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**Realizing Their Positions in the Universe as Human Beings:
Exploring the Writings of Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in Relation to
the American Women's Movement of the
Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

College Scholars Senior Project
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I.

During the Ante-Bellum period, a small but significant minority of American women fought for the abolition of slavery. Yet, ironically, while working to advance other humans' rights many of these women realized that they too were experiencing discrimination. Consequently, following the Civil War, American women began to publicly assemble to demand their rights as American citizens. Although white middle class women involved themselves with many social and educational concerns during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the core of their concerns rested in attaining the vote. Manifested among intellectuals, social reformers, religious zealots, and socialites, many white middle and upper class women understood the need to participate in the political process in order to gain equal educational opportunities, achieve societal changes, and break from the domestic sphere in which they were locked.

From 1870 to 1935, women strived towards and accomplished great achievements in these areas; however, the same women who fought for women's education, suffrage, and social reform were those whose social status kept them contained in a separate sphere from men. These primarily white middle and upper class women remained in their homes on a daily basis, in the company of each other, their servants and their children; therefore, their leisure time enabled them to organize as they became increasingly discontented with their status as second-class American citizens. Western states were the first to offer the franchise to women, although most of the woman suffrage campaigns began in the Northeast. The women's movement spread throughout the country organizing creative forums in higher education, and particularly as well in the women's club movement. Females eventually met several goals, such as equal educational

opportunities, temperance reform, and suffrage; however, these accomplishments were simply a beginning.

American women's advancement between 1870-1935 in Knoxville, Tennessee and its surrounding areas serve as an interesting microcosm of comparison to the national movements. Against this backdrop Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's writings provide a barometer for historical comparison. Although Gilman was much more politically active than Chopin, both wrote innovative pieces that sought to advance women as equal humans in America near the turn of the twentieth century. Born in the Northeast, Gilman's involvement in the women's movement represents the national women's movement; in contrast, Chopin, who was from the mid-Southwest, based her work on local women and their involvement in women's rights by realizing their individual purposes as humans. It is significant that several different women throughout the country fought for women's rights in several different ways, including but not limited to woman's suffrage, because both Chopin and Gilman believed that women's national ability to vote would in no way eliminate the multiple ways that women were repressed.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women began to demand their rights in a number of ways. Industrialization and urbanization contributed to this. In *The Politics of Domesticity*, Barbara Epstein argues that women began to identify with a certain set of "female" values when a different social sphere, the "middling classes," emerged with the rising market economy and industrialization. "When [men and women in traditional families] moved to the towns and cities, separating themselves from their rural origins and the family farm, women lost the direct involvement that they had once had in economic production and came to be confined to the tasks of child care,

housework, and the creation of the home as a refuge for men” (Epstein 2). It was thus considered prestigious and even necessary for a husband to economically support his wife; however, the “middling class” women were further separated from men, yet dependent upon them. This new separation from a “man’s world,” coupled with financial dependence on men, bred resentment among some women, but, it simultaneously promoted a “distinct set of values” among them as well (Epstein 2). These new principles, which had begun with abolition, extended to temperance, female education, and suffrage, to name a few reforms.

Although Epstein argues that women formed their own principles because they were separated from men and confined to their homes, the formation of the “middling classes,” wherein women would not have to work for their personal or their families’ livelihoods, allowed these women to expand their opportunities into the realm of higher education. Certainly, a strong educational background was a common bond among several principal players in the women’s movement of this time. For example, suffragist and temperance activist Alice Stone Blackwell obtained a bachelor’s degree from Boston University in 1881. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, also a suffragist, graduated in 1847 from Oberlin College, and became the “first female ordained minister of a recognized denomination in the United States” (Huth 1). Lucy Stone, also a graduate from Oberlin College, the first co-educational college in America (1833), became an ardent abolitionist and suffragist as well publishing “the most influential women’s rights paper for forty-seven years” (Huth 3). One of the most prominent suffragists, Carrie Chapman Catt, whose career encompassed many fields, such as educator, journalist and lecturer, received her bachelor’s degree from Iowa State College in 1880. The Methodists’ first female

ordained minister and an active suffragist, Anna Howard Shaw, graduated from Boston University in theology and subsequently became the Methodists' first female ordained minister. These activists exemplify the increasing numbers of women who obtained college degrees between 1870 and 1935. Their desire for a higher education and college administrators' increasing willingness to allow women into their schools, were two primary factors in this development.

Spawned by the rise of women elementary and secondary educators during the mid-nineteenth century from twenty-five to eighty percent, normal schools proliferated, as pressure remained for colleges to admit women. The time periods between 1865 and 1890 witnessed the foundation of several women's colleges. Following Oberlin's lead, several land grant universities became co-educational by 1862. Female graduate training also emerged with women's medical schools, further, these were over a dozen co-educational medical schools by the 1890's. Women's higher educational opportunities also advanced their employment opportunities as teachers and administrators in women's schools, and as lawyers and ministers. Thus, in an interesting turn of events, women's employment as educators furthered their need, desire and demand for education, yet, this education necessitated women's ability and demand to obtain professional jobs, voice their opinions and demand their rights.

Although mid-nineteenth century American women were beginning to advance their equality with men, Tennessee women gained their right to equality in higher education later than most women in other states who attended land grant universities. Gerda Lerner, in *The Woman in American History*, states that land-grant universities had been co-educational since 1862, but she overlooks The University of Tennessee, which did not

admit women until three decades later. Tennessee may have been late in following the nationwide trend because of the economic structure of the South and its traditional notions about females and Southern honor. In his article, “The Rise of Southern Coeducation,” Gerald Gaither argues, “Not only was education thought debilitating to the female mind and body; the frontier character of Southern life made the pattern of life uncondusive to educational opportunity” (22).

Conventional standards were not the sole reason that several Southern universities wavered about creating a coeducational system. According to Gaither, “universities could not avoid the growing evidence that such unparalleled coeducational activity would spell an end to the male status quo” (23). Men’s fear that their authority would end with the beginning of women’s education greatly explains the unwelcome reception from many male students to the first women at the University of Tennessee. Upon entering the university in 1892, one male student wrote the following poem:

So now the men all stay at home
And nurse and sweep the floor;
No longer are there “lady” cooks,
As in the days of yore.
Thus all these honors, all these crimes,
All this male degradation
Are due in part-in fact they’re all-
To this co-education (Office of the University Historian 126).

Certainly, this student foresaw the inherent danger in providing his female counterparts with the same educational opportunities that he had received. After all, Angie Warren Perkins, the first dean of women, who influenced Dr. Charles Dabney, the University of Tennessee’s president, to admit women graduated from Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and taught at Wellesley College and Lawrence University. “She [also] had the advantage of travel and study abroad and a term as president of the Tennessee

Federation of Women's Clubs, and she was a strong advocate of women's rights" (Office of the University Historian 126). Thus, the unwelcoming poet's fears were founded in the fact that education increased women's status as citizens and thus increased their ability to find better leadership and employment opportunities, possibly at the expense of men.

Although women's gradual entrance into higher education indicated a great landmark in their striving towards equal rights, limitations qualified each opportunity. Perkins's position as Dean of Women was, as set forth in a list separately describing the duties of the Dean of Women and Dean of Men on February 2, 1898, "Honorary... without compensation"; it was her duty to "care for the moral, intellectual, social and physical interests of the women students" (History of Women in UT Historian's Collection Folder). Distinctively different was the prescribed role for the dean of men, who was paid a salary and whose duties omitted moral interests. Thus, women were allowed an education, but, they remained second-class citizens, for whom rules required chaperones, and whose curriculums focused in 1894 on "training in some specialty, or education for some profession" (Report to the Board of Trustees). According to the University of Tennessee Record of 1905, this "specialty" was home economics, in which women could pursue an "honorable career of a home maker" (3). The only professions the record mentions are those involving education. Ironically, Catherine Wiley, Southern Impressionist and one of the first women enrolled at the University of Tennessee in 1895, eventually returned to a "safe sphere" for women by teaching home economics at the University of Tennessee. So, although the artist received much local attention, her enormously talented work never obtained national recognition; thus, "By 1905, Wiley

had returned to Knoxville and began to teach art in the home economics department of the University of Tennessee... [which is] an interesting comment on the times” (Pennington 22). Therefore, women were gradually advancing their opportunities through education, but their prospects at the University of Tennessee were narrowly limited at the turn of the twentieth century to becoming homemakers and educators.

Regardless of the limited professional and creative prospects afforded American women during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, housewives and teachers became the core of the women’s movement.* Jane Addams was a model for women who were dissatisfied in their comfortable positions in affluent societies. This “cultured and sheltered” woman returned from a European trip shocked at the poverty she had witnessed (Lerner 126). Determined to change similar conditions in America, Addams moved her belongings into a former mansion in the Chicago slums in 1889, for she wanted to eventually implement projects similar to British settlement houses. Addams encouraged other middle-class women to join in Hull House. As part of the vanguard of the progressive movement “Armed only with unbounded idealism, faith in the goodness of all human beings and a practical and pragmatic approach toward self-help, the settlement house workers braved the slums” (Lerner 126). These women also pressed for inner-city reforms, such as garbage collection, public health and sanitation programs, increased working class access to museums, libraries and children’s summer camps. They also pressed for better working conditions and minimum wage legislation. The settlement workers, part of the larger Progressive movement, also pressed for women’s suffrage so they could advance “in the housekeeping of public life,” more effectively

(Lerner 128). Most importantly they provided an example to other women that led to important social reforms.

Margaret Sanger followed Addams's example by working in the slums of New York City as a nurse. Sanger's social work led to the revolutionary advancement of birth control rights for American women. Her childhood, as a poor daughter with ten siblings and work convinced her that uncontrolled child bearing and home abortions greatly undermined women's health. Because the Comstock law prohibited birth control education in the United States she began to study European methods of "birth control," a term that she coined in her magazine *Woman Rebel*. In 1916, Sanger published facts about birth control, and with her sister, set up the first birth control clinic in America. Subsequently, the police arrested the sisters, which led to great public support for the American Birth Control Conference League. Fortunately, Sanger witnessed the progress of her difficult work. In 1937, the United States legalized birth control and women gained some control of their own bodies.

The women who worked in the slums, concentrated their efforts in the Northeast, where urban problems abounded. Women elsewhere also took up social causes however. For example, several women in the vicinity of Knoxville, Tennessee took strides towards social reforms during the same period. Mrs. Mary Ogden Morell became an advocate of the blind. After she lost her eyesight in 1926, the former teacher and artist learned and began to transcribe books into Braille. She taught other blind community members to read and write Braille and thus be independent. According to one historian, Morell "was herself an inspiring example of what one handicapped by blindness can accomplish" (Knox County History Committee, East Tennessee Historical Society 459). Mrs. Delia

Lottridge Roberts, of Knoxville, also worked for the physically disabled. Roberts graduated from Mary Baldwin College and subsequently taught at the Tennessee School for the Deaf. Following her marriage, she instructed young women at the Samuel Boyd Sewing Society and was a “pioneer in the Parent-Teachers Association in Knoxville” (Knox County History Committee, East Tennessee Historical Society 475). Mrs. Belle Karns Morris, who was also a teacher, devoted her life to the betterment of local schools. She successfully pleaded with the county court to erect a new building for Camp Grove School, organized a Parent-Teachers club, promoted a public library, and served on the city school board and the Board of Education (Knox County History Committee, East Tennessee Historical Society 460). Although these local women served the needs of their community, they did so in a socially accepted manner as wives who were involved with schools and churches.

Although most female, social reformers of Knoxville affiliated with Christian churches, this religious connection did not always inspire these women to join the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Throughout the temperance movement the number of women in the Tennessee WTCU was between one and eighty-six per 100,000 residents even though the Christian-based organization furthered women’s equality. As Janet Zollinger Giele, in *Two Paths to Women’s Equality: Temperance, Suffrage and the Origins of Modern Feminism* observes: “After the repeal of national prohibition in 1933, WCTU reform goals were often interpreted as defensive and moralistic. Only in the last few years has the contribution of the temperance women to feminism been appreciated as an extension of “domestic feminism” (63). Following the WTCU’s formation in 1874, America could not ignore the “most dynamic women’s organization the country had ever

seen” (Lerner 123). Certainly, member Carrie Nation’s violent rampages in saloons with her “praying bands” called much attention to the group. Although Nation’s tactics were questioned by some, under Francis Willard’s leadership as national secretary near the end of the twentieth century, the WTCU expanded its membership and advocated women’s dress reform and suffrage. Although, the WTCU did not accomplish its ultimate goal of national prohibition until 1919, it nevertheless advanced women’s concerns. Giele points out through “working for temperance and prohibition the WTCU broadened women’s civic horizons by quietly fostering the expression of feminist principles among the moderate middle class. [It also] directly advanced the cause of suffrage by at first supporting limited forms of franchise, such as school, municipal, and local option suffrage, and later full suffrage” (97). Therefore, regardless of its conservative, religious undertones, the WTCU was quite advanced in its endorsement of women’s suffrage.

The WTCU initially endorsed the woman’s suffrage movement to increase support from women for their cause. Prohibition occurred one year prior to women’s national suffrage, but both movements transpired in a deliberate manner. Suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Coffin Mott had organized the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls as a result of gender discrimination at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. The Seneca Falls Convention took place eight years later; however, as we have seen, women had a long struggle to gain equal political rights. Following the Civil War, many feminists thought that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which gave African-Americans voting rights, but limited these rights specifically to “male citizens,” worsened womens’ legal status (Lerner 108). Sex discrimination in the Fourteenth Amendment actually weakened the feminist movement

as controversy over the issue split the group into factions. In 1869 Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton set up the National Women's Suffrage Organization, which excluded men, to work towards the female vote. Simultaneously, Henry Blackwell, Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe and Mary Livermore led the American Woman Suffrage Association toward the same goal.

It was not until these two women's suffrage divisions reunited as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1890 that they began to gain political momentum. Yet progress continued slowly as pioneers and sectional conflict continued at the state level. Following Lucy Stone's death in 1893, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's death in 1902, and shortly before Susan B. Anthony's death in 1906, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw became the NAWSA's president in 1904. According to Lerner, Shaw's leadership was weak and thereby encouraged problems such as those of the western suffragists, who had already gained the vote, and their resentment towards Easterners and southern suffragists' insistence in utilizing white supremacy to secure male advocates. These divisions remained a problem and the suffragists' "views were not accepted... until they mounted a social movement that proved their political capability" (Giele 113).

Women's political abilities were ultimately displayed through several women's efforts, most notably Carrie Chapman Catt's. During Catt's brief presidential reign over the NAWSA (1900-1904) she worked relentlessly to implement a "businesslike basis," bring organization and efficiency to the association and a "long-range strategy for victory" (Lerner 162). Catt argued that if women wanted the vote, they must gain support from their Congressmen at a grass roots level. Lerner says Catt's "pragmatic understanding of political reality" was unique, but it was not popular. When other

women's suffrage leaders rejected her strategy, she retired. Catt went to New York where her organizational tactics successfully united the Women's Suffrage Party of New York City in 1910. Catt modeled each assembly district in a political manner, like Tammany Hall, and all districts united to fight for a New York State referendum in 1913. Despite an extremely well organized campaign, Tammany Hall defeated the referendum by a fifty-eight percent vote. Nonetheless, Catt and her supporters persevered and were met by a neutral vote from Tammany Hall in 1917.

Their determination led women to their final victory of securing the vote in 1920. According to Lerner, the final phase of the women's suffrage campaign began in 1912, when Alice Paul became the chairman of the Congressional Committee of NAWSA. This college-educated Quaker and social worker applied radical tactics that she learned while working with the British woman suffrage campaign. For example, Paul organized a suffrage parade in Washington the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. Although the parade sparked much national attention, "Kaiser Wilson," as the suffragists labeled him, did not respond. Paul and Catt, who rejoined the NAWSA in 1915 as the president, continued to push Congress with their ultimate goal to amend the Constitution to guarantee the female vote by December 1920. During their "final push" America was involved in World War I. This fact did not deter Catt, who "accuse[d] the administration of hypocrisy in fighting a war for freedom abroad while denying women the vote" (Lerner 169). Finally, on January 20, 1918, the House voted in favor of women's suffrage. Subsequently, the Senate defeated the amendment by two votes and again in February 1919. Wilson finally endorsed a woman's right to vote two times in May 1919, and both the House and the Senate voted to submit the Nineteenth Amendment to the

states. The states then held the definitive power, and by January 1920, thirty-five states had ratified the amendment, with one more state needed to support the amendment. Tennessee's Senate ratified the bill, but the state House of Representatives was two votes short. The state ultimately granted victory to suffragists as Harry Burns, youngest member of the Tennessee House and son of a "staunch suffragist," conceded to his mother's wishes and voted yes, making the vote forty-nine for and forty-seven against (Lerner 169).

Many women involved in social reforms endorsed the woman's suffrage movement because they believed women's votes would further their goals, but, the radical nature of the suffrage movement discouraged many women from actively joining the campaign. As Karen J. Blair, author of *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914*, states:

The very boldness of the suffrage movement limited its appeal. Only a small percentage of women were strong enough to ignore the teachings of the sermons, popular magazines, novels, beauty guides, health manuals, fashions and even phrenology which instructed them to stay home and practice meekness, passivity, and subservience" (3).

Blair argues that women's clubs allowed women a channel by which to "leave the confines of the home without abandoning domestic values" (4).

Julia Ward Howe began the women's club movement when she founded the New England Women's Club in 1868. The Sorosis Club emerged the same year in New York City, and by 1890 these and several other clubs combined into the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Although women's clubs began as literary clubs, they promoted female development through cultural and scholarly activity. Many organizations worked towards improving social conditions in their own communities. Unlike several radical

suffragists, clubwomen did not overtly challenge the conventional female standards; rather, they improved upon this image. By 1914, clubwomen supported the federal suffrage amendment. Therefore, they supported female development that began in cultural and social realms and gradually progressed to political means.

The women's club movement was less radical than temperance or suffrage unions. Numerous women in Knoxville, Tennessee, utilized clubs as a forum to advance their interests. Southern states were traditionally against women's suffrage because prior to the Civil War it was associated with abolition. Thus, more Knoxville women were involved in local women's clubs than directly with the National Women's Suffrage Organization. Several "pioneer and civic [female] leaders" occupied memberships in the "city's eminent literary society," the Ossoli Circle (Knox County History Committee, East Tennessee Historical Society 419). Socially prominent, Ms. Mary Boyce Temple initially presided over the club, founded in 1885, until 1890. Upon Temple's recommendation, the club chose the name Ossoli Circle to honor Margaret Fuller Ossoli, an American Transcendentalist whose literary meetings in Massachusetts during 1840 instigated the idea of women's clubs. Temple graduated from Vassar in 1877; single throughout her life she did not fit the conventional female image that, according to Blair, typified clubwomen. Her interest in benefiting women with cultural and literary knowledge was typical of her status, however, as was her social activism. Along with her extensive membership in other clubs, such as the Bonny Kate Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the East Tennessee Historical Society and the Pen Women's Club, Temple was also a "welfare worker," as characterized by her volunteer efforts among the poor (Knox County History Committee, East Tennessee Historical Society

495). Certainly, her \$25,000 donation to the University of Tennessee for a plant research foundation as well as her leadership and financial commitment to preserving Blount Mansion greatly contributed to the educational welfare of men and women in the Knoxville area.

Although Temple directed Ossoli Circle, she did not found it. The founder, Mrs. Lizzie Crozier French, was also a strong social activist. There is no evidence to suggest the untraditional Temple was ever greatly involved in the women's suffrage movement. In contrast, French who led a more typical late nineteenth-century Victorian lifestyle for females as a married mother, held more radical political notions. French received her education at the Convent of Visitation at Georgetown, D.C., then at the Episcopal school at Columbia, Tennessee, but she never attended college. At twenty-one she married William B. French, and later had a son. William French died less than two years following their wedding, which emancipated French, who "became the pioneer advocate of woman suffrage in Tennessee and for forty years labored for this cause" (Knox County History Committee, East Tennessee Historical Society 419). As a component to her goal of women's liberation, French also educated adolescent females and children in the East Tennessee Female Institute buildings, founded the Woman's Educational and Industrial Union, organized the Writer's Club in 1911, which was the Knoxville chapter of the League of American Penwomen. She was also the president of the Tennessee Federation of Women's Clubs from 1910- 1912 (Knox County History Committee 419-20). French's liberal notions did not fade with age; rather, they increased as demonstrated by her choice to attend the Unitarian church in her later years, which was more progressive than the Episcopal Church of her earlier years. Thus, French expressed her beliefs by

actions, prompting her election as the president of the Tennessee Suffrage Association. During her presidency, she made an “Address on Woman’s Rights,” which was published in 1912 in the Proceedings of the Bar Association of Tennessee. When women finally exercised suffrage nationally in 1920, French cast her first vote and joined the local League of Women Voters. Although her run for “city councilman” in 1923 was unsuccessful, French never ceased in her activism for women’s rights. Even up to her death in 1926, she was in Washington lobbying to obtain a beneficial bill for working women.

Certainly, women’s suffrage was not a cure-all for women’s problems in the United States. Following the Nineteenth Amendment’s ratification, most middle and upper class women remained in the home and concentrated on their roles as wives and mothers. The Great Depression began in 1929 and set women’s opportunities further back; women, especially those who were married, were strongly discouraged from working because they would be filling jobs that men also needed. Women’s suffrage, however, was an extremely important measure for women’s autonomy because it granted them political freedom. Women overcame many difficulties to attain this first step to independence; moreover, their demands for equal education and their increased social role as “caregivers” and “moral regulators” increased their confidence and influence in the public sphere. The combined impact of multiple local women’s clubs and movements led to national encouragement. Between 1870 and 1935 American women made significant progress through education, social reform and suffrage, towards the ultimate economic freedom they are still striving for today.

*This study focuses on late nineteenth and early twentieth century feminism, which was connected to social movements among middle and upper class, white women. Although it is important to note that several

African-American women fought for civil rights and working class women fought for civil liberties within labor organizations, these women focused on the issues that affected their lives on a daily basis, rather than as a charity. Most of these women, as well as their wealthier counterparts, advocated women's suffrage because they all believed that their vote would allow them to further their own interests; however, middle and upper class women were able to focus more time and energy within the women's movement because they did not have to work.

II

Amidst the backdrop of the women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century emerged two prominent female writers, Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. From an early age, Kate Chopin embodied an innovative spirit, which was initially instilled in her by her great-grandmother. As she matured, Chopin's perceptive and captivating personality developed as well. Unlike many upper-class women in the late nineteenth century, Chopin found the process of securing a husband ridiculous; however, she eventually married. After several years of marriage and six children her husband, Oscar, died and left Kate a widow. Shortly thereafter, she began to write for emotional comfort and financial support. It was at this point that Chopin began to deeply evaluate her full range of emotions as a human being, rather than as a woman. Chopin reflected her personal evaluation and growth through the fictional female characters in her works written from 1889 to 1903. Although Chopin was never directly involved in any feminist movements or organizations, she took an individual step for women's liberation by exploring and representing the complex range of human emotions in several of her short stories and her second novel, *The Awakening*.

Although Chopin matured in a traditional, southern, upper-class society, which greatly repressed women, her personal desire for autonomy emerged in conflicting emotions throughout her life. She manifested these contradictions in her personal life and her writing. Throughout Chopin's life, beginning with her childhood in Saint Louis and progressing to her experience as a wife, a mother and finally a writer, she maintained an independent spirit, yet, she always struggled with the repression she felt as a Victorian female. This paradox shaped her literature as she progressed as an autonomous woman.

Born into a wealthy, Irish- Catholic family on February 8, 1851, Katherine O'Flaherty's family experiences shaped her later writing much more so than her education at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in her hometown of St. Louis. As a child, O'Flaherty suffered two great losses. Both were male family members. Her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, died in a train accident, and her half- brother died of typhoid fever while a prisoner of the Union army during the Civil War. These losses caused O'Flaherty to absorb herself in literature to ease her sorrow. They also caused her primary family influences to be women. She was very close to her mother, Eliza Faris; however, her great- grandmother Mme. Charville greatly influenced her later writings by telling her vivid stories about the founding of St. Louis and other stories of "questionable nature" (Rankin qt. in Seyersted 17). O'Flaherty drew on these bold stories as a model for her fictitious heroines, as well as models for her own behavior.

O'Flaherty's behavior as a teenager and young woman was not shocking or bold; however, she had untraditional attitudes towards the elite practices of St. Louis society in the late 1860s. Per Seyersted describes her as an "enigma" in the sense that she conformed to her surrounding society, but remained independent (24). O'Flaherty was a devout Catholic and wanted to become a wife and a mother in the traditional sense. Unfortunately for O'Flaherty, it was traditional for young "belles" to attend upper- class parties and balls to find a future husband. She called attendance at these events a "nuisance" (Seyersted 24). O'Flaherty would have rather been playing music and studying literature, such as Dante, Goethe, Mme. de Stael, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Bronte.

During these formative years, O’Flaherty was influenced not only by female writers, but also by groups of females, who made a lasting impression upon her. Prior to her visit to New Orleans, O’Flaherty was interested in the Blue Stockings Club, a group of women who cultivated intellectual conversations. Her visit to New Orleans in May 1869, however, gave O’Flaherty a new perspective about what a woman could do with her life (Seyersted 30). There she learned to smoke (a rebellious act for females during the time) and she met German artist Mrs. Barder. Barder had displayed her talents so well she earned a great deal of respect as well as a wealthy husband rather than by being simply a society belle.

That O’Flaherty was impressed by Barder’s ability to find a well-to-do husband, rather than to earn a living independently, exemplifies her traditional pre-occupation with marriage. On June 7, 1870, Katherine O’Flaherty became Kate Chopin when she married Creole planter, Oscar Chopin. Following the marriage ceremony, the newlyweds took an extensive honeymoon in Europe. Before departing from the United States, they stopped in Philadelphia, where Chopin met a Clafin sister who was a “notorious female broker of New York City” (Seyersted 33). This woman (later identified as Mrs. Victoria Woodhull) fought for women’s suffrage, won a nomination as a United States presidential candidate, and published a newspaper where she encouraged female independence, birth control, free love and socialism. Chopin wrote in her journal that Woodhull “entreated [me] not to fall into the useless degrading life of most married ladies... but to elevate my mind and turn my attention to politics, commerce, [and] questions of the state...” (33).

Although Chopin respected the non- traditional females with whom she came in contact, she seems to have ignored their advice initially. When the Chopins returned from their honeymoon, they resided in New Orleans, where Kate filled her traditional role as a wife and mother with few complaints. She did not care for her weekly reception day, however, which was traditional for an upper- class woman during the late nineteenth- century. Such a practice was necessary for Chopin to become assimilated into Creole culture, which was prejudiced towards newcomers. Her insight into this culture, however, provided a basis for the majority of her fiction. Reflections of her own visit to Grand Isle are present in *The Awakening*.

Chopin's fiction was not only influenced by the elite Creole culture, but also the culture of the street. She was a vibrant woman who, rather than isolating herself in her home as several upper-class women did, often went walking and was greatly impressed by New Orleans' culture. These walks provided Chopin with a greater insight into her surroundings and also allowed her free time from her six children, whom she had between 1871 and 1879. Although she greatly loved her children, Chopin very much understood the female sentiment that questioned that their lives were devoted entirely to their children and husbands.

Chopin was indeed dedicated to Oscar as well. Her journals indicate that she greatly loved him. Oscar was often criticized by many members of their Creole clique for allowing Kate so much independence in her speech and actions. Such freedom, however, allowed the couple to have a mutually rewarding relationship. Oscar's business, though, was not quite as rewarding. In 1879, his business was failing in New Orleans and the Chopins moved to Clouterville, a plantation area in Northern Louisiana, so that Oscar

could work in the family business. It was here where Oscar contracted malaria and died in 1883. Showing strength of character, Chopin took over her late husband's business briefly; however, in 1884 she returned to St. Louis to be with the first influential female in her life, her mother (Seyersted 48).

Although Chopin's grief was initially relieved with her return to St. Louis, it was ultimately worsened in 1885 when her mother died as well. It was during this trying time that Chopin relied on family friend and physician, Dr. Kolbenheyer. He greatly influenced Chopin in her views on science and religion. Kolbenheyer introduced Chopin to Darwinism; however, as a perceptive woman, she formed her own view "between the optimists and the pessimists among the Darwinians" (Seyersted 85). This is significant because part of this view included human free will, which she presents in several of her fictitious heroines, such as Edna Pontellier. Kolbenheyer's agnostic, scientific teachings also affected Chopin's religious views. She shed her Catholic heritage, as well as the restraints the Catholic Church posed on women.

Kolbenheyer not only influenced Chopin's beliefs; he was also the catalyst in her writing career. He was impressed by her descriptive abilities in letters and therefore he encouraged her to write fiction to relieve her grief and to support her children. Chopin followed his advice and wrote her first piece of published literature, "If it Might Be" in 1887. This poem, which is an appeal to be with her late husband, was published in *America* in 1889 (Seyersted 50).

The subject for Chopin's first published piece indicates that she was still preoccupied by her deceased husband. As of 1887, she had not found an interest of her own to pursue. Detaching herself from the domestic life, which she was accustomed to, writing became

an outlet for Chopin to express her individual ideas. Although her writing did not focus on children--if mentioned, they are normally the children of a heroine--the nascent writer was careful not to neglect her own children. Chopin wrote a couple of times a week, while generally surrounded by her children. That she chose to be in the company of her children indicates that, although she was beginning to direct her own personal interests as a woman, she also balanced those with traditional domestic interests.

Chopin's ability to complete several works in such a trying environment was due to her spontaneous writing style. She never took conscious notes for or discussed any works before writing them. The writer said, "Story writing--at least for me--is the spontaneous expression of impressions gathered goodness knows where..." (Seyersted 117). Once the words were on paper, Chopin rarely altered her first drafts. Although literary success was important to her, artistic integrity was as well. She felt that if she altered the content of her original story much of it would destroy the spontaneity that initially prompted her to write fiction pieces. Although Chopin's creative sources were her own, her fiction falls into the literary genre of realism that was quite common in the late nineteenth century. She was greatly influenced by French writer Maupassant and female writers Freeman and Jewett. She respected Freeman's ability to "portray frustrated women with a mixture of frank realism and artistic control,"(Seyersted 121). Chopin's focus on realism prompted her to write about various human psyches and characteristics, particularly women's, with an objective voice towards their actions which had been spawned by their true inner feelings. Throughout her career, the writer's literature focused upon non-traditional women. Chopin's first novel, *At Fault*, deals with divorce and alcoholism, both controversial topics at the time of its publication in 1890.

Although the story doesn't condone either source of conflict, Seyersted claims that the novel was Chopin's attempt to express her impatience with "moral reformers" and "facile idealism in fiction." Seyersted continues: "... *At Fault* [was] one of the first American novels to deal with divorce... [Chopin] is saying that we should accept man as he is; that the interference of moral busybodies is useless, and that they have no right to impose upon others a mask for immorality" (Seyersted 91, 93). The author sought to bring human flaws to the surface in her writing to expose women as full individuals attempting to understand their positions as humans in the world.

Chopin's irritation with moral busybodies indicates that she was not sympathetic to women's reform groups. Aside from abhorring the moral pretensions of groups such as the Women's Temperance Union, she thought groups for women's liberation, such as those endorsing women's suffrage, were fighting for a false panacea for women's troubles. In fact, Chopin was quite an individual in that she never belonged to many clubs throughout her life. She briefly belonged to the Wednesday Club of St. Louis from 1890 to 1892. She shortly withdrew her membership from this club--started by T.S. Eliot's mother, Charlotte Eliot, to prove the importance of women in society--because she disliked the pretensions of the women in it. Chopin later admitted that she had joined the group simply because it was "compulsory to be in a specific group" (Seyersted 92). As she became more involved in her writing, however, Chopin began to slowly shed such societal pressures, and she increasingly expressed her individual notions in her actions and writing.

Shortly following *At Fault*, however, Chopin did not boldly assert her thoughts concerning female actions in relation to a repressive society. Her next publication in

1894, *Bayou Folk*, was a collection of short stories, which critics praised as a work of local color fiction. Although the majority of the stories in this compilation are set in the Creole setting of Louisiana, Chopin did not wish to be perceived as a local colorist. Rather, she wanted her fiction to extend beyond the realms of the local and encompass “universal character” (Seyersted 82-3). That she was labeled a local color artist suggests that male critics appreciated Chopin’s work as quaint and descriptive of a specific region; however, they did not praise her ability to understand the depth the human psyche, which focused primarily on women.

Although Chopin did not care for the critics’ labels, their praise brought her artistic recognition in the St. Louis area and beyond. In the late 1890’s she maintained a Salon where cultural activity thrived. Although she associated with several affluent and prestigious people during this time period, she remained true to her individual emotions and desires. She refused the various marriage proposals she received. Seyersted says that this may have been due to her continued devotion to Oscar or her epiphany on May 22, 1894 that his death, along with her mother’s, liberated her even though they brought her much grief (58). The writer realized if she were to return to married life she would lose this freedom and “she now lived for her writing” (Seyersted 62). Chopin also maintained a level head regarding the cultural “elite” whom literary fame had brought into her company. She didn’t appreciate “empty- headed” and vain people. She rather preferred natural individuals (Seyersted 67). Chopin’s ability to dismiss the snobbery that so often comes with fame allowed for her own mental expansion, as well as her ability to express this on paper.

Chopin more clearly expressed her expanding thoughts on the female condition in her second collection of short stories, *A Night in Acadia*. This collection of short stories, published in 1897, received acclaim as a piece of local color fiction. The writer continually refused to be labeled a local colorist and the true purpose behind several of her stories was presented more clearly. Concerning the women in *A Night in Acadia*, Seyersted says “Women’s quest for self fulfillment was a theme which had occupied her all along and her new force is seen particularly in her heroines who live out their strong impulses. Some devote their lives to maternal and wifely cares, while many insist on freedom from traditional duties and limitations” (70).

Undoubtedly, Chopin’s greatest search into feminine consciousness was her second novel, *The Awakening*. This book, published in 1898, details one woman’s personal enlightenment regarding her emotions and desires. To fulfill herself, she must cast aside the obligations and limitations that the surrounding patriarchal society has placed upon her. Although she was hailed for the novel’s literary qualities, Chopin’s failure to criticize the heroine, Edna Pontellier, for placing her own priorities and happiness above that of her husband and children was abhorred by most critics. The shocking nature (for the time period) of *The Awakening* essentially caused the end of Chopin’s literary career. She was ostracized by much of the St. Louis arts culture as signified by the St. Louis Arts Club’s refusal to accept her as a member. Seyersted says that Edna’s suicide in the end of *The Awakening* indicates that Chopin saw “no happy end in woman’s quest for freedom... [the novel] is something of a landmark in nineteenth- century American literature in that it reaches out beyond woman’s obtaining equality in law and love to the existentialist demand for dictating one’s own destiny, and even that the horror of

freedom, the immutable affliction for both the women and men who venture that far”
(149-50).

Chopin did not have a “happy ending” to her life either. She was never accepted back into the St. Louis arts society and she died, shortly after she was ostracized, on August 22, 1904. Unfortunately, Chopin’s fate seemed to echo that of Edna Pontellier. She fought for women’s equality through her own actions. By dismissing society’s barriers and doing as she pleased as an individual she was able to support herself and earn respect, as well as criticism and rejection, as an independent woman of the Victorian era.

III

As the successor to earlier females who had significantly influenced societal reforms in America, it is not surprising that Charlotte Perkins Gilman became one of the most outspoken American women during the feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. Because Gilman's father left home when she was young, she was never impressed by the traditional domestic parameters set forth for women. Nonetheless, the writer married at an early age and shortly thereafter had a child. Gilman's negative experiences during her first marriage enhanced her reproach towards the domestic expectations and repression of middle and upper- class women. After breaking from marital restraints, Gilman sought to establish an extensive forum to promote her radical views about a woman's role in society. Her reform writings and activism label her as a feminist; however, her social criticism reached far beyond the typical suffragist or temperance union member. To fully liberate women, the far-sighted author thought that American society should be reconstructed in a socialist manner (Scharnhorst ii).

Unlike Chopin, the middle to upper class lifestyle promoted for women never tempted Gilman. She was always very independent, and once she became trapped in a domestic role as a wife and mother she was miserable. Gilman's misery at attempting to fulfill the traditional position as a late nineteenth-century, white woman in a middle-income marriage spawned an extensive career, primarily focused on gaining women's autonomy. Her career development as a prolific essay and fiction writer, as well as a political activist, coupled with her straightforward writing style, and radical messages, signaled an outright rejection of accepted gender biases. Gilman associated with a much more radical

group than Chopin, and not surprisingly her unconventional lifestyle and notions brought discrimination and criticism upon her works. Nonetheless, Gilman's persistent work and faith in women's equality persisted to the end of her life.

Gilman's notions about traditional patriarchal families developed at an early age. Born Charlotte Anna Perkins in Hartford, Connecticut on July 3, 1860, the future writer learned at an early age to rely emotionally and financially upon women. She was the descendant of several outspoken women, such as author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe; founder of the Hartford Female Seminary, Catharine Beecher; and suffragist Isabella Beecher Hooker. Consequently, Gilman had several female role-models who fought for human and female equality through educational and political opportunities. According to her biographer, Gary Scharnhorst, Harriet Beecher Stowe was Gilman's*greatest role model and she strove to emulate her great aunt's service to humanity. The lack of a male figure in most of Gilman's childhood also contributed to her respect towards women. After discovering that her mother should no longer have children, Gilman's father left his family fatherless and poor and Gilman "learned early to question the sanctity of the home, the 'domestic mythology,' and the role assigned to women within the conjugal family" (Scharnhorst 2).

Gilman not only questioned societal norms concerning a woman's familial role, but also throughout her formative years she also shunned conventional standards of female behavior. As a teenager, she broke the "cult of true womanhood" by refusing to apologize to her mother for an offense she did not commit. She also immersed herself in literature, rather than in dress and manner codes for women. Her formal education was limited, but she read independently and voraciously. Emerson fascinated her, as did

Whitman in her later years. The only female authors she seems to have read, however, were sentimental fiction authors, such as Louisa May Alcott and A.D.T. Whitney.

Although her opinions about these women authors are unknown, her interest in them is significant because they, like her ancestors, broke from the traditional female role by exerting their ideas in literature (Scharnhorst 3).

As Gilman was educating herself, she was becoming increasingly aware of injustices placed upon females. As a self-made scholar, her evolving feminism was mostly intellectual. Like several academics of her day, she subscribed to a Unitarian type of religion where she saw God as a “rational power or immanent presence,” rather than a condemning patriarch. Her religious views prompted her to “assume the right functional relation to society” as a social reformer (Scharnhorst 4). Gilman’s “functional relations,” however, did not include her participation in the temperance unions (the religious fervor deterred her) or as an ardent suffragist: “[Gilman thought] the vote per se was no panacea for inequality between the sexes” (Scharnhorst 4). The developing radical also asserted her feminism through physical exercise and her refusal to wear confining female fashions, such as corsets (Scharnhorst 4).

Gilman’s rapidly increasing philosophy towards female independence along with her own childhood experience with her father caused her to have “ambivalent feelings about marriage”; nonetheless, she married at twenty-four (Wells 1). Shortly after she met Walter Stetson, the artist proposed to the developing writer. Although Gilman enjoyed his company and saw them on equal terms, torn between “a duty to life and a duty to love,” she thought she should give up her own personal happiness for her work (Gilman

qt. in Scharnhorst 5). Ultimately, she chose societal norms and the desire for companionship over her work and she married Stetson on May 2, 1884.

Having given up intellectual work for conventional happiness, the newlywed soon found that rather than being able to work on her writing, she was confined to household duties. The novice wife thought it was unfair that she performed household labor free of charge and she asked her husband to pay her for her efforts. Although Gilman didn't seem to have specific problems with her husband's personality, marital conventions deeply disturbed her, as reflected in "In Duty Bound." This poem, published the same year as her wedding, expressed negative sentiments about marriage.

Initially unhappy with the household duties expected of a wife during the late nineteenth century, Gilman's depression increased when her domestic obligations were compounded with the birth of her only child. The arrival of Katharine Beecher on March 23, 1865, less than a year after marriage made Gilman feel increasingly confined and overwhelmed. Her distaste for domesticity defeated her and she felt as if she were good at nothing. She recovered while visiting a friend of the Stetson's, Grace Channing, but slipped back into depression when she returned home. At this point, Gilman realized that "the familiarity of the domestic routine bred contempt" (Scharnhorst 8). She was happy when independently working, yet, when performing work expected of a wife and mother, she was miserable.

Although very discontented in her first marriage, Gilman made attempts to rid herself of grief. In order to keep her sanity, Gilman endeavored to cultivate the intellectual and activist sphere. For example, she attended the first suffrage convention in 1886 and began to write for local papers and journals. In 1887, the despondent wife attempted to

cure her depression by taking a “rest cure” under the supervision of “nerve specialist” S. Wier Mitchell. Mitchell’s “cure” restricted everything that Gilman felt was positive. His treatment was “designed to reduce a female patient to the state of childlike docility” and she was instructed to reduce intellectual activity to two hours a day and “never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as [she] live[d]” (Scharnhorst 9). Though this experience was horrific for Gilman, she used it later as a means to speak for women’s liberation in her short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Mitchell’s “rest cure” also increased her desire for autonomy; with that, the Stetsons separated in 1887 and eventually divorced in 1894.

Liberated from the restraints of her marriage, Gilman began to spend her time writing fiction to promote emancipation for all females. Following her separation, Gilman moved to Pasadena, California where she focused strictly on her literature, which was “fundamentally, an unapologetic defense of didacticism” (Scharnhorst 11). As a single mother using her work as a means of support, she was also interested in the cash value of work. Gilman’s moral agenda and financial need prompted her to write many short stories, published in magazines that “sympathetically portray[ed] rebellious young women who resisted the demand to marry (Scharnhorst 13). Gilman wrote such stories to promote female independence and encourage women not to fall into the same misery that she had. They were not literally autobiographical as many critics thought; however, the author risked societal ostracism because she was a single mother in the late nineteenth-century.

Although Gilman’s stories were not factual accounts of her life, her own experiences influenced several of them. Her most famous story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” published in October 1890, (previously noted to have been inspired by her time under Wier S.

Mitchell's supervision) created an instant controversy. Although Gilman intended the short story to be a pure work of "propaganda" against women's domestic confinement and prominent rest cures to help their depression, it created a following that viewed it as a work of the grotesque (Scharnhorst 15). In the piece of psychological realism, the protagonist husband and doctor, John, confines her in a nursery to take a "rest cure." "Her triumph 'is symbolized by the overcoming of John, who is last seen fainting on the floor as his wife sweeps over him'" (Kennard qt. in Scharnhorst 19). Although the heroine's "cure" had not met the criteria her male doctor and husband had wished for, she, like Gilman, is freed by realizing her misery as a wife and ultimately breaks free from suffering.

In addition to her writing, Gilman attempted to help humanity through her work as a Nationalist in the 1890's. Nationalism was synonymous with Socialism in many respects. Gilman was partially drawn to the movement because it professed to emancipate women through economic as well as political integration: "Women will be independent financially, not of each other, not of the race, but of this revolting condition of dependence upon man with whom they hold the relation of marriage" (Gilman qt. in Scharnhorst 26). (It should be noted that she believed in women's freedom to choose a monogamous partner and not in free love, which she believed some European feminists advocated). Although Gilman eventually left the movement, partially because the Nationalist clubs practiced sexual discrimination and spoke out against divorce, her activism established her as a campaigner for women's equality.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, Gilman continued her writing and political advocacy to promote women's equality. In 1891, she moved to Oakland, California to

join the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association. In Oakland she made new friends to compensate for her husband and friends she left behind and maintained a Salon in her home between 1893-1894 "where various psychological, philosophical, economic, biological and ethical questions were discussed" (Scharnhorst 34). She also continued to publish several short stories in papers, magazines and journals.

Although Gilman's intellectual and literary career was thriving, she had to sacrifice her role as a mother to Katharine. Her story, "The Unnatural Mother," written in 1893, outlines her plight. In May 1894, she sent her nine year-old daughter to live with her ex-husband, Walter Stetson and Grace Channing, who would soon be married. She claimed this was a sacrifice, but her view that women instinctively nurtured children contradicted the burden that she thought children placed upon mothers.

One of the reasons Gilman cited for sending Katharine away was her career move to San Francisco, which she claimed was unsuitable for a child, to take a position as president of the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association. She took over its publication, the *Impress*, and pledged to make it "a paper which would advocate 'all truly progressive measures,' including those for women's equality (Gilman qt. in Scharnhorst 37). The determined activist could not, however, overcome the prejudice against her as a divorced woman and mother, and consequently, the paper failed.

Although Gilman was ostracized as a businesswoman, society was able to accept her more readily as a writer, which was a more accepted profession for women at the time. Her first book, *In This Our World*, a collection of verse published in 1893, was well received by critics in the Eastern United States as well as England; however, their admiration was limited by sexist conservatism. In praise wrought with chauvinism,

literary editor, Harry Thurston Peck said, “[Gilman] stands head and shoulders above any of the other minor poets of her sex” (Scharnhorst 40). Although H.D. Howells proclaimed her civic satires were “original and of good quality,” he qualified his approval by denouncing their radical nature, claiming only “fanatics, philanthropists and other Dangerous Persons” would accept them (qt. in Scharnhorst 43).

Gilman was best accepted as a literary artist, yet, she always had a social agenda behind her creative work. Her increasing social awareness and plans attracted the attention of several famous reformers, both women and men. In 1895, the writer began to work more as a sociologist than a literary artist. For five years she lectured non-stop: “I worked for Equal Suffrage when opportunity offered, believing it to be reasonable and necessary, though by no means as important as some of its protagonists held; and for Socialism, feeling the real basis of that system to be right, in spite of the mishandling of Marx” (Gilman qt. in Scharnhorst 45). During the time she helped organize several Women’s Conferences, she met suffragists Anna Howard Shaw and Susan B. Anthony, as well as Hull House founder Jane Adams. As a respected lecturer, she was also pleased to meet Reform Darwinist, Lester Ward. She praised Ward, stating that he proved females were biologically superior to men.

Gilman was interested in biological studies on gender, such as Ward’s, but she personally thought the way to women’s emancipation was through economic freedom. In 1898, she published her most famous, non-fiction work, *Women and Economics*. The radical book outlined what she perceived to be the foundation of women’s oppression:

- female subjugation originated during pre- historic times when men made women subjects under their greater physical strength
- motherhood did not allow women to work outside of the home; marriage was an arrangement enforced by the church and state

- men gave women food and shelter in exchange for “domestic servitude”
- women’s sexual attributes and subordinate roles had been emphasized so that they may keep and maintain male mates; women married for money, not love
- house care and child care should be specialized as a professional institution (Scharnhorst 51).

Although her book defines middle and upper-class women’s repression (her focus is clearly self-centered in that she neglects to mention the working-class women who had to labor in order to survive) Gilman was optimistic about female progress: “The standard of progress is not the number of states granting women the vote but the changes legal and social, mental and physical, which mark the advance of the mother of the world toward her full place... more and more the field lies open for the mind of the woman to glean all it can” (Gilman qt. in Scharnhorst 52). Her optimism was later reflected in her feminist utopias, which detailed women’s progress in a reformed world created by females.

Gilman’s ability to understand and prescribe remedies for women’s role in late nineteenth-century America was reflected in her altered attitude towards marriage. Following her divorce from Stetson, the writer had vowed not to remarry; however, she soon found that she had sacrificed personal happiness for her job. Therefore, she married cousin Houghton Gilman in 1900 following a three-year lecture tour. At this point in her life, the “unnatural mother” was unable to have children and she gladly welcomed the partnership.

Involved in a happy marriage and reunited with her daughter, Gilman was content and therefore, very productive. During this time period, “Gilman intertwined four intellectual threads—the economic emancipation of women through specialization and remunerative work, a social motherhood featuring experts in child-care, socialized housekeeping and the kitchenless home, and the gynaeocentric theory of sexual differentiation”

(Scharnhorst 59). Unfortunately, Gilman was unable to impact great reform, and as the years passed she said, “My work grew in importance but lost in market value. I wrote more and sold less” (qt. in Scharnhorst 82). This may have been due to the fact that, like most female writers at the turn of twentieth-century America, most critics (who were male) enjoyed the entertainment value of several of her short stories, but not the message of social and economic change to liberate women. Her messages remained fairly consistent throughout her works, became repetitive and less appreciated for their sole entertainment value.

Although Gilman’s later works lost their popular appeal, she persevered. Between 1909 and 1916, she alone edited and published the monthly magazine, the *Forerunner*. While involved with the publication, she estimated that she wrote an average of 21,000 words a month. Throughout her time at the *Forerunner*, Gilman maintained integrity by consistently promoting unpopular reform ideas and refusing to advertise products she couldn’t endorse. Although subscriptions to the publication were small at fifteen hundred, circulation was wide. Subscribers included the Woman’s Suffrage Association and the Socialist Literature Company.

The prolific publisher and writer expressed several of her views in the three utopian romances that she wrote and serialized in the magazine. Scharnhorst states that Gilman’s choice to write utopian fiction was effective in the sense that it was a type of “reform naturalism” that enabled her to surpass the inherent contradictions of naturalism, such as determinism, which negates the usefulness of social reform (87). Gilman’s romances, *Moving the Mountain*, *Herland*, and *With Her in Ourland* are all narrated by twentieth-century American men, and “satirize androcentric culture and describe the more humane

world she expected to evolve from it” (Scharnhorst 87). Gilman’s social thought was by no means perfect. The utopia she created in *Moving the Mountain* (1911) would not have been an ideal for many. Scharnhorst points out that it violates individual human rights for a mass ideal. Although the majority standard is also promoted in *Herland* (1915) and *With Her in Ourland* (1916) men are the controlled minority because these utopias are geocentric ideals modeled after her childhood, when her mother single-handedly raised her. Although Gilman’s utopias disregard the interests of the minority, Scharnhorst claims, “[her] philosophical orientation, [and] her reform naturalism was expressed better in utopian than in realistic fiction” during the *Forerunner* years (96).

Scharnhorst cites Gilman’s utopian romances as her best forum, but she also published many other fiction stories and non-fiction essays in the *Forerunner*. Many of these works described women’s economic independence where a woman becomes separated from her husband and with the help of another woman becomes emancipated. Others were feminist fantasies, which promoted food and drug reform and revealed the psychological mistreatment of women. Gilman also endorsed women’s contraception; however, she thought sex for pleasure and free love was selfish and immoral: “European feminists... may aspire to personal or sexual liberation, but American feminists generally prefer to devote their lives to social service and the general welfare” (qt. in Scharnhorst 102). Gilman remained active in woman’s political emancipation as well. Before 1912, she promoted the idea of a Woman’s Party, but she endorsed the Progressive Party and Theodore Roosevelt in the campaign of 1912. She continued to support the idea of a woman’s platform. Around 1916, the publisher became very opposed to the practice that teachers had to resign when they married. A self-proclaimed pacifist, Gilman spoke out

against World War I, claiming it was a device for profit-hungry men. As the war progressed, however, she began to contradict herself, speaking out against the German nation. Such a contradiction, coupled with the repetitive nature of the magazine articles doomed its continuance. Although Gilman discontinued publication in 1916, she finished strongly and devoted the final two editions of the *Forerunner* to the illogical nature of women's fashions and the threat of a world war.

Gilman had exhausted her ideas and writing capabilities as a publisher, yet, she continued to make contributions to the *New York Tribune*. During her final years, she promoted urban plans that would centralize domestic services. She thought that cities should relocate the urban poor in the suburbs, indicating intolerance of the poor and immigrants. She also continued to advocate a "social nucleus... that would improve agricultural productivity and, more importantly, ease the burden on women..." (Scharnhorst 109). Additionally, Gilman discussed the repressive nature of traditional religions on females. She argued for an "earthly millennium realized through social progress"; women's religion could provide this because they saw heaven as here and now (Scharnhorst 111). She also continued to condemn the sexual liberation of women. Her articles suggest that sexually promiscuous women exploited their bodies.

Gilman remained adamant about social reform and women's liberation through the end of her life. Scharnhorst says that "[she] never lost faith that, when the female half of humanity is fully enfranchised, politically and especially economically, the man-made world will be fundamentally reformed" (iii). In 1925 she wrote an autobiography, hoping that her ideas and accomplishments would perhaps be appreciated in the future. Her lost popularity saddened her as she expressed to a friend in 1930. After her discovery that she

had inoperable breast cancer in 1932 and her husband's death in 1934, as an advocate for the right to die, Gilman took her life by covering her face with chloroform in 1935.

Gilman's death was consistent with her life as a feminist visionary because she would have rather personally confronted and defeated difficult circumstances to the best of her ability than have been overtaken by a dominant force, such as female repression.

*Gilman's name changed from her birth as Charlotte Perkins. With her marriage to Walter Stetson it became Charlotte Stetson, which remained her name until her marriage to Houghton Gilman. To avoid confusion, however, she is consistently referred to as Gilman.

IV

During the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, American women increased their status outside the domestic sphere. Whether working alongside their male counterparts for reforms, improving their economic status and proficiency through education, or fighting for political equality through the vote, women were increasingly recognized as humans, rather than as child bearing, household managing commodities. Concurrently, female literary pioneers Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman promoted this cause through their works. Both women sought to improve women's status by presenting them as humans with desires, goals and accomplishments equal to men.

The two authors, however, approached this cause quite differently in their lives and their fiction. Chopin never participated in any typical feminist movements, such as temperance, social reform, or suffrage. She did not join any clubs or organizations that supported "woman's political, economic and social rights equal to men," and she shied away from social issues, probably because she thought they were unrealistic (Seyersted 102). Her fiction, however, suggests otherwise because within it she presents a wide gamut of female characters who search for self-satisfaction realistically within their environments, which, after all, was the premise of the women's movement. Conversely, Gilman worked directly for women's liberation and thought any goal attainable. Far from being a quiet observer, Gilman dedicated her entire life to improving the quality of women's lives through political activism, writing and journal publications. She often expressed her attitude that the United States was seriously undermining itself by incapacitating half the population's abilities. The authors' differing sentiments towards similar goals appears in the work of each, most notably in their famous fiction works.

Chopin's controversial and famous novel, *The Awakening* (1898) realistically presents the heroine's unsuccessful attempt to be satisfied as an independent woman in a patriarchal society. In Chopin's realistic setting, she utilizes symbolism of flowers and water to represent Edna Pontellier's gradual emancipation. On the other hand, Gilman avoids symbolism in her straightforward style, but her setting is an ideal land, devoid of male influence, where women have already found fulfillment.

Chopin's *The Awakening* and Gilman's *Herland* exemplify how two authors', among several women working for reform, different lifestyles and political sentiments were manifested in two works each striving for the same goal of women's liberation, and the contexts where women challenge male domination. In addition, both works examine the different societal aspects that controlled women.

Although both authors utilized different genres, Gilman and Chopin shared the primary goal of illustrating female liberation from male-dominated spheres. For example, in *The Awakening*, Edna discovers that the life she has been living for years, as an upper class wife and mother, is not personally gratifying. Like many women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Edna has not married for love; rather, she married for money. Her husband, Leonce Pontellier, provides a comfortable life for her with an abundance of material items. Other women tell her that he is the "best husband in the world," but he does not provide her with any personal support, companionship or affection (Rubin 887). He views Edna as another commodity. For example, when she returns from the beach sunburned, he looks at her as if she were a "valuable piece of property" that has been damaged (882).

Gilman also addresses the issue of women as chattels in *Herland*. Completely lacking any male influence, the inhabitants of this socialist-type land are disrupted by the three male explorers, who are taken prisoner to learn about Herland in return for information about “ourland,” the United States. When the three explorers enter the utopia, Van, the narrator, expresses his surprise at the matriarchs they encounter: “Woman in the abstract is young, and we assume charming. As they get older they pass off the stage somehow into private ownership mostly or out of it altogether. But these good ladies were on the stage and anyone could have been a grandmother” (20). Although Van and Jeff’s attitude towards women in “private ownership” changes dramatically, Gilman contrived the third explorer, Terry, to epitomize male chauvinism. He, too, views women as simple objects of beauty to be won by men and their money and then treated as lovers and domestic servants in marriage. Upon their arrival, he attempts to win over several of the young girls over with elegant gifts, such as rhinestones and silk scarves. Like Chopin’s Edna, they are unimpressed. Unlike the other two explorers Terry is not amazed by these capable, intelligent women; he would rather mold them into the ultra-feminine, submissive females he is accustomed to. Later when Terry becomes engaged to Alima, a young female in Herland, he is excited because he thinks she will change her name to Mrs. T.O. Nicholson as a sign of his possession. He says, “a wife is a woman that belongs to a man.” However, his anticipation is mistaken because Alima does not take his name nor does she submit to his wishes, and they eventually separate.

In Gilman’s utopian Herland, women have freed themselves of a subordinate existence under men, just as Chopin’s Edna is attempting to emancipate herself from Leonce. Chopin portrays how, realistically, it is difficult for a woman to become

emancipated in a society that cherishes Madonna figures and rejects “spinsters.” In *The Awakening*, Madame Adele Ragtinolle symbolizes late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America’s ideal woman, who is beautiful, child bearing, and intellectually weak. Edna describes her as a “mother wom[an]... who idoliz[es] children and worshi[ps] [her] husband” (Rubin 894). Mme. Ragtinolle has been married seven years and has a child every two years. While in Grand Isle with Edna she is pregnant again and is very careful to follow the doctor’s orders “not to lift a finger” (Rubin 895). The complete rejection of this “faultless Madonna” is Mademoiselle Reisz, who has refused married life with children to devote her life to her career as a pianist. The two women dress in an opposite manner; the mother dresses quite femininely, impractically and angelically in pure white and lace, while the pianist dresses in a dark, sloppy manner with dead flowers in her hair. The dead flowers represent Mademoiselle Reisz’s wilted soul as she has been rejected by her surrounding Creole society. She is thought to be a cranky spinster and Adele’s steady rebuff against her indicates that the upper-echelon women who conform to their patriarchs’ desires view her as a classless fool. Although several people reject the spinster and she seems a bit disenchanted and lonely, she is a much more interesting and worldly individual than Madame Ragtinolle. She loves Edna’s company and often plays the piano for her and offers her advice. Later on in the novel, Edna brings her fresh flowers to place in her hat, perhaps resembling their mutual revival resulting from each other’s intellectual stimulation. On the contrary, Edna can rarely have a discussion with Adele; at the beach the “mother woman” responds to Edna’s questions and suggests that it is “too hot to think” (Rubin 896). After observing and interacting with these two

women, Edna is torn by contradictory feelings. Her lifestyle is similar to Adele's, but her sentiments are similar to Mademoiselle Reisz's.

Chopin depicts Edna's struggle to deal with these contradictions. The author did not suggest the heroine should have never married, nor does she advocate birth control for those women who do not want children; rather, she illustrates Edna's gradual realization of societal constraints around her as well as her pragmatic effort to break free of these binding circumstances. Although she is an upper-class wife who supposedly exists to please her husband and children's needs, Edna has never attempted to emulate models of feminine standards in her "duties" and dress. Near the beginning of the novel, she admits to herself that she has never been one of the "mother women" and her children are "not apt to rush crying into [their] mother's arms for comfort" (Rubin 887-8). Although her husband spoils her with lavish gifts and gives her "uniform devotion," it is not uncommon for her to cry due to the "indescribable oppression" she felt in married life (Rubin 886). Similarly, the heroine does not attempt to create falsely overt feminine traits through constricting fashions: "The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical... there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it... Edna Pontellier [was] different from the crowd" (Rubin 894).

As Edna begins to yearn for independence, these differences become more pronounced. While at Grand Isle, a popular Creole vacation spot, the heroine learns to swim, emancipating her body through physical exercise. Chopin, thus, symbolizes Edna's own personal "awakening" towards her needs and desires: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and around her" (Rubin 893).

She begins a compatible friendship with a man, Robert. She realizes the freedom she feels when away from her children, and she begins to stand up to Leonce telling him not to speak to her in a condescending manner. Another interesting development during her “awakening” is her altered attitude towards religion: “A feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service... her one thought was to quit the stifling atmosphere of the church and reach the open air” (Rubin 914). This suggests Chopin’s sentiments that the Catholic Church greatly oppressed humans and women in particular. Following her “awakening” Edna is fully aware of her repressed forces and wishes to shed them; however, she does not know if this goal is realistic: “she could feel realities pressing into her soul ... [she] had the sense of something unattainable” (Rubin 913). The presence of the young, happy lovers accompanied by the old, religious chaperone suggests her impulses versus society’s constraints.

Nevertheless, when Edna and Leonce return to their lavish New Orleans home, she attempts to make her wishes reality. She begins regimes of exercise and observation by walking around the city, rather than staying at home and receiving wealthy women callers. This activity undoubtedly upsets Leonce, who is worried about his business and reputation as reflected through his wife. Dr. Mandelet’s suggestion that Edna’s actions may be due to associating with “pseudo-intellectual women” is incorrect; however, her desire to experience life fully as a human being is incurable (947). Therefore, when Leonce embarks on a business venture to New York, Edna sends her sons on an extended stay at his mother’s home and the heroine “resolve[s] never again to belong to another but herself” (963). She continues her emancipation through physical activities, such as gardening, and education, or reading Emerson and developing her talent for painting.

She uses her artistic gift to secure financial freedom along with betting on horse races, where she meets the infamous Alcee Arobin. The two begin a sort of affair and her ability to disregard her marital restraints suggests a type of sexual freedom. (She is, however, still emotionally attached to Robert.) In order to completely live free from her husband and children's influence, Edna moves into her own residence, "the pigeon house." Although she is more satisfied with her independent lifestyle, the heroine realizes that her surrounding society will make it difficult for her to continue. Although she may be able to bear criticism about her scandalous activity as a female, she takes to heart Madame Ragtinolle's words, to "think of the children"(Rubin 996). She is afraid that they will suffer because of her reputation. Chopin ends the novel with a conflicting image of women's emancipation. Edna proclaims, "Perhaps, it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life" (Rubin 996). Edna's "awakening," however, causes her much suffering in a fundamentally patriarchal society. Unsure about how to handle her contradictory impulses, the heroine finally drowns herself at the end of the novel; the water that initially liberated ultimately kills her. This ending is significant because Chopin was suggesting that while it was wonderful for women to realize they were more than domestic supports and decorations for their husband and children in a patriarchal society, it was also more painful.

Whereas, Chopin's novel depicts women's liberation at the turn of the twentieth century with a pessimistic tone, Gilman has a more positive outlook toward women's reform. In writing a utopian romance, rather than realistic fiction, Gilman was able to disregard the difficulties women were experiencing achieving liberation. Written more than a decade after *The Awakening*, Gilman may have been encouraged by the growing

women's movement. Like several utopian romance novelists, however, Gilman did not set the work in the future; rather, she set the fictional Herland in an extremely remote area of the world. Although several circumstances in the story are completely unrealistic, such as the women's ability to have children without sperm, she contrived the land to be completely without men so that she could represent a world perfected by the wisdom of women. She therefore juxtaposed the problems of a male-created society with the solutions of a female created setting. She arranged this plot by presenting three male explorers, Van, Terry, and Jeff, who come from an unnamed land, which is assumed to be America. Upon arriving in Herland in their "flying machine," they have only heard rumors about the female- created society, but they bring their male assumptions. They presume that a land run by females must be uncivilized. So, they bring guns, which represents violent male aggression towards problems rather than rational female methods. They are very soon surprised, however, because the land they find is beautiful and well cultivated by the strong women inhabiting it.

Ironically, the men are treated much like Gilman perceived women to be treated in the United States. They are locked under the women's supervision to be educated and to teach the Herland residents only at the matriarchs' discretion. Gilman presented her ideas for social reform through the men's education. Each man, according to his personality, responds differently to his education and incarceration. Gilman contrives each male character to represent different types of men. Jeff adores women and holds them in the highest esteem; thus, he is automatically convinced by the female's wisdom and beauty. The narrator, Van, enters the utopia with preconceived notions of women; however, he is fairly open-minded and he learns quite a deal from them. Terry is a sexist and a bigot,

who thinks women should not be educated or allowed to work; rather, they should be “loved, idolized and honored” (Gilman 61). Therefore, he loathes the practical and endeavoring women of Herland.

Naturally, in a single-sex land at least some members of that sex must work; therefore, Gilman portrayed her socialist ideas through the jobs in Herland. Several of these jobs revolve around the primary concern in Herland, the children. Because children represent the future of this utopia, they are given special treatment before and after birth. Gilman advocated family planning by presenting each woman in Herland as having a child every five years (through parthenogenesis). If the economy is unstable, the women suppress their reproductive capabilities until the economy refurbishes. Gilman did not, however, promote abortion. The women in Herland are repulsed when the explorers ask about “infanticide” (66). Special care is taken for each woman during her pregnancy and once the mother gives birth to the child, it is the entire community’s responsibility to nurture and raise it. Therefore, motherhood does not become a repressive means to keep women at home; rather, it is group effort to ensure the future of the country. Each job is specialized to suit the individual’s expertise. Some women have jobs taking care of the babies in nurseries and educating the adolescents (everyone receives equal education opportunities), while others have jobs cooking for the community. The idea of centralized cooking was important to Gilman.

Logically, it would be very difficult for women to perform their jobs well in the restricting fashions of the early twentieth-century, as much so as if they were physically unfit. Thus, each woman wears non gender-specific robes that they also provide the men to wear. Each woman is “light, clean and fresh looking” with a short hair cut (Gilman

30) and they wear their hats for “purpose, not fashion” (Gilman 45). The Herlanders also maintain their health through a daily physical exercise routine, like dance. Although Terry refers to the Herland citizens as “neuters” because they lack the “vices of men and the virtues of women,” such as “modesty,” “patience” and “submissive charm,” (Gilman 98) Van observes they are “rid of masculine traits [the men] thought to be feminine because there are no overly masculine men pushing for overly feminine qualities in women.

Another masculine trait that the Herland citizens lack is a patriarchal religion. The Herlanders do not worship a specific male god; instead, they recognize a “Mother Spirit” that is their own motherhood magnified beyond human limits. Unlike the Christian God, this spirit does not condemn them and they pay respect to her through living “splendidly” (Gilman 111). Van observes that they are “More Christian than any people I’ve ever seen” (Gilman 111).

Herland’s absence of men and a patriarchal religion alters the ultimate marriages between the male explorers and their wives, Celise, Ellador and Alima. Van and Ellador have a wonderful friendship with one another, as do Jeff and Celise; however, Terry cannot accept the untraditional nature of his marriage with Alima. The three couples engage in a wedding ceremony to recognize their monogamous relationship with each other, but following the wedding the situations remain the same. The couples do not live together and the men do not gain a domestic servant and sex object, as Terry had wished. Because there is no sexual tradition in reproducing, the women do not have any sexual attraction towards the men. Terry cannot stand his celibacy and rapes his wife. The women in Herland support each other and exile him from their land. Van and Ellador

leave with him so that Ellador may visit “Ourland,” and Van leaves there with the distinct impression that they are a “Great race through children. All the surrendering devotion our women have put into their private families, these women put into their country and race. All the loyalty and service men expect of wives, they gave, not singly to women but collectively to one another” (Gilman 95).

Van’s concluding statements sum up Gilman’s ideal vision for a reformed America where women would have an equal opportunity to impact social, political and economic agendas. In *Herland*, Gilman portrays women as she thought they could be, that is more civilized than men; whereas in *The Awakening*, Chopin depicts her observation of women attempting to break from their male-formed molds into their own entities. Unfortunately, she did not view this as an easy path. Both Chopin’s Edna and Gilman’s Alima encounter male opposition to their strong personalities. With little support from other women or men, Edna feels that she cannot continue, but encouragement from the women in Alima’s community enable her to survive the most horrific violation of a male towards a female. Therefore, literature expresses the difference that a community of women could make to each other, just as women were bonding together in clubs and societies.

Conclusion

Both Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman ultimately rejected the traditional married life customary for middle and upper class women at the turn of the twentieth century. Their independent decisions to do so ultimately led each to careers as authors promoting female autonomy throughout the United States. Although the pioneering female authors encountered many difficulties with respect to their families, finances, and publishing in a patriarchal society, these problems exposed them to a life that many women in their echelon never witnessed. Thus Chopin and Gilman developed as full human beings, rather than remaining child-like dependents, and through their literature they relayed the possibilities of fully developed women their readers. Although the authors did not utilize the same writing techniques or hold identical personal beliefs, their writings represent turn of the twentieth century, American feminism because they demonstrate woman's entrapment in a male-dominated culture and her struggle to overcome it.

Additionally, the differences between Chopin and Gilman furthered their representation of the women's movement because of the diverse individuals within it. Although white middle and upper class women primarily represented feminists, each individual woman or group who sought to improve opportunities for women outside the domestic sphere, cohesively formed this brilliant movement. Whether women became involved through education, social reform, or women's suffrage, each may have been influenced by Chopin or Gilman's literature, initially published in women's magazines, but ultimately read in academic, literary, or reform circles.

Women confined to their homes may have been initially enticed by Chopin or Gilman's short stories in magazines, which often represented women repressed in the domestic sphere and attempting to escape. Although separate gender realms repressed upper echelon women by confining them to roles as wives and mothers, they also ironically allowed them extra time and money to desire and afford education, which expanded their horizons beyond the home. The mid nineteenth-century witnessed a rise in women's higher education in separate colleges and the beginnings of some co-educational schools. Subsequently, educated women, such as The University of Tennessee at Knoxville's Angie Warren Perkins, further increased educational opportunities for women. More informed women were likewise more developed as humans and less likely to be satisfied in the traditional servitude of a wife and mother.

Certainly once Chopin and Gilman realized their full potential, neither was satisfied in the accepted role for women. Women in similar positions, searched for absolute autonomy without the support of other women, as Chopin and her characters often did, or through organizations or groups of women that mutually benefited their own rights by asserting "female values" into the society at large and working to attain their goals by gaining the ultimate objective of women's suffrage, as Gilman promoted through her actions and literature. Literary or "women's" clubs, such as the local Ossoli Circle, allowed women to use their education to read and discuss literature. Although most of these women did not work professionally, several of them labored to better their communities and promote women's equality. For instance, the Federation of Women's Clubs endorsed women's suffrage in the early twentieth century. Jane Adams and Margaret Sanger utilized their discontentment in the home to educate themselves through

personal experience working with the less fortunate. The Women's Christian Temperance Union, led by Carrie Nation, sought to decrease the inherent evils they perceived in alcohol. Although Chopin and Gilman's personal development turned them from strong Christian sentiments, therefore directing both away from the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the WTCU's contribution to women's suffrage should not be discounted. Likewise, both Chopin and Gilman believed that several feminists overemphasized the Women's Suffrage Movement, yet, Gilman promoted it much more than Chopin. Both, rather, considered the "woman problem" to encompass several factors beyond suffrage equality.

Although several suffragists advocated a woman's right to vote as their primary goal, many promoted numerous goals, such as education and social work, that also maximized women's human potential. Similarly, women whose primary focus was not on suffrage, promoted the Nineteenth Amendment because it stood as a means for them to accomplish what they deemed as important. While Chopin and Gilman represented different perspectives from one another, they had similar desires to utilize their full abilities as women and represented the wide spectrum of women whom they influenced to work towards independence and equality.

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