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The Feminine Voyage: Travel and Feminine Space in Chopin's *The Awakening*,
Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Larsen's *Passing*

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Thesis Mentor



Second Reader

"She wished to find out about this hazardous business of 'passing,' this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take ones chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly."

-Nella Larsen

Chapter 1

Introduction

Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Nella Larsen are three female authors who took the risk, "breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take ones chances in another environment" (Larsen 157): Chopin writes about the south, Wharton focuses her attention on the north, and Larsen is struggling to be recognized as a black female author. Though they were unaware while they were writing their novels, these three women represent a range of female authors trying to penetrate the male-dominated canon to have their literature and interpretations of female life accepted and lauded. Each work celebrates a female heroine who has her own needs and desires that differ from what men want and dictate, a relatively unheard of concept in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By having their female characters realize or begin to realize their particular needs, each author is embarking on a groundbreaking journey. Prior to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, female authors were absorbed in writing the sentimental novel, centering on the domestic activities in the home. The female characters in this genre were defined by the variety of roles that they performed in association with their home: mother, wife, and housekeeper. It was these portrayals that severely limited women's movement and had a direct impact

on their lack of freedom. Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen, in their respective works, each tried to define another dimension of the female in order to provide some sense of mobility for their female characters.

Chopin's Edna Pontellier, Wharton's Lily Bart, and Larsen's Irene Redfield are able to exist only because they can leave the home and the slave-like duties that their predecessors were bound by in order to pursue their own passions and interests. These three texts do not focus on the home but rather on the variety of journeys that the three main characters take along with the friendships that they are able to form outside of the stifling kitchens, dining rooms, and bedrooms that they would have previously been forced to remain in. As Judith Fryer notes, "Women have stood, in our culture, for some space that is static and tranquil, and men have had the whole Territory to explore" (9); however, Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen reverse or redefine the spaces that women are allowed to inhabit. Their female protagonists cannot embark on these groundbreaking journeys by themselves, so each author provides a guide(s) for the protagonist who offers suggestions for ways to live as well as aids in navigating uncharted territories.

Ultimately it is the protagonist's individual exploration, the "breaking away from all that [is] familiar and friendly" (Larsen 157), that is necessary to explore other environments and help uncover the complex nature of female identity.

One of Edith Wharton's earliest short stories, "The Valley of Childish Things," can be used as a gloss for what Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen are suggesting:

Once upon a time a number of children lived together in the Valley of Childish Things, playing all manner of delightful games, and studying the same lesson books. But one day a little girl, one of their number, decided that it was time to see

something of the world about which the lesson books had taught her; and as none of the other children cared to leave their games, she set out alone to climb the pass which led out of the valley.

It was a hard climb, but at length she reached a cold, bleak tableland beyond the mountains. Here she saw cities and men, and learned many useful arts, and in so doing grew to be a woman. (qtd. in Fryer 8)

The solitary journey that the young girl embarks on is both physical and mental, as are the journeys of Edna Pontellier, Lily Bart, and Irene Redfield. The journey also separates the girl from her playmates, forcing her to be an outsider, resembling the status of Edna, Lily, and Irene. The knowledge that the young girl gains on her adventure sets her apart from the rest of her kind; similarly, by traveling Edna, Lily, and Irene gain knowledge which equates to temporary aspects of freedom. Edna Pontellier is an outsider in the Creole community, Lily Bart cannot afford membership in the upper class, and Irene Redfield can be both black and white due to her ability to pass, so all three women operate in a variety of worlds, possessing the ability to move succinctly between spaces. Each woman also functions as an outsider in relation to her sexuality or lack thereof. Although many of the spaces that the women reside in are male oriented, "the fact that women do not control physical or social space directly does not necessarily preclude them from being determinants of, or mediators in, the allocation of space" (Ardener 17). Whether these women are learning about their opportunities, their restrictions, their race, class, gender, or sexuality, it is a process with consequences that must be understood. The completion of the process is not the goal of Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen, but the realization that there is a process, that these female characters are different, and that they

should celebrate their differences in order to define themselves and gain freedom for themselves and their gender.

All three of the female protagonists are privileged due to their class status. Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart are members of the upper class, while Irene Redfield is a member of the black middle class. These women are afforded the opportunity to have maids and servants to look after the house and children while they saunter through the city attempting to carve a new path for the women of the late 1800's and early 1900's. By no means do these three texts offer a concrete solution that entitles women to the freedom and equality that they deserve since the endings are ambiguous, but it is exactly this open ending that frees the female protagonist instead of restricting her and forcing her into a particular role. The ambiguous endings also subvert the intentions of the authors, creating a sense of liberation and then squashing it so as to subtly usurp power. Chopin's Edna Pontellier and Wharton's Lily Bart kill themselves, an ambivalent end to a lifelong struggle, indicating their inhabitation in a new space represented by an undefinable world. On the other hand, Larsen's Irene Redfield is alive at the end of *Passing*, though psychologically disturbed, suggesting a foray into yet another unexplored world. However, just as Wharton and Chopin subvert their characters progress at the end of the novel, so does Larsen, since she explores the length to which women must go to protect the small progress they have made. Larsen's text proves to be the most complex because of the subverted sexual agenda coupled with or overshadowed by racial issues.

Each of these novels is problematic because any temporary escape by the female protagonist is thwarted by the end, suggesting the lack of mobility that each author possesses along with their characters. These are not novels that conclude with happy

endings, but that does not mean that gradual progress is not being accomplished. In fact, painful exploration is taking place, revealing issues that cannot neatly be categorized under the umbrella of domestic fiction.

* * *

Prior to 1940, women were not praised for the variety of writing they were producing. Instead, they were primarily noted for their ability to write domestic fiction. Two anthologies of writers during the nineteenth century were compiled, but male and female authors were not even published within the same book, emphasizing the different space women were trying to write in. The women who were writing during the nineteenth century were placed in Fred Lewis Pattee's version of American Literature during the 1850's, *The Feminine Fifties* (1940). However, this was not the only version of literature during the nineteenth century. Male writers like Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Whitman dominated the other text of influential writings of the time period, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), produced by F. O. Matthiessen. The titles suggest the gender focus of each text. Each book depicts a different version of the writing of the nineteenth century, but Matthiessen neglects the fact that "not only were most readers women, the most successful writers, especially of fiction, were also by and large women, women now mostly forgotten" (Bell 76). Women's writing was simply dismissed, lacking the attention, consideration, and respect that male writing achieved. There were numerous women writing during the nineteenth century but they were overshadowed by Matthiessen's male-dominated depiction of prominent authors. The following chapters will highlight a variety of these female authors, primarily focusing on three women: Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and

Nella Larsen, three women who attacked the patriarchal power structure that confined women to inferior roles.

The early to middle of the nineteenth century found women like Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, Fanny Fern, and Harriet Beecher Stowe producing texts categorized as sentimental fiction. This genre focused on presenting emotional portraits of domestic women. Sentimental fiction denigrates women by claiming that the text and its characters are influenced more by emotion than reason. Therefore, they act according to feelings rather than practical reasoning. The world that each author presents in sentimental fiction relegates women to the control of their fathers and husbands, restricting their identity and development, creating similarities between each text, which mirrored the plight of the century: the feminine fight against the patriarchal establishment.

Ironically, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, and Fanny Fern established their own journeys into the world of commerce when they turned to writing to support their families. This upset the separation of the sexes and enabled women to overcome the gap between the man's sphere of the "open air" and the confined space of the women's sphere, the home. Stowe was married, but she supported her husband and children with the money she produced from her writing. This should have been her husband's responsibility, but Stowe was able to become the breadwinner in her family. She fervently claimed, "I am determined...not to be a mere domestic slave, without even the leisure to excel in my duties" (Bell 105). Along with Stowe, Warner wrote in order to support her father and pay off his debts, so once again this is the picture of the failure of a man to support his children or his wife. On the other hand, Fern's husband died and left her to support two children, so she then focused on her writing. Some critics of the

nineteenth century condoned women writing to support their families because women did not initially proclaim these responsibilities, so they were only protecting their family, a female duty. Nevertheless, the strength and perseverance of these women cannot be denied. This was not their "normal" role, but they proved that women could successfully enter the business world, a male-dominated enterprise. Some of this independence transferred into the writing of Warner, Cummins, Fern, and Stowe, celebrating a sense of freedom and progress for women authors as well as the characters they created.

Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) focuses on a young girl, Ellen Montgomery, who is separated from her ill mother, robbed of the opportunity to say goodbye because of a controlling father. Both mother and child are trapped by the dominance of this man who functions as husband and father, exploiting them as a result of their lack of power. This innocent child becomes a commodity that is passed between relatives and friends under the command of her father. Ellen becomes a piece of property who is never consulted about her movement, and eventually turns to religion and supportive friends for any chance of survival, only to end up being allowed to correspond with a man in America. Following Warner, Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854) introduces the character of Gerty, who becomes Gertrude later in the text. This young child is an orphan who resides with an unsympathetic woman from the age of three. Gerty eventually finds friends and survives, but towards the end of the novel, Gertrude marries and the 'peaceful happy home' (Bell 92) of the sentimental novel is upheld as the virtuous domestic establishment. According to Michael Davitt Bell, "the basic message of *The Lamplighter* must have been clear to the novel's many readers and must have been consoling: Domesticity is not confinement to the home but liberation from the idle

extravagance of fashion" (92). As a result, Cummins presents two worlds: "the frivolous life of fashion and the solid virtues of domestic competence" (Bell 91). Instead of championing luxury, Cummin's favors the hard work that women perform in the home, but it is this work that forces women into the role of a subservient slave.

Also in 1854, Fanny Fern published *Ruth Hall*. Fern's text opens with the marriage of eighteen-year old Ruth Ellet. The young girl leaves the authority of her father only to be transferred to the authority of her new husband. Ruth loses her mother when she is young, as do the other two female children in Warner's and Cummin's novels. Subsequently, the lack of a mother figure as well as the restriction to domestic life unifies all of these texts in their depiction of a single role for women during the nineteenth century. Being young females, these girls were defined by the relationships they had with other people, most notably men; therefore, the lack of female influence forces them to succumb to the control of their fathers when they are still children. Since there are other females present as the women mature, a bond can be created, aiding the process that each woman must undergo in discovering her identity. It is this tradition of female bonding and producing a female community that can be found in *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, and *Passing*. The three female protagonists are not defined by the people they encounter, instead they use the male and female guides as models.

As the nineteenth century progressed, female authors became bolder in their approach to upsetting and displacing the established stereotypes, but there were remnants of the domestic novel, mainly in the lack of strong female role models. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Kate Chopin's female protagonist in *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier, embarks on her journey through life without her mother since she died when Edna was

very young. In the first years of the twentieth century, Edith Wharton presents Lily Bart as a high society girl (*The House of Mirth*) who also loses her mother at a young age. Similarly, Nella Larsen's *Passing* finds Clare Kendry being raised by her drunken father, since her mother has also died. Irene Redfield's mother is dead as well, but Larsen does not provide the reader with the time frame for her death. However, it is clear that neither woman has a mother in Larsen's novel. Although Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen draw on a traditional female character with roots in the early nineteenth century, the figure of a young girl robbed of companionship with her mother, she disappears and in her place is an older female protagonist, suggesting the author's ability to deviate from the tradition inspired by Cummins, Warner and Fern, and embark on a new quest.

Still, the female characters in these texts are left without the aid of their mothers to mature in a male dominated world where they have to fight to discover and define themselves, so they require the help of female guides who offer motherly advice and a variety of different roles that the protagonist can explore. However, it is only when they depart from the stereotypical roles that were available to them--wife, mother, and housekeeper-- that they may triumph and begin to make their own decisions. This is not an easy process for authors because they are using their characters to challenge the established ideals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that were male proscribed.

The general feeling during the middle of the nineteenth century was "man in the open air, woman in the home" (Bell 114), so a variety of texts present men traveling or moving around and women remaining stationary in a home or being shuffled between their father's and husband's homes. Though this may seem to constitute movement, it is lateral movement since the women go from the control of their fathers to that of their

husbands or other male figures striving to become their husbands. Nevertheless, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Nella Larsen present three courageous female characters who desire to distance themselves from the home by traveling. This trio of female authors “demanded freedom and innovation. They modified the realistic three-decker novels about courtship and marriage that had formed the bulk of mid-century ‘woman’s fiction’ to make room for interludes of fantasy and parable, especially episodes in which a woman will dream of an entirely different world” (Showalter 69). Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen do not dwell in a dream state, instead they allow their female protagonists to enter other worlds, but their goal is to execute those dreams in the male dominated world. Their texts emphasize reality and the need for their female characters to exist in that world. It is this different world that women had to enter in order to live free lives and escape the confines of patriarchy. In order to gain entry into this other world, the women must travel to another character’s home, the outdoors, another city, or simply wander. There is another significant element to these journeys: the travel must be solitary for at least a portion of the journey. Edna Pontellier, Lily Bart, and Irene Redfield purposely make individual journeys in order to strengthen their character and avoid being trapped in the home under the rules of the patriarchy.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe established an analogy between marriage and slavery, which spoke to the place of women in the male world. To be married during this time period meant that the wife was equal to the status of a slave. This idea was further supported by John Stuart Mill, who in 1869 likened “a married woman’s status to that of a slave” (Daphne 115), thereby suggesting that women were being oppressed by their husbands and the patriarchal order that ruled society. The

significance of Mill's quotation suggests that even a male acknowledged the fact that men subscribed to the negative treatment of women, thereby, they did not deny women's slave-like status.

The Awakening, The House of Mirth, and Passing initially recall the idea of marriage as slavery, but Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen do not abandon their protagonists in this position of servitude. Edna Pontellier and Irene Redfield are both married, so they are indebted to their husbands for food, clothing, and shelter, but their actions are also dictated to and directed by their husbands. The relationship between husband and wife is similar to that of slave master to slave since the slave master is responsible for feeding, clothing, and sheltering his slaves as well as making sure that they complete whatever task the master demands. Fortunately, by traveling and entering once forbidden spaces, these two wives can enjoy a sense of freedom. Moreover, Lily Bart, who is looking for a husband, will join the company of her female heroines when she marries, but Wharton does not succumb to the traditional stereotype, allowing her female protagonist to remain single. Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen attempt to allow their female characters an escape route so that they are not forced to remain under the control of their husbands or men who pursue them, thereby escaping from the position of a slave. According to Bell, "it [Uncle Tom's Cabin] does share with the works of Warner, Cummins, Fern, and other women novelists of the 1850's a more general subject: a world in which men dominate, often cruelly, and in which women, domestic slaves, have only domesticity itself to protect their severely limited moral autonomy" (Bell 114). Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen are not satisfied with this limited prospect for women so their novels offer women an autonomy that is not linked to the kitchen or home in any respect. In fact, the ability to

freely move outside of the home establishes a measure of freedom for the female characters.

* * *

By the time Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen were writing their influential works, a variety of aspects in the lives of the nineteenth and twentieth century inhabitants were being transformed. For instance, Daphne Spain's *Gendered Spaces* traces the segregation of the sexes through the architecture of houses during most of the nineteenth century. By the conclusion of the nineteenth century, houses were being designed with the intention of encouraging family collaboration and cooperation in all rooms regardless of gender or age. The freedom of women followed the transformation of the home, so women began to gain more control over their lives as the nineteenth century came to a close and the United States began a new century. This correlates to the time period that found Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen breaking the stereotypes for female characters in literature.

The American design of houses followed that of the British, which relegated separate space to men and women. However, the spaces allotted were by no means equal, as the treatment of men and women was clearly not equal. Robert Kerr's book, *The Gentleman's House; or How to Plan English Residences in 1871* states that "one room out of twenty-seven...[was] intended strictly for women: the boudoir" (Daphne 114). On the other hand, Kerr claims that at least six rooms should be "identified as men's rooms: the library, billiard room, gentlemen's room (for business transactions), study, smoking room, and gentleman's odd room (where young gentlemen could 'do as they like')" (114). Kerr's book dictates what rooms women could enter and what rooms they must leave to the men, so the diminished physical space of women correlated with their lack of

power not only in the home but also in their relationships with the opposite sex. For example, in the nineteenth century married women could not vote, could not own property, could not receive their own wages for work, and could not obtain access to education. All of this would eventually change, but it was a gradual process that was very arduous and often discouraging.

Although Kerr was speaking about British homes, the same theories can be applied to American houses since they followed the British model. According to Daphne Spain, Americans did not possess the amount of wealth that flourished in Britain, but books encouraged women to follow the cult of domesticity (119). William Alcott's *The Young Wife* and *The Young Husband*, along with Catharine Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, focuses on the wife creating the order that was necessary not only for her family but also for the rest of society. In Alcott's and Beecher's books, the parlor was the dominant room for the female while the library remained intact for the use of the men. Since Americans did not have the money to create numerous rooms that were restricted to specific sexes, they utilized separate entrances as well as different size furniture. For example, in the 1870's a Sear's catalog reflects the following hierarchy in the chairs that were sold. There was "a large gentleman's chair" and a "smaller lady's chair" (Spain 126), but in 1897 a man's easy chair and a woman's rocking chair were both the same, which alluded to the rise in equality among the sexes. Daphne Spain concludes that "architects did not set out to create more egalitarian environments specifically for women, yet the twentieth century was characterized by gradual reduction in sexual spatial segregation and gender stratification" (134). Many aspects of society were changing and slowly encouraging women to participate.

For example, at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 there was a Woman's Building, that housed work by women: "it [the building] was conceived by women, managed by women, designed by a woman architect, and decorated by women artists and painters" (Ammons 1). The following year a new almanac about women came out, *The Woman's Book*, published by Scribner, thus suggesting another example of the need to focus on women and their issues. Unfortunately, men during the nineteenth century desired wives who were "less intelligent and less sophisticated than themselves" (Ammons 12), making it easier to dominate in the relationship and the household. The creation of the women's building at the World's Fair seems insignificant, since women now hold occupations that were once forbidden to them, their salaries have increased, and they choose to work outside of the home. However, in the late 1800's women were not acknowledged as architects, painters, or businesswomen, though they were gradually proving to the male world that they were capable of attacking and completing similar skills.

* * *

According to Judith Fryer, "Spaciousness, then, means being free; freedom implies space. It means having the power and enough room in which to act. It means having the ability to transcend the present condition, and that transcendence implies, quite simply, the power to move" (49-50). It is this freedom that Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen begin to provide their female protagonists, but just as it would take decades for the complete transformation of the architecture of the home to be realized, the literary world would be slow to reflect any alterations in the role for women because the authors were experimenting within a very limited amount of space. Therefore, they were unable to provide suitable alternatives for their female protagonists.

Coupled with spaciousness is the trope of travel. According to Marilyn C. Wesley:

In taking her figurative journey, the woman traveler moves out of her traditional position as object of masculine culture, and her active career controverts the fundamental opposition of masculine mobility in an exterior area to feminine restriction to a domestic space. Not only does the metaphor of her journey inscribe a place for women in the world, but by challenging the range of privileges and restrictions authorized by gendered spatial orders, the trope of the woman's journey is a narrative reconstruction of the meanings of that world. As her own subject, the woman traveler goes beyond subversion to construction of alternative possibility.

(xv)

It is this alternate possibility that Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Nella Larsen are interested in exposing in *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, and *Passing*, respectively, by creating a distinct "woman's journey" that offers expressions of freedom and self-definition at various moments in the novels. However, in order to reach these alternate possibilities women must "withdraw from the patriarchal culture into the indistinctly mapped and terribly difficult space of the self in order to generate new modes of being and expression" (Fryer 44). Withdrawing from patriarchal culture is not enough, so Chopin, Wharton, and Larsen write novels that encourage female exploration that is closely associated with the outdoors, female sexuality, nurturing and safe space, as well as liberated geographic space.

The tropes of travel and space have existed in literature and history, but they are normally associated with the male realm since men have been interested with the imperialistic dimensions of travel and space (Ardener xii), which are expressed by

conquering land, and the people on the land, which notably include women. However, the related tropes of female space and travel are much different since they do not rely on the need for violence and manipulation, but the idea of gaining freedom from this conquering mentality that exists in the male sphere. Hence, this examination of Chopin's *The Awakening*, Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Larsen's *Passing* will consider the tropes of travel and space that must exist if women are to conquer the obstacles, understand themselves, and arrest the control of patriarchal institutions.

Chapter 2

He fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunks of the water-oaks and across the stretch of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun. When they reached the cottage, the two seated themselves with some appearance of fatigue upon the upper step of the porch, facing each other, each leaning against a supporting post.

"What folly! To bath at such an hour in such heat!" exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. He himself had taken a plunge at daylight. That was why the morning seemed so long to him.

"You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage. She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically, drawing up her lawn sleeves above the wrists. Looking at them reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach. She silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm. She slipped them upon her fingers. (Chopin 4)

This early scene in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* introduces a variety of themes that permeate the novel, but most importantly this scene highlights the idea of movement or travel that becomes essential for Edna Pontellier's survival. The first glimpse the reader has of Edna is as a figure in motion, traveling from the beach to the Pontellier cottage on Grand Isle, foreshadowing numerous trips that liberate Chopin's main character. The

beach represents an unrestricted space that allows Edna to be herself while the Pontellier cottage serves as an indoor space that constricts Chopin's heroine. Robert Lebrun serves as a guide in this scene as he escorts Edna back to the confines of her husband and her marriage, signified by Edna placing her wedding rings back on her finger, consequently returning to a life of imprisonment. Unlike Léonce, Edna's role as a human being is diminished because like an actor playing a particular part, she becomes the subservient housewife when placing her wedding rings back on her finger, while her husband is the director in control. Even though Mr. Pontellier appears to dominate this scene when he surveys his wife's body and provides her with the objects that chain his wife to him (the rings), Edna is in motion and Léonce remains seated in his wicker rocker, displaying his inability to move as well as completely control his wife. It is because of her husband that Mrs. Pontellier recognizes her need for mobility. If she fails to move or travel, she will be reduced to an ineffectual stationary object. Therefore, she rebels against her husband, a representative of the patriarchy, as well as the Creole way by remaining an outsider, but it is through physical journeys that the world becomes accessible to Edna and she becomes acquainted with herself.

Critics claim that Kate Chopin was not involved in any of the feminist movements of the time, but her writing focuses on women and their oppressive treatment. Chopin is often categorized as a local colorist, but according to Elaine Showalter, Chopin "did not share the female local colorists' obsession with the past, [or] their desperate nostalgia for a bygone idealized age" (71). In contrast to this group of women, Chopin wanted to "record, in her own way and in her own voice, the terra incognita of a woman's 'inward life' in all its 'vague, tangled, chaotic' tumult" (71). Therefore, Chopin focused her

writing on women's capabilities, providing an outlet for the following decades. The interest Chopin had in departing from this genre can be coupled with her departure from sentimental novels like those of Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), which Chopin grew up reading.

Chopin's own life is often examined in relation to her fiction and this proves important for understanding *The Awakening*. Kate Chopin grew up surrounded by independent women, her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother (all widows), thus indoctrinating the young author into a life full of possibility, one without a reliance on men. The creation of the summer resort on Grand Isle can be seen as an attempt to resurrect this female community, since the men in the novel are usually working off the island. The absence of male figures enabled Kate Chopin as well as Edna, to set off on journeys, "taking long walks and streetcar rides alone, exploring the city and enjoying her own company" (Toth 116). Exploration was essential for women who were usually subjected to the control of patriarchal social structures, and one way to gain the ability to investigate was to remain mobile, a necessity to experience new lifestyles or approaches to life.

There is no doubt that the overarching journey that Edna embarks on in *The Awakening* is to discover herself and her sexuality, but there are numerous miniature journeys that occur in the course of the novel that are just as significant. The journeys usually include physical movement from inside the confines of a home to the freedom of the vast outdoors. Beginning in the summer retreat on Grand Isle, the trips continue in the city of New Orleans. Not only does Edna experience physical freedom in the unrestrictive arms of nature when she is mobile, but the journeys also serve as

illuminating experiences at the emotional and intellectual level. Travel illustrates the concept of stasis versus motion, and it is this movement that adds life to Edna, providing the opportunity for her to attain self-knowledge. Wesley examines the trope of women's travel in captivity narratives and concludes that "the woman traveler repatterns understanding by contradicting the assumptions and challenging the oppositions that structure the gendered social world" (xiv). Edna disturbs the dictated gender restrictions of the nineteenth century through her ability to migrate, exposing her to a new landscape.

Edna's self-discovery as well as her other journeys are aided by her interactions with female characters from a variety of economic backgrounds who serve as guides. She is exposed to three divergent types of guides. As the quoted scene that begins the chapter notes, Robert Lebrun functions as Edna's first guide. Being a man, Lebrun evades easy classification because he both participates in oppressing Mrs. Pontellier and rescues her from the stifling atmosphere of the Pontellier cottage. However, the young Lebrun is not the only guide that Chopin creates to help her protagonist. Two other guides associated with Edna are Adele Ratignolle, a completely oppressed Creole woman, and Mademoiselle Reisz, an artist and an outsider in the Creole community. These two women are diametrically opposed to one another, but a final female model serves as a unification of the two extremes. The mulatresse functions as both a mother because of the special milk she produces and an artist because of her ability to cultivate the vegetation surrounding her. Each of these individuals guides Edna on a specific type of journey, offering her a different potential lifestyle.

The destination each guide brings Edna to directly correlates to his or her individual status in the novel. For example, Robert Lebrun accompanies Edna off the island, a

journey which needs the reliance of a boat. Because Robert is a male, he has numerous opportunities to leave the island, including his trip with Mrs. Pontellier. When Adele guides Edna they do not leave their familiar surroundings, remaining either at the beach or on the porch, not too far from the established Creole culture that suppresses Adele. Mademoiselle Reisz functions as a third guide as well as being someone Edna journeys to see. Her apartment is outside the confines of the Creole community in New Orleans, so it is appropriate that Edna must travel alone to benefit from her relationship with Mademoiselle Reisz. This particular journey occurs numerous times, further distancing Mrs. Pontellier from her husband's culture and community, and foreshadowing her final journey to be influenced by the garden of the mulatresse. The mulatresse is also outside of the Creole community, like Mademoiselle Reisz, and she supports herself with her garden café, symbolizing her penetration of the male economic system. Edna embarks on this solitary journey to the garden, which also signifies her ability to make the final journey at the conclusion of *The Awakening*.

The variety of journeys the protagonist participates in can be categorized according to the people involved, the way she travels, and the actions she performs during the journey. Her smallest journeys, or those that seem insignificant since Edna only moves from inside the Pontellier cottage to the porch, are nevertheless quite crucial since during these "trips" Edna stands up to her husband, confronts the patriarchy and its rules, and denies her place as a fixed object. Edna's other defiant journey occurs in New Orleans when she neglects her Tuesdays at home and leaves the restricting atmosphere of her husband's home and culture to embark on an individual journey. Other excursions are defined by the solitary aspects that encompass them. However, most important is the type of space

associated with each journey Edna takes since she must depart from one space, normally a restricting one, in order to enjoy liberation in a more open space, usually the outdoors. Thus, Edna's journeys are inextricably linked with spatial images.

To further emphasize this point, Chopin structures her novel in two worlds, each with its own definition of space and what occurs within that space. Edna was born and raised in Kentucky as a Presbyterian, but now she has married a Creole and is living in New Orleans. A second dichotomy is presented because part of *The Awakening* takes place on Grand Isle, while the rest of the novel is set in New Orleans. The protagonist does not belong entirely to one world or another, so she is unable to be defined by the spatial boundaries that each world constructs. Therefore, throughout *The Awakening* Edna is caught between two worlds, but this can be read positively because she begins to recognize some of the options available for her investigation. As a result of the constant transformation of her settings, the protagonist is afforded the opportunity to travel and to disrupt the role she has been assigned. Hence, she is no longer restricted to Mr. Pontellier's home and she does everything she can to escape from there. For instance, when her family is on Grand Isle, Edna remains outside on evenings when Léonce is actually home, and she spends many hours on the porch or at the beach. All of these spaces represent freedom or avenues to freedom.

By working in New Orleans, Léonce is only at the Lebrun's on weekends, further encouraging his wife to navigate the possibilities of other spaces. Even when he is on Grand Isle, Léonce goes to Klein's hotel which is designated as a male space, affording him another excuse to escape to a world surrounded by men, just as he experiences in the New Orleans business world. Both Léonce and Edna find they must travel outside of

their residence in order to escape and maintain their sanity. While there is gambling, drinking, smoking, and women in this club to cater to men's needs, women in the novel do not have an established room or building to retreat into, so they must co-opt a feminine space that consists of no walls and no boundaries: the outdoors. Mrs. Pontellier does not want to be home with her children where her husband expects her to be, so she travels to other houses or simply wanders through the streets in an attempt to revolt against her prescribed duties. Although Edna experiences her own sense of freedom by eluding the confining roles of wife and mother, she is unknowingly oppressing the quadroon and other women of varying degrees of blackness (these women who tend to the housekeeping, cooking, and caring for the children). The confining home with its dictated duties is where the women of color are left by Mrs. Pontellier, thereby subjugating other women while she enjoys moments of freedom.

The quadroon and other black women are not the only female characters who remain tied to the home. Madame Ratignolle, the second guide to emerge in Chopin's text, following Robert Lebrun, represents the doting mother from the sentimental novel who adores both her children and husband. The sentimental novel was touted for its ability to "celebrate matriarchal institutions and idealize the period of blissful bonding between mother and child" (Showalter 14). Chopin describes Adele "as possessing the more feminine and matronly figure" (15), so this description suggests the juxtaposition of Edna and Adele. It is Adele Ratignolle who belongs to the "mother-women" (9) on the island because they are "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 and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 9). In other words, women like Adele are defined by the sacrifices they make in their relationships with other individuals, namely their husbands and children. If Adele were stripped of her children and husband she would have no identity, because they dictate her identity and role in life. On the other hand, Edna does not wish to be surrounded by her children, so performing these sacrificial acts would be unthinkable for her character.

A variety of significant scenes occur out of doors in *The Awakening*, and one of them occurs with Edna’s first female guide, Adele. It is these scenes that allow the protagonist freedom as a result of the unrestricted space that she occupies. Early in the novel, Edna displays her need to escape from her children when she and Adele travel to the beach. This scene takes place outside of the summer residence inhabited by the Pontellier’s. According to the narrator, “the day was clear and carried the gaze out as far as the blue sky went” (16). In order to arrive at their destination, Madame Ratignolle and Edna Pontellier travel down a “long, sandy path upon which a sporadic and tangled growth that bordered it on either side made frequent and unexpected inroads” (Chopin 15). The vegetation was free to grow in numerous directions and was never tamed or brought under control by gardening tools. Unlike the women in the novel who are enslaved by the structure of patriarchy, the vegetation is unimpeded. The wild growth represents a variety of directions that Edna’s life might take if she were not being pruned to become a Creole wife and mother. As the two women journey to the beach, orange and lemon trees, yellow chamomile, vegetable gardens, and a lush green landscape surround them. All of this vegetation signifies a boundless area or view that does not strangle the female protagonist and her guide. The description is paradisiacal, since like Adam and Eve, the

two women are surrounded by vast beauty that is plentiful and in full bloom. The narrator recounts, "Edna had prevailed upon Madame Ratignolle to leave the children behind, though she could not induce her to relinquish a diminutive roll of needlework, which Adele begged to be allowed to slip into the depths of her pocket. In some unaccountable way they had escaped from Robert" (15) as well. In this passage, Chopin links men and children in the burden that is placed on women because it is the men who initiate or establish the roles and rules, but it is inadvertently the children who force their mothers to remain shackled as a result of their responsibility.

During this discussion, Edna reverts back to her childhood and recalls walking through a green meadow that had no boundaries to restrict the hopes of the young girl. According to Judith Fryer's discussion of the process behind Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," "an imaginative state [is created] in which she is at the center of a space rippling out to a seemingly infinite vastness, a space associated, in memory, with childhood freedom" (5). In the context of *The Awakening*, Edna's childhood resembles Woolf's process only when she is in the vast space of the meadow, which is an escape from the male-dominated spaces and thought processes that her father and religion occupy. This meadow "seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl" who quite possibly "was running away from prayers, [and] the Presbyterian service, [which was] read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of" (Chopin 17). Unfortunately, Edna is still running from these aspects of her life: religion, rules, and her father. Each of these elements require structure in order to function, but they are in contrast to the freedom of the meadow, ocean, sky, trees, and gardens that allow Edna space to define herself. The reference to Edna's father could very well be a reference to

all men since Léonce now controls part of the “gloom” in Edna’s life, attempting to dictate his own orders and cultural expectations.

It is during this brief escape with Adele that the protagonist “becomes aware, in the first place, of her need for freedom; she desires the liberty to choose, to follow her own soul’s direction. In the second place, she wishes to be aware of these dictates of her soul, to make choices based upon what she discovers to be her own needs” (Lant 119).

Through her interaction with Adele and her communion with nature, Edna begins to awaken to the oppression that stifles women. Chopin introduces this momentary sense of freedom with the remarks about escaping Robert and the children, so it is fitting that Robert and the children march into their private meeting and force Edna to return to the reality of her burdens and ties. The choice of the word “escape” is revealing in this scene since someone usually attempts to escape from something that is ominous or harmful.

For Edna, Robert and the children are harmful because they infringe upon the life that she wants to lead by controlling the length of the escape scene and by barging into the tranquility that has been established. The scene represents a temporary freedom, “trapped” as it is between the departure and arrival of Robert and the children. At this point in the narrative, Chopin frames the scene, so that some of the freedom is removed, because it can only occur when Edna is alone with another woman as well as outdoors.

Adele would never view the interruption of her own life as a burden or intrusion as Edna does on the beach, indicating a major difference between the two. Adele has three children and is considering a fourth while the protagonist has two boys and will not have another. Edna does not have a daughter in *The Awakening*, so men surround her at all times in the house. By constantly removing herself from the home, Edna avoids the

unbalanced ratio and the further oppression that would occur in the male-dominated household. Edna's father is also a presence throughout the novel, but the only reference to her mother is that she died when Edna and her sisters were very young (Chopin 17). Therefore, even as a child she was dominated by her stern father who was employed as a colonel in the Confederate Army. Then she was passed from the army-like atmosphere of her father to her business-minded husband. The reader discovers that Edna has two sisters, but they are only briefly alluded to. Edna's younger sister is getting married, but she refuses to attend her sister's wedding, thus showing her further refusal to participate in an activity that she finds undesirable. Perhaps Edna does not attend the wedding because she feels that her sister is entering into a debilitating relationship where she will become a slave to her husband, and Edna does not want to be an accomplice in this act of subjugation. A stronger woman would have tried to warn her sister before the marriage, but Edna functions as an outsider, so it would not be characteristic of her to align herself with another human being, even her own sister.

Another example of the outdoors providing a sense of freedom and expression for Edna occurs early in the novel when Mr. Pontellier returns from Klein's Hotel, in an episode that is a further depiction of male dominance. After waking up his wife and accusing her of not realizing that Raoul has a fever, Mr. Pontellier falls asleep. However, his wife is now awake and ventures out to the porch where she releases her emotions, and "an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, [fills] her whole being with a vague anguish" (Chopin 8). This scene serves as an enlightening experience since Edna begins to recognize her oppression, and once again it is important to note that this occurs outside.

A later scene that also occurs on the porch proves much more revealing and shows the inner strength of Edna's character in relation to the demands of her husband. Léonce insists that his wife not remain on the porch due to the cold and the mosquitoes. Edna curtly responds that there are no mosquitoes and she has her shawl. After numerous pleas, she tells her husband to go to bed. She states, " 'I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you' " (Chopin 31). Edna gains strength from being outside of the home that her husband's financial status has made possible, and leaving the house foreshadows her departure from the Pontellier home in New Orleans, later in the novel. During the second porch scene, Edna is stretched out on the hammock and at two different intervals Léonce sits with his feet elevated. He is the only one who moves in the scene, showing his inability to dominate the situation. Edna Pontellier remains still and quiet, revealing her composure and confidence as she stands up to her husband. During this scene, she does not try to pass as a Creole woman, a nurturing mother, or devoted wife; Edna exercises a small amount of freedom by doing as she pleases in the feminine space outside of the Pontellier home.

The larger "journey" that Edna takes on the boat with Robert to Cheniere Caminada is also part of her "awakening" process. Robert once again functions as Edna's guide in her escape from the island. This scene also occurs outdoors, with the expansive sea and sky surrounding the boat as it flows through the water. She feels a sense of relief and release, "as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening- had snapped the night before...leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set sail" (Chopin 33). While they are on the boat, Mrs.

Pontellier is the only married woman, surrounded by the young lovers, the lady in black, Robert, old Monsieur Farival, Beaudalet, and Mariequita. These individuals are not members of the upper class that the Pontellier's inhabit, so Edna experiences some of her freedom with members of the lower class. In fact, there are two key scenes (at Madame Antoine's cottage and the mulatresse's garden) that find the protagonist being helped by women of mixed blood, exploring the need for black, white, and mixed women to provide support for one another in their struggle against the patriarchy.

The opportunity for movement is crucial for Edna's eventual freedom, and this is experienced on the boat as well as on foot. Edna is trapped when she is forced to stay in one place, be it on the island or in New Orleans, but with each trip away from these confining atmospheres, she is able to exert her freedom and let the wind dictate her movement as it does the sails on a ship. Most of the passengers on the boat are traveling to attend mass, but Edna feels confined in the "stifling atmosphere of the church" (Chopin 35). Once again being indoors represents suffocation for the main character, so she rushes out into the freedom of the outdoor air. More specifically, she feels stifled in a church, which represents the patriarchal ties of Christianity as well as her father's strict influence. When Robert takes her to Madame Antoine's cottage, she is removed not only from the island but also from the upper class surroundings that engulf the novel. The defined gender roles that are adhered to on the island and in New Orleans are also abandoned in this small village, because after her long sleep, the typical roles are reversed as Robert cooks and serves Edna. Robert "stirred the smoldering ashes till the broiled fowl began to sizzle afresh. He served her with no mean repast, dripping the coffee anew and sharing it with her" (Chopin 37). A female normally attends to the

cooking and serving, more importantly a female maid or servant, so Robert is depicted outside of his usual role as a commanding male. Edna generates strength in her relationship with Robert partly because he is so much younger than her, creating a different relationship than that with an older man like her husband. This holds significance for *The Awakening* because Edna is able to subtly reverse some of the stereotypes that bind women to their roles.

A significant change in setting occurs when the Pontellier's leave Grand Isle at the end of the summer and return home to New Orleans. However, this relocation only propels Edna's race for the independence of self-definition, because after returning to New Orleans, she refuses to fulfill her obligations by being trapped in her home to entertain the high society women each week. Hence, she is clearly rebelling against the Creole way that Adele adheres to. Edna challenges the role that has been established for women because she does not want to show off her husband's home and its expensive treasures. She does not wish to be part of his ornamental collection of possessions that are on display, because after being on Grand Isle Edna wants to be her own person. According to the narrator, "She [Edna] began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked. She completely abandoned her Tuesdays at home, and did not return the visits of those who had called upon her. She made no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household en bonne menagerem (as a good housewife) going and coming as it suited her fancy" (54). Obviously Edna's behavior defies that of the proper Creole wife. Mary L. Shaffter recalls that "as wives, Creole women are without superiors; loving and true, they seldom figure in domestic squabbles" (138). Their home should essentially be the most important aspect of their life. However, Edna engages in numerous domestic squabbles

with her husband as well as affairs with Robert Lebrun and Arobin, once again fighting against the established role for a Creole woman, or any woman of the time. Faithfulness in marriage is expected in a relationship, especially from the female partner, and this virtue is embodied in Adele's relationship with her husband.

After returning from Grand Isle, Edna makes many trips to visit Mademoiselle Reisz in her apartment. The journey by foot exposes Edna Pontellier to members of a variety of economic classes, but it is also her choice to walk so she is not restricted to a carriage, the proper way to travel. Her association with Mademoiselle Reisz illustrates that Edna does not need to remain around the upper class at all times in order to feel important. In fact, it is the upper class that causes her to conform to numerous rules that she abhors.

Mademoiselle Reisz is another guide for Edna on her journey, representing the opposite mentality of Adele. This woman is not married and has no children, but she is an artist. Mademoiselle Reisz is free to commit her life to music because she is not confined by the role of mother or wife, like Adele Ratignolle. The lifestyle of Mademoiselle Reisz appeals to Edna more than that of Adele, but Edna refuses to devote her life to art. The difference rests in the fact that "Adele is a 'faultless Madonna' who speaks for the values and laws of the Creole community, [but] Mademoiselle Reisz is a renegade, self-assertive and outspoken. She has no patience with petty social rules and violates the most basic expectations of femininity" (75). Edna is not a complete rebel like Mademoiselle Reisz, but she does begin to mount an attack each time she travels from the confines of her home.

Consequently, the only indoor dwelling that Edna Pontellier finds comfortable is Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment. It houses a variety of windows which are usually open

so that the outdoors is able to mingle with the inner workings of the apartment, causing Edna not to feel confined or stifled inside the established structure. It is through the companionship and presence of Mademoiselle Reisz that Edna comes to the conclusion that she must move into the "pigeon house" since it will afford her "the feeling of freedom and independence" (Chopin 76) to explore her femininity. In fact, Edna Pontellier "had resolved never again to belong to another human being" (Chopin 76), thereby refusing to be a slave to her children, her husband, or her art. It is significant that this realization occurs with another woman and not a man, highlighting the importance of a female guide. Just as her outdoor meeting with Adele began to awaken her, her boat trip with Robert added to the process, and the porch duels with Léonce heralded Edna as a fighter, so the rebellious attitude drawn out by Mademoiselle Reisz continues the process towards self-conceptualization in her natural domicile.

Another example of Edna's inner debate as well as her travel can be seen when Dr. Mandelet observes her "walking along Canal Street" (Chopin 62). Andrew Delbanco believes that "she walks suspended between a leisured culture that is dying and a business culture that is thriving" (94). Delbanco's imagery further extends her ability to perch on the outskirts of two possibilities, representing two extremely different worlds. Edna vacillates between entering the space of the business world, when she sells her sketches, and remaining in the upper class leisure, like a beautiful artifact inside her luxurious home. Upper class women during the nineteenth century were supposed to display their husband's wealth, but now Edna is embarking on a business to sustain her own needs. Subsequently, as a result of her ability to make money she can escape from being merely a pawn in the patriarchal business world. When Edna considers joining the male sphere

of commerce, once again she refuses to assimilate. Instead, what she gains through these experiences is not acceptance by others, but assertion of her demands and desires, thereby revealing the partial success of her inner journey.

Another example of her achievement towards self-definition occurs when Léonce leaves for New York, and his wife once again journeys outdoors and remains in the garden. The symbolic life-giving nature of a garden is analogous to women's ability to procreate. Here Edna is in an open space, where she is able to experience freedom from the constraints that she is forced to live under. This short departure from the house once again foreshadows her permanent departure from her husband's home and life. Edna also creates a physical void when she moves out of her husband's house. She has mentally resigned herself from being her husband's puppet, but she is still physically and monetarily in his home. A pigeon is normally housed in an enclosed space (coop) which makes it impossible to freely fly; therefore, the name of this house does not appear to liberate Edna Pontellier. On the other hand, the pigeon house, like the Woman's Building at the Chicago Fair, is decorated and bought by a woman. The contents of the home are purchased by Edna, as is the home, so she no longer has to rely on her husband for financial support.

Following Léonce's trip to New York, another pivotal scene occurs in the garden of a woman who represents a mixture of white and black ancestry, emphasizing Edna's similarity to these women who are supposedly beneath her. Chopin declares that "there was a garden out in the suburbs; a small leafy corner, with a few green tables under the orange trees" (99). She must pass through a gate or threshold to enter this feminine space that is operated by a woman. The orange trees towering above the tables serve as a

canopy for the garden, but the emphasis is on the life-giving green vegetation that invigorates and relaxes Edna. It is here that she finds comfort as well as strength when Robert enters her feminine space. The mulatresse is known for her milk, which is a life-giving and life-affirming resource that is created and released by a mother, so perhaps this women functions as a mother figure for Edna by strengthening her for battle. There is a small conflict in the garden between Edna and Robert, so the protagonist relies on her surroundings and the mulatresse's nourishment to fight Robert.

Edna's first words in the garden are emitted in the form of a question to Robert. In fact, many of her statements are questions, causing her to exhibit an aggressive behavior. Edna implies that she is "what you would call unwomanly; but [she points out that] I have got into a habit of expressing myself" (Chopin 100). It is evidenced by this quotation that women are not supposed to express themselves, since men do it for them. Edna is aware that she does not possess the characteristics that her gender is supposed to espouse, and once again she realizes and verbalizes her idea in a feminine space: the garden. This is the final significant female that Edna meets, and it is the mulatresse who provides another piece to her identity, thus functioning as another guide along her journey. Edna frequents the garden on her "perambulations" (Chopin 100); therefore, this is a place that she returns to for rejuvenation. The limitations of the Pontellier home can be contrasted with the freedom the outdoors represents, including freedom of expression.

Another example of potential freedom throughout *The Awakening* is Chopin's use of bird imagery to parallel Edna's progress and thought process. Like Edna, birds make various flights or journeys throughout their lifetime, inhabiting different types of space as

they travel, but nevertheless being able to traverse the limitless sky. During a conversation with Arobin, Edna comments: "She [Mademoiselle Reisz] put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. 'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth'" (79). These lines hold the key to Chopin's novel and to Edna's latent ability to become this bird that is able to soar above patriarchal discrimination. The bird soaring would be in motion, on her way to something or someone, but the falling bird cannot control what happens to her body and is trapped in a devastating situation. In response to Mademoiselle Reisz's allusion, Edna tells Arobin that she "only half comprehended her" (Chopin 79). At this juncture in her life, Edna cannot understand the full ramifications of Mademoiselle Reisz's vision because her wings are not strong enough. Edna is building the strength in her wings throughout the novel, but before she can realize her full potential she drowns in the inviting and sensuous sea.

Chopin repeats her use of bird imagery in the final scene of the novel where Edna sees "a bird with a broken wing...beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling, disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin 108). The bird symbolizes Edna's physical descent from the living to the dead as well as confirming Mademoiselle Reisz's analogy of the "bruised, exhausted [bird] fluttering back to earth" (Chopin 79). Therefore, the ambiguous ending of Chopin's novel can have both negative and positive readings. Earlier in the novel Mademoiselle Reisz warns Edna about the destruction of the weak bird, but now the bird, like Edna, tumbles toward destruction, seemingly subverting any freedom Edna gained.

The last scene in the novel focuses on Edna and the vast sea. As she approaches “the water of the Gulf stretched out before her...believing that it had no beginning and no end” (Chopin 108-109). The expansiveness of the sea allows Edna the freedom to express herself because it does not attempt to control her. Instead, the sea stands as an open space that is inviting and not threatening. For the first time in the novel, Edna is not relying on another man or woman, but on her own will to decide. According to the narrator’s observation, “the voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in the abyss of solitude” (Chopin 108). None of the adjectives that Chopin chooses for the sea are overpowering; therefore, in it Edna can exist without being oppressed. Chopin does not end her novel by claiming that harsh waves crashed over Edna’s helpless body, but she ends with her conquering “the old terror that flamed up for an instance, then sank again” (109). Once again the terror or feeling that she could not describe on the porch has returned, but this time Edna is prepared.

Kate Chopin does not attempt to provide her readers or critics with an answer to the problems that faced women in the late nineteenth century, but she makes it clear that their diminutive roles should not simply be accepted. According to Elaine Showalter, “*The Awakening* is a novel about a process rather than a program, about a passage rather than a destination” (73), thus suggesting not a solid solution to the oppression of women, but a possible way to achieve a solution in the coming years. One possibility Chopin holds out is that by interacting with others who function as guides, women will begin to recognize their options. Edna is able to explore herself and the space that surrounds her by being led on a quest, determining her own sense of freedom as a result of the motion she

engages in. All Chopin could do was raise these controversial issues because the late nineteenth century did not offer the opportunity to rescue Edna or other women from their suicidal tendencies. Although this bold step was taken, Chopin suffered immensely in her struggle to empower women with choices, but she raised the issue of the need for feminine space and travel if women are to be liberated from the confines of patriarchy.

Chapter 3

He led her through the throng of returning holiday makers, past sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats, and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans. Was it possible that she belonged to the same race? The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was.

A rapid shower had cooled the air, and clouds still hung refreshingly over the moist street.

"How delicious! Let us walk a little," she said as they emerged from the station.

They turned into Madison Avenue and began to stroll northward. As she moved beside him, with her long light step, Selden was conscious of taking a luxurious pleasure in her nearness: in the modeling of her little ear, the crisp upward wave of her hair—was it ever so slightly brightened by art? — and the thick planting of her straight black lashes....He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. (Wharton 6-7)

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* presents the reader with the beautiful character of Lily Bart, who shines like a moonbeam of concentrated light in contrast to the darkness and dinginess of the common people on the street. In the scene above, Lily Bart has just descended from the train, an invention that allows individuals to travel between destinations of great distances, indicating an example of Wharton's concern with travel and space. As the novel opens, Selden spies the beautiful object standing stationary as he approaches, but the two quickly depart from the train station and journey to a quieter place for tea and refreshments. Their journey by foot indoctrinates the reader into a

series of journeys that shape *The House of Mirth*. Even though Lily is outside she feels claustrophobic due to the intense heat and the numerous people in the busy city. She does not “know a soul in town” (Wharton 6), so Selden appears as her knight in shining armor to lead her on an “adventure” (Wharton 6) into the peaceful atmosphere of his flat at *The Benedick*. Thus, the use of guides can be seen as a tool that Wharton employs, following Chopin’s dependence on guides in *The Awakening*. Her pleasure with the accoutrements that Selden’s flat offers foreshadows a break from her own affluent class, which becomes the downward spiral through the class structure that the novel depicts.

The House of Mirth, published in 1905, follows Chopin’s *The Awakening*, and can be seen as another attempt to challenge the patriarchal system. Edith Wharton, like Kate Chopin, was not involved in any of the feminist movements of the day; she was not an activist because she was a member of the upper class, unwilling to become involved with those representing the lower class. Ironically, however, Wharton has her female protagonist mingle and then live with the lower class. This class distinction is a major reason that women remained oppressed for so long. They were unable to band together, regardless of race and class, early in women’s efforts to gain rights, and this is reflected in all three novels as women with money separate themselves from those without monetary gains. Yet, Wharton did believe that “the position of women in American society was the critical issue of the new century” (Ammons 3). In fact, Wharton thought that women should be able to write about science, history, and politics, so she supported George Eliot’s desire to incorporate science into her fiction. Science was considered a male world, so women were once again infringing on the sphere that men dominated. Wharton’s own novel, *The House of Mirth*, also allows women to enter the male sphere

of business that is normally strictly dominated by men, causing women to be dependent. Both Chopin and Wharton end their novels with their female protagonist committing suicide, suggesting that they are unable to find a suitable escape for their heroines, but they are able to begin to offer possibilities for women throughout their respective novels.

Women were treated like objects in the nineteenth century and Wharton makes this very clear in the opening of her novel. When Selden is walking with Lily Bart, "he [has] a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her" (Wharton 7). This is not the way that a person is usually described, but the way in which an object is described, thus supporting the notion that women were objects of possession for their male counterparts. These men determine and control the rules of society, which are reflected in the spaces women are allowed to occupy. John Berger claims that space and self are interconnected: "To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such limited space" (qtd. in Fryer 98). Therefore, from birth women are forced into a particularly confining space, robbing them of any choice. Women were controlled so much so that they were not permitted to think for themselves, so men controlled their bodies, their actions, and their minds, leaving little space for exploration.

The roles available for women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries only furthered women's confinement and dependence; however, Lily Bart skillfully evades these classifications that restricted most women. She cannot be defined as mother, wife, or housekeeper. It is this lack of definition that saves her from succumbing

to the patriarchal roles that have been established, but it also proves dangerous since she is unable to define herself outside of her physical attractiveness. Wharton does offer the roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper to Lily in the form of other female characters who function as guides or models, but by rejecting these roles Lily is able to begin to uncover her own identity and move beyond the restrictions of class, entering a world that contains possibility.

According to John Clubbe, "only in fantasy can she [Lily Bart] make herself into a queen of infinite space, and in fantasy she prefers to dwell. For this reason Lily is always restless, always moving, unable to live in a house, anyone's house, for very long" (543). Perhaps the reason Lily is so restless does not have to do with fantasy but rather with the notion that she understands reality too much, realizing that she cannot be free in her current position. She cannot proclaim ownership over her own space because she lives under the control of others: first in her aunt's home, then at the Trenor's at Bellomont, on the Dorset's yacht, and in Mrs. Hatches' drawing room. Ms. Bart cannot define her own space, because she is restricted by the society she wants to enter. Thus, she is not a dreamer; she resides in the harsh reality of the upper class society that defines its members by their financial means, style of dress, and luxurious entertainment. In order for Lily to escape from this lifestyle that imprisons her as well as other women, she must descend the social ladder and remain in motion throughout the novel. If she inhabits one residence for too long, she will remain trapped forever in a harsh world that only recognizes her beauty, continuing her commodification.

Through traveling, Lily gains freedom, but this occurs when she travels to places that are outside the confines of the homes and wealthy spaces that her class occupies. For

example, Lily travels to gardens or the outdoors, to the apartments of lower class women, and abroad in order to escape the affluence of New York life. Shirley Ardener states that "The environment imposes certain restraints on our mobility, and, in turn, our perceptions of space are shaped by our capacity to move about, whether by foot, or by mechanical or other transport" (12). If this thought process is applied to Lily, her environment, more specifically the wealthy atmosphere that she associates with, oppresses her mobility. The journeys she takes can be classified as moving from hostile space to nurturing or supportive space. She has little freedom, "because social bonding is for Lily physical bonding...all spaces available to her are prisonlike" (Fryer 92). Lily must escape her prison and it is through numerous journeys that she accomplishes this, leaving the affluent society that never accepted her and entering the outdoors which can be deemed a feminine space, a space where she becomes genuine instead of a fragile porcelain doll.

The class that she enters upon reaching each level of the hierarchical design can also categorize Lily's journeys. As the level of society declines so does the amount of space available to Wharton's heroine, building a connection between the trope of travel and the trope of space. However, it does not matter that Lily cannot afford to inhabit and control a large space because it is not the amount of space that becomes important but the fact that she can have her own space. From the beginning of *The House of Mirth* the protagonist longs to have her own flat, a space that she can decorate, own, and control. While visiting Selden's flat she exclaims, "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self" (Wharton 8). The fact that this is Selden's flat is appealing to Lily since her every movement is controlled by her aunt or her class status. By living on her own, in her own space, Lily would be able to exercise more control over her own life.

As Lily descends through society she is not afforded the opportunity to live on her own, hence she can never adapt to her new surrounding, forcing her to continue to move through time and space in order to survive. As she plunges down the social ladder, the space she can occupy is smaller but it affords her more freedom due to the lack of money required as well as the limited amount of obligations. Mrs. Hatch's world greatly contrasts that of the upper class where Ms. Bart is perched for most of her young life. For example, "Mrs. Hatch and her friends seemed to float together outside the bounds of time and space. No definite hours were kept; no fixed obligations existed: night and day flowed into one another in a blur of confused and retarded engagements" (Wharton 214). Time and space are two aspects of the upper class life that create slaves of its members, chaining them to obligations of politeness and perfection in performing the most mundane activities, or traveling during the summer months. The vast amount of space owned by the upper class is falsified by the illusion of happiness that money cannot purchase, exhibiting the appearance of freedom. Judith Fryer notes that, "In the world in which Lily moves, space is money, and more space means less human contact" (91). The Dorset's and the Trenor's, the wealthiest couples in *The House of Mirth* according to monetary standards, are actually the poorest when it comes to companionship. They are involved in affairs and lack communication with their significant other. In actuality, when Lily is the poorest and has the least bit of space to move in, but it is her own space, she is momentarily free, though on the edge of poverty and despair.

In order to travel from class to class, Lily looks for guides and models who represent a specific lifestyle she can mimic. Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor symbolize the women Lily Bart's mother would have associated with had she lived, but, nevertheless, they are

the first guides that attempt to indoctrinate Lily into an affluent lifestyle. To follow their lifestyle Lily must become a prima dona married to a rich man who will protect and support her. They do not necessarily guide Lily because they are too absorbed in their own affairs, but they do serve as the model upper class women she desperately tries to emulate. Another model for Lily is Nettie Struther, a mother and wife who battles back from death and desperation, living in conditions unfit for a human being. However, she creates a friendly home with a warm kitchen; therefore, she ascends the social scale from a pariah to a respectable working class woman. A second female character works as a liaison between the social classes, traveling between different levels of society functioning as a legitimate guide for Lily: Carry Fisher. Carry herself is not a member of the upper class, but her job forces her to freely move up and down the social ladder. The final female guide for Lily is her cousin, Gerty Farish, a social worker selflessly giving of herself to women who are less fortunate. Gerty provides her cousin with support so she ministers to the needy upper class woman just as she would one of her social cases. Lily's only male guide is Selden, a gentleman who attempts to rescue her at numerous times in Wharton's novel by bringing the beautiful woman outdoors, but he is ambiguous in his role as guide since he also is a member of the established patriarchy.

Women like Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor are puppets who dress in the latest fashions to display their husband's affluence. These women pride themselves on their homes, trinkets, entertainment, and food, but they are actually parading themselves around like mannequins selling an item. Lily has an opportunity to enjoy membership in this club, but she would have to marry Simon Rosedale, a man she does not love. In fact, Rosedale would like his wife "to make all of the other women look small" (Wharton

139), and the only way this can be achieved is if Rosedale's wife wears better clothes and more jewels than the other wives, restricting her to even less space because it will be controlled by Rosedale. According to Elizabeth Ammons, a woman "is human chattel with an ornamental function, the prized domestic trophy whose leisure, dependence, and expenditure evidence her husband's financial prowess" (29). These rich women are no different from slaves, though their treatment is not comparable, the principle remains the same. Women are working for men, whether it is as African slaves or white upper class women. All of these women carry the same burden as they travel from mansion to mansion, but they are unaware of that fact. Instead, they battle with each other to maintain their position at the top of the social structure, peering down like vultures at the struggling women and men who fight to become upwardly mobile. These rich women represent stasis because they are not mobile; they are trapped in a confining space regulated by their husbands. Of course, they travel to their summer homes and make journeys on yachts, but the type of space they occupy does not change, so they represent lateral movement if any at all.

The spaces that Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor travel to and from are also not their own, but their husband's possession. According to Carol Wershoven, "money and rank meant only imprisonment in an exclusive cage where the main topics of conversation were food, fashion, and good form, where one's day was filled with visiting, dining, and gossip about the select few in one's set" (17). The upper class women of this novel are equivalent to the jewelry, furniture, sculptures, vases, and floral arrangements put on display in each home to flaunt the wealth of a particular space. Tragically, the upper

class women become a space in and of themselves because they have an established pedestal in their husband's homes.

The commodification of women within the patriarchal social structure is not the only obstacle Lily must face when she inhabits space on the highest rung of the ladder. Her second battle is with the other women who occupy the space on top. Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset are jealous of Lily's beauty, so they try to further oppress her through foulplay. Judy Trenor helps Lily maintain her position early in the novel, but there is a price she must pay. Early in the morning, Lily must rise and attend to Judy Trenor's correspondence, which "suddenly recalled her state of dependence" (Wharton 34). These women also spread lies about Lily and turn their backs on her, thus initiating a causal chain of descent for the beautiful heroine.

However, they are not the only women in *The House of Mirth* who rob Lily of opportunity. Her own aunt, also a member of the upper class, undercuts her niece when she slices Lily out of her will. The inheritance money would have saved Lily, but then she would be trapped in the same patriarchal space of Judy Trenor and Bertha Dorset, requiring her to find a husband. The charwoman, one of the lowest women in terms of class in Wharton's novel, challenges Ms. Bart's status through her discovery of the love letters to Selden; therefore, involving each class in the cut throat survival, which significantly decreases Lily's ability to enter spaces defined by class. This becomes significant since Lily will visit each class on her journey down the social ladder and experience some of the same treatment. Ammons supports the idea of female survival by stating that women are, "forbidden to aggress on each other directly, or aggress on men at all, [so] women prey on each other – stealing reputations, opportunities, male admirers –

all to parlay or retain status and financial security in a world arranged by men to keep women supplicant and therefore subordinate" (39). All of this ill behavior occurs because of the masculine need to oppress women in a particular space. By keeping the women static and divided by financial means, they are at the mercy of the men in their lives or the rich men who arrange the system. Thus, the women are pitted against one another justifying their use of animosity.

Upper class women like Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor are not the only models that Wharton demonstrates as being available to women. Carry Fisher, Nettie Struther, and Gerty Farish are also the other women in *The House of Mirth* who help the protagonist, as well as other women, survive. Although none of these women are members of the upper class, they are able to move in society and function on numerous levels, which suggests a positive way for Lily to exist. Carry, Nettie, and Gerty do not have to claw their way to the top and continue to be ruthless in order to maintain the static position of Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor. The women in the lower classes have to work to make money so that they can live, but the upper class women also have to work in order to maintain their illusion of power.

Carry Fisher offers Lily the role of devoted mother as well as social organizer for couples attempting to bridge the gap between the middle and upper class. Even though Carry is not a member of the upper class herself, she is free to travel between classes, mansions, yachts, and countries, introducing spaciousness into her life. Her constant movement does not allow her to remain trapped in one space for too long, suggesting the option for Lily to travel between classes instead of remaining stationary in the upper class. It is Carry who enables Lily to work for Mrs. Hatch as well as in the millinery,

attempting to create a favorable situation as well as a profitable space for the main character to enter.

Gerty Farish, Lily's cousin, has her own flat which corresponds to her own space. Although Gerty has the distinct opportunity to inhabit her own flat, Lily describes the flat as a small confined area. Early in *The House of Mirth*, she claims that Gerty's flat is "a horrid little place" (Wharton 8), proclaiming her affinity to the upper class; however, it is to Gerty that Lily turns when she is in trouble, regardless of the small flat. After Gus Trenor attempts to rape Lily, it is to the protective arms of Gerty that she travels. Following the hostility of Gus Trenor, Lily is held and stroked like a child by Gerty. Consequently, Gerty becomes a mother figure for Lily by supporting and nurturing Wharton's protagonist. This nurturing atmosphere that is established in a humble space sustains Lily, and is outside of masculine space since Gerty is not married, dating, or attached to any male in *The House of Mirth*. On the other hand, Gerty is not satisfied with her life because she yearns for a relationship with Selden, thereby illustrating an ambiguity even in this positive role model's life.

Nettie Struther presents the final example of a positive female in Lily's life. It is Nettie who holds the position of dutiful wife and nurturing mother, while belonging to the working class. Nettie resides in a tenement that is "extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean" (Wharton 244). Since Lily does not marry, the role of wife is not applied to her and similarly she is not defined as a mother. Nettie comforts Lily when she finds her sitting on a bench, disoriented. She has recently lost her job at the millinery, so she relies on a journey to escape another hostile and hopeless situation. The two women walk together to Nettie's apartment where they enter the feminine space of the kitchen.

Just like Gerty's flat, the kitchen provides the warmth and comfort that is missing in the protagonist's life. Although both the spaces are dreadfully small and plain, rejecting the numerous acres and rooms that the upper class boasts of, they represent a sense of happiness and comfort for each female character.

These three women, like Lily, are outsiders in this world where money is the means to power and security, so they are unable to inhabit the same space that the rich maintain. Nettie Struther, Carrie Fisher, and Gerty Farish do not expect any compensation for their help, but the women of the upper class demand it. Even in the upper class, Lily Bart is not free to do as she pleases. In fact, as she drops out of the wealthy class she escapes from some of the dependence that is required of her only to face dependence on herself to survive. Therefore, after hardships Lily journeys to one of these three women for guidance, companionship, or support, leaving a hostile space in favor of the comforting space that the three women represent.

Even though all women in the novel fight against the existing power structure, the major problem lies with the women in the upper classes who cannot understand how valuable it is for all women to join together in their battle with the opposite sex. Lily realizes that women of different classes must struggle together because, "she had been long enough in bondage to other people's pleasure to be considerate of those who depended on hers, and in her bitter moods it sometimes struck her that she and her maid were in the same position, except that the latter received her wages more regularly" (Wharton 24). Wharton's word choice is significant here since bondage recalls the horrors of African slavery and that is what Wharton attempts to compare Lily's struggle to. Slaves had no space to identify with since all that was provided by their masters was a

disheveled shack, usually unfit for human occupation. The area in which the slaves were allowed to move was strictly controlled, creating a further correlation between women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and slaves.

Another significant connection between Lily Bart and slaves occurs during the tableau vivant scene when Lily places herself on display so everyone can inspect the curves of her body, keeping nothing secretive. It is as if Lily places herself on the auction block, allowing others to ogle her. The men are enthralled with Lily's portrait and her own male cousin comments on her body. When African slaves were placed on the auction block their bodies were ogled, poked, and prodded for strength, endurance, and child bearing potential. Just as black women are encouraged to produce children for introduction into the world of slavery, white women who give birth to baby girls create another person to display their husband's wealth and perpetuate the upper class's reign in the prison-like space. Although no one touches Lily as she performs, she is looked at by her "masters," the upper class men, in the same way that the white slave owners and masters inspected their maids, servants, and field hands. Therefore, just like a slave, the amount of space Lily is afforded is restricted. After all, she is on the same auction block that tore families apart. Lily can also be compared with the portraits that grace the walls of the upper class homes, restricting her once again to masculine controlled space.

On the other hand, it is important to note the background of Lily Bart's portrait, suggesting a natural space instead of a confining one. When she poses for the tableau vivant, the backdrop is enveloped with foliage. Ms. Bart "had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings" (Wharton 106) in order to showcase her physical attributes. Although Lily is the focus of this portrait it is

significant that it is only in nature that she portrays herself as “the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world” (Wharton 106). She has been removed from the confines of the rich homes and is able to be herself in the outdoors. Therefore, Lily’s placement in the tableau can be interpreted as either freeing due to nature or imprisoning because of her slave-like resemblance.

The equation of nature with freedom is a reoccurring theme in *The House of Mirth*, affording Wharton’s female protagonist an opportunity to explore spaces that are not bound by the patriarchal laws of the upper class. There are numerous scenes in *The House of Mirth* that present Lily in a garden or garden-like atmosphere, which reflects her beauty as well as allowing the attractive heroine to venture outside the confines of the homes and mansions of the rich, thus linking space and travel once again. Edith Wharton was extremely devoted to her own garden and she viewed it as “her conscious attempt always to arrest the chaos around her by conquering, dominating, planting, cultivating space, the ground, the earth – herself not the lady in the landscape, but the gardener, the landscape architect” (Fryer 170). The verbs that Wharton uses to describe her gardening are reminiscent of the terminology used in colonial expansion, which was patriarchal in nature. The British viewed other lands as objects to conquer, dominate, and cultivate, but this is the same way that men viewed their relationships with women. The power to control a particular space or person is what makes an individual powerful, so Wharton transposes this power onto her role in the garden. She was the architect or creator of a defined area, but this also can be read generically as women creating ideas or relationships once they have the ability to escape their economic status as possessions.

Wharton places Lily in numerous gardens or outside spaces where she finds peace. In the garden at Bellomont, Lily separates herself from her opulent circle, viewing the “warm tints of the garden. Beyond the lawn, with its pyramidal pale-gold maples and velvety firs, sloped pastures dotted with cattle; and through a long glade the river widened like a lake under the silver night of September” (Wharton 40). This is a setting that is repeated throughout *The House of Mirth*: Lily is immersed in a “tranquil scene” (40) in nature and removed from the wealthy. Unlike the particular descriptions of elegance at Bellomont, the landscape surrounding Lily is flowing and natural. There is nothing controlled, fake, or manufactured. The cattle are not in a straight line; instead they are free to roam the countryside, just like the river that overflows into the lake. These exemplify the freedom apparent within nature.

While walking through nature, Lily and Selden leave the confining space of Bellomont in order to escape society. It is by the hand of Selden that Lily is guided down the path and away from the ostentatious residence. The two stroll down a “path [that] wound across a meadow with scattered trees; then it dipped into a lane plummed with asters and purpling sprays of bramble, whence, through the light quiver of ash-leaves, the country unrolled itself in pastoral distances” (Wharton 51). By leaving Bellomont and its trivial luxuries behind, Lily and Selden journey to a place where “the landscape outspread below her seemed an enlargement of her present mood, and she found something of herself in its calmness, its breadth, its long free reaches” (Wharton 51). She does not have to worry about hiding her financial situation or performing the proper ritual tea pouring while in the woods. After the climb up the path Lily struggles within herself because “at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and

exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive's gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them; the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight" (Wharton 52). It is this "flight" that equates the protagonist with a bird, but it is also an inner journey that is only possible in the natural world. Lily and Selden enter a dreamlike atmosphere that elevates them as they share a philosophical discussion. They talk of freedom, which is quite appropriate since Lily is feeling such a sense of lightness and freedom in the autumn air. She can be viewed as the focal point in another tableau, subjugating her to a passive object of art, or this scene can garner strength for the protagonist by exhibiting her ability to engage her mind in conversation with Selden, instead of just being an admired object of beauty.

After the tableau vivant, Selden again guides Lily into the outdoors. While leaving the indoor space, "Selden had given her his arm without speaking...and they moved away...till they passed through a glass doorway at the end of the long suite of rooms and stood suddenly in the fragrant garden" (Wharton 108). The doorway functions as a threshold between the stifling celebration inside and the liberating beauty outside, allowing an escape by traveling away from an uncomfortable situation. One of the guests expresses his dislike "When people crowd their rooms so that you can't get near any one you want to speak to" (Wharton 109). Thus, suggesting the appeal of the outdoor garden. Wharton expertly juxtaposes the large number of people inside to the lone couple sharing a private moment outside. It is in the silence of the outdoors that Selden and Lily exchange a kiss in the "magic place [that] was deserted" (Wharton 108). Lily leaves an

unpleasant and false atmosphere in order to immerse herself in a natural portrait of perfection.

Unfortunately, Lily is not always associated with positive images from Wharton's garden since she is described as "some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud has been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty" (Fryer 86). Here Lily Bart becomes an "exhibition," used by others to maintain their stature, so she is trapped in a prison and unable to move because she has been pruned to mere perfection. It is only by traveling outside the confines of New York society represented by the homes and individuals that occupy positions of power that Lily can enjoy an occasional sense of freedom in the garden.

Lily Bart is the outsider in Wharton's novel from the beginning because she cannot afford to maintain her position in affluent New York society. For Wharton, New York itself functions as a space that constrains her female protagonist because of the economic burdens and the debt she owes Gus Trenor. Lily is able to escape on the Dorset's yacht, which itself is still confining since it is associated with the high society of New York, but "the Dorset's invitation to go abroad with them had come as an almost miraculous release from crushing difficulties...[making] mere change from one place to another seem, not merely a postponement, but a solution of her troubles" (Wharton 153). Lily's journey away from New York allows her to escape but also to be connected with the ocean, a feminine space due to the water. Lily enjoys a brief rebirth on the water, but is quickly forced back to the shackles of life in New York. Being abroad in foreign countries introduces her to new spaces that are not governed by the economic market of the United States, affording her a short-lived freedom.

Lily Bart's final stop on her travels finds her working at the millinery and living in a room at a boarding house. Women of her social status would never participate in these lower class actions, but Lily is forced to detach herself from the upper class in order to experience a life of independence from men, family, and society after a journey through space. Lily is miserable and poor, but she is not dependent on anyone or any societal structure but her own. It was the dependence on her rich friends that created her troubles earlier in the novel, but at the end of the novel Lily attempts to support herself and carefully budget her money.

Lily takes a room in a working class boarding house, but she takes the hall room, which is the "smallest, cheapest room...formed by partitioning off the end of the hallway" (Wharton 224). In this narrow room, with shabby paint and blotchy wallpaper Lily lives out her remaining days in solitude. This small space that is Lily's recalls Gerty's flat and Nettie's kitchen, but no matter how small the space, it is her own. She can afford only a small residence because she is working to pay for the room herself. In contrast, her bedroom at Bellomont, the Trenor's home, contains "softly-shaded lights, her lace dressing-gown lying across the silken bedspread, her little embroidered slippers before the fire, a vase of carnations filling the air with perfume, and the last novels and magazines lying uncut on a table beside the reading-lamp" (Wharton 34). None of these luxurious items inhabit the small space Lily now calls home, suggesting her complete withdrawal from the upper class lifestyle as well as her inability to afford entrance into that world. The juxtaposition of these two spaces presents the area that Lily begins with as well as the atmosphere she ends in, framing the character of Lily Bart in two different extremes.

By descending the class ladder, Lily is exposed to a variety of spaces that allow her different amounts of freedom. She no longer has to follow the strict code of the upper class, using her body as a commodity, wearing the proper clothes, or having a certain amount of money to participate in gambling or other activities. It is only after Lily leaves the confines of the upper class that she begins to understand how oppressive her life was. Wharton uses a variety of guides and models to aid Lily on her journeys and in her investigation of space, indicating a strong connection between space and travel. The outdoors offers Lily the majority of her freedom, but the warmth of Nettie's, Gerty's, and Carry's humble homes offer Lily compassion and encouragement after a harsh environment surrounded her, threatening to suck her life away. Although Lily does not consciously leave each space she occupies, embarking on a particular journey, the trope of travel is present and the only avenue for Wharton's female protagonist to enjoy a small amount of freedom before her tragic death.

Chapter 4

She edged her way out of the increasing crowd, feeling disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many sweaty bodies.

For a moment she stood fanning herself and dabbing at her moist face with an inadequate scrap of handkerchief. Suddenly she was aware that the whole street had a wobbly look, and realized she was about to faint. With a quick perception of the need for immediate safety, she lifted a wavering hand in the direction of a car parked directly in front of her. The perspiring driver jumped out and guided her to his car. He helped, almost lifted her in. She sank down on the hot leather seat.

For a minute her thoughts were nebulous. They cleared.

"I guess," she told her Samaritan, "it's tea I need. On a roof somewhere."

"The Drayton, ma'am?" he suggested. "They do say as how it's always a breeze up there."

"Thank you. I think the Drayton'll do nicely," she told him.

There was that little grating sound of the clutch being slipped in as the man put the car in gear and slid deftly out into the boiling traffic. Reviving under the warm breeze stirred up by the moving cab, Irene made some small attempts to repair the damage that the heat and crowds had done to her appearance.

All too soon the rattling vehicle shot towards the sidewalk and stood still. The driver sprang out and opened the door before the hotel's decorated attendant could reach it. She got out, thanking him smilingly as well as in a more substantial manner for his kind helpfulness and understanding, went in through the Drayton's wide doors. (Larsen 147)

This early scene from Nella Larsen's *Passing* introduces the need for Irene Redfield to be rescued from the stifling atmosphere that the summer heat represents, but it also presents the trope of travel that Irene requires if she is going to survive. Remaining stationary in the streets, a very crowded and public space, or in any oppressive space, is detrimental to the health of Larsen's female character. The cab driver becomes Irene's guide, continuing the trope from the previous two texts, as he rescues her and provides a vehicle by which she can escape the common streets. The short ride in a small, private space revives Irene, but her full recovery takes place on the roof of the Drayton Hotel where she is far above the sweaty people on the street. It appears that the indoors pacifies Irene and allows her the freedom to relax, but it is actually the roof, which is analogous to the outdoors, that offers salvation for Larsen's protagonist. Larsen juxtaposes the confinement of the street and car with the vast space on the rooftop without boundaries. Consequently, Larsen stresses the fact that there are numerous worlds in her novel, and the reader is quickly introduced to two of them via Irene: "it was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below" (Larsen 147). Irene's escape from "contact with so many sweating bodies" (Larsen 147) recalls Lily Bart being surrounded by common people on the train platform. Just as Lily needs Selden to deliver her to his flat high above the masses, Irene relishes her ability to be rescued and raised above the common people. Lily and Irene possess another commonality since both enter places for freedom that can be categorized as restricted spaces. Unmarried women are not supposed to enter a bachelor's flat, while black women are not allowed in a white establishment.

Nella Larsen's *Passing* was published in 1929, twenty-four years after Wharton's novel. Unlike the novels by Wharton and Chopin, which were not highly praised or accepted when they were originally published, Larsen enjoyed numerous awards and accolades for her writing. For example, she was the first black female creative writer to win a Guggenheim in 1930. Larsen was writing during the Harlem Renaissance, but she often found it difficult to publish her work due to its controversial race issues and subversive sexual desires. This did impede her progress as well as her health once she discovered that her husband was engaging in numerous affairs with white women. Ironically, it is the suspicion of an affair between Brian Redfield and Clare Kendry (*Passing*) that creates the frenzied thoughts of Irene, and indoctrinates the reader into a world of repressed sexuality. Larsen was born to a Danish mother and a black West Indian father, suggesting her mixed race ancestry, which correlates to her female protagonist in *Passing*. Just as Chopin's and Wharton's life experiences surfaced in their novels, a connection between the author, Larsen, and her work, *Passing*, is crucial for a complete understanding of the variety of levels in which the novel operates.

According to Corinne E. Blackmer, "*Passing*...stresses the interpretive anxieties and sexual paranoias that make convention-bound people reluctant to allow others the freedom to travel freely throughout the many worlds, identities, and sexualities of American society" (100). It is these numerous worlds, as well as their "anxieties and sexual paranoias," which Larsen explores by situating her protagonist in the black middle class of Harlem, allowing her to pass because of economic entitlement. Larsen's novel, just like Chopin's *The Awakening* and Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, depicts an individual who refuses to subscribe to the restrictions of society. Through a divided

female character, Larsen subverts the stereotypical race, gender, and sexual positions that were available for women during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not only is Irene divided within herself because she is a mixture of whiteness and blackness, but she lives during a time when society was divided and segregated, thus restricting space and travel. Irene, like her predecessors, Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, is economically tied to her husband Brain, who is a doctor, but Irene yearns to rid herself of dependence on him and, by extension the patriarchal power structure. Irene also explores her sexuality, which is presented as a divided front: she “seems fascinated, sometimes entranced, by Clare’s appearance” (Blackmore 476), but she is devoted to her husband and children. Irene is also divided between two places, black Harlem and white Chicago. This division correlates with race but it can also be discussed separately as an issue of space and travel. Although Larsen also depicts New York in *Passing*, it is diametrically opposed to the upper class world that Wharton illustrates in *The House of Mirth*.

Passing is not the first novel Larsen has written concerning a divided individual. Her first novel, *Quicksand* presents a divided female protagonist in Helga Crane. The divisions in *Quicksand* are racial, geographic, and sexual. Larsen’s protagonist is representative of the tragic mulatto, “alienated from both races” (McDowell xvii). McDowell goes on to state that Helga is “divided physically between a desire for sexual fulfillment and a longing for social responsibility” (xvii). However, Helga Crane expresses her sexuality through the accepted avenue of marriage and motherhood. Another aspect of the divided self that Larsen offers is geographic because Helga Crane travels to Europe from America, more specifically Harlem, New York. As Benjamin Brawley notes, “this certainty of the division of her life into two parts in two lands, into

physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was unfortunate, inconvenient, [and] expensive" (86). The unfortunate nature of this division is the lack of a complete person, since Helga Crane is not able to live as an entire entity in one space. Helga, like Irene, is torn between a variety of identities that offer different amounts of freedom or the potential for freedom, though neither woman experiences absolute freedom by the end of either novel.

Coupled with the notion of the divided self, Larsen establishes the trope of travel early in *Passing*; it is a recurrent theme utilized to stress her heroine's liminal state as a result of her race, gender, and class. Unlike Chopin's Edna Pontellier, Irene Redfield often enjoys her role as wife and mother because it presents a sense of security, but she relishes her time alone when she can wander through the streets. Larsen also differs from Chopin and Wharton by creating a female protagonist who does not rely on guides as much as Edna and Lily. Irene experiences most of her journeys on her own, but her initial awakening, a sexual exploration, is spurred by Clare Kendry, who offers Irene "an identity that can escape the enclosures of race, class, and sexuality, enclosures that would limit her 'having' ways" (Cutter 84). The notion of enclosures refers to the space that frequently populates *Passing*, one that is restricting due to physical characteristics, economic status, and sexual preference. A character's status in each of these establishes the variety and type of spaces that are available for visitation and investigation.

In comparison to Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, Larsen's text offers Irene more freedom because she can pass from the black world to the white world, although there are ramifications to her fluctuating identity. *Passing* is the most subversive of the three texts because it deals with racial, sexual, gender, class, and identity issues surrounding the

protagonist, but race is the issue propelled to the foreground in order to subvert the issue of female sexuality. Another difference between *Passing* and the other two novels is the death of the guide, Clare, and the survival, though questionable, of the protagonist.

Although Clare dies, it is her persistence that causes Irene to question her own identity in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation. However, "while the strategies of self-disguise and masquerade Clare employs are far from ideal, they represent viable means of survival and transformation under conditions that temporarily limit her moral agency as she fashions an identity that allows her greater autonomy and self-determination" (Blackmer 112). It is through these skills that Clare attempts to guide Irene, yielding a potentially happier life for the protagonist, though temporary.

Clare is significant for Larsen's novel because she encourages Irene to discover herself, differing from the options that the passive guides in Chopin's and Wharton's texts suggest. Clare is aggressive and explosive, which causes Irene to fear her. However, Irene is on a journey to examine herself and confront her fears, which can only be done through the aide of a guide-like figure who helps her enter spaces through the trope of travel. It is only after Clare enters Irene's life again that she realizes that "She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed" (Larsen 225). The suffocation the protagonist experiences recalls the overwhelming sensation that enveloped her in the crowded, heated, sweaty streets early in the novel, but now she is alone with no one to rescue her. Irene goes on to comment that "It was... enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well" (Larsen 225). This

revealing quotation provides insight into the double bind that black women face, setting Irene Redfield apart from her predecessors: Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart. Neither woman was black so they only had to deal with class, gender, sexual, and identity issues, allowing them one less burden.

Irene's guide has a daughter who is away at school and a husband who is frequently away on business, freeing Clare to be an independent woman who chooses where she travels to and who she spends time with. Not only does Clare enter the restricted space of her home, but she also enters the restricted space of the Dayton Hotel, a white upper class establishment. By traveling to Harlem and Boston, Clare enters black spaces as well as white spaces, transforming her identity like a chameleon to adapt to her surroundings. Moreover, Clare uses her marriage to a white man as "legally proscribed liberation from the constraints of racial identity configured through marriage" (Blackmer 103). In contrast, Irene has two sons to whom she devotes her time, as well as a husband (who is black) who remains home. It is Clare who upsets this home life and "destabilizes Irene's role as wife and mother" (Cutter 88), forcing the protagonist to play a different role which requires her to transcend black spaces. She wholeheartedly believes that Brian, her husband, is engaged in an affair with Clare, so Clare literally invades and disrupts the space of her friend's marriage. Perhaps the affair accounts for Irene's confusion with her husband, because "It was as if he had stepped out beyond her reach into some section, strange and walled, where she could not get to him" (Larsen 214). Irene suggests that there is a space that Brian has retreated to that she is denied access to, once again creating a restricted space, but this time Irene cannot "pass" to gain entry.

The inability to “pass” is not always problematic for Irene, especially when she is outside of her home and marriage, traveling between New York and Chicago. The setting of Larsen’s novel is not fixed in New York, though the majority of action takes place there. Journeys to Chicago enable the characters to escape from the stifling control of their racial communities. In order to explore any ideas, feelings, or desires it is necessary for the characters to be mobile and travel to liberating spaces affording particular freedoms for personal investigation. When in Chicago, Irene does not have to worry about passing or having her space restricted. This only occurs when she enters the African American community of Harlem where she must adhere to the social constructs that have been established by white men who are the controllers and creators of space. It is also in Chicago that Irene is afforded the opportunity to pass while shopping and drinking tea on the roof of The Drayton Hotel. Therefore, a particular city can be seen as a space that defines the amount of freedom a character is allotted. In order to travel between Chicago and New York, Irene utilizes the train, a specific means of travel, once again emphasizing the need to escape by means of a journey.

It is as Irene returns to the confinement of New York that she thinks about whether “that old, queer, unhappy restlessness had begun again within him [her husband]; that craving for some place strange and different” (Larsen 178). This notion of a liberating space is similar to Irene’s Chicago, which is a different place because she is free to pass. Brian’s space is also associated with a particular geographic location: Brazil. The geographic space becomes significant since it has often been associated with “sexual freedom [because it is] a country where homosexuality has been a visible cultural force throughout modern history” (Blackmore 477). Opposing Brazil is the confining

atmosphere of Harlem. According to Blackmore, "Harlem's bourgeoisie, having always to prove against stacked odds that it was not morally inferior to the dominant white middle class, had not space in which to experiment with alternative sexualities" (483). If Brian remains in Harlem, as the novel suggests, he will be unable to experiment with his sexual orientation. Therefore, not only does Irene explore sexuality in relation to her own sex, but her husband Brian is trying to delve into his homosexual inclinations.

Brian's sexual preference is called into question again because Irene convinces herself that Clare and Brian are having an affair. After her realization, Irene's attitude changes and she understands that "it was only she that had changed" (Larsen 218). Martha J. Cutter suggests that "Larsen's imagery implies that without her identity as the wife of Brian and the mother of his children, Irene has no identity" (89). On the other hand, Irene is able to deny her surging lesbian feelings by emphasizing her commitment to the bond of marriage and dedication to her children. Larsen uses a mirror to reflect Irene, but "the face in the mirror vanished from sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind" (217). Cutter further claims that the vanishing face symbolically represents "a gap, a blank, an absence" (89) that eats away at Irene, forcing her to realize the unfulfilled life she has been living because she cannot deny the reality of the image or its lack that appears in the mirror. The idea of space has now traveled within Irene and presents a void that must be filled. An argument can be made that this also is a restrictive space because it is alien to Irene since she is not supposed to entertain the feelings that her husband is unfaithful, but, more importantly, because she is forbidden by the patriarchal society to have sexual feelings for another woman.

On the other hand, this space could represent the forbidden sexual desire that attracts Irene to Clare. In this case, the void represents the lack of sexuality in Irene's marriage to Brian, especially since they have separate bedrooms. By allowing Irene to explore issues of female sexuality through Clare, Larsen's novel recalls Chopin's Edna Pontellier and her heterosexual awakening. Larsen takes an even greater risk by including a possible homosexual awakening in Irene. By flirting with homosexuality, Larsen was revolting against a history where black female writers dealt with sexuality by creating chaste black women to combat the licentiousness associated with female slaves. It was " 'purity,' the sexual morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie" (xiii) that black women writers mimicked. However, outside of the literary world, sexuality was a prime topic. This was not only the Freudian era but also the Jazz Age, which promoted sexuality through music. On the other hand, black women novelists consistently downplayed female sexuality. Deborah McDowell's introduction to Larsen's two novels provides the following definition from Carole Vance: "Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency" (xiv). McDowell goes on to state her own theory that "For women, and especially for black women, sexual pleasure leads to the dangers of domination in marriage, repeated pregnancy, or exploitation and loss of status" (xiv). The idea of domain becomes very important for issues of space and travel since women who express their sexuality are often limited by marriage, falling into the patriarchal trap of control, unable to define themselves, their actions, or their space. By creating sexual desire between Irene and Clare, Larsen suggests that "a lesbian relationship would serve Irene as an ultimate act of rebellion against the patriarchal system which oppresses her" (Blackmore 480). Thus, by

disturbing the accepted sexual sphere for women, Irene is able to travel through her libidinous mind and body to create an identity separate from that of mainstream black and white society.

The portrait of words that Irene utilizes in describing Clare is “exotic, sensual, [and] couched in the discourse of desire” (Blackmore 476). When Irene unsuspectingly is reunited with Clare on the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel, it is Clare’s looks that first draw her attention. She notes the “peculiar caressing smile” (Larsen 148) on Clare’s lips as well as the fact that Clare has “dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin” (Larsen 148). The description that Irene provides is very sensual in nature, paying strict attention to the details of Clare’s face. While she stares at Clare and her stares are returned, each woman is crossing into the unknown territory of another female’s space. Clare actually moves to Irene’s table, transporting herself into Irene’s private space in a public setting, foreshadowing subsequent invasions of Irene’s privacy later in the novel. However, the later invasions are more intrusive because they occur in Irene’s bedroom, not a public place. Clare invades Irene’s private space, her bedroom, twice in *Passing* and physical contact is made each time, indicating the lack of personal space. First, Clare plants a quick kiss on Irene’s forehead, while the next time Irene reaches out to touch Clare’s arm.

Juxtaposed to the intrusive indoor spaces are other spaces, though not Irene’s, that publicly allow her to experience a sense of liberation in the outdoors. On most occasions when Irene leaves her home she has a set destination to travel from and to. For example, she might leave her home to enjoy lunch or shop for her children; but on one particular day Irene is free to perambulate, suggesting an undefined journey that is free to take

shape as she proceeds in “the morning’s aimless wandering through the teeming Harlem streets, long after she had ordered the flowers which had been her excuse for setting out, was but another effort to tear herself loose from it” (Larsen 213). Irene’s excursion is initiated, like many others, with a clear purpose and definition, but it quickly alters so chores or societal demands no longer confine her. Larsen does not even describe where Irene walks, providing a larger sense of freedom and secrecy in her journey. The fact that her expedition cannot be described in words is significant because no one can inscribe meaning onto it, which would translate into controlling Irene’s movement in space.

While walking in Harlem, Irene is clearly not passing, so she is presenting her true self. The aimless wandering alludes to the desire to remain outside of her home, her responsibilities, and her entrapments, all associated with her gender and race. Larsen’s protagonist escapes the confines of her home by leaving the patriarchal structure of the indoor space where women are usually depicted. Larsen does not elaborate on her main character’s exact thoughts when she wanders, but this is not important because Irene realizes simply that she must leave the house. Perhaps Irene is brooding about the tea which is about to occur in the confines of her home, illustrating the duty that a female has to entertain. In fact, when Irene arrives at home, “she [doesn’t] want to be bothered. She [goes] upstairs and [takes] off her things and [gets] into bed” (Larsen 214). Her refusal to attend or serve tea is more defiant than Chopin’s Edna Pontellier on Tuesdays because Irene remains in the house, in the space of her bedroom which extends above the gathering. Irene presides over the formalities of the tea like a detached ruler whose presence is felt without needing to be physically involved. She eventually descends the stairs and joins the tea but only when she is prepared. Edna leaves her home so as not to

be bothered with such trifling responsibilities, a literal journey of escape, whereas Irene remains in the space of her home struggling to control her situation.

Although Irene exerts some control over her gendered space, her friend, Clare, has complete power over her house. It is racial issues that plague Clare the most, since public spaces were segregated, but this idea carries into the privacy of her home. The color line itself represents different spatial orientations recalling Dubois' use of the Veil, which acts as a division between people, places, and thought processes. An individual's color dictates what side of the line they are on as well as their boundaries. Clare's husband, John Bellew, believes that "he can discern who is black and bar them from his household: 'I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have and never will be'" (Cutter 86). John attempts to designate a space, his household, and control who enters. He is unaware of the fact that Clare freely passes, literally and figuratively, in and out of the space he defines as his. She subverts his control of space by not allowing herself to be defined in his terms and by inviting other black women into his space further usurping his attempt to reign over his household. John cannot dominate Clare's mind or body and she weakens his control by redefining the boundaries of their home and relationship. In other words, Clare goes out of her way to conceal her true race from her husband, including "her almost ludicrous attention to environmental disguise, [she] has decorated her sitting room in dark browns and blues to obscure the sharp visual distinctions between white and black" (Blackmer 110). Hence, Clare not only inhabits her own space, but she creates it. In order to construct this lie, Clare must deceive her husband, while gaining power as a manipulator. Perhaps this is the only avenue by which Clare can survive.

The use of deception is not unique to Clare's character, but can also be applied to Irene. The protagonist does not share any of her fears with her husband; in fact she denies that there is a problem when Brian enters the space of her private bedroom with concern. These fears can be defined as her own battle with sexuality, her annoyance with Brian and Clare's supposed affair, as well as her own self-esteem. Many of these issues rise to the surface in the final rooftop scene of *Passing*. Irene, Brian, and Clare are on their way to a party that is hosted on the top floor of an apartment building. This tragic scene enacts the ambiguous death of Clare Kendry who falls or is pushed out of the open window. An argument can be made that Irene is guilty of pushing Clare, because like an animal backed into a corner, with no other options, Irene lashes out. She recalls, "the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, [and] the ringing bells of her laughter" (Larsen 239). Clare was her guide, a woman who was supposed to help her, but Irene believed Clare was gradually taking over any space that Irene claimed. She infiltrated Irene's bedroom, her marriage, and her mind. Therefore, when Irene pushes Clare out the window of the rooftop apartment, Irene is pushing Clare out of her life, reclaiming the space that is rightfully hers. Since Clare falls through the air from the top floor, her body literally and figuratively journeys to its death, but this is not a journey that Clare embarks on by choice, robbing her of the control over her life that she desperately fought to keep by any means possible.

Passing aids women in severing some of the bars that previously housed them, but new bars are quickly created. Nella Larsen is not afforded the freedom to remove all of the bars, so just like black women, the female author is also trapped because there is only

so much she can give her characters. It is because Larsen “gave her characters sexual feelings at all, she has to be regarded as something of a pioneer, a trailblazer in the Afro-American female literary tradition” (McDowell xxxi). Therefore, Larsen introduces the idea of female sexuality, but appears to subvert it at the end through the death/murder of Clare, confirming Irene’s insecurity and constant struggle to define herself. On the other hand, Larsen might not be able to infuse her character with this particular “freedom.”

Larsen, like her predecessors, Chopin and Wharton, makes a concerted effort to explore forbidden subjects in relation to her female protagonist through the tropes of travel and space, creating momentary liberation from the static nature of women under the rules of patriarchy. It is Judith Fryer’s belief that “woman has been unable to move. She has been denied, in our culture, the possibility of dialectical movement between private spaces and open spaces- ‘open as in free to be entered or used, unobstructed, unrestricted, accessible, and available” (50). This lack of space is an issue all three women attempt to explore, but in order to enter these spaces women must travel, thereby establishing a concrete connection between the tropes of travel and space. Solitary travel is not suggested by any of the authors since guides are enlisted to aid the three protagonists on their treacherous journeys into unmapped territories. Issues of female space and travel are extremely complex because men are always impinging on women’s space and pitting women against one another. Therefore, these are concepts and tropes that create connections between otherwise very different texts.

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