas about the reasons behind these suicides were frequently presented, argued, and defended. Some psychologists attributed suicide to insanity and imitation, while others ascribed the act of suicide to those individuals with an intelligent disposition. Other theorists, however, saw the act itself as being in direct connection with social consciousness and the plight of women.

Louise Stockton, in 1874, like other public intellectuals involved in the suicide discussion, ascribes suicide to mental illness. When treating suicide as a mental disorder, oftentimes, doctors find it safe to assume suicide as being an indicator of insanity. The situation is complicated when there is a threat of insanity because, “of course, [it] is difficult to cure any one [with that kind of] tendency” (812). “A Suicidal Epidemic,” published the following year, goes as far as to suggest that “all cases of determined suicide are characteristic of confirmed insanity” (276). Following the same trend of thought, Albert Rhodes, in 1876, affirms, “more than forty percent of female suicides are attributed to ‘acts of insanity’” (192).

Professor A. B. Arnold, M.D., in 1879, takes this idea a step further when he speaks of specific cases of insanity in regards to his patients' attempts to commit suicide. Professor Arnold presents a case of a young woman suffering from "acute mania-hereditary predisposition." Her father informs the doctor that the girl has suffered from numerous attacks, attacks that are simply described as a mental disorder caused by a melancholic disposition. The doctor explains that the young woman "is twenty-four years of age, menstruates regularly, and with the exception of these repeated attacks of insanity, she has always enjoyed excellent health" (404). The doctor uses certain symptoms that the girl exhibits as his basis for assessing the girl as being insane.

Six weeks ago her family noticed some signs of a recurrence of an attack. She became indifferent to her household duties, frequently remained in bed beyond the usual time, spoke little, appeared to be absorbed in thought, and when reproached on account of her singular behavior she answered with a sigh or tears... No particular hallucination or delusion could be detected in her case. Her general health has not suffered; her appetite is tolerably good, but she sleeps little. (405)

More than a century has passed since this report was issued, but, most likely, a very sane woman today could still be observed displaying the same characteristics that this young woman exhibits, and, yet, in 1879, this girl has doctors evaluating her as insane.

In 1881, Royal Whitman continues to argue for this socially acceptable explanation for suicide. Many writers of the time "regard all suicides as insane" because they believe that "suicide is an act of delirium" (474). Whitman quotes Dr. Rowly who argues that "as no rational being will voluntarily give himself pain, or deprive himself of

life,” it is determined that “one who [does] commit suicide is indubitably *non compos mentis*, and is not able to reason justly, but is under false images of the mind, and therefore suicide should ever be considered an act of insanity” (474).

But not all suicides are considered a direct result of mental illness; some writers would argue that a human being’s natural instinct to imitate would be the next most logical reason for wanting to take one’s life. M.T. Gavin’s 1870 article is the first to announce the social theory of imitation as a prevalent cause for someone committing suicide. Gavin believes that “the influence of imitation has... had at all times a wonderful influence in increasing... the number of suicides” (319). But Gavin is just the first of many writers to assert that imitation should be viewed as the prime source of suicide.

In fact, an 1875 article titled “A Suicidal Epidemic” is just one of several articles that cites the same recurring story that becomes the standard example for proving that imitation is the primary sociological and psychological reason for committing suicide. In “A Suicidal Epidemic,” the story is that:

Sir Charles Bell, surgeon of Middlesex Hospital, was one day describing, to a barber who was shaving him, a patient’s unsuccessful attempt to cut his own throat, and, on the barber’s request, pointed out the anatomy of the neck, showing how easily the act might be accomplished. Before shaving operations were completed, the barber had left the shop and cut his throat according to Sir Charles Bell’s exact instructions. (276)ⁱ

The story suggests that the human mind is so vulnerable that individuals, in fact, do have the potential to imitate an act that they have either heard of or read. According to Albert Rhodes, women who have relatives who have committed suicide or know of someone

who has committed suicide can be so deeply impressed by the act that they too become highly susceptible to suicide. Rhodes uses an example of a young woman who not only sees her uncle commit suicide, but also hears of her father dying by his own hand. She then concludes that her life should meet the same end result. After several failed attempts, she is institutionalized, and doctors soon discover that she never really had any thoughts of self-destruction; it is only because she was exposed to suicide by those around her that she herself felt the need to die. Professionals use this case as an example of how easily a woman's imagination can lead to her demise (198).

In 1888, William A. Hammond, M.D. continues to uphold the belief that suicide is an act of imitation. He asserts, in his article "Madness and Murder," "imitation is of more force when the intellect is not fully developed"; more specifically, even "in the normal condition," suicide through imitation is "more strongly exercised in women" than in adult men (632). He cites an example of a woman who was so impressed by seeing her neighbor throw herself into a well that she too found it impossible to walk by a well without feeling the overwhelming urge to throw herself into it. Hammond continues to argue his contention of imitation being the prominent influence on suicide attempts in an article published two years later, "False Hydrophobia." Hammond believes that "there are very few persons who are not more or less under the influence of 'suggestion.' [Human beings] seem to be endowed with comparatively low powers of original action, and ... [are] moved to an extent scarcely normal by the facts and circumstances that surround them" (167). With his two articles, Hammond affirms his belief that imitation is the most common cause for any person who commits suicide.

Even though some writers, like Hammond, argue that imitation is more common in those of a weak intellect, and that, furthermore, suicide is an act committed out of imitation or is connected to insanity in some way, on the contrary, other writers choose to believe that suicide is an act committed by those who possess a strong intellect. Gavin's 1870 article "Curious Facts about Suicide" is the first of many to argue that the act of suicide depends to a certain extent on an individual's intelligence. As a matter of fact, Gavin is under the impression "that suicide increases with the intellectual growth of a people.... [I]n fact, [it] might be used to measure the intellectual capacity" of a given person (319). Albert Rhodes' 1876 article begins by stating that "suicide is unknown in animals, and rare in unintelligent people.... [I]t is the head which drives the man to the act [of suicide]; he reasons, and from his reasoning comes death" (188). The 1880 article titled "Suicide" also goes on to confirm, the already established belief, that suicide is more abundant in areas in which the society is most educated (73). William Mathews, LL. D. makes a statement that confirms the same resounding point in 1891: "self-killing is emphatically the crime of intellectual peoples" (481). If this is true, that suicide is an act committed by intelligent people, the question then becomes: why would said intelligent person choose suicide?

What becomes clear in the thirty years leading up to the turn of the century is that many writers want to answer this question. In 1874, Louise Stockton is the first to argue that autonomy and free will are viable reasons for committing suicide. She maintains that human beings believe that if they have a right to anything, it is the right to govern their own lives. Stockton argues that we, as individuals, decide when this life is no longer worth living:

We may allow law, religion, or friendship, to decide for us in matters of conduct, or business, but who shall determine whether life is bearable or not? We acknowledge restraints and obligations that may make us resolute to live, but we are apt to believe our obedience is voluntary, and to make nice distinctions between the duties we owe society and our personal rights. (811)

Stockton argues that individuals take their lives because of their personal conviction to do so.

An 1880 article, titled "Suicide," follows Stockton's lead but also acknowledges the extent to which society plays a role in an individual's search for autonomy, a search that may lead the seeker to suicide; the article recognizes suicide as "'a social resultant'—not only because it is a chronic need—but also, and still more, because it is one of the forms of the pursuit of happiness; because it is an outburst of the universal appetite for calm; because every man who willfully terminates his life does so, necessarily, with the idea of improving his condition" (67). The article supports the idea that suicide could be a manifestation of personal choice and individual expression. But what is interesting about this article is that it makes the argument that suicide is "an unforced personal" choice, and that what has become evident is that, by the late nineteenth-century, patriarchal society is being "thrust" into "a fervor of self-murder" (76).

In 1881, William Knighton acknowledges the increasing rate at which people are committing suicide. Knighton maintains that "suicides are annually becoming more common... all over the civilized world... [For] men are everywhere becoming more

weary of the burden of life” (376). Even with the advances in technology, the prolonging of life, and the preserving of health there are still a great many people becoming impatient with life and have an even “greater desire to escape its burden” (376). Knighton quotes, scholar and author, M. Littré who holds the opinion that “suicide is justifiable, on the ground that ‘every man has a right to his moral liberty’” (379). Another article published in 1881 by Royal Whitman continues to assert the same ideas for individual autonomy and its connection to suicide. Whitman quotes a Dr. Griesinger from Berlin who says:

Whatever certain scientific authorities may assert, we are not warranted in coming to the conclusion that suicide is always a symptom or result of insanity. There is no insanity present when the feeling of disgust with life is in exact relation to the actual circumstances; where evident moral causes exist which sufficiently account for the act; where the resolution has been deliberately made and might have been abandoned had the circumstances changed, and in which we discover no other symptom of mental derangement, as when a man prefers death to a miserable, contemptible life. The abhorrence of life and the idea of self-annihilation correspond to the intensity of the painful impressions, which bear upon the individual. (475)

Whitman acknowledges suicide as being a part of a political sphere where phrases like “the pursuit of happiness” and “moral liberty” are common, and can be used as legitimate reasons why one would want to escape this life. Writers are recognizing the strength of

human resolve when it comes to doing what is best for the self in regards to living and existing as both an individual and a member of late nineteenth-century society.

John J. Reese, M.D in 1888 concurs that even if there are times when there is evidence to support the possibility of insanity or imitation, oftentimes, “the act of self-destruction [is] the result of a calm, deliberate determination, based on sufficient motives, and executed for a special purpose” (58). It may not be a motive that can be applied to everyone in every situation, but a motive that applies to “the particular circumstance in which the individual [is] placed in that special crisis of [her] life” (58). Furthermore, Reese argues that self-destruction is done with the sole purpose of “*freely and intelligently*” ending one’s life (60). A person may commit the act of suicide “intentionally or knowingly with the full purpose in view of terminating [her] existence” (60).

In 1891, Mathews applies the ideas proposed by Stockton in 1874 and the ideas proposed by the 1880 article titled “Suicide.” Mathews maintains that suicide is an act committed by sane and rational human beings. He then goes on to propose that if those same sane and rational human beings are reaching the point where suicide is their determined end, then we, as a community, should begin to question the late nineteenth-century male-dominated society in which we live. Mathews makes the direct connection between suicide and late nineteenth-century patriarchal society.

Reasoning would prove all men to be at times insane. Who is not, at some time, “beside himself” with rage, fear, or shame? While it is hard to mark the precise line between the normal and the abnormal functions of the brain,—to tell exactly where reason ends and madness begins,—and while

it is true that many self-slayers are either unconscious of their acts or perform them under distinct hallucinations, yet it is equally true that the great majority of such persons [committing suicide] are perfectly aware of the nature of the deed they are doing, and do it with the so-far intelligent purpose of escaping misery which seems unendurable, punishment, or disgrace. It is heart-breaking or brain-tearing trouble, some bitter and intolerable grief which has taken root in the deepest recesses of the soul and poisoned all the sources of joy, that makes men [or women] long to die or impetuously seek refuge in death, in the hope that it will be an eternal sleep, or, at least, an end of their misery. (473)

In 1893, Frederick L. Hoffman takes up where Mathews leaves off. Hoffman starts by defining suicide as an act committed as a “direct product of the will, coolly planned and carried into effect as a logical conclusion” (689). But he then asks: “Whatever the causes are that produce such frightful conditions, this much is certain, that something must be radically wrong in a society when thousands are *compelled* to put an end to their own existence. Is it the individual member or the social organism that is to blame?” (688) Suicide can then be seen as “the result, not so much of [individual’s] own vices, [but more so] as [the result] of the state of society into which that individual is thrown” (688).

In 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics* addresses the effect that late nineteenth-century patriarchal society and the environment have on human beings. She asserts that “in spite of the power of the individual will to struggle against conditions, to resist them for a while, and sometimes to overcome them, it remains true that the human creature is affected by [her] environment, as is every other living thing”

(1). Gilman then turns her attention to women in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society. She contends that “[woman is] utterly disbarred” (67). Women, by the turn of the century, are eagerly looking forward to “a new-born, hard-won, dear-bought independence” (91). Gilman argues that women are restricted in “their power to think and judge for themselves” (624). Women in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society are “denied the physical freedom which is the path to further wisdom, she [is] denied the moral freedom of being mistress of her own action...” (624). Gilman argues that the strength of individuals’ wills can be seen in “suicidal martyrs” whose intelligence and desire for freedom forced them to extremes “even to the door of death, and through it” (1). As intelligent beings in a repressive society, then, women may choose to become “suicidal martyrs.”

Chapter two takes up Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, published in 1899, as a response to this conversation over women who take their own lives, contending that a woman commits the act of suicide not because, as American society suggested between 1870 and 1900, she is insane or imitating others, but for reasons that apply to her female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, an individual woman trapped in a confining culture. Chopin seems to be directly responding to this idea by allowing Edna to commit suicide at the end of the novel at least partly because Edna is placed in late nineteenth-century New Orleans patriarchal society. What Chopin reveals to the readers by sharing Edna’s story is the struggle that women must endure in trying to live a dual existence. If her given society expects and obligates women to act and feel a certain way and internally Edna wants to grow and become an independent woman, is it any surprise that this burden of life can easily become too much to bear?

Chapter three will demonstrate the extent to which Edith Wharton, in 1905, further adds to Chopin's foray into the discourse on suicide. Lily Bart, in *The House of Mirth*, like Edna, establishes herself as a woman who refuses to fit the mold in which New York society would place her. Unlike Edna, Lily rejects expected roles before marrying for money or position; in fact, she remains single. And, unlike other female characters in the novel, she does not adopt certain practices, like trading sexual favors with married men in return for gaining financial security, or resorting to gossip and blackmail as a means of securing her status; instead, by the end of the novel, readers witness Lily's descent in her social ranking and find her working a factory job. Lily goes against all the social norms that are expected of her by her society and ultimately does so by using her apparent passiveness and, sometimes, indecisiveness as a form of empowerment throughout the novel. This becomes a sort of purposeful inaction. Although Lily appears to be passive, she is simply acting "passive." She is letting herself appear to be passive or unaware to others as a way to reject the societal terms that have been imposed on her. Through this rejection, Lily, like Edna, establishes herself throughout the novel as an independent woman, and, in the end, Lily, too, commits suicide in an act of free will and sound mind to escape the misery her society forces on her.

Chapter Two

From its start in 1870 and through to the end of the century, the discourse on suicide evolved from one driven chiefly by male psychologists who saw insanity and imitation as chief reasons behind suicide, to a new, sometimes feminist, consciousness about the extent to which late nineteenth-early twentieth century patriarchal society was to blame for an upswing in suicide among women. The issue of suicide seemed to not only embed itself in discussions amongst essayists, but also revealed itself in the literature that was being written at the time, more importantly, literature that was being written by women at the time.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* directly connects with the rise in feminist perspectives concerning the issue of suicide. An article that originally appeared in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* on May 13, 1899 concurs that the novel "deals with existent conditions, and... handles a problem that obtrudes itself only too frequently in the social life of" women (quoted in *The Awakening and Selected Short Fiction* 252). The problem, according to the article, is that women of the late nineteenth-century were assumed, as the article goes on to suggest, to be superficial beings whose only concerns revolved around clothing, marriage and appearance. But, in fact, certain women authors, like Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, were beginning to question the late nineteenth-early twentieth century patriarchal view of women and their role in society in their writing and lives.

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of *The Awakening*, struggles against being silenced and fights to express herself even though she is seen as an object and a possession by her husband. The late nineteenth-century New Orleans patriarchal society in which she lives expects her to fulfill her sole responsibility in the home as wife and

mother. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff explains, “[l]ove of home, of children, and of domestic duties are the only passions [women are expected to] feel.” And, Larzer Ziff states it best when he clarifies that the novel does “not attack the institution of family, but it reject[s] the family as the automatic equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment” (23).

What Chopin reveals to readers by sharing Edna’s story is not the importance of fulfilling one’s duty to society or, the opposite, rejecting all that society has to offer, but, instead, the struggle that women must endure in trying to balance this dichotomy and live a dual existence. Edna’s given society expects and obligates women to act and feel a certain way; it expects women to embrace their essential roles as wife and mother and fulfill their domestic duties. But Edna realizes that she wants to grow and become an independent woman. The problem is that Edna exists in a culture that will not allow this kind of freedom. In trying to assert her autonomy, Edna acts out against the norm, and the prevalent men in her life—her husband and a male family doctor—explain this desire in Edna as a mental unbalance. Once realizing that her need for independence will never be met, Edna, ultimately, chooses death as a way to maintain her autonomy.

What Chopin does at the end of her novel by “allowing” her heroine to commit suicide is to demonstrate Edna’s ability to choose “her fate, thus raising the issue of a person’s right to control her own life and even choose her own death” (Black 99). Edna throughout the novel attempts to gain autonomy through acts of independence—moving out, coming and going as she pleases without answering to anyone, expressing her thoughts and feelings freely without apology—but quickly realizes that she is immersed in a culture that is not accepting of a lifestyle that does not conform to its established roles for women. In the end, Edna accepts that she cannot continue to live a dual

existence, and her death then becomes a symbol of triumph, for she does not choose one life over another, but instead allows her true self to remain intact by making one final act of autonomy.

Chopin uses her novel as a way to address directly the suicide discussion that was taking place when she introduces Edna, who chooses her own death as the only viable choice in the patriarchal New Orleans' culture in which she is placed. Chopin chooses to not only add further dialogue to the ideas being presented by her predecessors, but also chooses to refute the main belief that insanity is the major cause for women who are committing suicide, which is a belief held by many of the male respondents in the discussion. Instead, Edna's suicide becomes interconnected with the nineteenth-century New Orleans' culture that seeks to control her.

Martha Fodaski Black suggests that a "close analysis of the novel reveals that Chopin examines the interdependence of female sexuality and gender roles to challenge cultural assumptions about women" (95). Chopin purposely foregrounds a woman whose characteristics are especially common to the time period as a way to demonstrate the validity of Edna's story. Chopin's protagonist, Edna Pontellier, is a twenty-nine year old married woman who commits suicide at the end of the novel by drowning; all three of these characteristics—age, status and method—are considered the most common for women in the late nineteenth-early twentieth-century who were taking their own lives (Rhodes 192). It also is not mere coincidence that Kate Chopin, at a time when the focus and main topic of conversation was suicide, was writing a novel whose main purpose was to examine the life of a woman who belongs to late nineteenth-century New Orleans affluent society.

Katherine Patterson describes this same patriarchal society as one that “constructs the silences/disappearance of women.” As Per Seyersted contends, Chopin is fully aware of patriarchal society’s construction of women, and she focuses “very sharply on the truly fundamental problem of what it means to be a woman...” (138). Emily Toth enhances Seyersted’s argument by stating that Chopin is “brilliantly attuned to women’s silences and inexpressible longings” (xx). Chopin, in fact, is so attuned to the silences of women in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society that she retaliates against this silence by writing a novel that allows a woman to be heard and no longer ignored by her society; she accomplishes this by allowing her protagonist to commit the resounding act of suicide.

Stockton argues that we, as individuals, decide when this life is no longer worth living. She elaborates on how laws or religious background may influence how someone may conduct herself, but it is ultimately her choice whether or not to endure life; a person may acknowledge her responsibilities to society, but never should those responsibilities outweigh her responsibility to herself (811). In *The Awakening*, Edna experiences this dichotomy; hence, in her last moments of life, Edna thinks of her husband and children; “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul...” (Chopin 133). Consistently, throughout the novel, readers witness Edna choose herself over her obligations to her husband, children, and, ultimately, her society, and because of this, the dominant males in her life, her husband and, family friend, Dr. Mandelet, think Edna to be mentally unbalanced.

In Chapter One, several male writers make the assertion that women most often commit suicide because they experience some form of insanity. Professor A. B. Arnold,

M.D. speaks of specific cases of patients' attempts to commit suicide where the determined cause was insanity. He uses one particular girl's experience as a means of explaining his rationale. He maintains that because of certain symptoms that the girl exhibits she can easily be termed as insane; and, hence, this insanity can then explain her reason for wanting to commit suicide. The most notable piece of evidence for the doctor's assessment is that the girl, though being found to have healthy sleeping habits and a solid appetite, is found to be "indifferent" in her "household duties" (405). Furthermore, the doctor explains that she also exhibited a more pensive and quiet mood (405).

Edna is placed in this same predicament. Mr. Pontellier confides to Dr. Mandelet that Edna is allowing "the housekeeping [to] go to the dickens" and that "her whole attitude—toward me and everybody and everything—has changed" (Chopin 76). Mr. Pontellier further criticizes his wife for "abandon[ing] her Tuesdays at home... throw[ing] over all her acquaintances, and go[ing] tramping about by herself" (Chopin 77). Mr. Pontellier is so concerned about Edna's lack of initiative to perform household duties and social responsibilities that he seeks consultation with a doctor. Mr. Pontellier is convinced that for his wife to neglect her duties as wife and mother, then she must be "growing a little unbalanced mentally" (Chopin 67). Is a woman's decision not to take care of her home, not to accept visitors on a certain day, or not to communicate how she feels, any reason for the men in her life to label her as insane? And if said woman chooses to commit suicide is there any real substantial evidence that the aforementioned behavior has anything to do with her reason to commit such an act? Chopin directly

refutes the belief that a woman must be insane to commit suicide and that any of the behaviors previously mentioned would constitute such a label.

Edna Pontellier chooses suicide because, similar to a caged creature, she is looked over by a “master,” her husband, and, once she experiences freedom, she longs for it, but cultural constraints stomp out her desires. A. Elizabeth Elz concurs that “women are kept in cages,” and *The Awakening* then explores the “obstacles [that Edna] encounter[s] when [she] attempt[s] to escape” her cage (14). Edna is trying to escape her patriarchal confines, and, therefore, “*The Awakening* represents a feminist overthrow of the burdens of patriarchy” (Patterson).

In developing her subject matter for *The Awakening*, Chopin included “her lifelong observation of women’s dreams and desires and her [own] knowledge” of patriarchal society (*Unveiling* 216). Kate Chopin was also aware of the influx of suicides among women. When asked her opinion on the outbreak of suicide during the years leading up to the turn of the century, Chopin sarcastically replied, “Mere reading of a particular case of suicide may cause a highly nervous woman to take her own life in a similar manner, through morbid sympathy... But do not men do the same thing every day?” (*Unveiling* 200) Chopin not only was aware of the plight of women and the issue of suicide, but also addresses these real life situations and themes in her novel and in her portrayal of Edna Pontellier.

Edna, as a woman who belongs to late nineteenth-century New Orleans’ upper class society, is oftentimes thought of and referred to as an object and a possession by her husband in the novel, a stronghold that Edna attempts to break free from. This stronghold that is enforced by her culture is one part of her dual existence. Edna must adhere to the

responsibilities that are expected of her. As Barbara C. Ewell notes, women in patriarchal society “were named and described only in terms of their relationships to men” (158). Thus, women are valued as both a possession and an extension of their husbands—the roles that they fulfill in regards to their husbands: wife and mother. At one point in the novel Mr. Pontellier reprimands Edna for spending too much time in the sun; “‘You are burnt beyond recognition,’ ... looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 4). This moment between Edna and her husband exaggerates the conditions that exist for women; in this situation, something as trivial as Edna getting sun burnt results in Mr. Pontellier scolding his wife for potentially ruining his valued piece of property. Since women are seen as objects, particularly as personal possessions by their husbands, they are not valued as individuals.

Mr. Pontellier feels that Edna does not respect her duty to him, as wife and mother to his children, and does not value her role in his life. Even the most insignificant act of falling asleep before her husband arrives in the evening disheartens Mr. Pontellier because Edna “evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation” (Chopin 8). Even Edna’s father, the Colonel, notices the lack of control his son-in-law has over his wife; “[y]ou are too lenient, too lenient by far, Leonce,” asserted the Colonel. ‘Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it.’ The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave” (Chopin 83). This is just one example of Chopin exploiting the patriarchal mentality. Katherine Joslin explains that Mr. Pontellier believes he has earned the right to be in control of his wife because he “has [in a sense] employed [Edna] and... therefore her time belongs to him

and his children. Edna has no right to time away from her family” (173). Here, too, Chopin foreshadows the inevitable events to come by adding the side-note that the Colonel, in following this very advice of a man needing to seize the reins in his marriage, drove his own wife into her grave.

The same enforced restrictions that place Edna in a position of being controlled by her husband are the conditions that force her into the role of wife and mother. Kenneth Eble describes *The Awakening* as a novel that “portrays the mind of a woman trapped in marriage and seeking fulfillment of what she vaguely recognizes as her essential nature” (9). Dorothy H. Jacobs continues to illustrate the idea that Edna is a woman confined by “authoritative males, societal reinforcements, and the solitude of the woman,” but Edna attempts to release herself from this captivity (81). Edna’s captivity represents one side of her dual existence; yet, Edna, throughout the novel, attempts to release herself of that obligation by trying to live an independent life—living alone, choosing the company she holds, expressing herself—but, by the end of the novel, Edna realizes that this lifestyle is socially unacceptable and death becomes her final release from captivity. Her death is a triumph because in death she is able to maintain her selfhood; even if in life her society would not allow this type of existence, in death Edna is able to holdfast to her independence by making the free-willed choice to take her own life.

Even from the start, Chopin presents Edna not as your typical late nineteenth-early twentieth century self-effacing woman.

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman... it was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who

idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals... (Chopin 11)

Mr. Pontellier is quite aware that his wife does not fit the criteria of mother-woman. He “reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose was it?” (Chopin 8) Mr. Pontellier believes his wife is neglecting her “duty” as mother. And, in late nineteenth-century male-dominated affluent society, his wife’s failure somehow reflects poorly on him.

In choosing not to fall in line with what is expected of her as a wife and as a mother, Edna does not just disappoint her husband, but also, in a sense, rebels against that which late nineteenth-century patriarchal society demands women to be. Edna knows that “she married only to comply with society’s expectations” (Black 104). Therefore, Edna, in her attempt to free herself from society’s expectations, refuses to compromise herself or her identity; “Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone” (Chopin 55). She explains to Madame Ratignolle, “I would give up the essential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself...” (Chopin 55). In fact, her children’s “absence was a sort of relief... It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which fate had not fitted her” (Chopin 23). She is no mother-woman. But as a woman, what role in life is she expected to fulfill? Obviously, wife and mother are choices. But what if these options are not what she truly wants for herself?

Edna begins to retaliate against these imposed responsibilities. In one scenario, Edna refuses to go to bed when her husband instructs her to follow him. Any other “time[,] she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to

his desire... unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us" (Chopin 37). Edna does not submit to her husband, but, instead, succumbs to the urge to deny him. Women are supposed to obey their husband's orders; it is as natural as breathing and walking. Yet, Edna, in her moment of empowerment, does not. Edna's moment of resistance triggers a newfound growth in individuality for her and sets Edna on a course that eventually leads to her greatest act of resistance, her act of suicide.

In another attempt to assert her own freedom, Edna decides to move into a little house around the corner from where she shares a home with her husband. When asked by Mademoiselle Reisz the reason for her wanting to leave home, Edna replies, "the house, the money that provides for it, are not mine. Isn't that enough reason?" (Chopin 92) Edna no longer wants to feel like a possession; like Jennifer B. Grey suggests, Edna wants to "own property... as opposed to being property herself." Edna's "instinct had prompted her to put away her husband's bounty in casting off her allegiance.... [With this] she had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (Chopin 93). Edna recognizes that she is "no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not" (Chopin 124). In moving out of her husband's home, Edna is attempting to assert her freedom. And, in embracing this newfound autonomy, Edna's understanding of love and marriage changes. Also, in existing in this new autonomy, Edna allows herself to more freely express how she feels and makes no apologies for her frankness. In one of her last conversations with Robert Lebrun, Edna's main love interest throughout the novel, she emphasizes that she makes her own choices; "if [Mr. Pontellier] were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both'" (Chopin 124).

If Edna were to leave Mr. Pontellier and become Robert's wife instead, she would be placed in the same subservient role that she is already in and is obviously dissatisfied with; Edna "wants a new paradigm; [Robert] merely wants to rearrange the actors of the old one, and Edna firmly rejects his falsifying, custom-bound notions" ("Un-utterable Longing"). Yes, she is a woman, and, yes, in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, women were viewed as possessions by men, but, throughout the novel, Edna struggles to break free of those conditions.

In sharing Edna's story Chopin reveals to the readers the struggle that exists for a woman who must live a dual existence. As Rachel Adams asserts, *The Awakening* is not written as a complimentary reflection of a society where Edna's social obligations are welcomed and upheld "but rather [a struggle to] escape from... social responsibility" (xxix). Even from "a very early period [Edna] had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin 17). Susan J. Rosowski explains Edna's quandary of a dual life as "the dilemma of the individual who attempts to find value in a society that relegates to her only roles and values of the woman, ignoring her needs as a human being" (59). Since, for so long, Edna was "just driven along by habit," she had accepted this dual life as her only option (Chopin 21). But Edna, throughout the course of the novel, discovers that she no longer wants to simply question social expectations internally, but instead she wants to live a life where she can be free and independent. There were moments in Edna's existence where she would taste the fruit of freedom, moments where "Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been

loosening—had snapped... leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails” (Chopin 40).

Since Edna experiences this glimpse of personal sovereignty, she is able to realize that she lives a life of unending inner resistance between her own female self and late nineteenth-century patriarchal society. Edna recognizes that she is growing and is “in some way different from the other self. That she [is] seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that [color] and [change] her environment...” (Chopin 47). Chopin applauds this growth in Edna by referring to her as an “impassioned, newly awakened being” (Chopin 53). Unfortunately, in Edna’s given society, she could not have a blossoming independent self, and yet still remain in balance with what patriarchy deems appropriate.

Mr. Pontellier is not blind to Edna’s blossoming self—she moves out of his home and into her own, she goes out whenever and with whomever she pleases; but, he is also aware of social conventions and the importance of staying in line with what is expected in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society. Lawrence Thornton explains that “[b]ecause of the social conventions that prescribe behavior in her world, Edna [exists] in a society that will not tolerate the terms she sets for her own freedom” (86). Mr. Pontellier reprimands Edna for her lack of social responsibility by reminding her that they must “... observe *les convenances* if [they] ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession” (Chopin 59). Even Edna herself believes that “by all the codes which [she] is acquainted with, [she is] a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex” (Chopin 95-6). Edna knows that her behavior negates the code of conduct that is expected from a woman. But this in no way encourages her to change her line of thinking or her lifestyle.

Her society considers Edna a poor model of a woman because it obligates women, like Edna, to act and feel a certain way. But Edna wants to grow and become an independent woman. She begins to “take pleasure in [her newfound] self-reliance... [And it] raises Edna’s consciousness of her entrapment and her servitude as a woman of the nineteenth century” (Black 104). Edna realizes that the freedom she desires is unattainable and unacceptable. And this was Chopin’s intention; she wants Edna to experience an internal metamorphosis: “Chopin was really interested in women’s awakening... the changes in the heart, the inner growth that takes place” as a woman matures into adulthood (*Unveiling* 194). Edna has always been “accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves... They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them” (Chopin 55). The conundrum is that Edna no longer wants to solely experience this awakening internally; she wants to live a life that parallels it; “[a] certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her—the light which, showing the way, forbids it... 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” (Chopin 16-17). Edna is beginning to question her place in the world. Mademoiselle Reisz confides in Edna that “[an] artist must possess [a] courageous soul ... [a] brave soul ... [a] soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 74). Similarly, a woman who refuses to conform to late nineteenth-century patriarchal society’s expectations would need to possess a soul that dares to defy. Mademoiselle Reisz, at one point, “put her arms around [Edna] and felt [her] shoulder blades, to see if [her] wings were strong... ‘The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings’” (Chopin 96).

Even though Edna possesses the desire to soar above tradition, she still cannot solidify her place in society as an individual. Even though Edna has a prime example of a woman who chooses an independent life in Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna is still not in a position where she can embrace that kind of existence. That life would require too many sacrifices on Edna's behalf. She is still expected to fulfill her responsibility as a wife and mother. And even though she moves out of her husband's house, she still remains his wife, and even though her children are away with their grandmother, Edna still remains a mother.

But Edna must still pay for her smallest escape from the norm; the elevation in her spiritual life is in direct connection with the fall in her social status; unfortunately, women cannot have a spiritual awakening and maintain their status as socially acceptable individuals in this late nineteenth-century patriarchal society. Because of this double-edged sword, Edna's desire for freedom and the behavior she exhibits in wanting to assert this independence is misconstrued. She is seen as a woman who is mentally unwell.

Throughout the novel, Edna asserts herself as a woman who will not follow social codes just to keep up appearances; in fact, Edna refuses to imitate the other women in the novel whose main purpose in life is to uphold these codes. In turn, the men in her life, including Mr. Pontellier and Doctor Mandeleit, view Edna as mentally unwell. Mr. Pontellier would, at times, "wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself" (Chopin 67). And what exactly does it mean for Edna to be herself? At the time, patriarchal mindset would point the finger at a mentally unbalanced state in a woman who refuses to be that which her husband expects—submissive wife and mother.

Once having the seed planted in his head that his wife could be suffering from some mental disturbance, Mr. Pontellier seeks medical advice from his friend Doctor Mandelet, “a semi-retired physician, ... [who] bore a reputation for wisdom rather than skill... and was much sought for in matters of consultation” (Chopin 75). Mr. Pontellier confides to Dr. Mandelet that Edna “seems quite well... but she doesn’t act well. She’s odd, she’s not like herself. I can’t make her out...” (Chopin 76). What Mr. Pontellier is referring to when he says that Edna is not acting well is that Edna is allowing “the housekeeping [to] go to the dickens” (Chopin 76).

Mr. Pontellier not only believes that there is a mental change in his wife’s attitude towards womanly duties of the home, but also in her behavior towards him: “[h]er whole attitude—toward me and everybody and everything—has changed... She’s making it devilishly uncomfortable for me.... She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (Chopin 76). Mr. Pontellier further criticizes his wife for “abandon[ing] her Tuesdays at home[,]... throw[ing] over all her acquaintances, and go[ing] tramping about by herself” (Chopin 77). Mr. Pontellier is so concerned about Edna’s lack of initiative to perform household duties and social responsibilities, and her, seemingly, farfetched “notion” of the “eternal rights of women” that he seeks this consultation with the doctor. Mr. Pontellier is convinced that for his wife to be thinking these thoughts of female empowerment and to neglect her duties as wife and mother, she must have some condition that only a physician would be able to cure. His consulting physician, after listening attentively and attempting to process all of Mr. Pontellier’s information, asks him the medically educated questions: “Nothing hereditary?” ... “Nothing peculiar about her family antecedents, is there?” (Chopin 77) Is it a genetic

disposition to want to express your inherent rights as a woman? Is it a distinct characteristic that is passed down through bloodlines to become indifferent to social and domestic duties? It is no wonder why Edna feels compelled to distance herself from her husband and from certain societal obligations; her given society would never view Edna as a woman who wants to shed her façade and become an independent individual. Instead, Edna is labeled “mentally unbalanced.”

In attempting to break free from her dual existence, Edna sees that it is not a socially acceptable choice to be independent or to assert this independence by neglecting her duties as wife, mother, and woman. She finds herself “trapped between her illusions and the conditions which society arbitrarily establishes to maintain itself” (Ziff 23). Ziff refers to Edna’s desires to live an independent life, where she is able to make her own choices and keep her self intact, as “illusions”. The reason for Ziff’s use of the word is that the problem with Edna wanting this kind of existence for herself is that it is simply unattainable. There is too much for Edna to overcome. With this dilemma, it is no wonder that “she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference” (Chopin 120). The consequences of Fate and her own longing for self-expression inevitably lead Edna to her greatest act of autonomy, suicide.

In Edna’s pursuit for autonomy, she makes the conscious decision to take her own life by drowning in the sea. The ocean always fascinated Edna, and that is where she chooses to commit suicide: “The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 17). The sea represents freedom for Edna. It is a place where she can wander freely and ponder over her respective place in society. The kind of thoughts Edna is having, the kind of moments

of enlightenment that she is beginning to feel, are experiences that can crush a woman, in her position, in her late nineteenth-century patriarchal society because she is unable to actively participate in her newfound freedom. There are few women who can emerge from that sort of experience. Dorothy H. Jacobs views Edna's commitment to the sea as "full knowledge and recollection of her hopes" (94).

Because Edna feels overwhelmed by her constant battle for freedom in a society that does not allow freedom, she looks to the sea "for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (Chopin 33). Edna welcomes the opportunity to lose herself because she never felt "thoroughly at home in [her] society" or in her obligatory roles as a woman (Chopin 12). Edna's choice, to end her own life, is, as Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith describe, "a free act of self-assertion and refusal to return to her domestic trap" (148).

Hence, in her last moments of life, Edna thought of "Leonce and the children.... [She thought] [t]hey were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul..." (Chopin 133). This would be Edna's final reflection of her life as wife and mother. Susan J. Rosowski maintains, "Edna's suicide represents her final attempt to escape—to escape her children, her lovers, and, most importantly, time and change. For only by complete isolation of self can Edna be truthful to her inner life" (47). Edna once said that she would give anything, even her life, for her family, but never herself, and, in the end, Edna did just that. She could no longer exist in a society that would force her to deny her own individuality for the greater good of social responsibility.

Per Seyersted valorizes Edna's assertion of free will by stating that "her suicide was entirely valid for her time, when her ideas of self-assertion were bound to be

condemned outright by the Victorian moral vigilantes" (146). Edna in "sacrificing her body [was able to] still preserv[e] her essential self" (Ewell 164). Charlotte Perkins Gilman once argued that the strength of individuals' wills can be seen in "suicidal martyrs" whose intelligence and desire for freedom forced them to extremes "even to the door of death, and through it" (1). Allen F. Stein echoes Gilman's insight into the plight of women and their choices; "the wives in Chopin's... stories of matrimony have but two options... they can submit, yielding to a husband and, indeed, to an institution that deny them anything approximating autonomy of thought, desire, or action, or they can rebel, only to find their rebellion short-lived and futile[.]" because late nineteenth-century patriarchal society does not encourage "the sort of personal latitude and growth for which they long" (9). Stein is correct that Edna Pontellier was presented with two options. The first option being submission to her husband's will and to a society that denies her freedom and independence, and Edna entered into this agreement; it became "a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which fate had not fitted her" (Chopin 23). The second option, which Edna also experienced, was a futile rebellion and rejection of those same societal expectations. But Stein neglects to mention that after Edna is presented with these two options and does her best with each, she chose to create a third option. In choosing death, Edna ultimately chose herself, for death was a symbol of her seizing control of her own life as a woman in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society.

Chapter Three

Kate Chopin is not the only American female literary writer in the late nineteenth-early twentieth-century who uses the act of suicide as a means for her female protagonist to escape patriarchal oppression. In Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart, too, uses suicide as a final rejection of societal norms. Lily, a single twenty-nine year-old woman who is associated with late nineteenth-century affluent New York society, fails to marry a wealthy man and adopt practices that will allow her to continue her status as a New York socialite. After missed opportunities and with a tarnished reputation, at the end of the novel, Lily chooses to commit suicide to escape the misery in which patriarchal expectations had placed her. Some may argue that Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*, unlike her predecessor's novel *The Awakening*, does not seem to belong in this suicide discussion. Actually, Wharton never overtly comments on the issue of suicide in the book; as a matter of fact, the word suicide only appears once in the entire novel. Yet, this does not make *The House of Mirth* any less important in this study of the suicide discourse. Edith Wharton uses a more subtle approach in her writing to illustrate how suicide can become a means of escape and maintain selfhood for a woman who not only is completely sane, but who also struggles to exist in the confines of late nineteenth-century patriarchal society.

Wharton, following Chopin's lead, begins to question patriarchy's view of women and their role in late nineteenth-century society from her position as writer and prominent cultural figure. Although Wharton purposely highlights a woman whose characteristics are especially common to the time period as a way to demonstrate the validity of Lily's story, Wharton still presents a woman who chooses to disconnect herself from her given

role. Similar to Chopin's protagonist, Lily commits suicide at the end of the novel, but, unlike Edna, Lily is a single woman who struggles to overcome patriarchal expectations. Chopin uses wife and mother Edna Pontellier to present a woman's struggle to find autonomy, while, Wharton showcases a single woman who exists on the fringes of late nineteenth-century upscale New York society and, when given the opportunity to adopt patriarchal standards through marriage, refuses and must then contend with her choices, experiencing a descent in her social status.

Lily is a bright and resourceful woman who thoughtfully questions her society's expectations of women. Because of this, she refuses to conform and, instead, acts out against the norm, a norm that emphasizes the need to marry for wealth and status and, when needed, participate in risqué or catty womanly acts. Unlike other female characters in the novel, Lily does not perform sexual favors for her powerful male friends so as to gain financial security, nor does she resort to blackmail; instead, she refuses and suffers the consequences: in the second half of the book, readers find her experiencing an economic and social descent. Lily goes against the social norms that are expected of her and ultimately does so by using her passiveness and, sometimes, indecisiveness as a form of empowerment throughout the novel. But it is this same seemingly passive nature that in actuality works for Lily as purposeful inaction. When Lily should be focused on attaining a marriage proposal she chooses to sleep in instead of attending church with Percy Gryce or flirts with an Italian Prince's step-son instead of securing her position with the Prince. In the novel, Carry Fisher comments that when Lily should be reaping the fruits of her labor (marriage), she decides to do something else: "she 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... sometimes... I think it's all flightiness—and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for" (Wharton 207-208).

For me, this inaction has a purpose. It is a means for Lily to actively rebel against social expectations. Lily could not verbally say, "No, I refuse to marry"; instead, she uses what others consider passivity as a way to reject the societal constraints that have been imposed on her. At the end of the novel, Lily's attempt to rebel against social expectations reaches a climatic end when, I assert, she chooses to commit suicide.

Most writers and critics, however, see Lily as a victim. Irving Howe calls Lily a "victim of her social milieu" (8), while Edmund Wilson argues that a significant number of Wharton's "tragic heroines... are... victims... who find themselves locked into a small closed system, and either destroy themselves by beating their heads against their prison or suffer a living death in resigning themselves to it" (21). Louis Auchincloss, after giving a succinct summary of the life of Lily Bart, declares that Lily is a "victim," one of "those poor beings who are weak" (35). E. K. Brown maintains that "Lily Bart is the victim of a conventionalized society which is remorseless to those who deviate from its fixed ways" (66).

I strongly disagree. Lily is not a victim. Most writers maintain that *The House of Mirth* is a deterministic novel and that Lily has no real free will. But this is simply not true; Lily's greatest act of free will is choosing to escape her restrictive and controlling culture through her own self-inflicted death. If Lily would have chosen to adopt her society's accepted practices, such as marrying for the sole purpose of financial gain, giving in to gossip, blackmailing other women so as to clear her name, or even allowing

herself to pay off debts to married men with inappropriate methods, then, yes, Lily would have been a victim, a victim of her given society. She would be one of the many women who, when presented with the choice, yields to late nineteenth-century affluent New York patriarchal society's standards. One sees Lily struggling to survive, but her struggle is not because she resigns herself to "Fate." If Wharton's heroine represents anything, it is someone who is strong and maintains her own convictions, so she does not fall victim to this society. In the end, her suicide is not a symbol of weakness or of her being a victim, but of her triumph over a world that did everything it possibly could to break her down. Lily does not fit the criteria of "victim" nor does she fit the mold of a woman in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society. In fact, Lily exercises free will by escaping this violently restrictive and controlling culture through her self-inflicted death.

Because she does not fit the criteria of a woman in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society, Lily, like Wharton, is forced to live a dual existence, or wear a mask of sorts, throughout the entire novel. Jeffery Meyers maintains that "Wharton lived in two worlds and couldn't quite bring them together. In her autobiography she wrote that her intelligence frightened her fashionable friends..." (xiv). This similar struggle with repressing one's true self and wearing the proper façade manifests itself in Lily Bart. Wharton, in her character of Lily, as R.W.B. Lewis explains, creates a "portrait[] of the stirrings of rebellious individuality within conventional society" (144). But, Lily is not allowed to completely express this "rebellious individuality"; in fact, she must be very careful and deliberate with her words and actions. Yet, it is this same ability, of being able to change from how she is perceived to how she wants to be perceived, that allows Lily the opportunity to exercise her "rebellious individuality." As a matter of fact, Lily's

entire life seemed to be purposefully planned; this can be seen even in her clear choice to take her own life.

Even though Lily cannot exercise her desire to fully rebel against her conventional society, she uses purposeful inaction as a way to affirm quietly her stance against that with which she disagrees. As a woman in New York society of the late nineteenth-century, she has little freedom. And so, for her, acts of freedom and rebellion are subtle and include sabotaging marriage opportunities, remaining single, and avoiding tactics that would ostracize herself and others from social circles. The most powerful of these rebellious acts may be her own death.

Lily's suicide becomes a triumph for multiple reasons. By choosing this death Lily no longer needs to play a double role and wear a mask to survive in society. Because her purposeful inaction throughout the novel is subtle, her actions can be misconstrued and, sometimes, used against her. But, in the end, I maintain, her death is resolutely an act to assert her autonomy, an autonomy that could no longer be satisfied by solely exercising purposeful inaction. Ultimately, her death is as "purposeful" and "planned" as her life, but this time her decision to commit suicide has clear results over which she has full control. In her death, Lily finally has complete control of her destiny. As a woman in New York society of the late nineteenth century, Lily has little freedom. Any choices outside the norm have dire consequences. For her, freedom and free will are both desired over marriage but only found when she chooses death, an ultimate escape from those consequences. The novel defines suicide in social terms—Lily asserts that marrying Selden would be social suicide. But later, after her fall from grace, marrying Selden would destroy him, not her social standing. So, choosing to commit suicide frees not only

herself, but Selden, from their love. Lily sacrifices herself, but she also comes closest to finding herself in her death—a death that declares her love for Selden.

Lily's purposeful and planned life demonstrates the strength she needs to gain autonomy. In a character like Lily, Wharton has created a woman who even at her most vulnerable moment is still very precise and deliberate with her every word, action, and physical expression. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her essay "Lily Bart and the Beautiful Death," explains, Lily "permits the pleasing aesthetic *appearance* that she can give a situation to substitute for its reality" (24). Furthermore, Wolff argues that "Lily's special skill in the representation of herself lies in an uncanny ability to experience herself as others must see her (and thus anticipate their reactions and control them)" (34). Lily is a perceptive and resourceful woman who knows exactly how to adapt to and/or manipulate any given situation. This ability gives Lily her only real taste of freedom. Since she cannot actively exercise her autonomy, she uses what others see as passivity or indifference as a way to balance social expectations with her own desire to maintain a sense of self.

From the very first page of *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton describes her heroine as a woman whose seemingly effortless deeds are really the result of thoughtful purpose. Wharton strategically chooses Lawrence Selden as our medium for meeting Lily Bart. Selden is one character in the novel that is not only accepted by the wealthy "frivolous" class, but also knows how to see through that superficiality and remove himself from the cage that confines them; as Amy L. Blair explains, Selden "reserves the right to judge the actions of the wealthy... [and] as the critical observer of society has the power to shut it down" (158-159). Selden "could never see [Lily] without a faint

movement of interest; it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation, that her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions” (Wharton 5). It was “[h]er discretions [that] interested [Selden] almost as much as her imprudences: he was so sure that both were part of the same carefully-elaborated plan” (Wharton 7). Thus, Selden believes that all of Lily’s actions are deliberate. He explains, “[y]ou are an artist and I happen to be a bit of colour you are using today. It’s part of your cleverness to be able to produce premeditated effects extemporaneously” (Wharton 74).

Lily plans her life and herself so effectively that her life becomes a work of art. Selden is accurate in his metaphor; Lily is an artist of sorts. William E. Modellmog maintains that “Lily views herself as a kind of artist whose ability to manipulate conventions and appearances presupposes a certain distance from them” (345). In one key scene in the novel readers witness Lily’s participation in a “tableaux vivant” during a Brys’ social gathering organized by Carry Fisher. Tableaux vivants, living pictures where characters in costume represent art work, “depend for their effect not only on the happy disposal of lights and the delusive interposition of layers of gauze, but on a corresponding adjustment of the mental vision” (Wharton 147). Lily, in beautifully portraying Joshua Reynolds’s “Mrs. Lloyd,” inspires Selden to believe “that for the first time he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world” (Wharton 149). Gerty Farish, too, believes that this image makes “her look like the real Lily,” a thought that she confesses to Selden to which he agrees (Wharton 149). The irony is that Lily was simply representing a piece of art. Daniel Manheim explains that Lily’s tableau is a success “because she effectively embodies someone else’s work and someone else’s identity: she acts. To act is to play a role inscribed by someone else, with someone else’s

words; but it is also to demonstrate one's own skill" (81). Cynthia Griffin Wolff makes a similar observation of Lily: "her every mood, motion, public attitude... is a deliberate piece of acting" (34). Lily knows how best to represent herself to others. Even though, in choosing Reynolds's "Mrs. Lloyd," "she had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself," Lily was still representing someone else (Wharton 148).

Yet, Lily is so good at presenting herself in a way that best serves the given situation that even those close to her feel as if she is being her real self. As Benjamin D. Carson explains, "What Selden and Gerty see as real... is but an imaginary relation to the real accepted *as* real. Selden and Gerty see in Lily a representation... [and] construct Lily through their gaze as... the reproduction of the real (though imaginary)" Lily (703-704). But Lily is aware that she is not displaying her real self to an audience of observers, but is, in fact, constructing an image of herself. Even after the performance ends, "[n]ot caring to diminish the impression she had produced, she held herself aloof from the audience" (Wharton 150). Carson maintains that "Wharton makes it clear that Lily is aware her performance was a charade; that she was masquerading not just as 'Mrs. Lloyd,' but as an insider; that she was of the leisure class proper" (704). Thus, Lily, in the tableau vivant, was embodying two roles; one role being that of Mrs. Lloyd and the other being that of Lily Bart, the Lily Bart that she wants the audience to believe she is, "as though she stepped, not out of, but into Reynolds's canvas" (Wharton 148). This scene shows the extent to which Lily is aware of her actions. She understands the effect that she is producing. Carson believes that "Lily knows that she was masquerading as 'Mrs. Lloyd,' but she also knows that she is masquerading as 'Lily Bart.' She was playing

herself, performing herself, in an attempt to (re)secure her place among the leisured class” (704). Lily feels that her performance “gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power” (Wharton 150). Lily, being always purposeful, seizes the opportunity at the tableau vivant to adjust the mental vision of those around her. Even though it is all a farce, those present feel as if Lily is being her true self when acting as “Mrs. Lloyd.”

In existing in a conventional society where she must live a dual existence, and, hence, know how to be an actress of sorts, Lily must tread lightly in her course for autonomy. Even though Lily does not fully rebel against her conventional society until the end of the novel when she takes her own life, throughout the novel she affirms her stance against that with which she does not agree by subverting role expectations and avoiding marriage without aggressively rejecting proposals. When she subtly sabotages marriage opportunities and avoids unethical strategies to thwart her competition, she is acting rebelliously and gaining a sense of freedom.

Some believe that Lily “compromises herself” and that she is “foolish about her rashness and opportunities” in regards to marriage opportunities (Meyers xxxiii). But, this is not true. Instead I agree with Modellmog’s assertion that “Lily’s success is attributable precisely to her unwillingness to marry” (349). But, unfortunately, for a woman like Lily, marriage is “part of the business” (Wharton 16). Flirting and husband hunting is a woman’s “career” (Wharton 54-55). Simply put, Lily is “so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (Wharton 10). Elaine Showalter quotes feminist critic Elizabeth Ammons in her essay “The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton’s *House of Mirth*”; Ammons “notes, ‘the [patriarchal] system is designed to keep women in

divisive and relentless competition' for the money and favor controlled by men" (147). Lily is clearly a product of her society in that she understands the essential need to marry a wealthy man so as to keep up appearances. Like Chopin, Wharton blames this lifestyle and the expectations that are forced upon women in late nineteenth-century patriarchal society on *Fate*. Because of these expectations, or, more rightly said, restrictions, Lily "was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of the race and make an independent life for herself" (Wharton 44). Elizabeth Ammons, in her own essay, poses the question, "what if [Lily] values personal freedom over security and does not want to spend her life owned and ruled by a man[?]" (351).

Even if Ammons' observation is true, throughout the novel, Lily is consistently reminded of her obligation to womanhood: marriage. Lily explains to Selden during one of their conversations, "[my aunt, Mrs. Peniston,] is full of copy-book axioms... And the other women—my best friends—well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me. I've been about too long—people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry" (Wharton 12). Most of the women that surround Lily are representations of "copy book axioms." Women are expected to dress a certain way and act a certain way and, especially, marry a certain way. Lily Bart is twenty-nine years old, and, by late-nineteenth-century New York leisure class standards, she is actually past her marriageable prime. Selden responds to Lily's statement with thoughtful questions: "'Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?'" (Wharton 12).

Selden may have been bantering with Lily, but there is truth in his questions; Lily simply "has [no identity] without the *objective* of marriage—it is what she is called to

do" (Manheim 82). There seems to be no other purpose in a woman's life than to marry, and both women and men are aware of this practice. Thomas Loebel adds that "women are engendered for marriage, and the whole construction of gendered identity is about teaching women how to shape and deploy their physical assets for attraction" (111). Even the simplest act of a woman not dressing up or looking her utmost presentable is seen as uncouth; the difference is that "a girl must, a man may if he chooses" (Wharton 15). Lily elaborates, "[women] 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 15). Men may do as they wish. But women, on the other hand, have expectations imposed on them; they must be presentable and they must be willing to follow through with marriage opportunities.

Throughout the novel, Lily finds herself participating in several marriage-bound courtships with potential husbands. One prospect is Percy Gryce, and it is expected that Lily will seduce him into proposing to her while at a country visit at Bellomont. Lily understands that "she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honour of boring her for life" (Wharton 30). Even though Lily is not interested in Percy, she knows that she is expected, in her own words, "to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance" (Wharton 54). It is understood that, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff explains, women "were never permitted to enact independent social roles. Their only role, their only reality, was in relation to a man.... Not surprisingly, then, marriage was judged to be the central fact of a woman's life" (78). But, Lily, ultimately, by her own doing, sabotages her chances with Percy Gryce. Lily's "course was too purely reasonable not to contain

the germs of rebellion. No sooner were her preparations made than they roused a smothered sense of rebellion” (Wharton 64-65). Lily begins to envision what her life would be like married to the wealthy Mr. Gryce. In doing so, she realizes that her fate leads only to boredom. With such conclusions, Lily seemingly misses her opportunity with Mr. Gryce. Lynne Tillman explains that “when [Lily] strikes out against convention or her interests, by spending time with Selden and avoiding her rich, boring suitor, Percy Gryce, her revolt takes the shape of inaction” (142). She deliberately chooses to avoid Percy, because she does not love him nor does she want to marry him. But, in regards to how others view Lily’s disinterest, she is simply thought to be “not serious” about her course of action (Wharton 83).

But, in reality, Lily rejects all of her suitors because she rejects a society that would forbid her autonomy. However, this is not a justifiable reason given her position and her culture, and, so, Lily must continue to balance her dual life. Still, there are those who see Lily’s rejection of marriage as a sign of her desire for independence. Both Selden and Lily’s friend Gerty Farish comment on Lily’s search for freedom and assert “that [Lily’s] life had never satisfied her [which] proved that she was made for better things. She might have married more than once—the conventional rich marriage which she had been taught to consider the sole end of existence—but when the opportunity came she had always shrunk from it” (Wharton 171-172). Gerty and Selden’s assumptions are true. Lily does have opportunities to follow through with social conventions of marrying into wealth, but when finding herself within arms length of what should be her one goal, she refrains.

Some may say she is merely being coy or keeping her options open—“a waterplant in the flux of the tides,” but I assert that Lily Bart is very much aware of her actions or lack thereof and is deliberate in her choices (Wharton 60). There is something about this lifestyle, about these expectations to marry a wealthy man so as to maintain social status, that makes Lily rebel against it. Even though Lily is aware of the necessity of finding an ideal husband and marrying him, she knows that that is not what she truly wants. Carry Fisher accurately describes Lily in a passage in the novel when recounting one of Lily’s missed marriage opportunities with an Italian Prince; “she 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... sometimes... I think it’s all flightiness—and sometimes I think it’s because, at heart, she despises the things she’s trying for” (Wharton 207-208). Lily dedicates herself to arranging the perfect marriage with a wealthy suitor, but, when it is time to follow-through in her plan, Lily sabotages her efforts.

Lily’s apparent indifference to marriage is not her only subtle method of rebelling against her conventional society; even when faced with social ruin she refrains from hurting others and herself by rejecting inappropriate acts that are deemed acceptable in her society. Some women resort to “stealing reputations, opportunities, male admirers—all to parlay or retain status and financial security in a world arranged by men to keep women suppliant and therefore subordinate” (Showalter 147). Lily understands that women are “all alike... they hold their tongues for years, and you think you’re safe, but when their opportunity comes they remember everything” (Wharton 84). Not only does Lily recognize that women gossip and tarnish each other’s reputation as means of getting

ahead, but that some women are willing to accept money from married men; for example, "a woman like Carry Fisher could make a living unrebuked from the good-nature of her men friends and the tolerance of their wives" (Wharton 87-88). Even though Lily finds herself in debt and struggling to provide for the lifestyle she is trying to keep up, she will not succumb to sponging money off married men if it means she must sacrifice her own self-worth to do it. Instead, Lily attempts to make her own money off the stock market by entrusting her funds in Gus Trenor and his expertise. But Lily soon realizes the error in her judgment when Trenor begins his sexual advances. Lily innocently believes that he is investing her own money, but quickly learns that Trenor has other intentions; he believes that by giving her his own money "he [now] has a sexual as well as financial claim on her and intends to collect his debt" (Meyers xxix). But, even with the realization that Trenor gave her money, it was never Lily's intention to repay him with sexual favors.

Once Lily realizes the severity of the situation, she begins to feel like "a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained" (Wharton 164). It is only after Lily flees Gus Trenor's home and finds herself reflecting on her agreement with him that she reckon[ed] up the exact amount of her debt to Trenor; and the result of this hateful computation was the discovery that she had, in all, received nine thousand dollars from him. The flimsy pretext on which it had been given and received shrivelled up in the blaze of her shame: she knew that not a penny of it was her own, and that to restore her self-respect she must at once repay the whole amount. The inability thus to solace her outraged feelings gave her a paralyzing sense of insignificance. She was realizing

for the first time that a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage; and that the maintenance of a moral attribute should be dependent on dollars and cents, made the world appear a more sordid place than she had conceived it. (Wharton 186-187)

Lily realizes that the social expectations that are required of her and that this world she exists in are simply not what she wants nor agrees with.

Because of the incriminating situation that Lily finds herself in with Gus Trenor, she must also bear the brunt of the gossip that women circulate about her. Regardless of the validity of the rumors, Lily's life, her reputation, and her friendships are negatively impacted by the scandalous talk: "A year ago Lily would have smiled at it, trusting to the charm of her personality to dispel any prejudice against her. But now she had grown more sensitive to criticism and less confident in her power of disarming it" (Wharton 143). Yet, Lily is presented with an opportunity where she could elevate herself in social standing at the price of trading in on someone else's indiscretions. But, instead, Lily seizes the opportunity as another way of rejecting social allowances. Mrs. Haffen, a charwoman who works in Selden's building, confiscates a bundle of love letters exchanged between Selden and Bertha Dorset, a wealthy married woman, from Selden's apartment and offers to sell them to Lily. She accepts. "She had no idea of reading the letters.... The recipient of the letters had meant to destroy them, and it was her duty to carry out his intention. She had no right to keep them—to do so was to lessen whatever merit lay in having secured their possession" (Wharton 117). Instead of purchasing the letters as a way of purposely hurting two people and, at the same time, benefiting herself, Lily acquires them in order to destroy them, in an intentional act of free will.

But, by rejecting the roles provided for her, Lily faces dire consequences, including social alienation and poverty. Lily understands the expectations that are imposed on her and finds herself questioning the established ideas of womanhood. When Lily is invited up to Selden's flat for the first time, she remarks, "[w]hat a miserable thing it is to be woman" (Wharton 9). She says this in regards to women who are single not being able to support themselves financially, unless they are widowed or a governess. Being that Lily is neither widowed nor a governess, she could not live an independent life, like Selden, simply because she is a woman.

Lily also cannot live a socially independent life. After leaving Selden's flat, she runs into Mr. Simon Rosedale who, of course, finds it suspicious that she, as a single woman, is found leaving a man's apartment. Lily questions this double standard, "Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (Wharton 19). Unfortunately, this is part of being a woman in this cultural context. Lily, a single girl in late nineteenth-century affluent society, could not and should not be seen leaving "the Benedick"—a building known for housing bachelors.

Yet, Lily, like Selden, desires freedom "“from everything—from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents”" (Wharton 76). Lily too desires and believes in the "republic of the spirit," but unlike Selden, she is unable to follow-through with her desire to live that kind of idealistic lifestyle. A woman in Lily's position in the late nineteenth century does not know and does not experience the luxury of personal freedom.

But Lily's choices still lead to dire consequences that end in her last act of autonomy, her death. Because Lily is plagued by rumors, her life begins to change and she experiences an economic and social descent. In Mrs. Peniston's passing Lily is only left with ten thousand dollars while Grace Stepney receives Mrs. Peniston's estate. There is no doubt that the rumors, of Lily's supposed indiscretions with married men, resulted in Mrs. Peniston altering her will. At the moment of announcement "No one looked at [Lily], no one seemed aware of her presence; she was probing the very depths of insignificance" (Wharton 244). Lily had resigned herself to the belief that she would inherit the estate, and that Mrs. Peniston's inheritance would provide Lily her only opportunity to repay her debt to Mr. Trenor and clear her name. But Lily knows now that she will be snubbed and cut off from her connections. Gerty Farish, Lily's confidant, encourages her to tell her friends the truth of what happened while vacationing in the Mediterranean with the Dorsetsⁱⁱ, which is assumed to be a factor in her being renounced from the will. Lily shrugs this advice off, and then ponders, "What is truth? Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe. In this case it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her" (Wharton 247). Lily's answer to Gerty's question gives the reader a better understanding in regards to the importance placed on a woman's reputation; "the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks" (Wharton 247).

Since Lily is disinherited, refuses to settle her debt with Trenor by using inappropriate methods, and refuses to blackmail Bertha Dorset with incriminating letters

so as to clear her name, Lily suffers a social decline in the novel. By the end of the novel, Lily, with the help and influence of both Gerty Farish and Carry Fisher, becomes an apprentice at Mme. Regina's millinery business, and she takes residence at a woman's boarding house. Having this job and living in such conditions classifies Lily as a working class woman. Lily can no longer fulfill her thirst for freedom with subtleties, like allowing marriage proposals to fall through or silently rejecting opportune means of regaining status in her society. Now she seeks freedom through her death. Although Lily's death is ambiguously presented, because her life choices are so deliberately made, it too seems deliberate, like a suicide more than an accident.

Lily's choice to reject her society and its expectations, its received beliefs about women, parallels her choice to reject a hopeless life and choose death. *The House of Mirth* defines suicide in social terms—early in the novel, Lily asserts that marrying Selden would be social suicide. But later, after her fall from grace, marrying Selden would destroy him, not her social standing. So, in choosing to commit suicide, Lily frees not only herself, but also Selden, from their love. Lily sacrifices herself, but she also comes closest to finding herself in her death—a death that declares her love for Selden.

There is only one scene in the novel where Wharton specifically uses the word suicide. Her figurative reference to the word comes in a moment when readers witness Lily find solace in her thoughts of her relationship with Lawrence Selden. Even though she refuses to let herself engage in the possibility of marrying Selden, it is evident that Lily loves him; "his love was her only hope, and as she sat alone with her wretchedness the thought of confiding in him became as seductive as the river's flow to the suicide. The first plunge would be terrible—but afterward, what blessedness might come!"

(Wharton 191) The word suicide here represents two significant ideas. One, early on in the novel, even though Lily knows that she loves Selden, by allowing herself to confide her love in him and, in turn, marry him, Lily is risking social suicide; Lily confides to Selden that marrying him “would be a great risk” (Wharton 81). As much as Lily used purposeful inaction as a way of rejecting the social expectation of marriage, she still understood that marrying Selden, even for love, was not an option. Lily, at one point, encourages Selden to love her, but not to act on it; “Ah, love me, love me—but don’t tell me so!” (Wharton 152). And so the thought of allowing herself to be with him becomes a type of suicide.

But, also, the word suicide here represents the idea of intimacy. The thought of confiding in Selden all of her indiscretions, and allowing herself to be honest, is an idea that Lily equates with committing suicide. The opportunity to experience intimacy is as freeing to Lily as committing suicide; and, so, death is then turned “into a state that communicates truth” (Moddelmog 357). The philosopher Pascal is quoted as saying “Happiness[] ... is the object of all the actions of men—even of those who kill themselves” (qtd. in “Suicide” 67-68). Could it not be that Lily believes that happiness only lies in being true to herself, in loving Selden, and that, for her, the only way to experience that level of happiness, to experience being her true self, is to end her life? I believe so. If this passage confirms anything, it is that Lily’s creator Edith Wharton does not view suicide as an act of weakness, an act committed out of insanity or imitation, which were the aforementioned leading causes attributed by commentators of the time to women committing suicide. Committing suicide would be as daring as a woman freeing herself from social expectations would be. Committing suicide would be the greatest act

of love and self-acceptance. Women, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman maintains, can have the will to defy expectations and can be seen in “suicidal martyrs” whose desire for freedom forced them to extremes “even to the door of death, and through it” (1). Edna Pontellier, in *The Awakening*, was a woman who chose suicide as a means of freedom, and, here too, Lily Bart equates suicide with a symbol of true self-expression.

After her fall from grace, marrying Selden would no longer destroy Lily’s social standing, but, instead, would destroy his. Once Lily began her descent in the social scale, she could feel Selden’s detachment of her through his absence; but, even during one rare visit, Lily could sense Selden’s forced indifference; “his awkwardness was due to the fear of her attaching a personal significance to his visit,” and “she saw that her presence was becoming an embarrassment to him” (Wharton 303, 335). One can see that, now, it would be social suicide for Selden to marry Lily. So, with the knowledge that Lily now exists on the peripheral of the world she once knew, at the end of the novel, she finally feels the freedom to be able to reveal her true feelings for Selden: “Once—twice—you gave me the chance to escape from my life, and I refused it: refused it because I was a coward. Afterward I saw my mistake—I saw I could never be happy with what had contented me before...” (Wharton 336). Lily had always admired Selden’s ability of being able to disconnect himself from late nineteenth-century New York leisure society, and so he, too, for Lily, is a symbol of what happiness in life could be.

... [Selden] preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. How alluring the world outside the cage appeared to Lily, as she heard its door clang on

her! In reality, as she knew, the door never clanged: it stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having once flown in, could never regain their freedom. It was Selden's distinction that he had never forgotten the way out. (Wharton 62)

In this passage living and partaking in this affluent society is equated to being imprisoned. A. Elizabeth Elz affirms that, during this time period, "women [were] kept in cages" (14). Edna Pontellier, in *The Awakening*, found herself in this same kind of predicament, and, inevitably, she chose to regain her freedom by exiting the cage, by swimming out into the abyss. Lily feels that, figuratively, loving Selden and being true to her self is a form of exiting the gilt cage, a form of suicide, but, in the end, in choosing to commit suicide, Lily frees not only herself, but also Selden, from their love. Lily "sacrifice[s] herself to preserve [Selden's] reputation and his memory of her" (Wolff 33). But Lily also comes closest to finding herself in her death—a death that declares her love for Selden.

Lily chooses to literally exit the cage that for so long imprisoned her. Donald Pizer asserts that Lily is "not merely related to or dependent on [her] social setting but... destructively imprisoned by it" but she escapes through death (242). Most critics of *The House of Mirth* argue that Lily Bart's death is either a deliberate act of suicide or a tragic accident. But a newly discovered letter written by Edith Wharton sheds new light on this mystery. A November 21, 2007, *New York Times* article written by Charles McGrath, "Wharton Letter Reopens a Mystery," explains that, before completion of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton wrote a letter to "Dr. Francis Kinnicutt, a well-known society doctor who specialized in the mental ailments of the well-to-do [,]" and the letter suggests that

Wharton was, indeed, contemplating using suicide as a means to an end for her heroine (McGrath). The letter “is dated Dec. 26, 1904, or just a month before ‘The House of Mirth’ began appearing in monthly installments in Scribner’s Magazine” (McGrath).

Wharton’s letter inquires, what would be “the most painless & least unpleasant method of effacing” her lead female character? (McGrath) Wharton also asks, more specifically, “What soporific, or nerve-calming drug, would a nervous and worried young lady in the smart set be likely to take to, & what would be its effects if deliberately taken with the intent to kill herself? I mean, how would she feel and look toward the end?” (McGrath)

McGrath claims that Wharton’s inquiries had more to do with Lily’s appearance than with finding a painless way for Lily Bart to commit suicide. But these inquiries may prove that Wharton intended that Lily Bart commit suicide at the end of the novel. That suicide may have been an act committed by a woman wanting to escape her given life from 1904’s “smart set,” as Wharton calls it. Critics like McGrath deny that possibility. Others, including Hermione Lee, an English Professor at Oxford, maintain that the ending is ambiguous and that Wharton, indeed, wanted Lily’s death to be unclear.

Does the letter prove that all along Lily intended to kill herself? I think it’s quite likely that in December 1904, Wharton was thinking that Lily was going to commit suicide, and that by the time she came to the ending, months later, she changed her mind, because of the way those last pages hold onto so many moral positions at once. I think that, as she went on, she decided that it would be more effective if she left the ending ambiguous. (Quoted in McGrath)

In conjunction with this newly acquired letter, that ambiguity provides a larger space for reading Lily Bart's act as a suicide rather than an accidental overdose. From the start, Lily Bart acts with deliberation when carrying out her intentions; she has purpose in her actions, so why then would her death at her own hands be an accident? This newly found letter only reaffirms Lily Bart's death as suicide, as a choice that a woman of her period might make, consciously and resolutely, when faced with the unconquerable obstacles a woman of a certain class faced at the turn of the century.

Thus, Lily chooses to commit suicide as a tragic escape from misery: "Yes—it was happiness she still wanted, and the glimpse she had caught of it made everything else of no account. One by one she had detached herself from the baser possibilities, and she saw that nothing now remained to her but the emptiness of renunciation" (Wharton 350). Lily slowly begins to feel "herself more strangely confronted with her fate" (Wharton 350). Furthermore, "she was appalled by the intense clearness of the vision; she seemed to have broken through the merciful veil which intervenes between intention and action" (Wharton 350). Lily's "only hope of renewal lay in the little bottle [of chloral—heavy sedative] at her bedside" (Wharton 323). This little bottle offers hope and renewal because it offers Lily an opportunity to choose her fate. By choosing death, Lily triumphs over restraining social forces. When Lily commits suicide, she commits an act of free will over which she has complete control.

Lily's final act of suicide is a symbol of her last form of self-empowerment. Although Alfred Kazin suggests that *The House of Mirth* promotes the theme "of the spiritual value of failure" and Blake Nevius agrees in *Edith Wharton, a study of her fiction* (118), Lily Bart is not a failure. As a matter of fact the reasons that Jeffery Meyers

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Endnotes

ⁱRoyal Whitman, in 1881, uses a similar example for imitation in that a physician, who was engaged in a lucrative practice, refused to shave in fear that he would be possessed with the urge to cut his throat. William A. Hammond, in 1888, states that a medical student, who gave no evidence of having any kind of mental derangement, was dissecting a body and, days later, was found dead from a hemorrhage after cutting into the same artery he had had illustrated on the corpse.

William A. Hammond, in 1890, employs a differing version of the same story in which a professor of anatomy, when conducting a post-mortem examination on a man who committed suicide by cutting his throat, informs his assistant, Hans, that the man would have suffered less if he had made the incision into his carotid artery instead. That same night, Hans, being a well-disposed man with no prior thoughts of suicide, took his own life by cutting his throat exactly how the professor had instructed.

ⁱⁱ Lily's falling out with the Dorsets can be attributed to Mrs. Dorset's jealousy—the Duchess, a prominent figure, is fond of Lily as opposed to Mrs. Dorset—or Lily's knack for being caught in suspect situations—riding home alone in a carriage after midnight with a married Mr. Dorset—or Mrs. Dorset being caught in a rendezvous with Ned Silverton and her fear of losing her husband manifesting itself into a false accusation that Lily was conspiring to steal away and marry Mr. Dorset.