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## Almost Speechless: Representations of Womanhood and Female Voices in Turn-of-the-Century American Novels

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ALMOST SPEECHLESS:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMANHOOD AND FEMALE VOICES IN  
TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY AMERICAN NOVELS

by

Carmen Sylvia Smith

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfilment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English  
(Nineteenth Century Studies)

Under the Supervision of Professor Melissa J. Homestead

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 2021

ALMOST SPEECHLESS:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMANHOOD AND FEMALE VOICES IN  
TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY AMERICAN NOVELS

Carmen Sylvia Smith, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2021

Advisor: Melissa J. Homestead

In this dissertation, I close read four turn-of-the-century American novels by Henry James, Kate Chopin, Charles Chesnutt, and Willa Cather to analyze how the voices and silences of fictional women characters work to disrupt cultural ideals about womanhood. Examining which aspects of the characters' identities are expressed in direct dialogue and which traits are conveyed to the reader through narrative devices reveals how cultural ideals about womanhood restrict women's self-expressive autonomy and work to exclude female voices from the public sphere.

Chapter One examines Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886) and how erotic rivals Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom compete to control Verena Tarrant's voice. Although a public speech artist, Verena is an empty oratorical voice box promoting others' ideas. Her lack of an original, self-expressive identity locks her into the private sphere as a static, empty ideal. Chapter Two explores how Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) has two models of womanhood available to her – the “True Woman” Adèle Ratignolle models ideal motherhood, social conformity, and marital submission, and the “New Woman” and independent artist figure Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna cannot reconcile those two competing drives within her to articulate an independent identity, finally seeking solace in suicide. Although Rena Walden in Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) outwardly conforms to all standards of perfected Southern

womanhood, Chapter Three exposes how whiteness is inscribed in conceptions of idealized womanhood; thus, Rena's invisible blackness disqualifies her from participating in white social politics. Rena's gender only further exacerbates her already present, racially motivated exclusion from dominant American culture. Chapter Four discusses how Cather's narrative focalizing of Marian Forrester through male characters creates her as an in-the-moment experience for the reader of *A Lost Lady* (1923). Despite the limitations imposed by this masculine framing of Marian, she asserts herself both through meaningful self-expression and through silences, succeeding in establishing a comfortable place for herself in society.

*I dedicate this work to my children.*

*May it serve for you as a reminder how far dedication, passion,  
dogged determination, and persistence may bring you.*

*This is for you.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

From the moment I decided to embark on this journey, I was blessed with the support of so many wonderful mentors, friends, family, and colleagues. I owe having completed this work in no small part to those who have encouraged me when I felt this was impossible, believed in me when I was doubting myself, motivated me when I needed a boost, and supported me to aim for greater heights. I am truly humbled by all the love I experienced throughout the endeavor that now culminates in this dissertation.

I want to thank Melissa J. Homestead, without whom this work would not exist. Her candid advice, invaluable insights, and relentless support helped me develop my scholarship and encouraged me to finish this work. I cannot imagine having succeeded without her dedication to me as an aspiring scholar and her support as a friend. I am grateful for the generosity of my committee with their time, care, and expertise: Amanda Gailey, whose encouragement, support, and friendship throughout these years has been invaluable, Andrew Jewell, who inspired and invigorated my curiosity about the scholarship that directly led to this work, and Priscilla Hayden-Roy, who always understood what challenges I faced writing in my second language, and who offered guidance, understanding, support, and the opportunity to converse in my mother tongue from time to time.

Thank you also to those mentors without whom I never would have attempted this: Lesley Ginsberg, who has cheered me on since before I thought I could pursue this degree and who has continued to cheer for me from afar, and Daniel Worden, who relentlessly encouraged and supported me in my desire to pursue this path.

To my friends, who made me feel welcome and at home in two states, I want to express my never-ending gratitude. Thank you to Kacey Ross, whose wonderful friendship, shared interest in the field of English studies, and belief in me has brought me here. Thank you to Bernice Olivas for pushing me to be a better person, and for patiently listening and

encouraging me during my greatest exhaustions. Thank you to Michelle and Brint Kriebel for the neverending love and support, and not the least for the chocolatey encouragements when they were most needed. Also thank you to Aakriti Agrawal for wearing so many different hats and having different roles for everyone in my family – friend, confidante, mentor, babysitter, student – I can hardly express in words how much Aakriti means to all of us and how much she has helped me finish this work.

Finally, it is impossible to understate the amount of appreciation and love I feel for my family for their support. My husband Gordon has been my greatest cheerleader and most monumental motivator throughout this process. His parents, Sheryl and Gordon Sr., since the very beginning have treated me as a daughter, and I am grateful beyond words to be a part of this family. Thank you to my parents, Mummy and Paps, for never doubting me, and for always being there for me in all my pursuits, even across oceans. As to my children, Joshua, Jaxon, Adrian, and Oliver, thank you for being who you are. I started this endeavor for you, I endured because of you, and I could not have succeeded without you.

## GRANT INFORMATION

This dissertation was made possible with the support of the Cather Program.



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## INTRODUCTION

At a pivotal moment in the plot of Henry James' *The Bostonians*, Olive Chancellor implores Verena Tarrant with a quotation from Goethe's *Faust*: "*Entsagen sollst Du! Entsagen!*" ("*You shall renounce! Renounce!*"). At this time in the plot, the narrator has repeatedly emphasized that Verena is an extraordinarily talented and charismatic public speaker, but the plot also painstakingly details that the ideas Verena speaks heretofore are never truly her own. In quoting Faust, Olive here demands that Verena renounce her interest in (heterosexual) marriage, devoting herself entirely to the feminist cause. Verena's renunciation binds her to Olive in a Boston marriage,<sup>1</sup> a union designed to promote women's equal rights by uniting Verena's "gift" for public speaking and Olive's talent for shaping the rhetoric and factual support of Verena's speeches. In thusly joining Olive's almost single-minded effort toward the feminist cause, Verena – not entirely voluntarily and certainly naïvely – gives up not only her adherence to gender roles and

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<sup>1</sup>The term "Boston marriage" describes an often romantic living arrangement between two unmarried women who live independently and emancipated from male financial support. Although the term itself is often associated with James's novel, even crediting it with coining "Boston marriage," the text of *The Bostonians* does not include the term, and the arrangement it describes long precedes the novel's conception. In fact, as Judith Sensibar argues in her article, "The Politics of Hysteria in *The Bostonians*" (1991), James's writing of the Olive-Verena dynamic was probably inspired at least in part by his sister Alice's romantic cohabitation with her friend Katherine Loring. One of the most prominent examples of a Boston marriage in the United States is possibly that of author Sarah Orne Jewett and the widowed Annie Adams Fields in the late nineteenth century. 148 Charles Street, the women's residence, was frequented by many men and women of letters, and, as a personal friend of Fields', Henry James was well acquainted with the women's relationship (Judith Fryer, "What Goes on in the Ladies Room? Sarah Orne Jewett, Annie Fields, and Their Community of Women"). With *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981), Lillian Faderman offers one of the most comprehensive studies of the history of Boston marriages to date.

norms, but also transfers control over her (public) voice from her father to Olive. For Olive, Verena's most precious asset is her (literal) public speaking voice, and in asking Verena to renounce, she claims sole control over it. Ironically, this editorial control over Verena's voice and expressiveness means Olive silences Verena. If Verena is allowed to speak only the content of others' minds, then she becomes an empty voice-box, devoid of an expressive identity of her own. The impact of voice as a means of self-realization and self-expression therefore stands in contrast here to its public utilization as a political tool. The historic context of the novel's writing and publication at the end of the nineteenth century places it at a tumultuous period of American politics during which the concept of identity – as an individual, as a nation, as a body marked by gender, race, heritage, or origin – was being redefined, reconstructed, and contentiously renegotiated. In addition to tracing these dynamics in Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886), I explore these themes in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Charles Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), and Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923).

As the representation of the fictional women's voices in these novels shows, racial and economic realities complicate social ideals about womanhood, which serve by design to systematically elevate the political power of white masculinity and to disenfranchise all other voices. James's central focus on First Wave Feminism is just one example of a *fin de siècle* novel thematizing the tension in American society at the time about who has a public voice and who gets to define identities. That tension was not only extremely political, but also highly gendered. At the turn of the century, patriarchally conceived and deeply ingrained societal standards, conceptualizations, and traditions regarding the role of women relegated them to a purposefully apolitical, private sphere. Common popularized tropes about womanhood in the nineteenth century, such the idealized versions of feminine identity in the figures of the "American Girl," the Victorian "Angel of the House," the "Cult of True Womanhood," and the concept of "separate spheres," all

worked to posit women as submissive, passive, nurturing, poised, and, most importantly, quiet. For women at that time, this meant that aspiring to these ideals, being a wholesome woman, offered societal acceptance, desirability, and potential security. Of course, these tropes being mere ideals means that no woman could ever fully reach such a perfected state of what a woman ought to be. And even if these ideals were not utopian to begin with, they were exclusive by design. The economic situation of most working class women, for example, meant to exclude them from the category of womanhood altogether. Critically, since idealized womanhood pertained only to a certain class of woman and inscribes whiteness as a central attribute, black and poor women are automatically excluded from the category of womanhood and pushed to the margins of a society that set white, middle- or upper class, and able-bodied femininity as a basic premise for women. Race functions as a particularly disqualifying factor not just because it intersects with all the other assumed entities of what makes a woman – blackness at the time being considered a physical disability, an inscription of supposedly degenerative genealogy, which during the late nineteenth century still disqualified black people from being considered as fully human. But blackness also presupposed that a number of legal, physical, biological, economic, intellectual, and societal disenfranchisements were visibly inscribed on the body and served as a marker of undesirability – a contrast against which ideals were defined in the first place. Of course, as I lay out further in my third chapter on Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars*, race is not always readily visible. Nevertheless, the white-passing main character Rena Walden in the novel inescapably remains disenfranchised and othered despite seemingly conforming to all attributes of idealized Southern womanhood. As Chesnut's novel so lucidly shows, it is the absence of even invisible blackness that fundamentally informs white ideals of womanhood.

Because I am interested in representations of women and cultural ideals about womanhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth American novel, my particular

focus in this dissertation is on how fictional women character's voices and silences work to disrupt cultural ideals about womanhood. As Caroline Levander has so thoroughly elucidated in *Voices of the Nation: Women and Public Speech in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (1998), American novels at the turn of the century showed a fascination with women's voices, elaborately describing their auditory quality and their effect. Levander illustrates further how it is precisely these novelistic representations of women's voices and the reactions they produced that performed an important role in challenging existing societal ideals about womanhood and proposing alternative, autonomous definitions. As she cautions, it is important in this context to differentiate between representations of women's voice and their speech in examining the political role of women within the emerging bourgeoisie in defining the turn-of-the-century American cultural landscape. For the purpose of my analysis, I am differentiating in this dissertation between women's "speech" as it occurs in direct dialogue in the novel (i.e. the explicit articulations of a character that involve at least one "listener" other than the reader) and women's voices as expressing their autonomous identity, which can be conveyed to the reader through such narrative devices as free indirect discourse, but can also be contained within expressive silences, symbolic allusions, or synecdochal representations. As I argue in Chapter Four, in *A Lost Lady*, for example, Marian Forrester's expressions of herself are often packaged within Cather's elaborate literary devices, so that Marian's laugh becomes more expressive for the main focalizer Niel Herbert – and through him, the reader – than her spoken words as represented in dialogue ever convey about her. After all, even those white women whose economic privilege makes idealized womanhood accessible to them (such as Marian, the titular, quintessential lady in her marriage to Captain Forrester) ultimately trade their autonomous voices for status. Locked into golden cages, to employ another trope, characters such as Marian in Cather or Verena in James must express themselves in ways other than direct speech. The novel makes audible these

fictional characters' voices for the reader through narrative devices other than their direct speech. In *The Bostonians*, Verena spouts many words on the stage and yet the words do not belong to her – she is fed the intellectual content by others. As Chapter One of this dissertation posits, Verena's speech is thus alienated from her voice, and her self-expressive voice has to be located elsewhere. In a historical era during which idealized femininity was celebrated as private, domestic, dis-empowered, silent, and submissive, and divorced women from the public sphere, then, women like Verena as represented in novels reflect how women's voiced speech did not necessarily align with their internalized identity. Prescriptive gender standards and ideals prevent even those women for whom an approximation of those ideals is attainable from honestly articulating their autonomous desires, and deprive them of the true voicing of their independent selves.

Examining how gendered distinctions about public vs. private (and related oppositions between superior vs. inferior language, or enforced silence vs. autonomous voicing) work for fictional characters within novels is especially poignant because the published nature of the novel itself already disrupts those very dichotomies. In her book, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004), Jennifer Fleissner argues that because the novel carries the private (feminine) into the public (masculine), “[t]o write about feminism, it appears, means either to write about the relation of personal to public life, with the latter defined as exerting excessive pressures upon individual self-determination, or to write about history, and specifically the historical moment of the novel's composition” (Fleissner 123). Yet, Fleissner suggests, if we understand the resulting novel as part of and participating in what she calls *fad culture*, then we can analyze that novel as “producing instead a subject that is fully public and fully historical” (124). For these purposes, Fleissner defines a “fad” as being “that embodiment of historicity that most pressures the self-determining individual” (124). Understanding a fad as a motivation for an individual's thoughts and actions entails

historicizing a particular moment in society as “the time when everyone was doing x,” and even further, “we might indeed say that any given moment becomes legible *as a moment* through the category of the fad” (Fleissner 124). For a particular novel, this means that its historically specific audience informed how the novel communicated with its readers, thus capturing a specific historical moment within its pages. This is particularly pertinent in examining the situation of women within the context of separate spheres because it reverses supposed opposites. As Fleissner posits, “[w]ith its powerfully recurring ‘cycles,’ the temporality of fashion seems to mimic that of a woman’s own body, and the feminized masses are thus swept off their feet interchangeably by those two supposed opposites: nature and history, to both of which they seem uniquely susceptible” (131). At a time when “everyone” is reading a particular novel, in other words, when the novel is “in fashion,” then, the distinction between women’s supposed natural impulses and the novel’s specific historicity becomes blurred. This raises the question “if the association between women and nature plays a traditional role in keeping women on the periphery of history, what happens when women begin to look like barometers responding instinctively to what is ‘in the air’ at any given moment? Do women become then the *most* historically ‘emblematic’ subjects?” (Fleissner 131). Similarly, if a novel publicizes the private identity of (fictional) women to a broad readership, does the novel establish women’s autonomous voices superior to the (controlled) speech expressions of those same characters? If novels make silences audible, does a character’s voice – her private identity – become more expressive and historically pertinent than what her articulated dialogue represents? And what happens if the character herself is unable to articulate her identity, as is the case for Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*? As I argue in Chapter Two, Edna’s aspirations to independent artistry stand in direct conflict with her social obligations as a mother and wife, and she is unable to reconcile these conflicting identities into a coherent articulation of herself. As Fleissner’s conceptualization explains, it is only



because of Chopin's novelistic representations of the two conflicting identities as epitomized in the characters of Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle that Edna's awakening becomes legible as a historical moment in which the cultural definition of a woman's identity is at stake.

In entering this conversation about American novelistic representations of women's voices and silences in light of prevailing cultural ideals about womanhood in the nineteenth century, my approach to these questions is to combine close reading strategies with discourse analysis to map the linguistic 'rules of conversation' imposed upon fictional characters within those novels. What precisely is the character permitted to speak out loud, what and how does she articulate, which of her speech is actively silenced, and which speech is repressed? Because the way authors represent women's speech in their characters is influenced by an author's understanding of how language works in society, fictional characters already reflect a preconceived notion of the role of women's speech in the public discourse of the time as imagined by that author. As such, novelistic representations of language and speech necessarily already reflect societal gender norms and expectations within the historical moment of the novel, particularly in the realist tradition which aims to portray "life" within the novel as realistic and plausible as possible. Situating the novel within its historical moment of conception is therefore especially important because, in accordance with Fleissner's point, the texts almost always allude to pertinent "fads" of the time to make a larger point. In *The Bostonians*, for example, Fleissner points to James' constant allusions to spiritualism and mesmerism as a cultural referent for the reader. Similarly, *The House Behind the Cedars* assumes the reader's ability to summon up a mental image of the at the time widely circulated painting *Phyrne Revealed Before the Areopagus* (Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1861), and the novel contains a number of more or less explicit allusions to and parallels with its widely read antecedent, Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819). Chopin references musical themes specifically by her

namesake, Frédéric Chopin, in *The Awakening*, utilizes her expertise in fashion writing to make several fashion referents in her characters' clothing, and uses Greek mythology as an allusive motif for Edna's emotional landscape. Cather relies on romanticized pioneer imagery, specifically as mythologized around the concept of "westward expansion" through the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, to firmly situate the plot of *A Lost Lady* at least a quarter of a century before its writing. In order to gather the larger points these allusions make, I pay special attention to deciphering those cultural references, which would have been readily legible to a novel's contemporary readership immersed in that historical moment.

In thinking about how novels contribute to challenging nineteenth century American politico-cultural tropes through language, considering the relationship of power to speech is of vital importance. As Levander notes, even authors of novels criticizing the oppressive gendering of speech play a role in the societal "separation of women both from public life and from the speech that shapes it [which] is a process enacted and reenacted within the pages of American writing for the purpose of reinforcing the masculinity of the newly reconfigured public sphere" (7). Of course, we must also acknowledge here again that this kind of oppression is specifically inscribed to reinforce the *white* masculinity of the public sphere – as Chapter Three of this dissertation details further, black authors such as Chesnut faced editorial challenges in the literary marketplace that amount to a similar speech disenfranchisement and certainly affect the way his fiction functions rhetorically. The literary marketplace forces authors to thusly be complicit in reinforcing male dominance in the public arena by re-inscribing white masculinity as a superior linguistic mode for public speech. However, as critical readers of fiction we are afforded a unique position in evaluating both characters' "private" speech situation and their "public" voices. Precisely because they are imagined, our relationship to fictional characters' identities can be much more intimate than that to 'real' women. Fictional characters do

not have anything to hide; they do not have a reputation to defend outside of the novel; they invite readers into their dressing rooms, private bedrooms, and most intimate thoughts. Or, perhaps, it is better to say that they *cannot* hide, because some kind of narrative intervention is always sure to inform the reader of pertinent private thoughts or ideas – except in those cases where it serves the plot to not reveal those until later. In examining the contrasts, then, between female expression in private and public situations we can conceptualize patterns of communicative rules specific to expected gender behavior: What seems to be a character’s primary concern, and how does the expression of that concern in her speech differ from a private to a public situation? What concerns are “spoken aloud” (i.e., in direct dialogue) and which are expressed in a more private thought pattern (even passively relayed through the narrator, such as through free indirect discourse)? Which aspects of the character’s inner self are entirely out of her consciousness and relegated to an omniscient narrative presence to relay to the reader, and with which emphasis? In which situations are women silenced, and what topics are they about to address as they are silenced, interrupted, cut off, or carried away? In which ways is the nature of how they are silenced relevant to the concerns of the character or their performance of gender? What speech situations seem to be considered appropriate to which topic being addressed? Who is the silencer, and in what relation does that character stand to the silenced? These are just some of the most pressing questions applied to the main characters in the four novels addressed in my effort to examine the role of fictional women’s speech in defining and outlining both individual and group identity at each novel’s peculiar historical moment and context.

With this historicizing close reading approach to these four novels, I strive to offer a unique conceptualization of how fiction actively formulates affective identity registers for otherwise inaccessible feminine expression. Because gender expectations and standards confine feminine expression to the private sphere (and thus silences women’s

speech, especially pertaining to the autonomous expression of women's identity), fictional accounts constitute one of the few accessible sources of language formulating feminine identity. In escaping conversational rules through narration, fiction functions to make legible otherwise unwritten things, to make silenced voices audible, and to circumscribe the unnameable. Much work has already been done to describe how the confinement to the private sphere affected women in the nineteenth century, and how it historically has kept them out of the political arena. With this dissertation, I am responding specifically to scholarship such as Levander's *Voices of the Nation*, which has pointed out how controlling women's speech by defining womanhood as confined to the public sphere works to (politically) silence feminine voices. Similarly, Joyce A. Rowe's essay, "Murder, what a lovely voice!" discusses the political implications of who holds the power of speech and under what conditions in *The Bostonians*, and its argument strongly relates to my approach in analyzing the speech of the main characters of the four novels discussed in the following chapters. Jennifer Travis' work in *Wounded Hearts: Masculinity, Law, and Literature in American Culture* (2005), and specifically her third chapter on "Things Not Named" has inspired my consideration of how even silences can be expressive, especially within fiction, a premise that has informed my thinking of each of the novels I am addressing here. However, although Travis does not explicitly address race, her focus on laws as reenforcing existing power structures when it comes to speech has also influenced my approach to Chesnut's novel, in which the arbitrariness of legal standards such as the one-drop rule or *partus sequitur ventrem* thoroughly permeates the silencing Rena faces as a woman of mixed race. Lastly, my assumptions about the relationship of individualism as expressed by fictional characters in novels and its relation to the meaning created by the reader are inspired by Nancy Armstrong's work *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900* (2005).

As John Austin's work on performative utterances has shown, language does not

always just describe reality or represent a signified approximation of truth. This concept is explicitly pertinent in Chapter One in my discussion of how Verena's vow to renounce heterosexual marriage in itself constitutes a marriage vow to Olive and the feminist cause. However, the premise that language can perform active work, that it can *do* things in creating reality, permeates all four of my chapters in my thinking about how meaning is formed and defines individual identity in the novelistic representation of women's voices. In my second chapter discussion of how Edna's inability to articulate her identity is informed by her own mother's early death, Lacan's psychoanalytic theories help explain the connection to the "primal" – the pre-lingual, infantile encounter with reality – as the source of all experience, which in Edna's case is disrupted and affects her linguistic articulation of this identity. However, these assumptions about the formation of linguistic identity form the basis of my thinking about all four of the chapters in this dissertation. With this dissertation, I aim to show how novelistic representations of voices actively perform a role in building feminine identity registers, and how these registers relate to the political landscape out of which these fictional voices arise.

Other than in everyday life, where everyone struggles with the extent to which to express one's identity and to which degree to perform a public role for the sake of societal expectations, a fictionalized novel permits us access to those deeply silenced stirrings of desire within another "person." Of course, I am working here with the speech acts and identities of *fictional characters*, which themselves are necessarily shaped, influenced, created, made to speak or be silenced by an author. The novels I am addressing in this dissertation are particularly concerned with the precise topic of which parts of a woman character's identity can be articulated and which aspects must remain unexpressed. Levander points out that fictional characters perform the transformative task of influencing readers' perceptions about gender spheres by insisting upon a "natural" linguistic difference between female and male voices. Of special interest to me is the

relationship of women's voices in the nineteenth century novel to the function of the novel itself as an historico-political artifact, and how fictional women characters' voices negotiate the issue of silencing within the literary marketplace. My focus lies on examining the semiotic content of (fictional) women characters' speeches and contrasting that with the implied, silent identity of the character which is contained in the narrative, while also examining how portraying this silenced existence in a novel constitutes a socio-politically influential voicing itself. With the exception of Chapter 3, which specifically addresses race as a supreme factor in silencing, and which touches upon the significance of representing African-American vernacular in Chesnut's "eye dialect," the kind of code-switching I am discussing here focuses on gendered differences in language. As Levander argues, gendering speech surreptitiously functions to keep women silent and out of the public/political sphere through "strategies by which rapt male listeners interpret women's [. . .] talk in order to reinforce the 'natural' gender differences they assume to be innate in women's speech," and which depend upon "the special interests at work within, and furthered by, literary figurations of women's speech" such as in the novel (Levander 7). In other words, because in a male-dominated public sphere men's speech and reasoning patterns are by default normalized, natural attributes of women's speech (such as a higher pitched voice or a faster speech cadence) become undesirable, abnormal, and inferior. This conception about the inferiority of women's speech is then extended also to other language patterns, such as more descriptive reasoning or a greater tendency to emotional appeals, which functions to gender language and rhetoric and mark women's speech overall as "naturally" or innately inferior.

Each of the chapters of this dissertation shows a female main character's obstacles in voicing her identity, and traces her expressions (both in dialogue and indirectly) of self throughout the novel's narrative. The chapters are organized chronologically by publication year of the novel they examine, starting with James's *The Bostonians* as the

earliest. The individual chapters further provide a succession of feminine identity formulation, beginning with Verena Tarrant, a character whose self is almost entirely absent (Chapter One), and progressing through a self that the character, Edna Pontellier, is unable to articulate (Chapter Two), Rena Walden as a dually oppressed woman whose already inhibited expression is not yet able to withstand this double jeopardy (Chapter Three), and finally, a self-expressively liberated woman character, Marian Forrester, who succeeds in establishing a comfortable position for her identity (Chapter Four). The novels are balanced among male and female authors. Because I am considering speech acts, I selected novels driven by narrator-and-dialogue rather than epistolary novels more typical of the eighteenth century. Historically, these novels are situated during First Wave Feminism, and at a period during which the figure of “The New Woman” emerges. As many historians have conclusively pointed out, this first wave of feminism is also deeply entangled with racial questions after the American Civil War about who “counts” as a fully autonomous citizen and human. For the purpose of this dissertation, I am considering Henry James an American author (seeing as his expatriate status makes scholars claim him rightly but variably as both American and British), especially since *The Bostonians* could hardly be more American both in setting and in concern. As for Cather’s inclusion here, I subscribe to Eric Hobsbawm’s case for the Long Nineteenth Century, particularly since such issues of gender and speech carry well into the first quarter of the twentieth century – for example, the Women’s Suffrage Movement, which emerged in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth, and which developed a set of ideas about women’s voices and freedom. Further, although published in 1923, the plot of *A Lost Lady* is firmly set in the late Nineteenth Century, thus offering a sort of retrospective meta-commentary about the aspect of voice. Three chapters feature middle-class white women characters, the category of women whose lives defined both older ideals of silent and domestic femininity and the emerging feminist ideals of public

voice and freedom. A fourth chapter about Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* contrasts Rena's black feminine identity with her "ideal" white exterior, and which stands also in contrast to her brother's masculine "passing".

The subject of my first chapter, "America's Silent Sensation: Voices, Identity, and Women in Henry James's *The Bostonians*" is the main character Verena's "empty" personality. Despite the fact that Verena performs as a public speaker, her audiences concern themselves much less with the content of her speeches than with the body delivering it – Verena is essentially reduced to performing as an oratorical voice box of ideas fed to her from the outside. James's narrator continuously emphasizes the pleasant quality of Verena's voice in excessive detail rather than offering the reader even a cursory summary of her words. Further, the narration often describes audiences' "mesmerized" reactions to Verena's voice, placing additional focus on the impact of sound rather than the intellectual identity of her as the speaker producing it. As such, Verena as a public speaker constitutes merely an empty echo chamber. Although her physical presence, along with her physical voice, is publicly exposed during her speaking engagements, her own identity – her mind even – remains notably absent. Through a simulated plea for Verena to enter into a marriage vow "*Entsagen sollst Du! Entsagen!*" Olive Chancellor ties Verena to herself in a Boston marriage, and thus assumes patriarchal control over Verena, and more importantly, her voice. In this sense then, Verena remains locked up first within her simulated marriage to Olive, and later within her developing relationship to Basil, and is permanently deprived of a self-expressive, autonomous voice. Within the larger context of the novel, the character of Verena thus represents a metonymic and idealized femininity that seems perpetually locked within the private sphere. Further, the competition between Olive and Basil – ostensibly over Verena, but essentially over the power to define women's identity – triangulates the three main characters' relationships. In this context, I rely on slightly varying Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualization of the erotic triangle



in (British) novels between two men over one woman to show how the struggle between Basil and Olive over Verena is really a war between privileged entities for more power over a perpetually silenced subject.

My second chapter, “A Cacophony of Silence: Feminine Communication and Emotional Aphasia in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” traces bird and wing imagery in Edna’s journey to self-articulation. Finding herself trapped by marriage and motherhood, Edna seeks to formulate an independent, artistic identity. In her search to self-discovery, however, Edna repeatedly runs afoul of social conventions. She enlists the help of two friends, each of whom serves as a model for one of the two competing drives within Edna and each of whom has a catalytic role in occasioning Edna’s emotional awakening: Adèle Ratignolle epitomizes the ultimate maternal Angel of the House and represents everything Edna is expected to be as a wife and mother, and Mademoiselle Reisz is the independent artist figure Edna aspires to be. Although Edna thus receives both Adèle’s instruction in the language of social convention and Mademoiselle Reisz’ example in ruthless independence, she is unable to conclusively articulate herself as independent and reconciling both. Misunderstood and unheard, Edna ends up asserting herself in the only way possible and seeks a failed artist’s escape from her golden cage in the novel’s last moment that implies her suicide.

Chapter Three, “‘Mis’ Molly Walden’s daughter Rena’: Voiced Motherhood, Patriarchal Violence, and Southern Race Relations in Charles Chesnut’s *The House Behind the Cedars*” examines Chesnut’s contrast between maternal and paternal lineages as definitive of race in the passing plot. Despite Rena conforming in appearance and (educated) demeanor to the highest ideals of white Southern womanhood, her invisible black heritage leads to her inevitable exclusion from participating in white womanhood. Legal matters such as the one-drop rule affect in which state Rena is considered black and which states afford her a whitened (although not white) existence. Rena’s family history is

further affected by slavery era concepts such as *partus sequitur ventrem* (the legal consideration that racial identity is passed to the child through maternal lineage, making children of black mothers and white fathers black, and thus the property of the mother's slaveholder – often also the father of the child in question). Consequently, Rena becomes inextricably defined by her black heritage. Further, because feminine standards demand her devotion to her family of origin when her mother falls ill, which leads to her suitor's discovery of her racial identity, her gender exacerbates the exclusion from white society by making racial passing impossible for her. In contrast, her brother John, who defines himself according to his (white) paternal lineage, and who is not morally obligated to nurture family ties as a man, succeeds not only in establishing *his* white identity, but to pass it on to his son. In so positioning himself and his son as white, however, he exploits his sister's black femininity, and in particular, her nurturing domestic role, and thus participates in the patriarchally informed disenfranchisement of not just women, but black people as a whole. In the second half of the novel, I argue, Rena discovers that assuming a nurturing and maternal role can be a form of racial advocacy. Embracing the role of the teacher for underprivileged black children allows her to assert her independent voice in advancing representatives of her race. However, as a doubly oppressed individual – both because of her race and because of her gender – Rena is unable to realize a liberated future for herself. Rather than let her pursuers further exploit (and/or rape) her, Rena deliberately chooses death, and thus carries her advocacy into her legacy. With this novel, I suggest, Chesnutt makes a larger commentary about what he sees as a possible vision for the future of American race relations through the embrace of maternal lineages and racial assimilation via intermarriage.

My fourth and final chapter, entitled “‘The Over-tone Divined By The Ear But Not Heard’: Marian Forrester's Voice” discusses how Cather establishes a retrospective experience of her main character through the narrative focalization of Marian through the

lens of other characters. Through that narrative technique, the reader's experience of Marian remains in the moment and develops alongside Niel's coming-of-age interpretations of her in the plot – even though the overall narrative is situated in the past and contextualized as the memory of an unnamed communal narrator. However, this method of setting up the character of Marian as an active reading experience rather than a self-descriptive persona silences her autonomous voice almost completely. After all, as readers we are largely limited to other characters' interpretations of Marian's external behaviors, most prominently those of the adolescent primary focalizer Niel whose age, inexperience, and idealizations of her make his point of view less than reliable. And yet, in operating through the expressiveness of silences and the meaningfulness of those self-expressions outside articulated speech, Marian successfully manipulates the commoditization of her desirability and sexuality so as to assert her own autonomous identity. Similar to how *A Lost Lady* operates as a narrative, then, on a smaller level, Marian defines herself through the things that are not named and thus gains her expressive voice through expressive silences.

Taken altogether, these four chapters provide my consideration about how the representation of the language of fictional women characters disrupts political considerations that aim to exclude female voices from the public sphere. Racial and economic factors complicate social ideals about womanhood, and the representation of the fictional women in these novels exposes how these exclusions are designed quite purposefully to elevate the influence of white masculinity on a systematic level by silencing all other voices. I have certainly concentrated on novels from a relatively limited time period (or, in Cather's case, thematically covering the late nineteenth century), but that time period in American literature is particularly fruitful for the consideration of female voices precisely because of the socio-political landscape at the time. Still in the throes of reinventing its identity as a nation after the Civil War, the American concern

with who deserves a voice was particularly prominent. While this struggle over the equalized power of voice is neither exclusive to women, nor concluded even in the twenty-first century, I endeavor to contribute a small sliver of further insight into how James, Chopin, Chesnutt, and Cather addressed the concern with the representation of women's voices in their literary imagination.

CHAPTER ONE  
AMERICA'S SILENT SENSATION:  
VOICES, IDENTITY, AND WOMEN IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE BOSTONIANS*

The female body as the site of the spoken – and unspoken – word is perhaps nowhere in literature as thoroughly explored as in the character of Verena Tarrant in Henry James's 1886 novel *The Bostonians*. James sets up Verena's character as a perfectly agreeable female with a noted talent for public speaking. What seems especially unusual in her characterization is how, despite her conformity to nineteenth century feminine ideals in America, as a character, she is not only allowed to speak – publicly even – but encouraged to do so. Yet, this apparent expressiveness of hers stands in direct contradiction to how, as many scholars continue to note, Verena seems remarkably “empty,” void of original identity, and difficult to define as a character. In the novel, James captures a pivotal American moment especially in regards to “The Woman Question” – the larger societal concern of how to define American identity in light of progressive movements particularly on the feminist front – and he epitomizes this historical snapshot in Verena's character. Standing in for an American nation still in the midst of reconstructing its identity after the Civil War and representing the inherent friction between Old and New, Verena becomes a pawn in a war over more than one value. Wanting to “fill” the yet empty Verena with their own ideas about who she is to become, the conservative Southerner Basil Ransom and his progressive cousin, the Northern feminist Olive Chancellor battle throughout the novel over control of Verena – and

specifically, over Verena's public speaking persona, her voice.

As a speaker, Verena at first glance seems to transcend the apparent contradiction between her respectable, 'good girl' identity and the sensationalistic character of public performances, especially female ones, which seem to contradict the widely theorized and idealized separation of spheres at the time of the novel's setting. The character of Verena constitutes a literal embodiment of speech, but the content of what she is permitted to speak on underscores the precarious construction of feminine respectability. The content of Verena's public speeches rarely originates from her, but rather is channeled through her from other sources. This tension between the (male) attributed origin of production and the site, the female body, through which it is expressed thus becomes reflected in Henry James's "anti-feminist" approach, as many scholars have considered it, to "The Woman Question" in *The Bostonians*.<sup>1</sup> James particularly emphasizes this gendered question at the heart of the novel not only by offering two versions of feminine performance in the characters of Verena Tarrant and Olive Chancellor, contrasted by the masculine hegemony of Basil Ransom, but also by narratively triangulating the site of production (the word) in the interactions between those three main characters. The emotional triangles constructed between the three main characters, in turn, end up continuously disrupting the constructed gender performance of each individual, especially as they regard such rigidly held categories as gender dichotomies. In this manner, the analysis of speech production and performance in the dynamic of the three main characters exposes much more than just the

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<sup>1</sup>In *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, Fleissner argues that women writers' literary endeavor "constitutes an attack on naturalist fiction," particularly fiction by male authors (82). In relating specifically Charlotte Perkins Gilman's writing to a variety of naturalist texts authored by males, including James's, Fleissner traces the traditional domestic, and, as I may argue here, corporeal, role of women as vanishing during this historic time period, reflecting the struggle of women writers such as Gilman in gaining intellectual recognition. "A Mania for the Moment," Chapter three in Fleissner's text, discusses the changing role of women, and their movement from the private into the public sphere, particularly as it pertains to James's *The Bostonians*, and thus links the feminist struggle of intellectual recognition with women's historically established gender roles limited by domesticity as an ideal.

fault lines in the idealized separation of spheres in the late nineteenth century. In extending it to the novel as yet another artistically stylized, yet socially relevant form of speech production and performance, James offers his dystopian vision about the future of American life for his readers.

*The Bostonians* offers a dystopian vision in the sense that it rejects rigid categorizations found in idealistic thought, of which gender dichotomies – particularly as inherent in the concept of “separate spheres” – are only one. The late Nineteenth Century, however, the time at which the novel is set, is riddled with such hegemonic categories and the kind of “idealism that underlies utopian thought” (Martin 107), especially in an America still redefining itself after a Civil War and anxious about its future. As Davis asserts, “[t]he story of Verena seems almost an allegory of postwar feminism, and James’s vision of the women’s rights movement is provocative and historically valid because the most powerful enemy of the movement in the 1870’s (and for some time thereafter) was, in fact, post-war reactionary thought and the fear of black votes, best symbolized by the Southerner” (580). The American feminist movement toward suffrage and women’s rights thus came at a time when the hegemonic white man, particularly the Southerner (whose type James perfectly captures in the character of Basil) was already threatened in his political supremacy by the possibility of a black male vote. Added to this anxiety is the fact that “[c]entral to political reform projects throughout the nineteenth century was the assertion, among both linguists and politicians, that politics and public language were unequivocally male prerogatives,” so that feminist speakers (who by definition are political and must be public to spread their message) such as Verena openly trespass onto several sacredly privileged male territories (Levander 12). The exclusion of women from American political culture was purposeful and largely reasoned to heed supposedly “natural” biological differences between the genders. Under that notion, women’s “physical weakness, sentimentality, purity, meekness, [and] piousness” were considered

the basis for not only excluding women from the public arena, but also for defining the characteristics of female speech in opposition to male language (Ryan, qtd. in Levander 13). Many of these attributes defining separate spheres of the genders are thus captured in various ideals about womanhood, including such poignant figures as “The True Woman” and the “American Girl.”

As in much of his other fiction – including the novella *Daisy Miller* and James’s possibly most famous novel *Portrait of a Lady* – in *The Bostonians*, James explores the ideological concept of the “American Girl”<sup>2</sup> and her impact on the formation of culture. As Nina Auerbach has observed, this idealized figure was “a personification of the United States more appealing and appalling than Uncle Sam” (qtd. in Sensibar 61). The American Girl figure was appealing because it promised women desirability and political influence by proxy by the mere promise of be(come)ing the quintessential American woman, and it was appalling because “the image of the American Girl in the nineteenth [century] silenced women by idealizing them,” as it was designed to do (Sensibar 61). Sensibar argues that “James’s American Girl, the ‘golden voiced’ Verena Tarrant and her muzzled hypochondriacal lover, Olive Chancellor, present strong correctives to the appealing aspects of this nineteenth-century myth” specifically in regards to how the novel negotiates “who controls the written and spoken languages of public and private discourse” (61). Especially in the portrayal of Olive Chancellor as a queer character, often

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<sup>2</sup>Although there are subtle differences between the ideals of “The American Girl,” the “True Woman,” and “the Angel of the House,” most having to do with marital and maternal status, all three of these ideals are informed by the same basic assumptions about women. Among those assumptions are that “good” women were passive, pious, domestic, (sexually) pure, and submissive to their husbands or fathers, but also that their biological nature made them exceedingly sentimental, emotional, and even hysterical. In combination with other attributes assigned to the female, such as consumption (as opposed to production) or private (as opposed to public), these ideals also cumulated to define the dichotomies of the separate spheres. Of course, all these assumptions were mere ideals women were supposed to aspire to in order to be desirable to a certain class of men, and achieving even an approximation of such idealistic visions of being depends significantly on externally determined circumstances, such as class, race, and/or socio-economic situation.



read as overtly lesbian, James explores how even such categories as “gender, money, and class may not always guarantee power over speech” (Sensibar 61). This is particularly evident in the dynamic between the sometimes masculine, sometimes feminized New Woman<sup>3</sup> figure Olive and the supposedly archetypically masculinized Southerner Basil in their joint battle over Verena – and, because of its political power, Verena’s voice in particular.

The set of triangular interrelations of and interactions between the three main characters Olive Chancellor, Basil Ransom, and Verena Tarrant thus establishes a complex mesh of masculine/feminine binaries that continuously shift in intensity from one character to another. In these exchanges, James places much emphasis on speech as a form of intellectual transmission and influence, and, perhaps most importantly, as a verbalized shift of power over Verena. Olive’s and Basil’s desire for power is strongly related to their respective sexual desire for her, which both characters use as the occasion to gain exclusive possession of her. In their battle over Verena, then, Olive and Basil become erotic rivals, not just over Verena, but over the future of American (gender) identity. As Kahan points out, for the purpose of charting “the text’s homosexual and heterosexual bonds” in the erotic triangulation between these three main characters, “[t]wo models of plotting seem especially well suited for this task: René Girard’s

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<sup>3</sup>While it is difficult to define the concept of the “New Woman” comprehensively – in part because her (self-)definition depends strongly on the assertion of independently defined and expressed individuality – this figure, emerging at the end of the Nineteenth Century, can be generally understood as a feminine revolt against, and counterpart to, the “True Woman” ideal. The “New Woman” figure is generally associated with the women’s rights movement in that she seems, as John Higham has argued, “committed to the turn away from Victorian domesticity and toward manliness and nature, given her similar enthusiasm for physical activity (as in the late ‘90s bicycle craze) along with other formerly male prerogatives” (qtd. in Fleissner 17). Yet, to nuance Higham’s point, the New Woman seems much less preoccupied with assuming a masculine identity, and much more with rejecting the idealized, patriarchally prescribed version of femininity serving male supremacy at the expense of female autonomy. For the purpose of my argument here, the New Woman figure can be understood as a feminist cultural response revolting against the systematically established “male educated elite that could use language as a means of social and psychological control” (Cynthia Jordan, qtd. in Levander 12).

‘triangular desire’ and Leslie Fiedler’s ‘innocent homosexuality’ thesis” (48). The work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on erotic triangles elucidates this further: In *Between Men*, Sedgwick delineates how, “[t]hrough readings of major European fictions, Girard traced a calculus of power that was structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle” (Sedgwick 21). Although neither Girard nor Sedgwick concerned themselves with American fiction such as *The Bostonians*, their theorizations are readily applicable to the erotic triangle with its “active members” Olive and Basil, and its passive object of desire, Verena, as well. Other than both Girard and Freud in his Oedipal triangle, Sedgwick argues for an important aspect of asymmetry in the triangle that is induced by gender-specific power differentials. In applying Sedgwick’s triangle to James’s novel, it remains true that Verena as female (and most feminine, according to ideals about femininity) embodies the passive and most disempowered member in the dynamic between the three. More importantly, however, Sedgwick’s conceptualization of the erotic triangle involves two men and one woman, with the woman being a conduit for the desire of the men for one another – a desire upon which the men, out of homosexual panic, cannot act. In James’s novel, in contrast, we are presented with two female and one male character, yet James’s overt discussion of Boston marriage, while not necessarily alleviating homosexual fear, adds additional dimensions to the desire of the rivals, Olive and Basil, for each other. In other words, because Olive and Basil battle to a large extent about asserting their respective ideological (and utopian) revisions of gender expression (as opposed to the expression of their sexuality) as their manifestations of desire, their respective share of realized power, with all its implications, constantly shifts proportionally to their exertion of force over Verena. Rather than in Sedgwick’s conceptualization of the erotic triangle, where female bonds lead to a “relatively smooth and palpable continuum of female homosocial desire,” James’s portrayal of Olive’s desire for Verena as informed by the same (masculinized) control over language (as political

power) leads to a complicating of social desire in general, and to a sharp distinction between sexual desire and gendered social desire (*Between Men* 23). As Sedgwick puts it, “the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love,’ differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent” even if, other than Sedgwick, we apply these bonds to desires and dynamics that are not strictly sexual (48). In the triangle between the three main characters Olive, Basil, and Verena, James therefore also exposes how what one may call individual desire, one’s original identity, or the “personal” voice, relates to its expression in the social group setting, the public, and the externally performed role one plays.

In his exploration of female celibacy as a mode of homosexuality, Kahan lucidly explains how Olive’s overt lesbianism in James’s novel does not preclude Basil’s and Olive’s desire for each other precisely because their rivalry (as Olive as the queered character epitomizes) is specifically non-sexual. As Kahan points out, “a Girardian reading of *The Bostonians* [. . .] would note that even before Basil and Olive are introduced to Verena, they are figured as rivals; in fact, Olive only invites Basil to Boston to contend with him” (49). For Rowe, “Olive and Basil’s rivalry for control of Verena’s voice is suggestive of the cruel parental rivalry for a child’s affection that is tantamount to child murder,” and, more importantly, therefore marked by rivalry over one’s own desirability more than over sexual fulfillment (165). For Olive as for Basil, their respective degree of desirability depends on their (political) power relative to each other, and the battle over Verena’s voice becomes emblematic of their war over whose position allows one to control the other. Kahan locates Basil’s rivalry with Olive in her (and, initially, Verena’s) celibacy, i.e. the rejection of marriage as a heterosexually normative feminine position enabling political empowerment, yet one basic aspect of this is that Basil first and foremost battles with Olive over her realization of this political power – independent of Verena, who becomes merely their (sexualized) symbol of contention. The

fact that Olive (and, at least temporarily, Verena) seem to be realizing a male- (and marriage) independent political power position – a position representing Basil’s deepest desire as a disenfranchised Southerner stripped of all influence and economic status – posits the real motive of his rivalry with her.

Basil wants what Olive has – an economically comfortable home from which to distribute his writings into the world – and, to achieve it, he briefly even considers a union with his cousin. Despite not considering himself to be “of a mercenary spirit” he reasons that “he had an immense desire for success, and he had more than once reflected that a moderate capital was an aid to achievement” so that “[i]t came over him [. . .] that she was unmarried as well as rich, that she was sociable (her letter answered for that) as well as single; and he had for a moment a whimsical vision of becoming a partner in so flourishing a firm” (16). Of course, he immediately dismisses that idea as “a mood” that “could only be momentary”, but it is reflective of his primary motivator originating elsewhere than in his (sexual) desire (16). The novel further emphasizes Basil’s much more mercenary spirit than he judges it himself when he, later in the novel and after having found Olive much less sociable than he originally thought, he finds himself “no nearer to the sort of success he had hoped for” in publishing his articles (189). Sitting with the widowed Mrs. Luna, his other cousin who had been trying to make love to him, “[i]t stole over him gently that there was another sort [of success], pretty visibly open to him, not so elevated nor so manly, it is true, but on which he should after all, perhaps, be able to reconcile it with his honour to fall back” (189). Publicity, success and economic security are inextricably tied together for Basil, and they constitute his greatest desire, greater even than sexual attraction. Reasoning through the benefits of a purely mercenary marriage, he therefore muses

If it gave one time, if it gave one leisure, was not that in itself a high motive?

Thorough study of the question he cared for most—was not the chance for *that* an infinitely desirable good? [. . .] Should he not be able to act in that way upon the public opinion of his time, to check certain tendencies, to point out certain dangers, to indulge in much salutary criticism? Was it not one's duty to put one's self in the best conditions for such action? And as the silence continued he almost fell to musing on his duty, almost persuaded himself that the moral law commanded him to marry Mrs. Luna. (190-191)

It is not until Basil finds out just a page later that Olive had been grooming Verena's public speaking ability for her feminist cause that Basil even remembers Verena: "Do you mean the—a—rather striking young lady whom I met in Boston a year ago last October? What was her name?—Miss Tarrant?" (192). Although "he had not thought at all about Verena Tarrant" for over a year (195), not having known about her and Olive's return from Europe and Verena's public "appearance at the Women's Convention" makes Basil feel "cheated and trifled with" (198), and directly affects his suddenly firm resolution that "[d]ecidedly, it was *not* his duty to marry Mrs. Luna, in order to have means to pursue his studies" (199). For Basil, then, marriage is not the fulfillment of an erotic, sexual desire, but rather a means to an end enabling him to pursue his political goals. His goals are directly antithetical to Olive's (and Verena's) feminist pursuits, and, as Mrs. Luna points out, the greatest threat to Olive is "some one [taking] it into his head to marry Verena" and thereby disrupting "their intimacy" (193). Therefore, it is his rivalry with Olive that becomes informative of his marital desires, not a primary (sexual) desire for Verena, the direct object of such desire (193). Notably, as Kahan points out, despite the lack of "eroticism" per se, this is consistent with Girard's conceptualization of the erotic triangle in which "both rivals claim to be the originator rather than the imitator of desire, reversing 'the logical and chronological order of desires in order to hide . . . imitation'"

(Girard, qtd. in Kahan 49). Even when the original desire motivating the rivalry between the two active members of the triangle is non-sexual, then, both Basil's and Olive's impulse is to firstly sexualize their desire and project it onto Verena as the passive object, and secondly to lay claim to "being first" in having thusly projected it onto a sexual object.

Applied to *The Bostonians*, the power dynamics within the erotic triangle elucidate the Basil/Olive relationship especially well because Verena is the quintessentially hollow object of desire upon whom all of Basil and Olive's expectations can readily be projected, especially in the beginning before she is given an opportunity to discover and verbalize her own, independent desires. Further, because of the strongly satirical nature of the novel, James presents us with caricatured, hyperbolic "types," which serve well to emphasize the hardened battle lines around political gender divisions. However, James also humanizes his characters and endows them with the ability to grow as individuals throughout the novel, which often complicates his otherwise so seemingly clear-cut satire. Davis notes that the often elusive authorial stance in *The Bostonians* strongly depends on those moments when the characters shift from being "types" to asserting their individuality, and that finding "the traditional Jamesian approval" in the novel "is complicated by the slippery irony of the narrative voice" (585). Nevertheless, read as a satirized, typified portrayal, Verena Tarrant's character is the epitome of an embodied Nineteenth Century feminine ideal; she is the "unforeseen embodiment of gratitude and fluency" (51). James endows Verena with all the physical qualities of an ideal woman of the time: she is young, attractive, gracious, well behaved (despite her constantly remarked upon odious upbringing), and soft-spoken. He further devotes much textual space to emphasizing Verena's "gift" for public speaking, and repeatedly contrasts Verena's unobtrusive, pleasant appearance with the performativity<sup>4</sup> inherent in her rehearsed

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<sup>4</sup>I mean to employ this term here congruent both with J. L. Austin's and Judith Butler's usage of the word.

speeches: “she had the sweetest, most unworldly face, and yet, with it, an air of being on exhibition, or belonging to a troupe, of living in the gaslight, which pervaded even the details of her dress, fashioned evidently with an attempt at the histrionic” (56). Verena’s speech performances are eloquently staged, yet while she delivers the content, she remains a “passive maiden” (57). Verena exhibits “a singular hollowness of character” defined only by her stunning physical presence while, throughout the novel, James attributes the intellectual content of her message to others: at this point in the novel, to her father (59). She herself remains emotionally unexpressive, merely channelling others’ ideas through her voice. In short, “James’s compellingly ‘empty’ Verena” questions the source of the formation of language (Wilt 293).

Since the language Verena employs is clearly identified as not her own, the reader remains in the dark about her own identity expression. She is narrated as a character purely by her physical appearance and presence, and the physical, audible sound of her voice, as they are perceived by and affect those listeners such as Basil Ransom and Olive Chancellor, who “were under the charm” (58). In fact, the reader never learns what exactly Verena’s words are during this, her first speech introducing her as a character, as its content appears to be entirely irrelevant to setting up her persona. Her speech does not contain anything meaningful to her or expressive of herself; as Basil finds when first hearing her, she “didn’t mean it, she didn’t know what she meant, she had been stuffed with this trash by her father, and she was neither more nor less willing to say it than to say

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As related to the speech act theory discussed by Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*, Verena instantiates the object, herself as a female speaker, through the public speech act she performs. Her presence in James’s novel, as I argue in this essay, depends entirely on her ability to constitute her identity through her speech performances; in this manner, Verena’s “gift” of public speaking is a performative utterance necessary to occasion her intellectual and actual presence throughout the novel. Consistent with Butler’s use of the term in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, *Gender Trouble*, and *Bodies That Matter*; however, Verena’s speeches constitute the repetition of the intellectual property of others, in which way she re-inscribes the social power relationships constraining her with the authoritative speeches channeled through her.

anything else; for the necessity of her nature was not to make converts to a ridiculous cause, but to emit those charming notes of her voice” (59). In Basil’s stance as “the stiffest of conservatives,” with “his mind [. . .] steeled against the inanities she uttered – the rights and wrongs of women, the equality of the sexes,” James provides here not only a point of view representing the socially hegemonic nature of gender roles based on patriarchal conceptions, perpetuated in this scene on Verena by her father. The narrator’s focalization through Basil’s judgment of Verena also highlights her existence as a purely physical, corporeal, mindless being. In this sense, then, Basil’s continuous inability (or perhaps refusal) to hear “what she said; he didn’t care for that, he scarcely understood it” focuses the reader’s attention on Verena’s physicality and the auditory nature of her voice (58). However, this hyperbolic attention to Verena “as a vocalist of exquisite faculty, condemned to sing bad music” – that is, express the ideas of others – also reveals the repercussions of Verena’s limited identity. If woman, as in the novel through Verena’s example, is to be reduced to purely corporeal existence, then her own identity and self-expression become non-existent, or denied. In other words, Verena is silenced out of her own voice by the restrictions placed on her in following a feminine ideal, even if the physical incarnation of her voice is appropriated by the same patriarchal actors that silence her – in this early scene, literally her father. As such, the intellectual content expressed by her, in this case, the message of Verena’s speeches, is merely channeled through Verena to lend male (patriarchal) content – the specific words – a material, aesthetically pleasant existence. As Sensibar notes, in reducing Verena to a physical iteration of the idealized “American Girl, Verena is denied access to the language that will allow her to speak honestly” about what *she* wants; in other words, keeping Verena from linguistically accessing her own desires and preventing her from expressing herself functions reciprocally to also deny her her own identity, making her “empty”. In *The Bostonians*, a Verena silenced out of self-expression is a Verena that has not been (quite literally in the



linguistically performative, instantiating sense of the word) summoned into full existence – she remains a transmissive medium.

It is important in this context also to note James's use of spiritualistic language, and his emphasis on mesmerism, in describing Verena's performances under the direction of her father. Verena's first appearance at Miss Birdseye's is described to Basil as one of the many "séances" Olive attends (25); Verena is a "charming creature [. . .], the daughter of Doctor Tarrant, the mesmeric healer," who becomes "inspirational" once she has her hypnotizing father "start her up" (51). Thus functioning as an explicitly patriarchal spiritual medium for her father, she then puts *her* listeners "under the spell" (34), showing "an irresistible appeal" of "some power outside – it seemed to flow through her" (53) rather than originating within, and creating "her mystic faculty" (54). While, as the narrator informs us, "it was impossible to have any idea of Verena Tarrant unless one had heard her," she remains nothing more than a corporeal medium channeling voices through herself, a "prophetess," subjected to the "grotesque manipulations" by others' ideologies to which she lends her body (57).<sup>5</sup> As Fleissner points out, in this performative state "one's public declarations no longer serve as a sign of who one is but have become merely things one produces" (124-25).<sup>6</sup> Further, as during Verena's implied "trance lecturing,"

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<sup>5</sup>The connotations of the word "medium" in relation to the character of Verena make it worth noting here that the publication of *The Bostonians* falls into a historical period when news media too experienced an exponential expansion of distribution and influence. Both a spiritual medium such as Verena and news media claim to be mere distribution vessels for information. Of course, the distribution of information inevitably involves a power dynamic that leaves media in control of which information audiences hear and know. In this sense, then, James's repeated references to Verena as a medium function as a constant reminder of the power distribution inherent in the distribution of information, and that whoever controls the dissemination of language assumes a higher position of power. Since Verena is controlled by her father here, it thus is Doctor Tarrant who displays his power over both her and the audience.

<sup>6</sup>Fleissner's reading of *The Bostonians* offers a historicized argument that the entrance of women from the domestic environment into the public sphere effectuated a dubiety about previously established hegemonic gender roles and identities during the late nineteenth century, as evident in American Realist literature. Especially Fleissner's considerations of how temporary feminist fads originate the futuristic "sentimental man" and place historic moments in the present are especially useful in considering the narrative craft of this satire as historically minute (160).

historically “mediums often lectured on women’s rights while in trance” (Ann Braude, qtd. in Fleissner 132). Fleissner explains that, in this context, Verena’s mesmerized speech should be understood as a dynamic “in which the passive medium merely obeyed the commands of the man who hypnotized her”(132).<sup>7</sup> Verena therefore becomes a vocal instrument during a performance entirely.<sup>8</sup> The narrator continuously emphasizes this instrumentality of Verena’s identity, and its connection with performativity, explaining that “she was a perfect little actress,” who, in speaking about ideas outside herself “recognised nothing” and “had no suspicions of social importance” (66). In publicly serving as a performative voice instrument for other’s ideas, Verena thus subverts the sensationalist “public’s appetite for a kind of voyeurism of the inner person, a fascination not only with the actions but the *feelings* of the notable and notorious” (Rowe 159). As Basil notices during this, his first encounter of her, Verena’s presence is distinct from the ideas she expresses, which are attributable to her father. And yet, her publicity and staged performance feeds the sensationalistic appeal of a woman – an ideal woman at that – expressing what is purported to be her deepest, most privately held sentiments. In this context, Verena appeals to all senses in and of the word “sensation”: she is producing a spectacle of (purportedly) her sentiments by addressing the pathos in her auditors. It is hard to escape this literally mesmerizing appeal, for Basil “didn’t wish to assent to what

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<sup>7</sup>James’s contrast of mesmerism to the phenomenon of spiritualism is important here because although both were established at the time of the setting of *The Bostonians*, in spiritualism “the spirit medium’s passivity was less fully clear” (Fleissner 132). Particularly in circumventing some of the gender expectations imposed by separate spheres, Fleissner notes how “the *appearance* of docility helped (to some degree) to blunt criticism of a woman’s otherwise outré presence on a public stage” (132). In this sense, historians contend that “beneath this language of female passivity lay unheard-of opportunities for nineteenth-century women to discourse learnedly in public, swear like sailors, and otherwise lay claim to male prerogatives under the aegis of spirit control” (Fleissner 132). In the distinction between the two, then, James emphasizes Verena’s passivity in speaking.

<sup>8</sup>In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler suggests that language, through signification, defines the presence vocalizing it, so that the material (bodily) presence speaking then becomes “productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification” (30).

she had said; he wished simply to tell her she was delightful, and it was difficult to mark that difference” (66). In Basil’s eyes, Verena defines herself as an object of desire by signifying her physical presence through her speeches, and yet it is not she whose identity is summoned in her words. In this sense, Verena becomes a silent sensation, with the linguistically productive force defining her and making her palpable— the (intellectual) content of the words summoning her presence as a public voice into existence – residing outside of her and thus independent from her corporeal presence; it is Verena, and yet, “[i]t is not *me*” (53, emphasis in original). Her sensations, in the sense of her emotional identity, remain silent, even while her voice, in the sense of an auditory vocal projection, is made a public spectacle and sensation.

As an empty voice vessel without a true identity of her own, the character Verena clearly exposes the slippages in the differentiation between a public voice and a private one, or, in other words, the performative self, subjected to convention, which is presented outwardly and the true, uninhibited and impulse-driven self experienced inwardly. Denied self-expression, and thus deprived of her own identity, Verena becomes a perfect damsel in distress, “a touching, ingenuous victim, unconscious of the pernicious forces which were hurrying her to her ruin” (240). As McMahan has noted, it may seem “strange that James ‘rarely even reports what Verena is thinking,’ but this seems to me not surprising since Verena scarcely ever thinks at all until she falls for Basil Ransom in the last quarter of the novel” (Philip Page, qtd. in McMahan 242). However, it is precisely her vulnerability in the absence of original thought – and, consequently, self-assertion – that also increases her desirability, since the absence of an expressive self makes her susceptible to manipulation for others’ purposes. Congruent with her role as the passive object, the prize, over whom the romantic rivals Olive and Basil battle in the erotic triangle, her being a malleable (voice) instrument increases Verena’s literal market value (as desirous competition leads to increased demand) for those rivaling over possession of

her. Wilt reminds us that those two characters “compete to define, really to bring to life, Verena Tarrant, [offering] their definitions as the very shape of ‘freedom’” for her (294). For Basil, this “freedom” would mean for Verena to abide by the prescriptive values of the American Girl figure, for her to be “tipping your preposterous puppet over and standing forth in your freedom as well as your loveliness” (328), in short, to define herself according to his standards: “not to think too much, not to feel any responsibility for the government of the world, [. . .] [to] be private and passive, and have no feeling but for that, and leave publicity to the sex of tougher hide!” (10). At least theoretically, Olive’s conception of “freedom” for Verena means exactly the opposite; she proclaims:

You must be safe, Verena – you must be saved; but your safety must not come from your having tied your hands. It must come from the growth of your perception; from your seeing things, of yourself, sincerely and with conviction, in the light in which I see them; from your feeling that for your work your freedom is essential, and that there is no freedom for you and me save in religiously *not* doing what you will often be asked to do. (135)

Olive emphasizes the need for Verena to develop her own sense of identity and to express it independently here, which puts her in direct antagonism to Basil’s goals, further reinforcing the triangular dynamic of the competition over Verena. However, Olive’s conception of freedom is complicated because, in her competition with Basil over Verena, she participates in the same objectification and commoditization that silences Verena and denies her the self-expression necessary to form her own convictions. Olive recognizes the need for Verena’s self-determination, and yet she cannot help but prescribe her own terms, “in the light in which I see them” on her.

Ironically, it is Olive’s privileged status that both make her Basil’s target of envy and cause her to reenact his oppressive structures of power. Olive’s financial security, her

claim to a “very private life” (135) in the comforts of a secure, bourgeois home is what Basil aspires to and what his cousin, despite being female, has realized. As Rowe explains, Olive’s freedom (enabled by economic security) almost certainly disturbs Basil’s sensibilities as a representative of “Southern conservatives [who] saw individualism as the privilege of the head of the household” (161). The subtext for Basil, of course, here is that this head of the household traditionally is male, and he is yet “too shamefully poor, too shabbily and meagerly equipped to have the right to talk of marriage” and to become a head of household himself (311). Olive, in contrast, has established the very cozy, private home, and secure economic position that Basil so desires and that he sees as a male privilege. And, even further, to add insult to injury, Olive uses precisely this wealth to literally “take possession of” Verena, Basil’s other object of desire, in a monetary exchange for her with her parents (77). Olive’s queerness, and her intimate relationship with Basil’s object of desire thus only serve to complete Olive’s intrusion into a position Basil considers rightfully his. However, it is also Olive’s financial privilege that informs her opposition to just this kind of entitlement, since that makes her one of “those ambitious bourgeois women who – in headlong pursuit of causes, hobbies, vocations – ‘have found [. . .] that however dear the home is, they can exist without it’” (Kate Wells, qtd. in Rowe 161). In other words, Olive’s financial privilege enables her to establish her own (patriarchally) independent identity and the accompanying claim to privacy the feminine ideal favors, yet it is the very acquisition of such privileged (male) prerogatives that allows her to want to disrupt these same entitlements that typically depend on the submission of the woman. And yet, while Olive is able to recognize how this entitlement functions to oppress women such as Verena when it comes from a romantic rival such as Basil, she is incapable of seeing how her privilege inadvertently simulates and recreates just this masculine control.

Olive initially seems to win out over Basil in taking possession of Verena, but her

desire for her is informed by the same driving forces as his as they ultimately battle over the right to embody and realize masculine privileges and power. As Rowe argues, “Basil and Olive mirror each other” insofar as “the social marginality of each only highlights the underlying gender typicality of their mutual inner emptiness. This lack of being is manifested in the fierce desire (and inability) of each to achieve a public voice of his or her own” (162). Basil is inhibited by his lack of economic privilege; his lack of a secure home affects his agency in asserting himself in the public sphere. Olive, the omniscient narrator informs us, “was subject to fits of tragic shyness, during which she was unable to meet even her own eyes in the mirror” (9). Her timidity constrains her (ostensibly “feminist”) ideas to the private, and they therefore remain unpublicized and unspoken. Without a public voice, Olive’s intellectual aspirations (and thus her feminist message) are doomed to remain unrealized – because unpublicized – within the confines of the home.<sup>9</sup> This is precisely why Verena is so valuable to both Olive and Basil; they become “polar twins [who] defend themselves against isolation and the fear of nothingness by displacing it onto their all-or-nothing rivalry to possess an Other – to annex and control Verena’s spontaneous power of utterance and the emotional fecundity it promises” (Rowe 162). When Olive ‘buys’ Verena from her parents “to purchase privacy” and to groom her into a public speaker for her feminist activism (McMahan 244), Verena consequently finds that “Miss Chancellor *has* absorbed me – there is no doubt about that” (221). However, in treating Verena as a commodity, property to be owned and utilized, and controlling her in this way, Olive also risks recreating the patriarchally inspired hegemony in their relationship Olive’s feminist ideology directly opposes. As Bertonneau points out,

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<sup>9</sup>See Gilman, *Women and Economics*, particularly pgs. 70-95, who asserts that “Language is our largest common medium, and leads into literature, which is but preserved speech” (71), and laments that the historical exclusion of feminine thought from the intellectual public sphere by way of domesticating and materializing female sexuality has created a “soul of woman [who] must speak through the long accumulations of her intensified sex-nature, through the uncertain impulses of a starved and thwarted class” (95).

“Olive’s exploitation of Verena is irreconcilable with the doctrinal essence of feminism, which is that women are the moral and intellectual equals of men and deserve to be treated on their merits as individuals, just as men are” (89). Yet, as Olive seeks to use her economic power to control Verena’s language – a highly political act, as we may remember – she also denies her the very self-determination and self-expression she herself has earlier noted as so important to Verena’s freedom (and women’s in general).

In “possessing” Verena not only in the objectified sense, but also in spiritually speaking her ideas through Verena as through a (voice) medium, Olive is therefore able to ‘produce’ Verena, through speech expression, as an individual. In other words, because Olive denies Verena the very self-definitive and self-expressive ability that would allow Verena to formulate<sup>10</sup> her own identity, she absorbs Verena’s linguistic production of a public (thus political) discourse. Consequently, instead of promoting the feminist equality she seeks in freeing women such as Verena from the constraints of a traditional marriage that “[silences] voices that question and thereby threaten the political status quo,” Olive recreates those very standards of “political and sexual exploitation” with her (Sensibar 61, 58). The titular implication of a Boston marriage between the characters of Olive and Verena serves to make the novel’s thematic preoccupation with marriage even more explicit. Although, as Boston marriages historically, Olive and Verena’s relationship is ostensibly lesbian, and often read as such, at least for my purposes the existence or absence of a sexual relationship (sexual intercourse) between the characters is irrelevant to the power differential enacted here. In fact, the exact definition of what constitutes a “lesbian” relationship in the nineteenth century – does it have to include sex? – is difficult to parse for the relationship between Olive and Verena: 1885-1886 as the time of James’s

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<sup>10</sup> Again, I’m using this word in both of its senses: Firstly, for Verena to fathom or devise a sense of herself, and secondly, to express this identity outwardly in words.

conception of the novel is a transitional moment, when modern conceptions of lesbian identity are emerging while older understandings yet persisted. As Sedgwick explains, other than in the linguistic relationship between Saussure's sign and signified, for any society, "the place of drawing the boundary between the realms of the two genders, *is* variable, but is *not* arbitrary" insofar as "the placement of the boundaries in a particular society affects not merely the definitions of those terms themselves – sexual/nonsexual, masculine/feminine – but also the apportionment of forms of power that are not obviously sexual" (*Between Men* 22, emphasis in original). In *The Bostonians*, James's fluid placement of these boundaries affects his presentation of the character of Olive perhaps most prominently as both her gender identity and her gender role continuously shift in proportion to her exertion of power in general, and specifically linguistic power, over Verena. For example, on one hand, she warns Verena that "[t]here are gentlemen in plenty who would be glad to stop your mouth by kissing you" (134). On the other, her writing of Verena's speeches lends her precisely that kind of literal "control over the means of production and reproduction of goods, persons, and meanings" which are associated with the masculine, and which she rejects as a sexual form of silencing by those "gentlemen" (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 22). At the same rate as Olive intends to "save" Verena from the constraints of a traditional marriage, then, she reenacts precisely this kind of linguistic control over her feminine (self-)expression which she criticizes as silencing women in larger society.

Even further, Olive herself extorts from Verena simulated marriage vows that simultaneously function to reject traditional marriage and accompanying feminine ideals as a feminine confinement in the way of women's equality, and to bind Verena to Olive in a queer Boston arrangement that nevertheless merely sacrifices, oppresses, and silences one feminine identity (Verena's) for another (Olive's) – in short, Olive literally enacts her own form of marital oppression at the time she extracts Verena's vow to renounce



marriage. Since Olive's shyness and privacy make the public expression of her feminist advocacy dependent on Verena's physical voice, her greatest fear is being abandoned by Verena in favor of a male suitor, which would inextricably tie Verena into that marital confinement and silence which Olive's feminism opposes. In other words, both Olive's vocal self-expression and her larger advocacy of women's equality depends on Verena's commitment to her rather than a prospective husband. Any of Verena's would-be suitors are consequently existential threats to "the cause" and direct romantic rivals to Olive. In light of this threat to Olive's ability to self-express, her plea to Verena – "*Entsagen sollst du, sollst entsagen!*" (84) – acquires multiple levels of significance. On the surface, this line represents a slight misquotation of Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>11</sup> However, while both the original and the altered line translate idiomatically in context as "you shall renounce, shall renounce," a closer, semantic analysis of this misquotation offers additional insights. Given James's familiarity with the German language and German literature, as evident in his correct quotation of the line "Do you know 'Faust'?" and other Faustian allusions elsewhere in the novel (84), I believe that the 'misquotation' here is an intentional one. Had James used Goethe's original *entbehren*, the plea would accurately express Olive's wish for Verena to *abstain*, to *manage/do without*, to *deprive oneself of*, consistent with the generally accepted translation into *renounce*, or *refrain*, and Olive's monastic vision for Verena. However, in using the word *entsagen* instead, James places an additional emphasis on the speech act as performative of this renunciation. Etymologically, the root word *sagen* translates into English as *to say*, or *to speak*; with the modification of the prefix *ent-*, the literal meaning of the word in German thus connotes for Verena to *de-speak*, or *to speak (herself) apart from*. With this nuanced interpretation of James's

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<sup>11</sup>Pierre A. Walker in his notes on *The Bostonians*, as cited below, remarks that a faithful representation of the original line would have been "Entbehren sollst du! sollst entbehren" (James 443).

“misquotation” and its increased emphasis on the speech act in mind, Olive then asks Verena here not only to renounce traditional marriage, but also binds her to herself in a Boston marriage: In asking Verena to verbally “renounce, refrain, abstain” (84), Olive solicits a performative utterance, a figurative marital vow, from her<sup>12</sup> with which Verena commits herself to Olive and her cause. Effectively, she physically speaks herself apart from, or away from, being conquered by masculinity through this performative utterance, so that the utterance itself secures Olive’s own possession of Verena, and replaces the threat of a heterosexual marriage with a realized Boston one to Olive.

Olive’s shift toward a linguistically violent marital oppression of Verena here is all the more significant because their relationship itself is based on (private) language and Olive’s major feminist concern is about the publication of feminine private voices without oppression. Although Olive increasingly fears Verena’s deserting her, the two create an “intimate, homosocial world” in which “the ‘tone of softness and sympathy’ that Olive reserves for her ‘very private life,’ forms the basis of the women’s intimate interactions” (James, qtd. in Levander 31-32). In fact, their private, intimate communications with each other create the whole basis of their homoerotic relationship as founded on the idea of women’s freedom to self-define an individual identity:

Olive often sat at the window with her companion before it was time for the lamp. They admired the sunsets, they rejoiced in the ruddy spots projected upon the parlour-wall, they followed the darkening perspective in fanciful excursions. They watched the stellar points come out at last in a colder heaven, and then, shuddering a little, arm in arm, they turned away, with a sense that the winter night was even more cruel than the tyranny of men—

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<sup>12</sup>J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

turned back to drawn curtains and a brighter fire and a glittering tea-tray and more and more talk about the long martyrdom of women, a subject as to which Olive was inexhaustible and really most interesting. (171)

However, as Olive subverts the intimacy of the speech so fundamental to their homoerotic bond into a violent denial of Verena's right to self-determination in compelling her to a marriage vow, she silences Verena in much the same way as her marriage to Basil later will. Olive's task in truly helping to emancipate Verena would have been to help her discover "a personal technique for communicating which does not lead to violation of the central self" (Winnicott, qtd. in Rowe 165). Instead, Olive fails to consider how turning "Verena into an advocate for one or another side in this gender war – men are responsible for all the cruelties of human history; women are perfectly useless for public life – is not only to absurdly simplify social and historical experience but to deny the individual the freedom to seek his or her own moral development" (Rowe 165). The marital vow which Olive extracts from Verena becomes therefore doubly violating; not only does it abruptly cut off Verena's formulation of identity, but the compulsory nature of Olive's demand also violates their communicative compact, which is based on freedom and respect for individual choices.

Just as the "I do" vow during a marriage ceremony constitutes a binding action, so does Verena's disavowal effectually tie her to Olive's matrimonial control in their Boston marriage, which is only further exacerbated by the economic power differential still existing between the two.<sup>13</sup> Since the only possible responses, especially for such a

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<sup>13</sup>While J. L. Austin argues that the utterance of the "I do" vow during the marriage ceremony constitutes the exercise of an action as expressed in these words (particularly pgs. 12-24), Sedgwick (*Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*) establishes the "periperformativity" in performative utterances that "though not themselves performatives, . . . are *about* performatives and, more properly, . . . cluster *around* performatives" (68). In this sense, Verena's disavowal constitutes a vow in itself; one to Olive's recreation of matrimonial circumstances.

submissive girl as Verena, to Olive's plea actually are "I do" or "I will," as readers we are witnessing a mimicked, albeit understated, wedding scene here. Rowe explains, Olive and Verena "nurture their public ambitions for democratic social change with an ambiance of authority and dependence that replicates (and parodies) the hierarchical intensities of the mother/child bond celebrated in the cult of Victorian domestic intimacy" (170). This bond is further forged by their "[r]eveling in the closeness which their mutual isolation encourages," and which Olive's "bourgeois home" enables (Rowe 170). However, in the overtly oedipal, homoerotic relation between the two women, Olive's purchasing of Verena from her father and marrying her to herself work together to merely "[replicate] the masculine pattern of hierarchy [they displace]" (Rowe 170). As the narrator informs us, Olive's "manner of repairing her inconsistency was altogether feminine: she wished to extract a certainty at the same time that she wished to deprecate a pledge, and she would have been delighted to put Verena into the enjoyment of that freedom which was so important for her by preventing her exercising it in a particular direction" (135). As Martin explains, one of Olive's fatal flaws is that, "like so many reformers, [she] wants freedom only for the 'right' choice, the choice that she has made for herself" (111). And, as he further elucidates, in extracting Verena's marriage vow, Olive not only misquotes *Faust*, but also misreads the context of the quote:

The line in question expresses the point of view neither of Goethe nor of Faust. Indeed it is Faust's lament at the world's denial of possibility to him; the world asks him to renounce. In this deep mood of despair, Faust turns to suicide only to be saved by the vision of Easter and the angelic choir. By imagining that Goethe calls for a life of renunciation, Olive seriously misrepresents Goethe's *Faust*. Faust wants to affirm life and indeed is eventually saved [. . .], ironically, by that very striving (*Streben*) that set him

off on his quest in the first place. Olive's desire for permanent allegiance violates the Goethean injunction to constant effort and self-renewal. (Martin 111)

Rather than allowing for Verena's striving toward a future she independently defines as an individual woman, then, Olive's hyperbolic focus on utilizing Verena to advance the futures of all women ultimately serves to recursively incarcerate Verena in the same golden cage from which she ostensibly wants to liberate her. Olive punctuates her misreading of Faust's directive toward individual self-renewal further when she declares later in the novel that "it was no use striving" to better the collective if individual women such as Verena "must most humiliate those who had most their cause at heart" (396). In short, failing to differentiate between individual freedom and collective interest, and making Verena renounce marriage for the sake of the collective, Olive inadvertently achieves just the opposite – she binds Verena morally to herself in a simulated, queered marital obligation.

This is even further emphasized by Olive's literal purchasing of the privacy she needs to form an intimate bond with Verena from her parents. Even the otherwise somewhat callous Dr. Tarrant seems taken aback at the formality with which Olive "wished to have an understanding with him; wished the situation to be clear," and makes sure "that their interview would have the stamp of business" (160). As the narrator illustrates, "[i]t assumed that complexion very definitely when she crossed over to her desk and wrote Mr. Tarrant a cheque for a very considerable amount. 'Leave us alone—entirely alone—for a year, and then I will write you another'" (160-161). While this transaction quite explicitly follows the Germanic tradition of paying a bride price to Verena's family to secure their (Boston) marriage, it is even more notable that Olive keeps this agreement a secret from her. Although Verena fairly quickly notices her parents'

increased affluence and “[guesses] the cause of it,” this “discovery [. . .] did not in the least disturb her equanimity” as she “accepted the idea that her parents should receive a pecuniary tribute from the extraordinary friend whom she had encountered on the threshold of womanhood” (168). Verena may not seem morally opposed to Olive’s bride price payment for her, a fact that Olive conveniently reasons is due to Verena’s being “too rancourless, too detached from conventional standards, too free from private self-reference” (169). However, as Olive notes to herself, even if the exchange itself does not trouble Verena, the fact that Olive keeps the transaction a secret means to violate the communicative intimacy the women have formed:

She withheld this incident from the girl’s knowledge, reflecting with some solemnity that it was the first deception (for Olive her silence was a deception) that she had yet practised on her friend, and wondering whether she should have to practise others in the future. She then and there made up her mind that she would not shrink from others should they be necessary. (160)

This concession to herself in their relationship as supposedly equal partners becomes all the more significant later in the novel when Olive blames the breakdown of their intimacy on Verena’s deception regarding her secret meeting with Basil.

The chapters of the novel describing Basil’s seeking out a private meeting with Verena and their stroll through Cambridge repeatedly emphasize how the open and honest communication between the two women forms the ultimate basis of their intimacy, and how silence/secretcy constitutes its ultimate threat. As Miss Birdseye points out to Basil requesting his visit to Boston be kept a secret from Olive, Verena, once privy to it, would most certainly inform her, since “[s]he tells her most everything. Their union is so close” (213). However, appealing to the same considerateness and innocence in Verena that Olive takes as a justification to keep her own secret, Basil convinces her “not to reveal it to her”

so as to spare Olive's feelings (223). As Verena reasons, "it would be something quite new for her to undertake to conceal such an incident as her having spent an hour with Mr. Ransom during a flying visit he had made," and although "[s]he had spent hours with other gentlemen, whom Olive didn't see [. . .] that was different, because her friend knew about her doing it and didn't care, in regard to the persons—didn't care, that is, as she would care in this case" (223). Even further, for Verena "the responsibility of treating the fact that he had not so kept away as a secret seemed the greater, perhaps, in the light of this other fact, that so far as simply seeing Mr. Ransom went—why, she quite liked it" (223). And yet, as the narrator's delving into Verena's conscience informs the reader, she consciously chooses to extend Basil's visit by inviting him to a tour of the colleges: "She felt as a girl feels when she commits her first conscious indiscretion. She had done many things before which many people would have called indiscreet, but that quality had not even faintly belonged to them in her own mind; she had done them in perfect good faith and with a remarkable absence of palpitation" (226). Verena's choice to invite Basil for a walk thus presents a contrast to her typical "good faith" because "[i]f Olive was not to know that she had seen him, this extension of their interview would double her secret" making "this monstrous little mystery" an active, consciously committed betrayal even worse for the fact that "she couldn't feel sorry" (226). Verena's silence thus constitutes a triple-fold deception of Olive: firstly, by keeping Basil's visit a secret, secondly, by keeping the fact that she enjoys Basil's visit a secret, and thirdly, by keeping these secrets despite consciously knowing that they constitute betrayals. More importantly, both Verena's and Olive's deceptions of each other involve their keeping things from each other, their silence about aspects significant to their relationship and formative of their intimacy.

Either of the secrets the women keep from each other affect the nature of their relationship to each other, so that, in another ironical twist of inadvertent self-injury, it is ultimately Olive who first disrupts the intimate bond between them with her silence and

allows for the rupture through which Basil attacks. Olive's silence regarding the transaction with Verena's parents to purchase the privacy necessary to form their bond affects the power differential in their relationship prior to that bond even having been formed. And Basil exploits the exact same opening: by usurping privacy with Verena (their secret meeting), Basil creates the opportunity for intimacy to form in (private) communication with her. James emphasizes how, just as the opportunity of Olive's intimacy with Verena is based on an omission of fact, so too is Verena's intimacy with Basil based on her keeping their secret, making them "conscious that in a moment they had become more intimate" (236). Even further, while "[t]he implication that his visit might remain as a secret between them made them both feel it differently," Basil reemphasizes the significance of Verena's silence as a conscious choice: "if she were to prefer to do so such a preference would only make him consider the more that his expedition had been a success" (236-237). As Basil acutely recognizes, Verena's (active) choice to keep their meeting from Olive signals not only her budding interest in him, but it also means a conscious break in the intimacy between the women. In other words, Verena's intimacy with Basil increases in inverse proportion to her intimacy with Olive, and, in either case, the formation of intimacy is dependent on private conversation.

Of course, Olive is bound to uncover Verena's secret conversation with Basil; however, even as she uncovers their connection, Verena still conceals the private conversation they had. When Basil appears at Verena's speech at the Burrages in New York, Olive deduces that the request for his invitation could have only come from Verena herself yet, Olive wonders, "How did you know his address? [. . .] —to enable Mrs. Burrage to invite him?" (282). Admitting to a correspondence only, Verena repeats her initial reasoning that "Olive knew she got letters from gentlemen; she didn't see why she should attach such importance to this one," yet Olive explains that "You attach importance yourself; otherwise you would have told me" (283). However, although Olive is aware



that Verena's attachment to Basil is closer than the girl admits, Verena still omits "to tell Olive just now that the letter was *not* all, that there had been a long visit, a talk, and a walk besides, which she had been covering up for ever so many weeks" (285). As such, Olive is made aware only of written correspondence between her rival and her companion; the degree to which Verena's and Basil's intimacy has already increased through verbal communication and conversation remains hidden from her. In other words, Basil has already begun to appropriate Verena's voice without Olive's awareness – in one sense, he has stolen hours of enjoyment of its sound at Cambridge, and in another, he planted the seed of (sexual) desire in Verena which will ultimately lead to her silencing of her for Olive's (feminist) purposes.

Olive's concern about losing Verena is two-fold: firstly, she worries about losing the private enjoyment of her company and conversation, and secondly, she fears losing Verena as a voice-vessel for the feminist convictions she channels through her. Consequently, following Mrs. Burrage's marriage proposal on behalf of her son, Olive reasons that "[i]f the Burrages were to take Verena they would take her from Olive immeasurably less than he [Basil Ransom] would do." It is notable that the conversation between Mrs. Burrage and Olive closely echoes the transaction between Olive and Verena's father; here, after having sent a large cheque for Verena's speech, Mrs. Burrage appeals to Olive for her son's private time at their New York house with Verena, with "[t]he only thing we ask of you is simply *not* to interfere" (302). With Mrs. Burrage's assurances regarding their commitment to the feminist cause, Olive reasons that even if Henry Burrage were to succeed to Verena's affection – and thus take her from Olive in the private sense – Verena would still remain Olive's voice-vessel for public speeches. More importantly, as Verena has assured Olive just prior to her meeting with Mrs. Burrage, "I am not more wedded to all our old dreams than ever, I told you the first time I saw you that I could renounce, and knowing better to-day, perhaps, what that means, I am ready to

say it again. That I can, that I will!” (293). However, while repeating again the earlier forcefully solicited marital vows to Olive, Verena fails to distinguish between her personal, private commitment to Olive and her public commitment to the cause, making Olive misunderstand their relationship. Further, just as Olive misreads *Faust*, repeated again in Verena’s renewed renunciation, so too does she misread the relation of their public, feminist goals and their private relationship. In other words, if Olive’s goal, as a feminist, is to emancipate women’s voices from marital control – i.e. making them equal to men’s in the public and political sphere – then she has to understand Verena too as an individual woman.

To thusly be consistent, her own control of Verena’s voice in their Boston marriage, even if channelled into furthering feminist goals, has to be read just as oppressive as men’s silencing of women. The conundrum for Olive here is that her control of Verena “[confuses] two issues: personal rights and group rights, frequently defending the latter through an appeal to the former” (Martin 111). Consequently, if Olive follows through on her own feminist agenda of considering women as individuals equal to men, she also needs to apply that principle to Verena, emancipating her both as an individual woman and as the epitome of feminine confinement in marriage.<sup>14</sup> This may risk losing Verena not only as a partner, but also as a public voice, the medium through which Olive propels, even effectuates, precisely this movement – as would be the case were she to marry the conservative Basil. This is precisely why Olive prefers Henry Burrage over Basil Ransom; if Olive were to “free” Verena from the (private) bondage she imposed on her for the sake of furthering feminism – i.e. if she let Verena freely choose the object of

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<sup>14</sup>Wilt seeks Verena’s identity in her exemplifying “the fate of women, suffering,” in a male-defined society, and argues that “her re-making herself in the idiom, the form, of suffering” continually reestablishes Verena’s femininity (308). Wilt sees Verena as perpetually and recursively tied into the suffering that informs femininity, thus materializing Verena’s apparently “empty” identity as representative of the “epic female journey to the nadir, the underworld – and back” (312).

her desire – she would risk losing Verena to Basil, thus also emancipating Verena from feminism.<sup>15</sup> However, prohibiting Verena from pursuing her individual desire limits her freedom and individual rights, meaning that she is not equal when it comes to marriage – neither within her existing, Boston marriage to Olive, nor in choosing her marital partner, nor even in freely choosing the kind of marriage she wants to live. Since Henry does not excite Verena’s desire, Olive remains caught in the perpetual dilemma between liberating women, including Verena, and thus losing her both for feminism and to Basil’s idea of marriage, meaning entrapping Verena, silencing her public voice, and erasing her individual identity. Olive thus laments to herself “that it was no use striving, that the world was all a great trap or trick, of which women were ever the punctual dupes” (396). For feminism and women’s liberation to succeed, James seems to suggest here, feminists such as Olive will need to reconcile the individual’s needs and desires with those of the larger collective. In short, while allowing Verena free choice may mean to lose her to the movement, denying Verena the language she needs to formulate her own desires and make free individual choices will necessarily lead to the failure of the movement as a whole because a movement, by definition, can only be informed by a collective of individuals making the same choices.

For Basil Ransom, his vision of how he defines his masculinity puts his efforts into a similar conundrum. Verena is not only the object of his (sexual) desire, but also the feminine epitome he seeks to preserve from what he sees as the feminists’ breach of gender hierarchy. He desires Verena because he is attracted to her performance of

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<sup>15</sup>Fleissner suggests a similar dichotomy in Olive that counterposes feminist willfulness with feminine domesticity; she argues that, whereas the historical circumstances of femininity provide little hope for change, Olive exemplifies the geminate quality of feminism in Regionalism and Naturalism, which “could come forward *through* that very willfulness, that persistent turn back against the self’s own demands” (122). While providing a historical positioning of James’s novel in relation to Regionalist figures, Fleissner thus provides a clear picture of the complex dichotomous concerns of Realist literature particularly as they pertain to first-wave feminism.

femininity and beauty. It is her passivity and innocence, her implicit projected need to be rescued and protected, that he considers her most innate self. And yet, “[s]ince character is ‘coaxed forth as one achieves mastery over the world outside oneself,’ Verena has not had a chance to develop any” true sense of identity or self (Sally Helgeson, qtd. in McMahan 248). Nor has she been given the opportunity to make (informed) choices of her own specifically as it regards her position in the world as a woman.<sup>16</sup> Yet Basil exploits precisely this (by means of feminine ideals) imposed silence on (and of) Verena to overpower her sexually and “assert forcefully his right to make Verena’s speech private” (Levander 32). Just as Olive has warned Verena that “[t]here are gentlemen in plenty who would be glad to stop your mouth by kissing you!” (134), Basil’s “only answer” to “the natural echo of what these ladies [Olive and Mrs. Luna] believed” as spoken to him through Verena’s mouth is “an outstretched arm, which, passing round her waist, should draw her so close to him as to enable him to give her a concise account of his situation in the form of a deliberate kiss” (323). As Sensibar points out, “[c]ertainly Basil’s desire is a modified rape fantasy just as his purpose in marrying Verena is ‘to strike her dumb,’” and his ultimate motivation is not to “rescue” Verena from Olive’s oppression (66). Rather, Basil “wants the success and victory of silencing a woman who questions the signs or meanings given her by her culture” (Sensibar 66). As Olive puts it, “He didn’t love her, he

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<sup>16</sup>In a lengthy, yet highly elucidative footnote, McMahan quotes from a variety of studies on nineteenth century etiquette for young women to show “how little Verena would have known about the stirrings of sexual desire.” As Haller suggests, “if properly educated . . . women would live through the years before marriage ‘perfect strangers to any sensations’ and would develop such feelings only when a suitable gentleman proclaimed his intentions” (John S. Haller, Jr., “From Maidenhood to Menopause,” qtd. in McMahan). Of course, to qualify Haller’s argument here a bit, it is probably more accurate to say that propriety would have women at least *claim* to never have experienced pre-marital sexual stirrings. Citing from Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s biography of Edith Wharton, however, McMahan further elaborates on how a certain ignorance about sensations of desire leads to an even greater ignorance about “the act of sexual intercourse” itself, and consequently, sexuality. Verena, having been neither educated in sexuality, nor in the signifying, Lacanian language describing (sexual) desire, therefore has no reference point to analyze her sensations, and consequently is doubly silenced in her self-expression. (McMahan, footnote pg. 248)

hated her, he only wanted to smother her, to crush her, to kill her [. . .] It was because he knew that her voice had magic in it, and from the moment he caught its first note he had determined to destroy it” (366). Because Verena’s speech, both because of its public nature and because of its topic, produces Basil’s “anxiety about [his] own limited power, not just in relation to patriarchy, but in relation to the successful public speaking of women who seem too comfortably ensconced in its power structure,” her public success is primarily a political threat for him (Levander 34). The nature of Verena’s speech, whether it is to be public or confined to the private, thus becomes the definitive gender dynamic in both the sexual and political rivalry between Basil and Olive.

James reflects this, in the late nineteenth century, very timely political discussion about the Woman Question – i.e. woman’s role in politics – within the often noted metaphorical recreation of the Civil War in Olive and Basil’s battles with each other. From a political standpoint, Basil metaphorically “admitted that North and South were a single, indivisible political organism” (12), yet for him as a Southerner, this union also means the defeat of his chivalrous, conservative Southern culture as it becomes usurped by liberal, modernist Northern thought. Similarly, Basil understands the male/female separate spheres, taken together to comprise a whole, but to understand the feminine forces as equal to the masculine would be to cede precious (power) territory to women. In this sense, Basil understands the interaction between the genders as an economic exchange where each depends on the different role within the production/consumption cycle of the other. The political defeat of the South after the Civil War carries with it not only a blow to his conservatism, but also casts shadows on his masculinity in the surge of what he terms the typical “‘Yankee female’ – the figure which, in the unregenerate imagination of the children of the cotton-states, was produced by the New England school-system, the Puritan code, the ungenial climate, the absence of chivalry” (39). And yet, as Maxwell explains, Basil’s later remarks that “chivalry works best when women are gracious (that is,

decline to take advantage of the ‘power’ offered) expose the essentially self-serving nature of chivalry; that it, in fact, only *appears* to give the advantage to the ‘weaker’ sex and that it works well only when this sex *agrees* not to take advantage of the power offered” (22-23). Interestingly, it is also in those instances when Basil, feeling emasculated, (re)asserts his dominance through emphasizing his conservatism that he is betrayed by *his* voice: “It was a part of his Southern gallantry – his accent always came out strongly when he said anything of that sort – and it committed him to nothing in particular” (192). With James thusly connecting voice to power, and dominance to masculinity, for Basil, all women are “essentially inferior to men, and infinitely tiresome when they declined to accept the lot which men had made for them” (186). In his reactionary stance against the political progress of the Union and the socio-cultural changes effectuated by it, Basil’s Southern masculinity is threatened by democracy as “talkative, querulous, hysterical, maudlin, full of false ideas, of unhealthy germs, of extravagant, dissipated habits” (184). Most of all, Basil fears the “most damnable feminisation” of American culture, which creates “a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities” and which threatens to diminish his own political power<sup>17</sup> (325). As the epitome of the “resisting male” (209), Basil aspires to resurrect a political sphere informed by (white) patriarchal privilege because “he was sick of all the modern cant about freedom and had no sympathy with those who wanted an extension of it” (318-19). Basil considers feminism – augmented by democracy – as threatening to him and his political power, and

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<sup>17</sup>In her introduction to *The Bostonians* (as cited below), A. S. Byatt argues that the novel excogitates “idealism in a democracy that is still recovering from a civil war bitterly fought for social ideals” (xii). In the historical context of the novel, first-wave feminism is intricately tied to the abolition of slavery, as both movements sought the release of suppressed groups from political exclusion and domestic confinement. As noted earlier, Davis also comments on the allegoric nature of Verena’s liberation standing in for the threat the women’s suffrage movement posed specifically to those Southern reactionaries already anxious about the fourteenth Amendment and the possibility of a black vote.

as long as women enter spheres that he considers privileged to men, femininity restricts and emasculates him.<sup>18</sup> In controlling Verena, then, and specifically in privatizing her voice for his sole perusal, Basil not only reasserts his own masculine superiority, but he also allegorically excludes women from the public, political arena. His direct antagonism to Olive in the battle over Verena, therefore is Basil's fight for the maintenance of hegemonic gender divisions in much same way Olive fights for feminism; for both, Verena becomes the commodity needed to assert their respective vision for the future role of the American woman in society.

Yet despite Olive and Basil's antagonism to each other, either of their utopian conceptions about (in)equality thrives only because the other one exists. Without Verena, Olive remains confined to the private sphere, a lone, unremarkable woman with no voice. Since Olive reenacts the same hegemonic hierarchies in traditional (heterosexual) models that silence Verena's individuality (and identity formation in exploring sexual desire) in their relationship, Olive takes on an increasingly masculine role in exerting this power on her.<sup>19</sup> As Basil notes sarcastically and "with a great mocking amazement," it would come

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<sup>18</sup>See Bentley on the Realists' "note of gender panic if not misogyny in the chorus of voices raised against women's increased public visibility" (113), which provides a lucid picture of the connections between post-Civil War politics and the socio-cultural changes inspired by shifting gender roles. See also Fleissner, who further argues that the increased presence of women in the public space effectuates the formation of the New Woman, which commences not only first-wave feminism, but also the commercialization of American culture – both marking an unprecedented dubiety about gender identity in history.

<sup>19</sup>See McMurray, who argues that "[h]omosexuality in Olive is the biological evidence of a rigid self-centeredness that has blinded itself to the heterogeneous character of reality" (341). In "James's Pragmatic Realism," McMurray goes so far as to portend that "the freedom [Olive] would win for women is pitched at an absolute level that strikes at the heterosexual basis of human existence," claiming that "any normal or usual relationship between the two women is perverted by the tyranny of Olive's pathological personality" (341). Without elaborating too much on the problematic claims McMurray makes here, putting his essay in conversation with Joan Maxwell's article "Delighting in a Bite: James's Seduction of His Readers in *The Bostonians*" shows how James's satirical treatment of gender relations easily is read as an absolutist argument favoring heteronormativity. In this sense, then, McMurray provides an account of the moral and philosophical implications of *The Bostonians* as reflecting the limited reality of absolutist experience, which, as I attempt to argue here, stems from a gendered dichotomy about the public/private in the societal perception of the time, and which, as Maxwell adds, itself is the target of James's satirical critique in the novel.

to no surprise if “she expect[ed] you to keep the house because she’s abroad,” wondering whether Verena has “any liberty at all” in her relationship with Olive (315). Basil’s remark, of course, is highly ironic since he is criticizing Olive’s confinement of Verena to domestic privacy only because he considers it *his* sole right to oppress Verena in this very freedom. The true problem for Olive is that she recognizes that the feminist movement “was a woman’s question; what they wanted was for women, and it should be by women” (141). Yet she also realizes “how weak Verena would be on the statistical and logical side if she herself should not bring up the rear” (153). As the women acknowledge to each other, it is Olive’s role for Verena to ““keep me up,’ [. . .] ‘You are my conscience”” while Olive “should like to be able to say that you are my form—my envelope” (152). What Olive seeks is a “partnership of their two minds – each of them, by itself, lacking an important group of facets,” which, through their complementing of each other, would have “made an organic whole” (153). What she does achieve instead, however, is to rob Verena of her conscience in the sense of usurping Verena’s ability to form her own, independent opinions. Although Olive idealistically seeks a unity of character constituted solely by feminine components, it is precisely this insufficient positioning of the female-to-female power differential between Verena and Olive that establishes the need for a third, masculine force balancing the unity of all three and serving as a self-expressive catalyst for Verena.

Within the inter-relational logic of the novel, neither Basil nor Olive give Verena all of the components necessary to achieve self-expression and make an independent choice for her future. Olive offers Verena a public voice, but she denies her the personal freedom to discover the nature of sensations, specifically, those of sexual desire and emotion. Basil Ransom, on the contrary, holds women as inferior to men “[f]or public, civic uses, . . . [b]ut privately, personally, it’s another affair” (330). Since, in all reality, he too is a failure in public affairs – unable to be published as a writer, defeated in war as a



soldier, and financially bankrupt, Verena's talent as a public speaker, and Olive's success in commodifying this talent for feminism, directly threatens him. Basil therefore stubbornly insists on women as private, insisting that Verena's public persona "isn't *you*, the least in the world, but an inflated little figure (very remarkable in its way too), whom you have invented and set on its feet, pulling strings, behind it, to make it move and speak, while you try to conceal and efface yourself there" (328). And Verena agrees; after his having awakened the first stirrings of sexual desire in her, she feels that this description of Olive's vision for her too is "something different from what she was trying to be, the charge of want of reality, made her heart beat with pain; she was sure, at any rate, it was her real self that was there with him now, where she ought not to be" (329). As Wilt points out, Verena here "only *seems* to locate 'reality' in love, 'there with him now,'" but it actually "locates reality in 'pain,' in suffering, where it so often is in James" (306). But, critically, she locates her *real self* in him, making Verena's choice to be either what Basil envisions, which would "create a Verena who would exercise power through love" in the caged sense that the ideal of the "American Girl" promises, or, to be what Olive wants, to gain (political) power in the insights provided by "the desperate suffering that opens one's eyes to the folly of love" (Wilt 309). It seems therefore that, in *The Bostonians*, Verena's full unfolding cannot be achieved without the suffering inherent in choosing between either "being intellectually consistent" by choosing the public life Olive offers, or by "being emotionally consistent" in choosing to realize her private identity with Basil (Wilt 309).

However, in confining Verena sexually, socially, and politically, Olive too gains a stronghold over her and her feminine expression, lending Olive the ability to express herself through Verena's speech, and thus ironically perform patriarchal superiority. Consequently, it is Basil's desire not only to conquer Verena, "to strike her dumb," and to silence her in a violent display that marks his power, regardless of her own identity, her

own will, or her own desires (312). He also battles the masculine influence which Verena envelops: Olive's feminist agenda. His goal is to make "the idea of giving herself to a man more agreeable to her than that of giving herself to a movement, [and] he found means to deepen this illumination, to drag her former standard in the dust" (375). For Basil, the feminist movement not only violates his ideas of what a woman should be and how she should present herself, but, in the character of Olive, it also personifies a queer empowered force against which he must fight to ward off "the most damnable feminisation" of American culture he imagines as its worst fate (325). Once more invoking parallels to the Civil War (America's ongoing Reconstruction being one of the other large political concern of the time), Basil's own masculine superiority, and with it, his entire vision about a politically patriarchal future America, thus depends entirely on his symbolic victory or loss over Olive as the progressive, Northern rival with Verena as the physical prize.

James describes this final battle of political ideology and struggle for Verena in decidedly violent and militaristic tones. The seductive notes of Basil's "siege" are authoritative and offensive, and undoubtedly sexual, as "[t]he essential was to show her how much he loved her, and then to press, to press, always to press" (375). Notably, this now open "war to the knife" for Verena's affection, at Marmion, again is a competition over private conversation time with Verena during which both Olive and Basil try to convince her of their respective visions (371). Having followed the two women to their vacation abode with the intention of winning Verena over, Basil learns that Olive "has taken it to bring out Miss Tarrant before the general public—she has never appeared that way in Boston—on a great scale. She expects her to make a big sensation. It will be a great night, and they are preparing for it. They consider it her real beginning" (345). This prospect is certainly an alarming one for Basil, who neither wants Verena publicized, "brought out," and sensationalized, nor does he want her to advance Olive's feminism. And yet, in a literal sense, it is Basil who has to "bring her out" of Olive's influence before

he can conquer Verena and conform her (to his) views. As Verena declares to Olive, “He says it’s only fair to you that he should give notice of his intentions. He wants to try and make me *like* him” (359, emphasis mine). Considering Verena’s underdeveloped and divided sense of self, this double entendre indicates how gaining Verena’s affection is not Basil’s only goal (especially since she confesses to already like him), but he also wants to assimilate her to his points of view, “to possess her on his own terms” (363). Verena notes, “he wants me to give up everything, all our work, our faith, our future, never to give another address, to open my lips in public” (360). And yet, she does not want to retreat with Olive but rather to battle it out: “The way for me then is to meet him, feeling conscious of my strength” (361). With each of the three characters relying on the strength of their convictions, the battle lines are thus drawn for Olive to retain the house, “he won’t come into it” (361), while Basil, having “insisted that the few minutes should be an hour” a day spent with him, has Verena meet him “a little way from the house; beyond it, outside the village” to go on various walks with him (370, 371). With “the house” established as Olive’s territory, and the outside as Basil’s, both rivals for Verena work hard to convince her to choose a life with them.

Although, ostensibly, the choice is Verena’s, ultimately, Basil and Olive battle over Verena’s subscribing to their respective ideologies, which means to convince her of the righteousness of their respective positions. In other words, both mean to “fill” the empty Verena with a conscience about herself and her role in the world – the same claim which Olive had to her earlier, but lost it due to violating their communicative pact. Again, this work of convincing Verena about who she “really” is, what she really desires, and what she is meant to do, is done through language. Just as earlier, Verena “had been stuffed with this trash by her father,” now Olive and Basil both intend to imprint meaning on her – to stuff her with rhetoric defining the direction of her desire, for either of them, for her future, and for herself (59). And, in this effort, it is Basil who “brings her out” daily

during his walks and talks with Verena. Although this is not strictly in the same sense as Olive's intention of "bringing Verena out" to the masses at the upcoming event at Music Hall, Basil does bring her out in public in the sense of extracting her from the private sphere where Olive has a stronghold on her. In other words, by bringing Verena outside to listen to his rhetoric for an hour or more a day, Basil not only literally takes her from (Olive's) home, but he also symbolically removes her from Olive's influence, thus bringing her closer to himself and his sphere. And, as his influence increases, Verena feels not just that "[s]he loved, she was in love," but that, with her growing desire for Basil, her entire worldview has changed, "that the truth had changed sides" (373). No longer is Verena "convinced that the fire of her spirit was a kind of double flame, one half of which was responsive friendship for a most extraordinary person, and the other pity for the sufferings of women in general" (373). Instead,

the words he had spoken to her there about her genuine vocation, as distinguished from the hollow and factitious ideal with which her family and association with Olive Chancellor had saddled her—these words, the most effective and penetrating he had uttered, had sunk into her soul and worked and fermented there. She had come at last to believe them, and that was the alteration, the transformation. (372)

Similar to how Wilt has earlier noted Verena's locating "reality" in "love", here, Verena directly connects "love" to "truth," and "truth" as being informative of her self, her soul. Furthermore, she explicitly credits language, Basil's words, as having achieved her transformation. It is clear, then, that even in her somewhat illuminated state at the end of the novel, Verena still confuses sexual desire with "her soul". This suggests that for Verena, the formation of her very soul, her own identity upon which her choices depend, is inevitably dependent upon the definition by others. In other words, Verena is incapable of

formulating an independent identity, an individual sense of self. Her apparent “emptiness” thus could be restated as her lacking individuality altogether – she is the mere spoils of the sexualized war between Olive and Basil over defining her future, and symbolically with it, the future of womanhood.

Just as the relationship between Olive and Verena has been defined by mutual communication and honesty – and this bond been broken by their respective keeping secrets – so is the bond between Basil and Verena defined by her silence. As Basil notes regarding Verena’s silent plea to him not to reveal to Miss Birdseye on her deathbed that Basil is not a supporter of their feminist vision, “[t]he emotion she had expressed as he stood there before poor Miss Birdseye was only one of her instinctive contortions; he had taken due note of that—said to himself that a good many more would probably occur before she would be quiet. A woman that listens is lost, the old proverb says; and what had Verena done for the last three weeks but listen?” (389-390). Here, Basil notes how Verena’s role in their relationship is to be quiet and listen to his rhetoric and musings, in other words, how his silencing her in the short term is predictive of her future silence in her role as his wife. And this prediction reflects onto Olive and Verena as well: the death of Miss Birdseye has symbolized the end of an era of “old” feminism as lived by the abolitionist, charitable, and humble Miss Birdseye, and the Bostonians seem to note a shift within their relationship and for their future. As Dr. Prance details, rather than talking to each other and comforting each other (which, during their earlier intimacy, they surely would have done), Verena ““doesn’t talk, she’s perfectly still, and so is Miss Chancellor. They’re as still as two watchers—they don’t speak. But you can hear the silence vibrate.’ ‘Vibrate?’ ‘Well, they are very nervous”” (391). With Mrs. Birdseye’s death symbolizing the end of a certain era of feminist ideology, and Verena’s affection for Basil predicating the end of the Bostonians’ relationship, the upcoming lecture at Music Hall thus presents the climactic, decisive event the entire novel has built up to. While “to ‘squelch’ all that,

at a stroke, was the dearest wish of [Basil's] heart," since "[i]t would represent to him his own success, it would symbolize his victory," preventing Verena's lecture really only represents his ideological victory since, after all, he already has won Verena herself from Olive (380). Olive understands that Verena's "silence itself was an appeal" which expresses her "shame for her weakness, her swift surrender" to Basil (399). Hiding her away so as to enable her to at least perform her simultaneously last and first large lecture thus seems the only way for the women to at least try and preserve some of their goals. The strain of Olive's partial and derived victory over Basil is thus wholly expressed in her expulsion, upon his finding out of Verena's departure from Marmion, of "a shrill, unfamiliar, troubled sound, which performed the office of a laugh, a laugh of triumph, but which, at a distance, might have passed almost as well for a wail of despair" (401).

While it seems as if Verena's appearance in Boston has thus become inevitable, it is her spotting him in the audience prior to the start of the lecture that makes it impossible for her to enter the stage. In a reversal of influence from the speech he attended at Mrs. Burrage's, now, his presence does not inspire her speaking – and seemingly speaking to him as her distinct audience – but it prevents it. Basil now has complete control over her and her voice, "he saw that he could do what he wanted, that she begged him, with all her being, to spare her, but that so long as he should protest she was submissive, helpless" (428). In language strongly suggestive of rape, the reader is informed that "[w]hat he wanted, in this light, flamed before him and challenged all his manhood," and he therefore declares that "[s]he's mine or she isn't, and if she's mine, she's all mine!" (428, 429). Rather than compromise his victory by letting Verena speak this last time, he takes her identity by force and erases her: "Ransom had already, by muscular force wrenched her away" from her old life, but further effaces her as he "thrust the hood of Verena's long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and her identity" (435-436). In the often cited last sentence of the novel, Verena is in tears, and "[i]t is to be feared that with the union, so far

from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed” (436). Basil has overpowered her, has appropriated her physically, so as to be able to produce his (forced) version of a small-scale body politic with Verena at his home. At the closing of the novel, Verena has become the site of reproduction,<sup>20</sup> without reproductive credit or ability for herself. Although Basil, the enforcer of existing patriarchal hegemony, ostensibly “wins,” in the final line of the novel James denies the reader a happy ending – in fact, he drives home the point about how *unhappy* their marriage (and Verena) will be.

We should not forget, however, that the triangular dynamic between the three main characters exposes how it is not just traditional, heterosexual relationships that depend on the definition of gender, gender role, and gender identity by men. Even the queer relationship between Verena and Olive cannot seem to escape masculine altruism in defining its own (power) structures and dynamics. Quoting Levi-Strauss, Sedgwick notes how “[t]he total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners” (*Between Men* 26). In *The Bostonians*, James describes a very similar dynamic in the triadic relationship between Olive, Basil, and Verena, complicating traditional gender stereotypes through the lesbian marriage of the two women. In setting up Olive as a character that is neither quite feminine nor masculine – or, perhaps, rather both feminine and masculine – James allows his readers to explore gendered power dynamics through both perspectives. In this way, James utilizes the dynamics within his erotic triangle similarly to Sedgwick’s model of “a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for

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<sup>20</sup>I employ this phrase with its multiple implied meanings of biological reproduction, the production of self-identity for Basil, productive home labor, and political productivity.

making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment” (Sedgwick *Between Men* 27). Other than Sedgwick, however, James establishes eroticism not just between competing masculinities (such as two male rivals competing for one woman), but between two lesbian femininities. While these femininities never battle in the same manner as the masculine forces in the novel do, James’s characters are nevertheless unable to escape the patriarchal altruism prescribing a dominant, masculine influence in any, even a lesbian, relationship or marriage. James criticizes the utopian nature about exercising power at the expense of the individual on hand of the example of marriage. As Bertonneau puts it, “choice needs to be mutually affirmed, for if it is not, then it can be nothing less than coercion” (90). This is especially made lucid in Verena’s inability to make any independent choice (and thus, to make her voice heard) since she simply lacks the individual identity to formulate one – she is perpetually coerced into submission. And yet, James does not doom American women (and feminism) to a perpetual silence, even if Verena remains doomed to a life of pursuing an idealistic version of herself as Basil defines it, and she “transforms into a caricature of the American Girl, the burgeonic hysteric, a ‘lacerated angel’ who suffers from aphonia” (Sensibar 67). Instead, before the novel ends, James endows Olive “with a sudden inspiration” to find her own voice and “[rush] to the approach to the platform” (434). Although we do not learn about Olive’s fate as a speaker, the fact that “[e]very sound instantly dropped, the hush was respectful, the great public waited, and whatever she should say to them [. . .] it was not apparent that they were likely to hurl the benches at her,” suggests a positive, hopeful outcome (436). For Olive, and for American women as a whole, a political future seems possible, James suggests, as long as such a pursuit at formulating identity is informed by and respects individual choices, thus upholding a democratic ideal that does not sacrifice individual rights for the sake of the whole.

With *The Bostonians*, James set out to write “a very *American* tale,” considering



“the most salient and peculiar point in our social life . . . : the situation of women, the decline of the sentiment of the sex, the agitation on their behalf.”<sup>21</sup> As I have attempted to show in this chapter, however, the social uproar informing the situation of women at the turn of the century is not limited to a redefinition of femininity. As Trilling contends, “a movement of sexual revolution is to be understood as a question which a culture puts to itself, and right down to its very roots” (110). To talk about culture, then, means to talk about the body politic and its relation to the individual identities that inform it. When a concern for a nation becomes who is to be considered a citizen with all the decision making rights accompanying it, placing, as in the Fourteenth Amendment, “the word ‘male’ before ‘citizen’ for the first time and thus [raising] the question of whether women were actually citizen,” then the question of America’s identity, and who gets to define it, is displaced onto definitions of gender (Davis 574). As a consequence, in asserting personal autonomy, the question becomes “what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman – about the quality of being which people wish to have” (Trilling 110). The salience of one’s role and responsibility in society diverges from sex and positions itself with gender, especially in regards to who gets to voice their autonomy, who gets to control language, and who gets to control their own fate. When, as Verena puts it, women escape from their “very comfortable, cozy, convenient box, with nice glass sides, so that we can see out” (260) – and so that others can see in – in short, when they refuse to be pressed into an idealistic mold and instead begin defining, expressing, asserting themselves, and thus acquire their own identities – the neatly arranged and (controlled) sense of a national identity, specifically as it has thus far been defined in a strongly gendered, patriarchally hegemonic way, falls apart. What seems like a small aspect – women’s voices – thus balloons into complex considerations about the nature of America, and its national identity

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<sup>21</sup>From Henry James’s notebooks as cited in the introduction to *The Bostonians*, cited below.

itself. As a keen observer of social change and noted psychological Realist, James's representation of how Verena's voice is inescapably controlled by patriarchal forces in *The Bostonians* offers a complex consideration of what is a very precise moment in American history.

CHAPTER TWO  
 A CACOPHONY OF SILENCE:  
 FEMININE COMMUNICATION AND EMOTIONAL APHASIA IN KATE CHOPIN'S  
*THE AWAKENING*

When *The Awakening* was published in 1899, First Wave Feminism was still in its childhood shoes, and the figure of the New Woman<sup>1</sup> was still an emerging, strongly debated feminine model in American society. Standing in direct contrast to the True Woman, the feminine ideal of the nineteenth century, the New Woman presented a cause for consternation – especially among male-privileged, conservative people – in her aspirations for independence and self-determinative autonomy. In the novel's main character of Edna Pontellier, and her struggles to find her own identity among dueling demands, Chopin was clearly concerned with contrasting these two prominent models. As Edna seeks to formulate her independent self as a woman throughout her awakening, she continuously runs afoul of social conventions and the expectations from her as a mother.

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<sup>1</sup>I am leaning here on the definition of “The New Woman” as the historical figure scholars have identified as “women of affluence and sensitivity, who despite or perhaps because of their wealth exhibited an independent spirit and were accustomed to acting on their own” (Bordin 2). Historian Ruth Bordin explains further that “The term New Woman always referred to women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic. However, when it came into general use in the United States for the first time, it was attached to the new American professional women emerging in increasing numbers in the last two decades of the nineteenth century” (2). The term was carried well into the twentieth century and used to describe what we today might call a “liberated woman” or “feminist.” In literary scholarship, the term “New Woman” is often applied to various strong female characters in Henry James, such as *Daisy Miller* (1878) or Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* (1880-81). See also my previous chapter on New Women in *The Bostonians*.

In *The Awakening*, a reconciliation of the two competing drives in Edna seems impossible, despite her being provided with a model for each: the angel-like True Woman Adèle Ratignolle, and the abrasive, independent New Woman artist Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna may fail to articulate her identity as a woman outside of these two opposed models in the novel, yet, as a literary work of art by a woman writer at the turn of the century, the novel itself surreptitiously points to its own author as an indicator that artistic self-expression need not necessarily come at the sacrifice of conventional womanhood.

Born on February 8th, 1850, as Katherine O'Flaherty, Kate grew up with with her Creole great-grandmother ("Creole" in this context meaning a white descendant of French settlers), grandmother and mother in St. Louis, Missouri, unfortunately losing her father at the young age of five to a railroad accident.<sup>2</sup> While her father, as her birth name suggests, had been Irish, her maternal lineage, as Kelley points out, "was descended from pure Creole stock" (346). The young Kate received a quite good education at the Sacred Heart Academy in St. Louis between 1855 and 1868. By all accounts, Kate's marriage to the Louisianan cotton trader Oscar Chopin was a happy one. After their honeymoon, Kate followed Oscar to live in New Orleans in 1870, where Oscar kept his trade and Kate gave birth to five sons in rapid succession between 1871-1878. Kate, according to Toth, apparently had a quite active social life in New Orleans and was acquainted with personalities of the likes of Edgar Degas, who resided in New Orleans for five months in 1872 ("From *Unveiling*" 133). In 1879, due to several years' worth of bad cotton crops and Oscar's resulting debt from dealing in cotton futures, however, the family and a Kate heavily pregnant with their last child and only daughter was forced to leave the expensive New Orleans for the small French village of Cloutierville in rural Louisiana. When Oscar

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<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, I am deriving all biographical information about Chopin from the chronology listed in the Norton edition of *The Awakening*, cited below.

died of swamp fever only three years later, Kate, grieving for her husband with several small children still at home apparently found herself increasingly unhappy with the unfamiliarly rural lifestyle in Cloutierville. Consequently, Kate relocated back to St. Louis in 1884 to live with her mother, who unfortunately also died in 1885. Thus doubly grieving, Kate was encouraged by her physician and friend, the Austrian Frederick Kolbenheyer – after whom Dr. Mandelet in *The Awakening* is modeled – to seek solace in writing, and who certainly also saw publication as a possible solution to Chopin's financial troubles.

In 1890, Chopin published her first novel, *At Fault*, about a young widow representing the Southern sentimental ideal of feminine pureness and self-sacrifice, who, because she considers it the duty of spouses to serve one another until death, rejects her divorced lover's advances until her rival's demise, clearing the way for the lovers' happiness. Fletcher argues that in this novel, "Kate Chopin shows her knowledge of feminine psychology and her conservative attitude toward marriage and divorce although at times it seems that she makes her heroine, Thérèse Lafirme, almost incredibly narrow" (122). Following this pattern of depicting how "constancy and patience can bring happiness," Chopin went on to publish two collections of short stories, *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie*, along with numerous uncollected short stories, poems, and sketches, over the next decade, most of them depicting Southern women as remarkably devoted, pious, and faithful wives and mothers (Fletcher 123). Chopin published her second and final novel, *The Awakening*, in 1899, only a few years before she died following a cerebral hemorrhage in 1904. As a novel, *The Awakening* remained in relative obscurity until the 1950s, when new academic approaches to feminist and gender studies allowed for a renewed interest in the novel's treatment of feminine psychology. In large part because, by the 1960s and 1970s, the category of gender was established "as a fundamental category of literary analysis," these new academic interpretative strategies itself awakened

“scholars to construct *The Awakening* as the story of Edna’s search for self-identity, for autonomy in the face of controlling others, for the right to define her own life and sexuality rather than be defined by her responsibilities to her husband and children” (Corse and Westervelt 148-9). Contemporary readers have since canonized “Kate Chopin’s most ambitious work” and made it one of the most widely read and assigned American novels in the American academy (Fletcher 123).

Among Kate Chopin’s ubiquitous uses of allusion, symbolism, and reference in *The Awakening*, one of the most strikingly omnipresent symbols is the novel’s bird imagery and related wing or feather references. Functioning as one of the main metaphorical features in the novel, bird and wing imagery offer an insightful lens for the analysis of Edna’s psychological map. Further, Chopin uses birds to metaphorically emphasize Edna’s inability to articulate her psychological needs to those around her and even to herself, using the image of the caged bird as a representation of Edna’s imprisoned and stunted ability for self-expression. As part of this emotional aphasia,<sup>3</sup> Edna may *feel* her self-identity, but she cannot verbally phrase her experience of self in her own, personal words. In this sense, Edna’s self-defining aphasia is different from Verena’s emotional muteness in *The Bostonians* insofar as Edna has access to the emotional register that defines her self-identity. Edna lacks the vocabulary to effectively communicate her needs to others. She does, however, have a formulated, autonomous self-identity which she accesses and communicates in pictures – as reflected also in her artistry. Edna suffers merely from aphasia – the inability to express herself in words – when it comes to communicating verbally and especially about her emotional needs. The character of

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<sup>3</sup>In medical terminology, “aphasia” describes several varieties of language disorders that affect the patient’s (previously existing) ability to understand or express language, usually as a result of brain injury. I am applying the term here in a non-medical way to describe Edna’s inability to access a linguistic register that adequately and effectively communicates her emotional self to others. This is, of course, not to be misunderstood as my suggesting a medical diagnosis for Edna.

Verena, in contrast, cannot formulate her identity because she has never had access to any of the referent language even indicating its existence. Other than Edna who already has defined herself emotionally in pictures, Verena has not yet even unlocked the door to her inner self – she is a completely empty shell of a girl unaware of even the existence of her own motivations until her encounters with Basil start stirring them. In short, in *The Bostonians*, Verena’s access to emotional language occasions her emotional self-definition and she thus “succeeds,” whereas, in *The Awakening*, Edna’s inability to articulate her already existent emotional register leads to her “failure” in reconciling her emotional needs with social demands. Chopin, of course, communicates Edna’s psychological state to the reader through language and represents Edna’s relative aphasia by continuously likening her to a variety of birds. In this chapter, I will trace how Chopin uses bird and wing references as an allegory to represent Edna’s emotional aphasia in a way accessible to the reader, while still maintaining the illusion of Edna’s failure in self-articulation. The bird references in the novel function to delineate Edna’s incoherent linguistic expressions as bird sounds, themselves as incomprehensible to the reader as Edna’s often disconnected actions, but made palpable on the pages of the novel via Chopin’s expressive symbolism. In depicting Edna allegorically as a bird, *The Awakening* thus simultaneously represents the silenced state particularly of married women expected to adhere to societal conventions in the nineteenth century, while itself communicating the nature of Edna’s aphasic predicament conclusively and loudly.

Immediately at the beginning of the novel and before even introducing her as a character, Chopin shows Edna as a caged bird desperately making noise and yet unable to be heard or understood. In fact, the novel begins with the description of “[a] green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door” in a noisy cacophony of parroted French-English exclamations, “*Allez vous-en! Allez vous en! Sapristi!* That’s all right!” opposite a caged mockingbird “whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with

maddening persistence” (4). As critics such as Elizabeth Elz have pointed out, “[t]he use of bird imagery to represent entrapment is a metaphor established well before Chopin” (14). The caged bird is a trope that represents specifically women’s entrapment in marriage and societal convention, although it is notable that the cage is almost always a gilded cage, symbolizing the idealistic, higher expectations of upper-class women to adhere to social traditions. What is interesting in this scene is particularly the juxtaposition of the parrot and the mockingbird before the reader is ever even introduced to the main character, Edna Pontellier. The reader is, however, introduced to her husband in the very next line, who “unable to read his newspaper with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and an exclamation of disgust” (15). As Elz notes, “[t]he cacophony of sound is explicit; the noise of these two nonsensical birds drives Mr. Pontellier away. The caged birds are not mere items to admire when one wants and to dismiss when one is either bored with them or wants silence; instead, they are a continuing presence, and Mr. Pontellier must act and remove himself from the situation if he wishes solitude” (15). Léonce does have the ability to remove himself from this “maddening” cacophony of noise. In contrast, the birds remain caged, unable to escape their situation. Reading the caged birds as a metaphor for Edna, then, Chopin immediately sets the stage for Léonce’s comfort and quiet perusal of the newspaper as the priority in their marriage, and the reader has not even met Edna yet. Further, Léonce’s reading the newspaper establishes him as a serious businessman, firmly anchored in the masculine sphere of consequential matters. Even here, during his weekend stay at the family’s summer residence at Grand Isle, he does not waste his time with such idle pastimes as reading books, as Robert Lebrun or the women do. Instead, he undertakes the more serious tasks of studying day-old market reports and editorials.

From the outset, it seems clear that Léonce lives in his own sphere within the Pontelliers’ marriage, his being defined by masculine business endeavors and prioritizing



his own comfort. His sphere, then, is immediately established as spatially separated from the noisy enclosures representing his wife's. The noise Léonce escapes in the opening scene, however, has further significance than merely constituting a maddening repetitious chirping. Rather, Chopin presents us here with two species of bird known for their mimicry, the mockingbird imitating the sounds and songs of other bird species, and the parrot mimicking human speech. Along with "a language which nobody understood," the parrot speaks Spanish, French, and Latin, while the mockingbird speaks a variety of "languages" understood only, however, by other birds. Elz sees the parrot's language ability as reflecting the Pontelliers': "Just as the parrot speaks an understood language – Spanish – Léonce Pontellier speaks French and English, and Edna is fluent in both French and English. Thus, she can comprehend what Léonce says; however, Léonce has a third language – social customs" (15). Yet, if the parrot speaks Spanish due to his immersion in an environment in which that language is spoken, and which reflects Léonce's "fluency" in a set of social customs Edna as a non-Creole in upper (white) Creole society does not master, then what are we to make of the parrot's fourth language, the one no one understands? It is my contention that considering the mockingbird in the other cage is the key here. Since the mockingbird mimics the songs and voices of all other birds, in this scene it stands metaphorically for the other, Creole women, who are separate from Edna, the exotic outsider from Kentucky. While at times Edna can understand the Creole women, at other times their social customs are as incomprehensible to her as Edna's inner language is to others, understood by nobody including her husband and her friend, Adèle Ratignolle.

Chopin also associates maternity and motherhood with birds and wings. Other than Edna, who is "not a mother-woman," the other mothers on Grand Isle were "fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood" (11). Even further, in their devotion to their husbands and children, the

Creole mother-women “esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (11). As Mathews points out, the language used here is not only strongly invoking images of nesting birds working tirelessly to raise their literal “brood,” but it also “echoes the discourse on motherhood prevalent during the nineteenth century – writings in which mothers appear as angels or soft spirits ‘hovering in soothing caresses’” (Melendy qtd. in Mathews 138). The angel figures here, of course, are invoking the Victorian “Angel of the House” figure, named after the same titled 1854 poem by Coventry Patmore.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in “[i]magine Adele and the other mother-women first as domestic chickens, caged by their maternal instinct, which in turn transforms them into ministering angels, Chopin blends motherhood, spirituality, and femininity, portraying Adele as the epitome of ideal womanhood,” through the reference to the “Angel of the House” poem (Mathews 138). Yet even further, Adèle is not only the perfect woman, she is also the ultimate mother, “a faultless Madonna” (13). Strongly indicating Edna’s ultimate fate at the end of the novel, Adèle is positioned here in contrast with Edna as the former of the “two female stereotypes in Western Christian cultures [. . .] Mary and Eve” (Kühl 171). These two female figures describe, on one hand, “[t]he holy Virgin, pure and good, willing to sacrifice and to be made an instrument of God” and, on the other, “the temptress, herself seduced by the Devil, carnal in her sinfulness, who defies the rules laid

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<sup>4</sup> “[I]nspired by Patmore’s love for his wife Emily,” the narrator in this poem meets, courts, and marries “the love of his life, with a second volume continuing the tale ten years into the marriage” (Kühl 172). The poem was rather poorly received, and continues to this day to serve “more as a valuable piece of evidence of social history than as a great piece of literature” (Kühl 172). It describes the female protagonist in terms that ultimately made the poem’s title “become synonymous with the ideal Victorian housewife,” who is supposed to be “modest, chaste and innocent, she unconditionally loves and supports her husband, submits to him completely and is a caring mother to her children” (Kühl 173). In American terms, this Victorian ideal is akin to the middle-class ideal of “True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society,” and whose four pillar attributes are “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Kim 72). Yet, while the American “Cult of True Womanhood” describes an ideal woman, it does not have the same, explicitly maternal references the “Angel of the House” ideal contains. In a novel as explicitly about motherhood as *The Awakening*, then, it makes much more sense for Chopin to invoke the Victorian ideal here, also in connection with the wing symbolism of the book.

down to her and thereby [causing] not just her own fall but the fall of man, the expulsion from Paradise” (Kühl 171). In likening Adèle to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, then, Chopin not only emphasizes the ultimate ideal of both woman- and motherhood, but also suggests Edna in contrast as a woman whose fall from grace is foreordained.

However, Adèle’s Madonna likeness is complicated by Chopin’s insistence on her whiteness. As the narrator relays, she cannot be described by words “save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams,” with “spun-gold hair,” “blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other crimson fruit in looking at them,” a “white neck,” slender and “beautiful arms,” and hands that could not be “more exquisite” (11). Adèle’s whiteness extends even to her clothes: she visits the beach “dressed in pure white, with a fluffiness of ruffles that became her” and “draperies and fluttering things which [. . .] suited her rich, luxuriant beauty” (17). Mathews explains that “[f]ashion commentary of 1898 noted that such a dress should give the illusion that the wearers, or ‘aery habitations,’ are composed ‘of stuff less solid than flesh and blood,’” an invocation of contemporary fashion customs Chopin’s readers would have been readily able to decipher (Cunnington, qtd. in Mathews 138). While again emphasizing the bird reference, Adèle’s appearances also invoke her spirituality, her purity, and suggest her (sexual) innocence. However, the novel also establishes Adèle’s pregnancy, which “was in no way apparent, and no one would have known a thing about it but for her persistence in making it the subject of conversation” (12). Further, as the other Creole women, she shocks Edna with her “entire absence of prudery,” even “relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her *accouchements*, withholding no intimate detail” (12). So, despite representing the ultimate wife and mother, Adèle is decidedly not virginal, or even innocent in expression. And yet, “[t]he emphasis on her whiteness [. . .] permeates the image, whitewashing the eroticism borrowed from the lower classes and non-white

models of womanhood with an assertion of what Birnbaum calls ‘colonizing whiteness’” (Mathews 138). Chopin’s insistence on Adèle’s whiteness thus emphasizes not only the spiritual idealism of her as a mother, but also how this idealist maternity is strongly tied to race and, by extension, class. In this way, Adèle becomes “some sensuous Madonna” put in contrast not just to Edna’s lack of spiritual devotion as a mother, but also to Edna’s lack of sensuous expressiveness, specifically as relating to her children and husband.

For Edna, both her marriage and motherhood is a burden she would rather not assume responsibility for, yet she is perpetually incapable of expressing exactly why. Chopin consistently leaves it to the narrator to explain how, although Edna “was fond of her children,” they represent for her “a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (21). This conception stands in such a stark contrast to Adèle, that when “Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children,” the two women get into “a rather heated argument” in which they “did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language” (49). It is notable that Chopin chooses to have this scene play out for the reader as a retrospective telling by the narrator. This conversation has taken place at an unspecified place and at an unspecified time, and the reader is not told whose memory the narrator is channeling here, Edna’s or Adèle’s. Just as the narrator emphasizes that Edna was “accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves,” she does not express them here either, and the work of informing the reader about Edna’s emotional state is left to a distant, third person narration, removed from the conversation spatially, chronologically, and narratively (49). Further, Edna’s continuous failures to communicate invoke again the opening scene in which the parrot, which speaks “a language which nobody understood,” tries to converse with the incessant mockingbird in the other cage (4). As Elz also argues, Edna has a consistent “problem of speaking but not communicating,” which, in application

to Adèle, she attributes to “a lack of agreement on what the role of the mother is”<sup>5</sup> (16). Edna “tried to appease her friend, to explain” that “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (49). Adèle once again reaffirms her angelic, idealized, Madonna persona and invokes the Bible: “a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that – your Bible tells you so” (50). Of course, Adèle here is talking about “giving her life” in terms of sacrificing her independence and freedom for her children, while Edna suggests “giving her life” in terms of dying for her children – again foreshadowing Edna’s suicide. It is this ambiguity in meaning, however, which Chopin uses to emphasize Edna’s linguistic limitations in trying to express herself. As Mou adds, “[t]he fact that Madame Ratignolle cannot understand Edna proves the difficulty that the idea of woman’s separate space poses to society, but that difficulty does not mean that as a writer Chopin cannot find a way, albeit elusive, to represent it”<sup>6</sup> (113). For Mou, the women’s “divergent attitudes toward love and spiritual space [. . .] highlight Chopin’s emphasis on women’s spiritual and emotional space” (133). And it is precisely this divergence in the spiritual and emotional space of the two women’s respective personalities that is at stake in the novel and leads to Adèle’s inability to comprehend Edna’s (failed) attempts at self-expression.

For Adèle, much expression depends on convention, specifically religious and social iconography. Edna, in contrast, attempts to communicate through emotion, the

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<sup>5</sup>While I certainly agree that that is true for Adèle’s role as the ultimate mother-woman in the novel, it is my contention that Edna’s inability to communicate is deeper going than that as she cannot make herself understood by any other character, including her husband, Mademoiselle Reisz, Alcèe Arobin, or Robert Lebrun either.

<sup>6</sup>Mou concentrates on how Chopin expresses Edna’s desire for a separate space by analyzing the author’s narrative techniques, specifically seven instances of free indirect discourse which, as she argues, reveal not just Edna’s inner identity to the reader, but also subtly provide guidance for interpretation. While some of Mou’s analysis is quite useful for my purposes, I find it useful to also consider Chopin’s allusions and references in this chapter, which, in true psychological realist fashion, build to expose a more thorough picture of the female psyche.

same fleeting and synesthetic experiences that are impossible for her to articulate in words. Consequently, she tries to communicate through a variety of pictures, memories, which Chopin exposes at length during the early scene when Adèle and Edna visit the beach. Leaving behind the children upon Edna's request, but having "no intention of bathing," the two women "had just strolled down to the beach for a walk and to be alone and near the water" (17). Adèle interrupts the silence as the women sit on the beach:

"Of whom – of what are you thinking?" asked Adèle of her companion, whose countenance she had been watching with a little amused attention, arrested by the absorbed expression which seemed to have seized and fixed every feature into a statuesque repose.

"Nothing," returned Mrs. Pontellier, with a start, adding at once:

"How stupid! But it seems to me it is the reply we make instinctively to such a question. Let me see," she went on, throwing back her head and narrowing her fine eyes till they shone like two vivid points of light. "Let me see. I was really not conscious of thinking of anything but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts."

"Oh! never mind!" laughed Madame Ratignolle. "I am not quite so exacting. I will let you off this time. It is really too hot to think, especially to think about thinking." (18)

Elz propounds that it is "Edna's physical appearance [which] suggests that she is struggling with her thoughts" to Adèle, and that Adèle's dismissal of Edna's attempt at recollection is yet another proof of how "language fails her as she attempts to communicate with Adèle" (15). Adèle clearly sees evidence of an inner dialogue in Edna, and yet she is more ready to accept Edna's off-the-cuff answer that she is thinking of

“nothing” than her true thoughts. For Adèle, Edna’s inner musings do account to little or “nothing,” and she deems them much less important than Edna does. Further, Adèle shows her unwillingness to consider any thought worth exploring if it is not immediately expressible in predetermined, magisterial language. Edna’s fleeting memories therefore are of little consequence to her, as they do not fit within Adèle’s tight considerations of propriety and deference to (always necessarily coded as male) authoritative philosophy. While Edna thus battles with articulating her inner identity, for Adèle it is of little consequence in light of the social role she has to fulfill as a wife and mother. In other words, for Adèle, the only identity that matters is that of the (idealized) mother and wife, whereas Edna recognizes the existence of a different psychology pulling her elsewhere, yet which she is incapable of articulating.

As Chopin relays over the following pages, Edna does not only not think of “nothing,” she in fact thinks of everything, essentially her whole life. Specifically, Edna recalls, “the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, [. . .] The hot wind beating in my face made me think [. . .] of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass [. . .] She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water” (18-19). As Taylor and Fineman emphasize, “[t]oo little attention has been paid to the significance of Edna’s memory, which suggests a great deal about Chopin’s remarkable understanding of depth psychology” (36). Edna’s presumably very early memory of walking through the meadow in Kentucky is crucial not only because it shows how Chopin has “conceived, as Freud later did, the notion of an unconscious mind which dominates her character’s actions” (Taylor and Fineman 36). But also, they argue, “Edna is, in fact, the paradigm of a pioneering map of the human psyche for which Chopin, with her pre-Freudian perspectives, was forced to imagine both the contours and the vocabulary” and which “is a map which existed in no previous work of

literature” (36). In specifically connecting the memory of the meadow with the ocean, including the feeling that she “felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it,” Edna emphasizes the significance of the ocean as symbolic of her psychological state. For Taylor and Fineman, “Edna’s feeling of euphoria, of a connection with matter which extends on to infinity, suggests what Freud was later to describe as the ‘oceanic state,’ a period of early childhood when the infant, unaware of the boundaries between her own body, her mother’s, and her environment, identifies erotically with all three” (35). It is crucial to note that Edna reveals just a few lines later that she and her sisters lost their mother “when they were quite young” (19). Glendening suggests that Edna therefore “associate[s] endless, unmotivated venturing with the unconscious and seemingly limitless pleasure of the womb and total maternal protection” (46). Although Edna does not give a specific timeline for the meadow memory, her beginning to relate her life story with this specific event, and describing as her mother’s death as already in the past, suggests that the meadow is an informative, subconscious memory for her.

The meadow memory thus establishes the ocean as a metaphor for Edna’s soul. As Ringe points out, this is consistent also with romantic iconography commonly used in the nineteenth century, in which the ocean represents a “‘place where there is no community,’ where ‘the individual . . . is free from both the evils and the responsibilities of communal life’ [and] where ‘decisive events, the moments of eternal choice . . . occur’” (W. H. Auden, qtd. in Ringe 582). Ringe adds that, “[a]s in much romantic art, [. . .] the sea serves here a double purpose for the individual: it invites ‘the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude, to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation’” (583). Borrowing from Melville,<sup>7</sup> Ringe suggests that the sea “can turn the soul’s attention outward to the

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<sup>7</sup>Ringe notes that, in borrowing from Melville here, he does not mean to suggest that *Moby Dick* inspired Chopin’s *The Awakening* directly, but rather that “both Herman Melville and Kate Chopin drew upon a common tradition of romantic imagery” (footnote, pg. 583).



infinity suggested by the endless expanse of encircling horizon and sky – to confront the universe alone – or it can cause, as it does to Pip in *Moby Dick*, an ‘intense concentration of self’ that can hardly be endured” (583). Edna’s transcendentalist journey to self-discovery is, of course, of a quite sexual nature, a connection Glendening attributes to “[t]he association of the ocean with the dead mother [which] explains why ‘the touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace’ and also why its sound is that of a ‘mournful lullaby’” (47). It is furthermore significant that Edna faintly recalls that her walk through the meadow must likely have taken place on a Sunday, “and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of” (19). Yet, she clarifies upon Adèle’s question, she has not “been running away from prayers,” in fact, “during one period of my life religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was twelve and until—until—why, I suppose until now” (19). Instead, Glendening argues, Edna here wants “to escape a stern, authoritarian father, or from an internalized version of him, similar to the angry God she must have heard invoked in his church services” (47). Edna’s telling of a series of infatuations in this scene, which culminate in her meeting and marrying Léonce Pontellier against “the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic,” is entirely consistent in her seeking escape from an authoritarian patriarch (21). Her retelling of this escape story thus metaphorically also represents and foreshadows her efforts of escaping the clutches of the larger societal patriarchy in the novel.

However, it is vital to note that Edna thoroughly fails to make any of these connections to her life. In fact, immediately after Edna’s retelling of the meadows memory, the narration shifts to the narrator, who, in quick succession and without clear chronological indications, connects them to the rest of Edna’s story. Chopin’s narrative use of free indirect discourse in this scene emphasizes how Edna’s self-expression depends on the vocalization of an old, subconscious memory, an articulation she is

nevertheless thoroughly unable to analytically follow through on. As Mou notes, in the retelling of Edna's story after the meadow memory, "Chopin chooses a new double-voiced technique, what Bakhtin calls 'stylization,' [. . . which] derives 'its *tone* and *word order* from direct discourse and its *verbal tenses* and *persons* from indirect discourse'" (Mou and Vološinov, qtd. in Mou 107, original emphases). As compared with the narrator's typical voice, Mou further explains, a stylized passage additionally takes on the voice of the character being stylized, so that the narrator's typical voice becomes saturated with the tonal inflections and language of the character while still maintaining the distance of a narrator. For Mou, Chopin's use of stylization is significant here for two reasons: "thematically, stylization enhances Edna's status as an incipient consciousness and enables her to taste the power of speaking for the first time; aesthetically, it narrows the distance between Edna and the narrator from the previous use of narrator's narration" (107). While the reader remains privy to Edna's story and emotions, the narration nevertheless retains the more distant third person "she," rather than the more intimate first person pronoun "I." This not only creates a necessary distance that minimizes the reader's judgment about Edna's past, but Chopin's use of stylization here also "allows readers access to Edna's innermost fantasies, which only she can relate" while still emphasizing her inability to effectively do so (Mou 108). In fact, the reader is given even greater access to Edna's subconscious than Adèle is, although we are not told the extent: "Edna did not reveal so much as all this to Madame Ratignolle that summer day when they sat with faces turned to the sea. But a good part of it escaped her" (21). It is clear, therefore, that Chopin here employs stylized narration to inform the reader of Edna's psyche which she herself is unable to articulate. In other words, the narrative convention here allows the reader linguistic access to Edna's memories and emotion which she herself cannot sufficiently relay to Adèle. As such, this scene is a prime example of how Chopin succeeds in maintaining two separate narratives at the same time: firstly, the true extent of Edna's

emotional state as relayed to the reader, and secondly, the limited awareness of it by her friend(s) due to her failure to articulate it conclusively.

Further noteworthy about this scene is that Edna relates her life story, at least in part, to Adèle specifically, who is established as the ultimate epitome of “mother woman.” Although most scholars would probably designate the scene of Edna’s first swim as the most poignant moment of her spiritual awakening, it is my contention that Edna’s awakening constitutes a spiritual rebirth that begins with her semi-conscious formulation of how the early loss of a mother has affected – or even stunted – her emotional expressiveness. As the narrator at the beginning of this chapter emphasizes, Edna is not typically “a woman given to confidences” and “[e]ven as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself” (16). Having grown up under her strict father and an older sister who “was matronly and dignified,” but “not effusive; she was practical,” rather than under the loving guidance of a mother, Edna “was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others” (19). In trying to offer some of her innermost desires and vulnerabilities to Adèle, the ultimate mother-woman, Edna essentially seeks a replacement mother figure in her (pregnant) friend. Even though Adèle cannot quite understand that Edna is seeking to learn those feminine ways of self-articulation the loss of her mother has prevented, she accepts the role of maternal nurturer and clasps Edna’s hand “firmly and warmly,” as a mother would her child’s in grief, and “even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, ‘*Pauvre chérie*’” (19). As Glendening posits, “[i]n its overall import, then, Edna’s recovered memory expresses her longing to discover or return to a realm of freedom and unconscious self-authenticity associated with the sea, movement away from the father and toward the mother” (47). In the figure of Adèle specifically, Edna thus finds a near perfect surrogate mother that seems to promise to guide her through her spiritual awakening (or, perhaps, maturation) and to teach her how to express herself in appropriately maternal

ways. Metaphorically, Adèle's pregnancy becomes specifically associated with Edna's awakening as she takes on a maternal role of her, a parallel that is only further cemented in the fact that the entire novel, *The Awakening*, encompasses almost precisely the duration of Adèle's pregnancy from conception to birth. Yet, Edna seeks a self-expression that reconciles her individualism with the demands of her as a mother and wife, whereas for Adèle, her social demands supersede, even replace, any individualism.

Many critics have noted Edna's apparent immaturity and child-like behavior and her inability to form mature bonds with those around her, including her own children. In fact, Dawson, in writing a scathing dissent about the novel, inadvertently makes that point more lucidly and forcefully than any other scholar. Critiquing Edna's very child-like infatuation with the unnamed tragedian and her kissing of his photo, for example, Dawson remarks that "[i]t seems to have passed unremarked that Chopin's immediately preceding paragraph has informed the reader that Edna was at this time of her life already a 'grown young woman'" (4). He reads Edna's decision to marry Léonce against her father's and sister's wishes as "an act of stubbornness" and perfectly describes the consequence-free mindset of a toddler in asserting that "Edna has done as Edna wished, and she continues to do so" (5). Further pointing to "Edna's self-centeredness" and lack of "concern for others' well-being," Dawson insists that "an interest in [others'] well-being and occasional acts of kindness are evidences of social maturation, and [. . .] this lack of growth in Edna, like her protracted nurturing of the teen-ager's romantic melancholy, marks her personal history as that of a lifelong adolescent" (7). Notably, however, Dawson also considers Edna a decidedly "self-defining individual" (although he seems to consider this a negative trait) and "a headstrong personality whose growth has been sadly stunted" (5, 17). Faulting Edna for her own immaturity, Dawson sees Edna's suicide at the end of the novel as another escape: "Having adamantly refused to be roused from her childhood dreams, she feels unequal to the less-than-onerous demands of her adult situation. And from these she

flees” (17). In contrast, others have pointed to the novel’s “pervasive voice of ‘motherlessness’” as the motivating factor of Edna’s immature identity (Fox-Genovese, qtd. in Ryan 253). Ryan argues that “Edna’s suicide derives from depression and that she is a woman haunted by the attachment deprivation of her childhood” (254). Taylor and Fineman also point to her mother’s early death as the deciding event that furthermore resulted in Edna’s having “been raised in a repressively patriarchal, masculine-dominated home” in which, after “removing the model and primary identification figure,” Edna was never offered “a substitute object for feminine identification” (37-38). Glendening further considers “the early death of her mother” as the catalytic event causing “an increasingly pathological narcissism that leads to her death” (42). Glendening sees Edna’s retelling of the meadow memory as “replete with significance for her character and how her life unfolds” specifically in the extent to which “[b]oth Thanatos and Eros pervade Edna’s childhood memory of walking through an endless meadow”<sup>8</sup> (47). It becomes quite apparent, therefore, that Edna’s awakening is intricately intertwined with her childhood trauma of losing her mother, which stunted her emotional growth and caused her inability to mature into a full woman. More importantly, the early death of her mother robbed Edna of a feminine example from which she could have learned the social customs associated

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<sup>8</sup>“Thanatos and Eros” refer to Freud’s fundamental drives (Urtriebe), Thanatos being the God of death and Eros being the God of Love. Freud’s earlier distinction between the ego drives (Ichtriebe) and sexual drives (Sexualtriebe) had proved insufficient in light of “the observation that narcissism, which belongs to the ego drives, was not an absence of libido, sexual energy,” but rather quite the opposite (Gerber 2). In Freud’s consideration, then, “procreation, as much as the sexual act itself, became part of a more fundamental and abstract process, namely the process of creating higher unities” (Gerber 3). Yet, as Gerber explains, “if the narcissistic ego drives, the survival instinct, also belongs to Eros,” then the opposite drive “is no longer about egotism, which is about preserving one’s own internal unity, but rather the process of *abolishing* unities” (3). Consequently, Freud “drew the conclusion that, besides the drive to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units” (both aspects now belonging to Eros), “there must exist another, contrary drive seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their *primaeval*, inorganic state” (*Civilisation and its Discontents*, quoted in Gerber 3). As such, Freud considers Thanatos, the death drive, as one of the inherently competing fundamental drives of human psychology, a conceptualization Chopin seems to very much anticipate in her portrait of Edna’s psyche.

with motherhood and wifedom. Furthermore, Edna was never instructed in the choices available to her as a woman for her self-expression – she literally never had the “language” of a feminine self modeled to her. Edna, in fact, is a “child-woman” whose spiritual rebirth finds its beginning in the retelling of her repressed trauma and finding of a substitute mother, Adèle as “mother-woman.” However, because Adèle functions as “only” a mother and wife in the novel, representing the “True Woman” ideal, she alone cannot fulfill Edna’s need for a role model: in order to reconcile her two visions, Edna needs a second model, that of the “New Woman.”

Shortly after the beach scene, Chopin provides us with just this opposing vision to Adèle’s True Woman figure with the introduction of Mademoiselle Reisz. A talented pianist, Mademoiselle Reisz is described as “a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others” (27). Immediately here, Chopin draws parallels between Edna’s “selfish” character and Mademoiselle Reisz’ disposition, suggesting, perhaps, that true devotion to one’s self-realization necessarily requires self-assertion. More importantly, however, Mademoiselle is explicitly blunt and outspoken – much to the chagrin of those around her – which is precisely the kind of self-articulation lacking in Edna. Further, Chopin writes, Mademoiselle Reisz “was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed” who “had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair” (27). Mathews argues that, from a twenty-first century reader’s perception, these fashion critiques would be rather without reference, but a contemporary reader would have most certainly caught the critiques leveled here by Chopin who, as we may not forget, also wrote numerous fashion pieces for women’s periodicals. As Mathews points out, Chopin here has Mademoiselle Reisz make “a uniquely anti-fashion statement” (139). Mathews explains that “[a]nti-fashion, a mode of dress that often functions as a

sign of protest, included during the nineteenth century the bohemian garb worn by French artists, the bloomer costume propounded by dress reformers, and the outmoded styles worn by eccentric individuals like Mademoiselle” (139). For Mathews, then, “Mademoiselle Reisz’s clinging to these outmoded styles of her youth makes a potentially political statement, for, in America’s burgeoning consumer society, women who resisted the sway of fashion fulfilled an oppositional role, contesting consumerism by rejecting what Veblen observed to be women’s primary function under capitalism: consumption” (139). As Elz argues, Mademoiselle Reisz constitutes an “opposition to Adèle” as Edna “explores which life, the True Woman or New Woman, she wants” (18). As a figuration of a “New Woman” artist, however, Mademoiselle Reisz exemplifies not only the independence gained by a pursuit of art, but also what Hildebrand considers “the masculine right to loneliness” (206). In other words, in the dichotomy between Adèle’s representation of the ideal “True Woman” and Mademoiselle Reisz’ representation of the “New Woman,” Chopin shows either option for Edna as coming at a cost: either the loss of herself, or a life in solitude. Both women, however, also provide role models for Edna in modes of communication: Adèle offering instruction in the language of social convention, and Mademoiselle encouraging blunt and reckless self-expression.

Originally, the manuscript for *The Awakening* had been titled *A Solitary Soul*, and it was only upon the urging of her publisher that Chopin dropped the original title even as a subtitle (Rankin, in Chopin 28, footnote). What Chopin’s original title shows, however, is her emphasis on Edna’s exceeding interest in her own self-realization while also emphasizing both her inability to articulate herself sufficiently and her resulting isolation. In a sense, Edna becomes the quintessential, literally misunderstood artist. Unable to express herself in words, Edna turns to painting as a means of pictorial self-expression. Hildebrand argues that “[w]ell-meaning critics’ ready desire to excommunicate Edna to the realm of the ‘amateur,’ ‘dilettante,’ and ‘dabbler’ participates in the same kind of

gendered separation of artistry – amateur groups of women produce domestic crafts in the home, professional male solitary geniuses create high art for the marketplace – that has long plagued female engagement in the arts” (Hildebrand 190-191). However, in Hildebrand’s view, “Chopin suggests that Edna’s rapid development as an artist implies profound natural gifts – the sort of innate rather than cultivated talent traditionally associated with the male ‘genius’” (190). Hildebrand rests this assertion not only on the fact that, despite the narrator’s diminishing Edna’s sketching as something she “sometimes dabbled with in an unprofessional way,” only six sentences later, the narration highlights how Edna “handled her brushes with a certain ease and freedom which came, not from a long and close acquaintance with them, but from a natural aptitude” (14). Furthermore, the fact that, later in the novel, Edna is able to sell some of her paintings for enough profit to finance an abode away from her husband and children “implies a tremendous ability to engage in the masculine realm of the art-marketplace” (Hildebrand 190). Showalter points out how Edna’s “evolution from romantic fantasies of fusion with another person to self-definition and self-reliance” evokes Emerson, “whose writing Edna falls asleep reading at the end of chapter 24” (qtd. in Hildebrand 192). Edna’s solitariness thus becomes “a masculine prerogative that must be nurtured and protected by the artist herself and by a mother-muse, a woman like Adèle” (qtd in Hildebrand 192). More importantly, however, Hildebrand contends, ignoring Edna’s artistic development in the novel leads to some scholars’ preoccupation with Edna’s apparent inarticulateness. Edna’s “inability to access a discourse that gives expression to her personal feelings prevents Edna [. . .] from gaining subjectivity” (Hildebrand 192). This argument, however, presumes “that *language* is the sole mechanism of accessing and manifesting subjectivity” while “images and artistic expression are the way in which Edna articulates self-awareness” (Hildebrand 192-193). As Chopin herself in her dual representation of Edna’s inarticulateness through the medium of the words on the page, Edna too has “a language of her own, a way of



knowing of her own, indeed, a world of her own, which speech does not elucidate” (Hildebrand 193). This explains the numerous miscommunications taking place among the characters throughout the novel, as well as the dichotomy between Adèle as the “mother-muse” to Edna’s awakening artistry and Mademoiselle Reisz as the masculinized solitary artist communicating with Edna through art.

Mademoiselle Reisz’ music lends expression to Edna’s emotional state in a way Adèle cannot access. As the narrator explains upon Edna’s expectation of Mademoiselle Reisz’ performance at the party,

“Edna was what she herself called very fond of music. Musical strains, well rendered, had a way of evoking pictures in her mind. She sometimes liked to sit in the room of mornings when Madame Ratignolle played or practiced. One piece which that lady played Edna had entitled ‘Solitude.’ It was a short, plaintive, minor strain. The name of the piece was something else, but she called it ‘Solitude.’ When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him.” (28)

In this short passage, the narrator emphasizes twice that Edna has titled the piece ‘Solitude’ in accordance with her own soul’s constitution. Further, the music Adèle plays evokes “material pictures” for Edna, and the material pictures associated with specifically the piece she has titled ‘Solitude’ are quite similar to the description of the scene at the end of the novel, just prior to Edna’s suicide. The notable differences in Edna’s imagined scene and the final scene of the novel, of course, are that here the music invokes a man, and that the bird soars into the distance – as opposed to fluttering to the ground with a broken wing. This is significant insofar as it explains Edna’s awareness of the limitations

her gender imposes on her: she is not a man free to pursue her artistic endeavors and quest to self-discovery; rather, she is bound to the golden cage of marriage and motherhood that keeps her grounded. With Mademoiselle Reisz's performance, however, Edna's perception changes: "She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair" (28). Other than with Adèle's playing, "[f]eelings, and not ideas, are emphasized with Reisz's selections" (Camastra 161). Edna's "very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body" (28). Again, music invokes the ocean here, but rather than being expressed in pictures, Edna directly feels the emotions affecting her very soul.

It is further noteworthy that the piece that brings Edna to tears and touches her very soul is a prelude by (Frederic) Chopin, the Polish composer. As Camastra argues, this is significant insofar as he, as an artist, "like Reisz preferred his solitude and small gestures of friendship" (158). Also like Reisz, Frederic Chopin had a strong "dislike for performing before large groups of people," and "her sensitive renditions of Chopin's music, affirmed by her audience, create an affinity with the master pianist, especially since it was a widely held belief that imitations of Chopin produced cheapened recitals of nebulous interpretations" (Camastra 159). Camastra speculates that, although the not specified prelude played at the dance may be any of two dozen Chopin composed, "[i]f it is the conclusive piece in Opus 28, then it is the D minor known as being 'sonorously tragic,' indicating Edna's pronounced reaction, and characterized further by James Huneker as 'like the vast reverberation of monstrous waves on the implacable coast of a remote world'" (qtd. in Camastra, 159-160). What marks Chopin's music is his high "regard for form and structure [which] was ever present in his compositions," so that Kate Chopin's referential utilization of his music<sup>9</sup> "successfully integrates the opposition of

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<sup>9</sup>Camastra insists that Kate Chopin, as an avid music lover and pianist, was quite familiar with Frederic

‘the ‘classical’ concern for form and the ‘romantic’ urge of inspiration’” (Camastra 160). For the novel, this implies that “Edna ostensibly adheres to prescribed feminine standards before witnessing an iconoclastic revelation of her senses” which ultimately unleashes Edna’s awakening (Camastra 160). Frederic Chopin once wrote, “words were born of sounds; sounds existed before words. . . . Sounds are used to make music just as words are used to form a language. Thought is expressed through sounds. An undefined human utterance is mere sound; the art of manipulating sounds is music” (qtd in Camastra 165). Kate Chopin seems to have directly applied the composer’s insights about the communicative nature of music – especially in regards to conveying emotions – in using his compositions both to catalyze and represent Edna’s emotional state throughout the novel.

Constituting not only a model for the solitary artist, Mademoiselle Reisz thus fulfills an important, emotionally catalytic role for Edna. When Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz to read Robert’s letters to the latter, for example, Reisz “played a soft interlude” which “melted into the soft opening minor chords of the Chopin Impromptu [. . .] with its soulful and poignant longing” (66). And again, just as on the night of the dance, “Edna was sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her” (66). As Camastra points out, although the narrator never specifically names the Impromptu Robert had asked Mademoiselle Reisz to play “[i]f Mrs. Pontellier should call upon you” (65), Chopin wrote only four Impromptus, and only one in a minor key: the “*Fantasie-Impromptu in C sharp minor*” (Camastra 157, emphasis in original). Impromptus in general “are written in such a way as to inspire improvisation and,

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Chopin’s works. She argues that, in *The Awakening*, “of all the composers alluded to, such as Franz von Suppe, Louis Herold, and Richard Wagner, Frederic Chopin is the most frequent and the most important figure” so that “[h]is presence in the work overshadows his contemporaries and extends the thematic breadth of *The Awakening*” (155).

ultimately, can be understood as tonal conversations between a performer and an audience,” so that Kate Chopin’s specific reference to the *Fantasie-Impromptu* not only highlights Mademoiselle Reisz’s pianistic skill in playing this rather difficult piece in an emotionally affective way (Camastra 157). Further, and more importantly, invoking the *Impromptu* here also emphasizes the emotionally communicative nature in the relationship between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz, who takes on even a type of messenger role between Edna and Robert in playing the piece he asked to play for Edna. However, because Mademoiselle Reisz does not inform Robert that Edna also reads his letters, her messenger role is not designed to facilitate the love relationship between them – to be a matchmaker – but rather functions as a catalyst for Edna’s psychological development. In other words, the emotional communication between Edna and Reisz via Chopin’s music takes Robert’s interest in Edna and Edna’s interest in him as its occasion, but its ultimate purpose is instead to uncover a more conclusive affective register of Edna’s psyche. Moreover, while Mademoiselle Reisz thus communicates musically with Edna, Edna is left without the ability to translate or transcribe her emotions further. Since Mademoiselle Reisz’ music does not evoke pictures, only emotions, Edna’s passions may be stirred by her music, but they remain expressionless and unarticulated, trapped within her as if in a golden cage, and building up to the ultimate crisis.

Chopin ties Mademoiselle Reisz’ emotional inspiration of Edna directly to her aspirations as an artist, and a painter in particular. The letters from Robert are a pretense for Edna to continue to visit Reisz, but they are not the primary reason, as Edna initially does not even know Robert writes to Mademoiselle Reisz. The first topic about herself Edna addresses is her insistence that “I am becoming an artist,” occasioning Mademoiselle Reisz’ exclamation that “You have pretensions, Madame” (65). Reisz muses that “[t]o be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the

courageous soul. [. . .] The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (65). Since Edna’s raw talent for painting has already been established, Mademoiselle Reisz here is specifically addressing the need for Edna to reject social convention in order to succeed as an artist. However, as Edna herself has never informed anyone including Mademoiselle Reisz, she remains unaware of Edna’s inability to “translate” musical inspiration into pictures. In fact, the reader is only informed of Edna’s failure to reinterpret sounds into pictures through the narrator’s indirect discourse at the party: “She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair” (28). Yet, a painter unable to generate pictures reflective of or inspired by her emotions is necessarily a self-expressively failed painter and merely a copier of externally existing images, again, perhaps, much like the mockingbird copying other birds’ songs or the parrot mimicking human language.

Chopin carries this reference further when Edna informs Mademoiselle Reisz of her intentions to move out of her husband’s house into what she curiously has termed “the pigeon-house” (93). Yet, rather than moving “[t]o New York? to Iberville?” or even just “to your father in Mississippi?” to pursue her independence, Edna moves merely “around the corner” (81). Her naming her new abode “pigeon-house” more than merely suggests that Edna continues to remain pigeon-holed in a space between her wifely and motherly responsibilities and her ambitions to independent self-expression. It seems that, although aspiring to independence, Edna can never quite formulate her independent identity and instead resorts to articulating it in mimicked domestic tropes invoking birds:

The pigeon-house pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home, while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected like a warm glow. There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social

scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligation added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to ‘feed upon opinion’ when her own soul had invited her. (95-96)

It is clear that Edna never quite succeeds in aspiring to the heights of independence of Mademoiselle Reisz, who herself “always chose apartments up under the roof [. . .] to discourage the approach of beggars, peddlars, and callers” and, thusly, to maintain a solitary existence. Yet she also never reaches the spiritual heights of the angelic Adèle who scolds her for her lack of “a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life” about how “very, very imprudent” it is in society for a (married) woman to live alone and receive visitations from Alcèe Arobin, who has “such a dreadful reputation” (97). In this sense, then, despite her raw artistic talent, Edna’s inability to translate her emotions into a communicative style – be it language or pictures – means that she achieves neither the ideal of Mademoiselle Reisz’ New Woman, independent artist figure, nor that of the “Angel of the House” domestic ideal; rather, she remains a failed, misunderstood artist reduced to mimicking a little of both and neither sufficiently.

Notably, Mademoiselle Reisz distinctly ties Edna’s ability to soar above her imprisoned self-expression to her ability to escape patriarchal demands. As Edna relays to Arobin, Mademoiselle “put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong” (85). Edna then quotes Mademoiselle Reisz directly: “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (85). As Mou points out, Mademoiselle Reisz uses “the image of a brave bird soaring above the level plain to talk metaphorically to Edna about artistic courage;” yet, despite this being

such an important imagery tying the soaring bird to individual and artistic freedom, “Chopin does not let Mademoiselle Reisz speak directly” (116). For Mou, “Reisz epitomizes a female self that is maimed in its quest – the single woman who has rejected marriage or childbirth by committing herself to art,” a point of view, she argues, “Chopin does not completely endorse” (116). Mou argues that “Chopin agrees that artistic originality and daring is vital to a female artist, but she disagrees with the idea that a female artist has to be radical in order to achieve meaningful originality” (116). In order to understand Chopin’s (and Mademoiselle Reisz’s) point here more clearly, one must also consider that Edna quotes Mademoiselle Reisz just at the moment at which Arobin is about to get intimate with her: “Why have you introduced her at a moment when I desired to talk of you?” he asks (85). In response, Edna cries “Oh! talk of me if you like, [. . .] but let me think of something else while you do” (85). Considering that Edna and Arobin become intimate, presumably for the first time, immediately afterward, it is not a stretch of the imagination to assume that Edna’s announcement that she will “think of something else” does not apply to Arobin’s talking. For Edna, Arobin’s kiss “was a flaming torch that kindled desire,” but the desire is specifically not for Arobin (85). Further, Edna feels both “her husband’s reproach looking at her from the external things around her which he had provided for her external existence” and Robert’s, which she “felt by a quicker, fiercer, more overpowering love, which had awakened within her toward him” (85). The double emphasis of Léonce’s providing for Edna’s “external existence” only, coupled with Edna’s internally experienced love for Robert, and her desire having been kindled by neither, but Arobin instead, thus further highlights how self-expression for Edna must be thoroughly divorced from any one man.

Even further, another effect of inserting Mademoiselle Reisz’s voice into the scene of Edna’s first overtly extra-marital sexual act is that it emphasizes the physical aspect of Edna’s sexuality and contrasts it with her emotional expressiveness. Edna’s sexual

experience is very much and explicitly dependent on being kindled by any one male, here Arobin, and before him, her husband for whom she explicitly has “no trace of passion” (21) but independent from her actual object of desire, Robert. From a sexual standpoint, therefore, Edna remains the perpetually seduced passive receptor dependent on men to inflame her physical reactions. However, these physical reactions have as little connection to her true object of desire – love – as her position as Léonce’s wife and Arobin’s lover has with her self-expressive, independent goals. In other words, because Edna is perpetually incapable of articulating herself and her emotions, she can never actively pursue her true emotions and passions and remains a passive receptacle in heterosexual intercourse, subdued by and dependent on male penetration. Furthermore, engaging in heterosexual activity constantly risks pregnancy, which only further would weigh down Edna’s ability to soar above tradition and effectively confines her in her metaphorical patriarchal cage. Edna does not realize this until much later, just before her suicide: “To-day it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier – but Raoul and Etienne!” (115). Heterosexual love, Edna realizes, ultimately and perpetually recreates the patriarchal bind she finds herself in, for she could never escape the clutches of responsibility for her children, “who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (115). What quoting Mademoiselle Reisz therefore impresses on Edna just at the moment at which she is about to have sex with Arobin, is that self-realization for her needs to be divorced from any man, lest she risk inadvertently making herself dependent on the very patriarchal traditions and expectations she so desperately seeks to escape.

Mademoiselle Reisz considers artistic freedom for a woman to be entirely possible only if she disavows traditional gender roles, and she impresses that same idea on Edna. For Mademoiselle, as the novel’s epitome of the independent woman, Edna cannot succeed as an artist unless she completely devotes herself to her artistry, just as for Adèle,



Edna cannot succeed as a mother unless she completely devotes herself to her children. To make this even more explicit, Chopin again codes Mademoiselle's "opposition to normative female roles" into her fashion, such as the "prunella gaiter that Mademoiselle mends during one of Edna's visits" (Mathews 139). Taking one 1894 copy of *The Woman's Book* as an example, Mathews explains, "[c]learly in contrast with the ruffled tea gowns and velvet-trimmed walking dresses shown elsewhere in *The Woman's Book*, the suit and gaiters adopt the idiom of men's dress, insistently expressing seriousness, activity, and purposeful work" (139). In the novel standing in clear contrast to Adèle's often white, lofty, and angelic attire, Mademoiselle's shabby gaiter in need of mending "implies not only women's changing life options but also the economic hardship that often accompanied a choice to shun marriage in favor of independence" (Mathews 140). Most notable, however, is that "Chopin includes only three specific details about Mademoiselle's attire, one of them the outdated but ultra-feminine false hair and violets, the second the masculine-coded gaiters, and a third the red flannel rag that she wears around her neck when she is sick" (Mathews 140). As Mathews argues, "[t]his final detail works to punctuate a point of friction where body, gender identity, and subjectivity interconnect, for elsewhere in the novel red functions as a symbol for female sexuality" (140). Drawing on several other scholars' works,<sup>10</sup> Mathews argues that "Chopin's treatment here draws on nineteenth-century stereotypes of lesbians, a position that becomes all the more pointed within Chopin's colour-coding of female sexuality" (140). In this manner, reading Mademoiselle as not merely rejecting traditional gender roles but as fully embodying the anti-thesis of the ideal woman, Mademoiselle's implied lesbianism "acknowledges a female subjectivity that defines itself not simply by opposing normative

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<sup>10</sup>Namely, Christina Giorcelli's essay "Edna's Wisdom: A Transitional and Numinous Merging" and Kathryn Lee Seidel's article "Art is an Unnatural Act: Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*," both cited in Mathews.

categories but by tossing the markers of those categories willy-nilly into a hybrid mix” (Mathews 141). As embodied by Mademoiselle Reisz’s, “[t]he artist who ‘dares and defies,’ Chopin suggests, chooses *anti-* as her mode of life, art, and dress, and she mixes categories, particularly gender categories, at will” (Mathews 141). As Glendening argues, “*The Awakening* asserts female capacity for sexual pleasure,” claiming it, in Edna’s case, as the inspirational source for her artistic creativity, yet, other than for a lesbian Mademoiselle Reisz, “Edna’s growing sensuality or ‘animalism’ [. . .] makes more undesired reproduction a highly probable fate likely to bring her more trouble” (61). Reading Mademoiselle Reisz as lesbian, therefore, further emphasizes how the novel argues for female sexuality as a valid and necessary source of individual expression, but simultaneously criticizes reproduction as being the only socially acceptable outcome. In other words, Chopin here seems to make a quite visionary feminist argument about female sexuality and feminine sexual pleasure as expressive means which exist independently from the pure physicality of reproduction as pushed by Christian convention and societal expectations.

This again also ties back to Edna’s rejection of religion implicit in her memory of running away from her father’s oppressive and gloomy Presbyterian service, a flight from convention she repeats with Robert the day after her first swim. There, at “the quaint little Gothic church of Our Lady of Lourdes, [. . .] [a] feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service” so much so that “her one thought was to quit the stifling atmosphere of the church and reach the open air” (37). The two instances of Edna’s running away from church services so close together in the novel thus constitute “a foreshadowing for Edna’s final break with established institutions, represented by church-going, institutions that ‘oppress’ and ‘stifle’ the growth of the individual” (Anastasopoulou 24-25). Interesting in this, Edna’s second flight from church service, is also her immediately following long sleep at Madame Antoine’s. As Anastasopoulou

points out, “Edna’s falling asleep is a symbolic emulation of death, very common in rites of passage. When she awakens, she again washes, ‘her eyes . . . bright and wide awake and her face glow[ing],’ imagery implying the brightness of a resurrection, or a newly-born person” (25). Edna, therefore, “[enacts] not one awakening from paternalistic sponsorship but many,” so that, each time, “when Edna runs away from her father’s Presbyterianism to the ocean-like meadow, when she escapes the stifling shadow of the church, when she dissociates herself from her husband’s ‘bounty,’ and when she swims seaward from the Grand Isle shore, she is challenging both Christianity and a much older ‘catastrophe’: the patriarchalism” from which she sees no escape (Bradley 58). Nevertheless, the reason why Edna’s escape from patriarchal confines is impossible is because she is incapable of articulating any of these desires so confoundingly motivating her. Perpetually doomed to merely parroting the verbalized expressive tropes of her two muses, Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle, Edna therefore remains inescapably caught in the mimicry of an existing convention, never to pioneer, or even communicate her own independent identity.

Thus, fittingly just at the moment at which Edna seems within reach of fulfilling her still imagined goal, a union with Robert, she is called to assist in Adèle’s accouchement, and obliged to function once again within the prescribed boundaries of her social situation. Yet Edna is unable to verbalize her desires to Robert anyway; while she credits him as the one “who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream,” she is stunned by his idea of her becoming his wife, teasing him for “wasting your time dreaming of impossible things” (109). Edna laughs at being considered a “possession” and claims that “I give myself where I choose” (109). It is at this point that the two are interrupted by Adèle’s call for Edna, robbing Edna of the opportunity to articulate her real desires of escaping standardized roles and defining her own independent identity to Robert, if she had been able to. Further, being called to Adèle giving birth painfully reminds her of the one obligation which she cannot ever escape and which will always circumscribe her, that

of being a mother. Watching Adèle in labor, “Edna began to feel uneasy” and “was seized with a vague dread” (111). The scene recalls to her her own experiences giving birth, although they “seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go” (111). We may remember that, early in the novel, Adèle had been repeatedly associated with the Christ mother. Here, during her giving birth, Edna remembers her own childbirth in terms of Christ’s resurrection as an “awakening” among the circle of birth and death. As Bradley reminds us, “[t]he grave of Jesus, [. . .] connotes a philosophical world with no promises of miraculous escapes, but it doubles as the ever-quickening womb, a woman’s metonymic role, the issue of which is already dead before it is born” (59). Adèle’s association with the Christ mother thus emphasizes Edna’s inescapability from her maternal responsibilities within the confines of the current social conventions. In other words, since Edna has already ascribed to the circle of life by becoming a mother, she will remain subject to that obligation for the rest of her life. In this sense, Edna’s aspirations to ultimate expressive freedom are dead before they were ever conceived. Edna’s inability to even fully articulate the source of her doomed quest for ultimate self-expression, her children’s births, further underscores the futility of her efforts to give rise to an articulation of her self. Adèle’s accouchement metonymically signals the end – or death – of Edna’s awakening as she metaphorically had assumed the nurturing mother role for Edna’s self-discovery as occasioned by Edna’s recalling of her meadow memory. Fittingly, Adèle’s final words of the novel, “Think of the children. Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” reverberate through the final pages of the novel as Edna drifts toward the inevitable end – her suicide (111).

Chopin emphasizes how Edna despairs at the inescapability of her situation as a mother one last time in her conversation with Dr. Mandelet on her way back from Adèle’s

accouchement. As Edna muses about how “Nobody has any right – except children [sic], perhaps – and even then, it seems to me – or it did seem,” the Doctor, “grasping her meaning intuitively,” philosophizes that “[t]he trouble is, [. . .] that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost” (112). Even here, in one of the last scenes, Edna still cannot make herself heard or fully understood or even understand herself fully. Edna may realize her awakening spirit was doomed from the start, due to her already having fallen for the decoy of heterosexual passion and its accompanying provisions for procreation and motherhood, but she still cannot actively describe her emotional situation or articulate it for herself and the reader. After returning home and finding Robert’s good-bye note, Edna consequently is left entirely silenced, void even of the parroted conventions to follow. Without ever “uttering a sound,” Edna sits up all night, and, as the reader learns on the next few pages, thinks of the inescapability and inexpressibility of her situation, her obligation to her children, and the arbitrariness of men’s control over her. The beginning of the next chapter starting at this point marks an abrupt shift in setting to Grand Isle, where Victor and Mariequita frolic and flirt about, only to be as surprised by Edna’s appearance as the reader is. In fact, Chopin indicates Edna’s absolute silencing and emotional stand-still by completely shutting the reader out of Edna’s thought processes here, her abrupt and un-foreshadowed return to Grand Isle and her lighthearted suggestion that she might go for a swim therefore leaving us in the dark about her intentions. The utter absence of any motivation for Edna’s actions in the last pages of the novel, even by the narrator, thus communicates Edna’s unformulated state of mind. In other words, because Edna cannot articulate her emotional state, she is left to drift in the ocean of her inner psyche, without plan, and without direction, even for herself. Without access to the language she needs to self-articulate, it is ultimately her

self-defining aphasia – her lack of words adequately describing her emotional state and communicating the same conclusively to others – that leads to her failure at realizing herself. For Edna, a self she cannot articulate cannot exist in a communal exchange with others, since it is, after all, communally understood language that allows for such a communicative exchange in the first place.

Just as the novel has opened with the image of birds, so too does it close with a bird reference. Yet while the birds at the beginning are cacophonously protesting their caged state, at the end there remains merely a helpless “bird with a broken wing [which] was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (116). While also invoking Icarian imagery here with a bird that tried to fly higher than it could (or should), the recurrence of a bird emphasizes the progression of Edna’s inhibited awakening one last time. Having begun the past summer as a stereotypical wife in a golden cage who strives to stretch her wings and fly, she ultimately has to realize the futility in trying to escape her preassigned role. As Bradley argues, through her suicide, Edna “is indeed freeing herself from both spiritual and cultural anchors” (60). Yet, “Edna, ‘neither perfected nor corrupted. . . is still swimming when we last see her’” (Gilbert, quoted in Bradley 59) suggesting a spiritual rebirth in the way in which Edna “felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (116). Again echoing the metonymic role of Adèle’s pregnancy in the novel, “one has to appreciate Kate Chopin’s transition from ‘scientific’ to ‘poetic’ reality, which helps interpret Edna’s suicide as a rebirth, the reader crossing the border between the scientific mode and the poetic and joining Edna as ‘psychic participant’” (Shaw, quoted in Mikolchak 42). As Mikolchak points out, “Shaw’s theory is very close to what has for a long time been known as a specific quality of German Realism known as Poetic Realism and characterized by its progressive reflectedness, a subtle technique of suggestion and silence” (42). The rebirth suggestion is further emphasized by the novel’s final words

leading the reader back to Edna's childhood memory in the meadow, when Edna, after the loss of her mother, first learned to reject patriarchal oppression, but before inadvertently falling victim to its, for Edna, inescapable clutches. In the end, the reality Edna faces allows for no reconciliation of her innermost desires for independence and the responsibilities her role as a wife and mother demand from her. This leaves Edna in a constant state of suspension, represented by the state just between life and death at which Chopin closes the novel, and permanently silenced. For Edna, Chopin suggests, there simply exists no space (yet) in which she can be both a mother and live her independence.

With *The Awakening*, and herself writing publicly only after her husband's death, Chopin suggests that white, economically privileged women such as Edna at the turn of the century face a nearly insurmountable paradox between the demands of society and self-realization. Edna's inability to escape the responsibility for her children in particular point toward the condition of motherhood as her primary "[antagonist] who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (115). Edna's suicide is the only "way to elude" this "slavery," suggesting that women's life as mothers is forced labor of a freedom-longing soul (115). Read as a conscious escape, Edna's suicide then becomes "a positive – indeed, perhaps the ultimate – mode of self-assertion" (Hildebrand 205). However, if read that way, Edna is able to assert herself only retrospectively through her suicide and therefore remains a failed heroine for the novel. As Hildebrand argues, "[w]hat Edna ultimately wants is the masculine prerogative of the solitary genius: the right to exist – and die – alone," yet what she lacks, and what becomes her ultimate handicap, is the ability to express her own genius (205). In this sense, then, Edna becomes the ultimate failed genius as both victim of her inescapable circumstances of pre-existing motherhood – a condition "which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (21) – and victor in asserting "a final, resolute claim to the masculine right to loneliness, to a (literally dead end) solitary

life that her ambition as an artist had prefigured” (Hildebrand 206). More importantly, Edna returns to her childhood in the last moments of the novel, a scene which Schulz describes as “a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a synaesthetic experience combining visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile sensations” (74). In the last imagery of the novel, in which “[t]here was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pink filled the air,” Chopin thus reminds us of Edna’s potential as a genius artist, who fails as a result of her preassigned gender role and her inability to express herself as her own *Gesamtkunstwerk* in her painting in the same way Chopin artistically expresses it verbally in the novel.



## CHAPTER THREE

## “MIS’ MOLLY WALDEN’S DAUGHTER RENA”:

VOICED MOTHERHOOD, PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE, AND SOUTHERN RACE  
RELATIONS IN CHARLES CHESNUTT’S *THE HOUSE BEHIND THE CEDARS*

In order to better understand Chesnutt’s authorial intentions in writing first the short story “Rena Walden,” and later expanding it into the novel at the center of this chapter, *The House Behind the Cedars*, it is important to first consider Chesnutt’s biographical background, as well as his self-admittedly utopian idea for solving the race problem in the South via genetic assimilation. As Gleason notes, citing a 1930 letter to a friend, Chesnutt “felt a strong attachment to Rena Walden,” considering her “in a way, my favorite child, for Rena was of ‘my own people.’ Like myself, she was a white person with an attenuated streak of dark blood” (30). What is interesting in this quote, and for the purposes of this chapter, is that much of the scholarship, such as Gleason’s, revolves around the idea that “[t]he distinctions Chesnutt prefers are clearly those of *class*, not race” (emphasis added, 30). Similarly, when Ferguson analyzes Chesnutt’s approaches to race, she sharply criticizes that “while the critics romantically hail him as a black artist championing the cause of his people, Chesnutt, as his essays show, is essentially a social and literary accommodationist who pointedly and repeatedly confines his reformist impulses to the ‘colored people,’” thus starkly distinguishing and creating classes of people on the black side of the color line according to their relative skin tone (“Genuine Blacks” 109). As Chametzky points out, Chesnutt’s work was rarely discussed by scholars

as he was largely absent from anthologies until the mid-1960s. Until the turn of the millennium, therefore, most scholars seem to have been evaluating Chesnutt's work strictly in terms of the relationships between race and class. In focusing on what Mohr later calls Chesnutt's privileging of "the black bourgeoisie," however, his fiction has received relatively little attention regarding his treatment of gender. Particularly considering how, as a male mixed-race author, Chesnutt much more resembles the character of John in *The House Behind the Cedars*, but explicitly privileges Rena as his protagonist, this chapter will utilize the more recent multi-intersectional analyses of Chesnutt to examine the double jeopardy of race and gender in the character of Rena. More specifically, I will trace how through language and voice, Chesnutt establishes Rena not just as an assimilated racial ideal, but also as an idealized, and intersectional picture of womanhood. In depicting Rena as the quintessential, "natural" epitome that seemingly conforms to the bourgeois ideals of "white womanhood," while her physique camouflages the "dark" influences of race, Chesnutt uses the concept of "motherhood" not only in depicting Rena as a creator of future, maternal, American lineages, but also as a metaphor for his own authorial stakes in the discussion of race.

The fundamental concern with passing, idealized forms of (female) beauty, and the color line in *The House Behind the Cedars* has a clear line of precedent and thought in the writings of Charles Chesnutt, much of which can be traced through his biography. For an author at the turn of the Nineteenth Century, particularly for an African American one, Chesnutt has somewhat of a unique biographical background. Born in Ohio as the son of free, mixed race parents, Chesnutt's complexion is often described as white enough to pass. Although Chesnutt himself ultimately chose not to pass, and rather devote his literary influence to elevating the condition of black people in the South, this immediately put him into a somewhat precarious position as a writer. On one hand, Chesnutt very much benefitted from his light complexion and enjoyed a comparatively good education

for a mixed race individual in the post-Civil War era. After his family had moved to South Carolina in 1866, Chesnutt enrolled at age nine in the Howard School, “a public school for blacks funded by the Freedman’s Bureau” (Fosset v). It was there that Chesnutt felt inspired by some of the great Victorian writers to become a writer and author. However, after moving back north to Cleveland in 1883, he first studied law and became a stenographer (Fosset v). His education – and quite probably his light complexion – thus afforded him access to a deeper understanding of and allowed him to contribute to what, especially during the post-Civil War years, would be considered elevated “white” discourse and classical expertise.

On the other hand, as an individual with mixed race heritage, Chesnutt remained black, at least according to the many one-dropism considerations in the American South. Thus, Chesnutt-as-writer had to contend with racial divisions and dichotomies that assumed an inferior intellectual constitution of black writers. In consciously assuming an identity as a black writer anyway, Chesnutt’s ultimate hope was that “his ‘race’ would not automatically debar him from the public arena, while he knew, on another level, that his being African-American more than likely meant his intervention in public debate would be discounted as illegitimate in the view of most late nineteenth-century white Americans” (Wilson 19). In other words, since Chesnutt chose to write explicitly as a black author (as opposed to taking advantage of the privileges that assuming a white identity would have afforded him) to a predominantly white readership, he necessarily had to contend with racists ideas questioning not only his authority in the matter, but also his mental capacity to grasp complex literary concepts. Simultaneously, Chesnutt also had to establish what Chametzky calls “black ethos,”<sup>1</sup> and with it, demonstrate working

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<sup>1</sup>Chametzky relies on Sterling Stuckey’s definition of black ethos as a “life style and set of values. . . which prevented [black people] from being imprisoned altogether by the definitions which the larger society sought to impose” (“Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery,” quoted in Chametzky 67).

versatility in black cultural tropes while operating within a white literary discourse.<sup>2</sup>

In a way, one could argue, Chesnutt himself as a writer exemplifies the stereotypical trope of the “tragic mulatto”<sup>3</sup> writer, unable to succeed on either side of the color line. Chesnutt himself laments in his journals that “I am neither fish[,] flesh, nor fowl – neither ‘nigger,’ poor white, nor ‘buckrah.’ Too ‘stuck up’ for the colored folks, and, of course, not recognized by the whites”<sup>4</sup> (quoted in Wilson 22). A young Chesnutt, however, believed that his hybrid identity could expose the arbitrariness of the color line and that “he could function as a kind of Janus-faced interpreter and represent both southern whites and blacks” (Wilson 24). As Chametzky elaborates, what “Chesnutt created in his stories, within the framework of folkloristic “goopher” or conjure and transformation tales – partly in response to Thomas Nelson Page’s fantasies about plantation life – was the first conscious, fictional form given to the black ethos in America” (67). In using a “technique of embedded narratives” in his conjure tales, Chesnutt not only exposes the relationship among his characters in Uncle Julius’ trickster status, never quite caught upon by the white Northerner John, even while retelling Julius tales (Lawson 105). Moments of condescension of an unnamed narrator superseding John’s narration also emphasize “the

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<sup>2</sup>This same tension very much lies at the core of Gayatri Spivak’s famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Arguing on behalf of colonized people, Spivak questions whether imposing the cultural discourses of the imperial nation – including language, rhetorical approaches, canonization and “white” racial aesthetics, etc. – imposes an inevitable and permanent silencing of the Oppressed. Spivak explains that the Subaltern are necessarily kept unable to join the decision-making, academic and political discourses due to their unfamiliarity with how to successfully operate within this prescribed, foreign discourse. Conversely, any previous member of the Subaltern who has mastered “white” discourse necessarily joins the discourse keeping the Subaltern oppressed, and therefore becomes one of the oppressors; in other words, once a member of the Subaltern class becomes elevated to speak on their behalf, he or she ceases to be a member of the Subaltern, thus rendering oppressed peoples perpetually silent.

<sup>3</sup>I am using the term “tragic mulatto/mulatta” solely in reference to the literary trope that first appeared in the second third of the nineteenth century, and which was well-established at the time of Chesnutt’s writing as a plot device.

<sup>4</sup>Chesnutt is purposefully employing offensive terminology here for the rhetorical purpose of emphasizing the dehumanizing effect of this language on the thusly classified people. For this reason, and for this reason only, I am maintaining the accurate and full spelling when quoting directly, so as to not diminish Chesnutt’s deliberate rhetorical impact and purpose in using those terms.

interplay between frames and tales to call attention to the nexus of relationships among author, audience, and genre” (Paul R. Petrie, quoted in Lawson 105). Even further, Lawson contends, the nesting of interrelated narration expands beyond the boundaries of the printed page, as “Chesnutt’s mainstream publisher and editor, Walter Hines Page, controlled and manipulated Chesnutt’s [fiction]” to the point of disenfranchising and demotivating Chesnutt as an author (Lawson 106). As Chametzky explains, “John’s limited sympathy, his inability to fathom Julius’ experience, [. . .] ‘is a hauntingly familiar projection of the white response to America’s racial problem’” (Robert Farnsworth, quoted in Chametzky, 68). Largely undervalued in American canonization, then, Chesnutt seems to constitute almost a meta-example of his approach to writing and authorship in his attempts to expose the arbitrariness and consequences of the color line.

Chesnutt’s fiction seems to elude easy classifications of genre as much as his identity as an author eludes simple categorization. Lawson, for example, argues that just as much as “Chesnutt was appropriated as a black writer” at the culmination of the field of African American studies, he was stuck into the niche of realism via the label of Southern Regionalism: “once we have a label, we tend to believe that subjects are therefore real, discrete, and defined by only one element. We create categories to validate the significance of a subject but too easily forget that we do this mainly for pedagogical convenience” (111). In composing his fiction, Sarah Meer has noted, “Chesnutt not only took white authors as his models but seemed at times to seek out genres particularly associated with that ‘feeling of repulsion toward the negro’ which he believed so prevalent” (quoted in Lawson 108). The range of genres Chesnutt thus employs across his fiction includes, of course, the local color regionalism of Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus so prevalent in *The Conjure Woman* and tales, but also, as Worden notes, palpable in some of his later novels, such as *The House Behind the Cedars*. Another prevalent genre in Chesnutt’s fiction includes Thomas Nelson Page’s Southern plantation dialect

stories, as well as his notable contribution to the “overt or implicit fictional challenges to [the] *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” genre which “began immediately after the book’s publication and continued through Chesnutt’s time” (Lawson 118). Janis holds that Chesnutt’s work blurs the boundaries between Realism and Romanticism, while Ramsey firmly locates specifically *The House Behind the Cedars* within the sentimental tradition. Others like Sollors note Chesnutt’s subversion of Greek classicism and tragedy in his work, while Hack notes several instances of Chesnutt’s reworking of popular Victorian literature for his purposes. Chesnutt’s fiction clearly appears as versatile and varied – and possibly as misunderstood by his contemporaries – as he seems to be in his identity as a mixed heritage author in the turn of the century American South.

Chesnutt scholars generally consider *The Marrow of Tradition* as standing out from Chesnutt’s other fiction insofar as the novel, other than the subdued criticism of racial distinctions in his other work, takes on a much more pronounced polemic form and centers around an actual historical event, the Wilmington Race Riots. Gleason explains that, although Chesnutt makes some alterations for his novel, his “account of the riot roughly corresponds to the currently accepted outline” (25). Yet Gleason also cautions that this very outline of events may have been influenced by another fiction resulting from it more than from actual occurrences: he notes that the events in Wilmington inspired two novels, Chesnutt’s and David Bryan Fulton’s *Hanover*. Yet later, authoritative historical accounts of the riots (such as H. Leon Prather’s and Helen G. Edmonds’) cite Fulton’s fictional *Hanover* several times as a historical source (Gleason 26). This is interesting for the study of Chesnutt insofar since “when *Hanover* is used to verify another generic text (such as Edmonds’ history, or Prather’s or Chesnutt’s novel), it reaches the status in Stepto’s formulation analogous to an ‘authenticating narrative’” (Gleason 27). What this emphasizes then, according to Gleason, is the extraordinary “burden of ‘proof’ on an Afro-American novelist attempting to portray race relations as they ‘really’ were at the

turn of the century” (27). Authors like Chesnutt really “faced the dilemma of working within the plantation/journalist tradition, or unmasking its falsehoods and presenting their own ‘truer’ versions of history” which, in turn, risked the alienation of a predominantly white, middle-class readership (Gleason 28). Despite Chesnutt clearly trying to soften his societal critique with a strong use of romantic conventions, *The Marrow of Tradition* “stepped over the bounds of racial decency and . . . shook his white audience’s faith in him” (Robert M. Farnsworth, quoted in Gleason 29). Even further, and to Chesnutt’s great disappointment, his attempts to “characterize and explore the imbalanced nature of [the mulatto’s] social and racial situation” were ignored (Ramsey 35).

For a deeper and more explicit insight into Chesnutt’s ideas about race and his authorial aspirations, many scholars therefore look to his non-fiction work, such as his journals, letters, and essays. Ferguson points out “a much-quoted journal entry of 16 March 1880,” for example, which elucidates Chesnutt’s explicit desire to use his fiction for purposes of social reform: “he would write for a ‘high, holy purpose,’ ‘not so much [for] the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites’ (“Genuine Blacks” 109). Knadler adds, that both as a thinker and an author, “Chesnutt was reinterpreting race as less a stigma against blacks, or an advantage for whites, than a cultural practice by which all are marked” (426). Citing from Chesnutt’s famous essay, “What Is a White Man?” published in the New York *Independent* in 1889, Knadler shows Chesnutt’s recognition that, with an increasingly more difficult and complex consideration of increasingly less visible racial markers in American society,<sup>5</sup> it had “become . . . in the

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<sup>5</sup>As Fossett explains in her introduction and notes to *The House Behind the Cedars*, the “racial and caste equality implied by the Emancipation Proclamation [. . .] and by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, the so-called Reconstruction Amendments ratified from 1865 to 1869” (xix) in practice caused widespread racial anxiety among white populations, who feared that “vengeful ex-slaves would subvert the almost unlimited white control of the American republic” (Ferguson, “Genuine Blacks” 111). This anxiety ultimately led not only to widely varying laws concerning the “legal classifications of race” (Fossett 210), but also to laws such as the so-called three-fifths compromise and later segregation laws

highest degree important to [white people] to know what race they belong to” (427). Chesnutt, however, rejected the idea that black blood necessarily “would lead to degeneracy and extinction” of the human race, a Darwinist view held by many ideologues on the “race problem” and “mulatto problem” (Toth 78). Rather, as Ferguson explicates, Chesnutt saw racial amalgamation as a solution to racism, even going so far as proposing “a wholesale racial assimilation achieved by the genetic dilution of the black race” (“Genuine Blacks” 111). In his essay series, “Future American” published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* between 1899 and 1900, Chesnutt argues “that the race needs to dilute itself through miscegenation with apparently superior whites, and he even provides a genetic formula for fully accomplishing this over three generations” (Ferguson, “Genuine Blacks” 114). Problematically leaving out “‘genuine Negro[es]’ (as he calls dark-skinned blacks in [. . .] ‘What Is a White Man?’)” (Ferguson “Genuine Blacks” 110), Chesnutt essentially suggests himself as a model for his idea of a racially assimilated, aesthetically pleasing, seven eighths white “Future American.” Fictionalizing himself as such a, as he saw it, aestheticized version of African American that would be acceptable for white society in *The House Behind the Cedars* thus allows Chesnutt to explore the implications of vision for American society. However, in making his protagonist in the novel female, he creates a doubled, because now also gendered, oppression plot that utilizes appeals to idealized womanhood to advocate for his vision of whitened Future Americans as the offspring of black mothers and white fathers.

From the outset of *The House Behind the Cedars*, the main character, Rena Walden, is described in her physical appearance, as seen through the eyes of another and

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under Jim Crow. Chakkalakal also notes how marital laws certifying slave marriages a legally valid make “inheritance possible, and so [hold] out the prospect of the accumulation of wealth and social status” for black people. Of note in the context of Chesnutt’s writing is always the question of the visibility of race, particularly since Chesnutt often uses the passing plot – such as in *The House Behind the Cedars* – to further his notion of the arbitrariness of drawing the color line.



as defined through that gaze. The narration begins through the lens of, as the chapter title tells us, “A Stranger from South Carolina” who leads the reader through the little town Patesville as if on a nostalgic tour of times past: He contemplates “the market-house, the central feature of Patesville, from both the commercial and the picturesque points of view” (4). Chesnutt immediately belies the title of his chapter, since the fact that the stranger “was unable to perceive much change in the market-house” – aside from a little peeling paint and some more moss – reveals that the visitor, now identified as John Warwick, is not a stranger to the town at all. Yet it is through this visitor’s lens and contemplations that the reader first encounters the novel’s main character: upon first laying his eyes on her, and thus narrating her presence to the reader, Warwick finds “that the young woman was strikingly handsome, with a stately beauty seldom encountered” (7). He describes her figure as “admirably proportioned” and “her abundant hair, of a dark and glossy brown, was neatly plaited and coiled above an ivory column that rose straight from a pair of gently sloping shoulders” (7). Warwick further observes “that she was tastefully, though not richly, dressed, and that she walked with an elastic step that revealed a light heart and the vigor of perfect health” (7). What Chesnutt achieves in this narration is to create a double-gaze in which the reader is asked to imagine the yet unnamed character of Rena according to John’s perception of her, which as Toth explains is nevertheless qualified through the use of “strategic tags such as ‘he perceived’ and ‘he could see’” (75). Narratively, Chesnutt “places the reader in the position of the voyeur” by way of his focalization of Rena’s description through John, so that “[t]his scopic language, bordering on aggression and containing palpable sexual overtones, makes the reader look, and what it forces us to see is Rena’s embodied femininity and beauty” (Toth 75). What John describes here, is a markedly white standard of femininity, however. From

emphasizing the “ivory column” of Rena’s neck (7) to comparing her to Phryne<sup>6</sup> (8), John noticeably employs classical references to Greek aesthetic principles.

Utilizing classical imagery in describing Rena achieves multiple narrative goals for Chesnutt. Firstly, of course, it emphasizes Rena’s beauty and idealized physique, especially with John’s seemingly fleeting reference to Phryne, herself a model for Greek sculptors and painters. Secondly, the reference to Phryne also helps the reader to literally visualize Rena’s whiteness: as Fossett explains in her notes, the figure of Phryne was popularized in 1861 through a widely reproduced painting depicting her court scene by Jean-Léon Gérôme, titled *Phryne Before the Areopagus*, whose imagery would have been well-established in Chesnutt’s readers’ minds (207). In this painting, the figure of Phryne, positioned to the front in the left half of the canvas, is spotlighted from above in such a way that her starkly white skin stands in contrast to the more sallow complexions of the court and her defender (Figure 3.1). The viewer also does not see Phryne’s face, covered in apparent embarrassment with one of her arms, so that the viewer’s focus remains solely with her body and its marble-white perfected contours. This also echoes John’s primary focus in considering Rena, whose face at this point he had barely caught “a second glimpse” of (8). It is interesting, then, that John contemplates that “[a] woman with such a figure [. . .] ought to be able to face the world with the confidence of Phryne confronting her judges” (9). Since Phryne’s face, at least in the Gérôme painting likely referred to in this passage, is hidden in discomfort, John here re-emphasizes Rena’s physicality rather than considering the emotional state of either Rena or Phryne’s. Thirdly, Chesnutt also emphasizes Rena’s whiteness in terms of “standards derived from ancient ideals that in

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<sup>6</sup>In her notes to the text, Fosset explains the figure of Phryne to be “a fourth-century B.C. Greek courtesan who was a model for representations of Aphrodite by the sculptor Praxiteles (and allegedly his mistress) and the painter Apelles.” The historical Phryne “was charged with profaning the Eleusinian mysteries, and her defender, the orator Hyperides (another of her lovers), dramatically engineered her acquittal by tearing her dress in order to display her breasts to the jurors” (207).



Figure 3.1: Jean-Léon Gérôme. *Phryne Before the Areopagus*. 1861. Oil on Canvas. Kunsthalle Hamburg, Germany.

Chesnutt's time governed European and American art" (Toth 75). Citing Kirk Savage, Toth explains that in the late nineteenth-century "the 'body of the Negro' was 'the black antithesis of classical whiteness'" in terms of racial aesthetics, "made to occupy the site of abjection, lack, or grotesquerie" (75-76). In contrast to black imagery and in addition to the classical aestheticism of the visual arts, "[c]lassical history and literature imbued the [white] American self-image with a sense of epic grandeur and reinforced the millennial religiosity of Manifest Destiny with secular purpose" (Barnard 74). As such, Chesnutt's descriptions of Rena via classical, white, comparisons, and his continued use of classical tropes and subverted references to classical literary standards, not only "[undermine] dominant visual iconography" (Toth 76), but also function as "a mode of resistance to the dominant narrative of American history" in the drawing of the color line both for his character and for him as an author (Barnard 74). In other words, in appropriating

exclusively white aesthetic and literary standards for his (visually white) character as well as for his (literarily white) narrative convention, Chesnutt meta-narratively challenges the color line as arbitrary and unsustainable.

Through his *The Conjure Woman* collection of tales, of course, we are familiar with Chesnutt's use of visual "eye" dialect in emphasizing racial differences. In congruence with Toth's argument that "[a]uthors deploying visual discourse certainly rely on evocative word painting, but they push beyond descriptive language into a more complex discursive register," it is no stretch to argue that dialect tales constitute a visualization of (racially idiosyncratic) speech patterns for the reader (70). Chesnutt in particular often uses the relative pronouncedness of dialect speech to create differentiations in complexion, and in this novel too "he dips into a full palette of linguistic codes: the heavy dialect of the uneducated servant, the smooth cadences of the aristocrat, the potent and stylized vocabularies of social Darwinism and evangelical Christianity, the conventions of law and the media, and the various literary conventions that inform his own prose"<sup>7</sup> (Finseth 2). The darkest characters in his novel, such as Frank Fowler or Aunt Zilphy, speak with the heaviest accent, for example when John overhears her say to Rena "with the dulcet negro intonation: – 'T'ank y', honey; de Lawd gwine bless you sho'" (8). Chesnutt immediately contrasts her accent with Rena's exclamation "I hope you're a true prophet, Aunt Zilphy," which, despite having "a faint suggestiveness of the old woman's accent" and thus faintly suggesting Rena's true racial status to the reader, John "hardly noticed" in his "thrill" to confirm her speech as white (8). In fact, he attributes Rena's faint accent to "[t]he corruption of the white people's speech [which] was one element – only one – of the negro's unconscious revenge for his own

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<sup>7</sup>In his essay on language, Finseth here analyzes one of Chesnutt's other novels, *The Marrow of Tradition*. Many of his findings are nevertheless just as applicable to *The House Behind the Cedars* as I am trying to show here.

debasement,” thus maintaining his impression (along with the reader’s) of Rena as truly white (8). John’s impression of Rena as defined by her appearance – translated for the reader in the absence of an observable accent – is hardly disrupted by his discovery a mere two paragraphs later that she is his sister. Instead, he specifically attributes that “he heard her voice” in suspecting her identity. However, as we learn later in the novel, since John has always considered himself as white, Rena’s identity does not contradict his impression of her as white, but rather reaffirms it along with his own whiteness.

When we meet Ms. Molly, Rena and John’s mother, in the next chapter, Chesnutt only further demonstrates the versatility of his dialectic register. Ms. Molly, racially identified as “quadroon,” still employs a noticeable accent that is nevertheless much less pronounced than Aunt Zilphy’s and thus correlates with her comparatively lighter skin tone: “Fergot him? No, God knows I ain’t fergot him!” she exclaims when John inquires about her son before revealing himself as the same (13). Chesnutt’s diverse use of accented language, stylistically visualized on the page for the reader and inextricably connected with racial identity of course is not limited to his black characters, as I’ll discuss shortly. However, it is worth pointing out here how, particularly with the use of eye dialect for his black characters Chesnutt also emphasizes the oral tradition of African American culture – exemplified also in the facet that Ms. Molly cannot read or write. As Sussman points out, Chesnutt was educated in stenography, “a writing system that claims to record and preserve the inflections of human speech,” an expertise that undoubtedly informed his “literary realism, a form of writing that claims to register the vicissitudes of human experience” (48). In dialect writing and specifically ascribing dialect to skin tone, Chesnutt engages “in a form of mimesis” of African American language that risks, however, to affirm racist assumptions about “whether or not imitativensness was an epistemic quality rooted in race” (Sussman 48). In other words, as a black writer exploiting “the ‘transcribed’ feeling of dialect writing,” Chesnutt risks to recreate himself

as a mere mimic of authorial craft – congruent with the racist considerations of African Americans as incapable of true, non-imitative, mastery – and thus runs the very danger of “[hewing] too close to transcription [which] automatically ejects the work from the aesthetic realm and into that of reportage, from art to ‘just telling things’” (Sussman 50). For the purposes of initially introducing his novel’s cast, however, Chesnutt certainly succeeds in not only visualizing his characters’ skin color for the reader, but also in tapping into his audience’s register for how they would consider race.

*The House Behind the Cedars*, of course, is a novel primarily concerned with the concept of “passing,” so it is only fitting that Chesnutt attributes visually dialect-free speech to John and Rena. As Frankenberg has argued, “one of the privileges of whiteness is ‘not to be named’ – to stand (as if naturally so) as the norm, the core, the point of reference against which every other culture or people are measured” (cited in Knadler 427). By signifying his character’s speech as void from “eye dialect” marking skin color, then, Chesnutt erases John and Rena’s blackness for the reader’s mind, leaving their accents along with their skin color “unnamed” and therefore invisible. In the absence of markers identifying them as black, John and Rena are white by default. As John pleads with his mother to let Rena go with him to pursue a white-passing life, “she will have no chance here, where our story is known. The war has wrought great changes, has put the bottom rail on top, and all that – but it hasn’t wiped *that* out. Nothing but death can remove that stain, if it does not follow us even beyond the grave. Here she must forever be – nobody!” (20). In fact, what John is arguing is that, in Patesville, where people’s knowledge of their heritage marks them as black, the siblings must forever be black. For John, being an unnamed “new person,” by default white, in South Carolina is preferable to carrying his mother’s, a black name.

As the reader has already learned, however, John is not unnamed; in fact, he has (re-)named himself after Bulwer’s character, Warwick the Kingmaker. And, further, he

re-names Rena after the white heroine in Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe*, Rowena.<sup>8</sup> As Hack notes, "John and Rena's names index their racialized identity" (111). However, while John takes the active measure of naming himself and assuming a white identity away from home, Rena as his sister remains much more passive and never fully adapts. Chesnutt signifies Rena's passivity in passing for white through "the narrator's practice of always referring to John as John Warwick, as opposed to Walden, [which] acknowledges the success of his self-fashioning as a white man, whereas the narrator's refusal to call John's sister 'Rowena' reflects the temporary achievement of this social identity and the limited purchase her time living as a white person has on her self-conception" (Hack 111). Whereas Rena passes passively (and incompletely) by way of association with John and the absence of racial markers to the contrary, whiteness, for John, is a much more active endeavor and carefully executed performance. Citing Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*, Finseth notes how "racial identity is a matter of performance and disguise, where the language of race deals in partial truths and slippery shibboleths, and where historical and popular representations of race cannot be trusted" (2-3). In *The House Behind The Cedars*, the performativity of race is nowhere as apparent as in the tournament scene, Rena's "début into [white] society," as John calls it (41).

The chapter "The Tournament" certainly stands out in Chesnutt's novel not just as highlighting the highly rehearsed, stilted conventions of white Southern discourse and its most open pastiche of Scott's novel, but also in establishing the theatrics and

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<sup>8</sup>Much work has already been done in pointing out how John's choice in naming Rena after the character "Rowena" rather than the racially marked "Rebecca" in the same novel signifies the artificiality of her position in white society. Chesnutt himself sarcastically has the daughters of Dr. Green remark about how the name Rebecca may be better suited for Rena. As Fossett notes, in *Ivanhoe*, the Jewish character "Rebecca, though in love with Ivanhoe, realizes that they can never marry because of religious differences and ultimately departs" (218). Although the revelation that Rena is much more like Rebecca than Rowena in the parallel to Scott's novel clearly foreshadows her ultimate fate, I am much more interested here in how the naming of the characters affects their racial performances in accordance with Daniel Hack's and Margaret Toth's analyses.

performativity of race. In her essay, Toth remarks on the “theatrical devices [which] inform Chesnutt’s visual discourse, with Chesnutt creating not only pictorial scenes suggestive of painting or photography, [. . .] but also dramatic scenes that could translate directly to the stage” (81). Specifically, she argues, the “meticulously described *mise-en-scène*” opening the chapter “allows the reader to envision exactly the set-up of the stage – in this case, the platform on which white Southern men will perform chivalry” (Toth 82). John, himself adopting an affected speech pattern, remarks on the staged nature of this performance, explaining “It is the renaissance of chivalry, Mrs. Newberry, [. . .] and, like any other renaissance, it must adapt itself to new times and circumstances” (34). Upon being challenged as “heretical about our chivalry” by the addressed lady, John finds that “[t]he spirit of a thing, after all, is what counts” (34). As McWilliams argues, however, what John achieves with his performance of Southern whiteness, “is not invention, but replication. He inscribes himself within the dominant cultural narrative, the racist ideology that consigns his mother to inferior status. His fabrication is a lie within a lie, for the myth of a white Southern chivalry was itself a fiction, a cover for a brutal social order based on slavery and exploitation” (136). And this is certainly a fiction not only John participates in, but, “quite in accord with the customs of chivalry,” so does George Tryon as the literal white knight and with them, the entire assembled society of Clarence: “If George were but masked and you were veiled, we should have a romantic situation, – you the mysterious damsel in distress, he the unknown champion” (38). As the tournament scene establishes, “whiteness, then, is understood as a form of social behavior, activity, and mannerism as much as it is a skin color, and, to reverse the formulation suggests that [John and Rena’s] skin color explains [their] refined social behaviors, activities, and mannerisms” (Sussman 52). In Chesnutt’s novel, therefore, whiteness is not just skin color, but becomes a recursively self-affirming set of characteristics that is defined by the absence of “named” black markers such as accent, a racial past, and mannerisms.



Of course, when it comes to Rena as compared to John, her performativity of whiteness is doubled because of her gender. Having acquired, at boarding school, not only “much of the self-possession which comes from a knowledge of correct standards of deportment,” but also having “learned without difficulty, for it suited her disposition, to keep silence when she could not speak to advantage,” Rena becomes a dual ideal (43). Firstly, as does her brother, she exemplifies Chesnutt’s racial ideal of an octoroon without visual racial markers and thus conforming to a white sense of aesthetics. And secondly, in her comportment according to white behaviors, she also becomes the quintessential Southern lady, the literal “Queen of Love and Beauty” (43). As Ferguson points out, Chesnutt continuously emphasizes Rena’s “fine feminine attributes – her ‘stately beauty,’ ‘admirably proportioned’ figure, a walk ‘that revealed a light heart and the vigor of perfect health,’ a ‘soft and sweet and clear’ voice, and a ‘singularly pretty face’ with patrician features [. . .] – all qualities that enable her to become a beauty-contest winner, the epitome of female ‘success’”<sup>9</sup> (“Rena Walden” 79). Highlighted even further through the chivalric, white knight performances during the tournament, “when Rena is crowned Queen of Love and Beauty, she in effect becomes the idealized virgin, symbol of abstract goodness and purity – in short, the perfect Southern belle” (Ferguson, “Rena Walden” 79). This is only further underscored through Chesnutt’s pastiche of *Ivanhoe*; as McWilliam’s explains, its author, Walter Scott, “was a revered figure in the South before and after the Civil War” (135). This reverence of the author went so far as to inform a Scott cult (also mocked in Mark Twain’s work) in the South because it “reflected a central tenet of

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<sup>9</sup>In her essay, *Rena Walden: Chesnutt’s Failed ‘Future American,’* Ferguson contrasts John’s legal education and general rationality with Rena’s sentimental and intuitive persona. In contrast to some other scholars such as Janet Mohr, Ferguson finds Chesnutt to have had a rather condescending opinion of women, which, she argues, reflects in the inevitable failure of Rena due to her “intellectual shortcomings” (79). Although I do not quite agree with Ferguson’s reading of the novel as Chesnutt’s establishing women as doomed failures in the advancement of race, her essay touches on some important aspects regarding how Rena (almost) perfectly exemplifies the Nineteenth Century white ideal of womanhood.

Southern myth: the specious claim that the South's governing elite descended from England's cavaliers and embodied its aristocratic ethos" (McWilliams 135). In Chesnutt's novel, the emphasis on the highly choreographed performance of Southern chivalry exposes Southern "whiteness as itself an insistent and panicked imitation of a naturalized identity for which there is no original"<sup>10</sup> (Knadler 433). Despite Rena's presumed imitation and performance of whiteness in this scene, as Chesnutt's audience would have considered it, his exposure of whiteness itself as a frantic performance allows Chesnutt to revert his audience's sympathies for what would be considered an unforgivable moral transgression – Rena's racial "lie" – and focus them instead on her flawless performance of Southern femininity. This not only makes Rena as a character inherently likable and relatable, but also forces the readers to constantly examine their own assumptions about "naturalness" and "performance." Although John declares that "the masquerade is over" after the ball (and it might be for him, at least in terms of his masquerading as a Southern chivalric knight just like the rest of Clarence society), Rena's performance of both white and feminine standards has only just begun.

In introducing Rena to Clarence society, however, John has not only made Rena a white Southern belle, but he has made her a white lady with all its connotations. As Chesnutt specifically emphasizes, at John's estate, Rena "was mistress, and tasted the sweets of power" (46). The eroticism with which John has viewed Rena in the first chapter, before knowing who she was, becomes even more pronounced as he admires Rena's performance of a white Southern mistress: "[h]er graceful movements, the quiet elegance with which she wore even the simplest gown, the easy authoritativeness with which she directed the servants, were to him proofs of superior quality" (46). Rena has

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<sup>10</sup>Knadler actually discusses Jerry's spectatorship of the Big Three's conspiracy in *The Marrow of Tradition* here, which nevertheless applies almost seamlessly also to *The House Behind the Cedars*.

literally taken the position of John's deceased wife, and Chesnutt further emphasizes this with John's feeling "correspondingly proud of her" as if she were conquered as such, and explicitly pointing out that John's "feeling for her was something more than brotherly love, – he was quite conscious that there were degrees in brotherly love, and if she had been homely or stupid, he would never have disturbed her in the stagnant life of the house behind the cedars" (46). Again measuring Rena's worth by "the Greek sense of proportion, of fitness, of beauty, which is indeed but proportion embodied, the perfect adaptation of means to ends" (46-47), John invokes the reader's mental return to the earlier chapters of the book, bringing some previous allusions into sharper relief. When John first compares Rena to the Greek figure of Phryne, for example, he alludes to not only the aesthetic proportion of her body, but also the eroticism of her nakedness. Even further, the baring of breasts can be read not only as a sexual act, but also as a decidedly maternal one as when a woman nurses a child. When John argues to his mother that his "child needs some woman of its own blood to love it and look after it intelligently," followed immediately by another maternal breast reference of how Ms. Molly "would have given all the world to warm her son's child upon her bosom," Chesnutt makes John's intent for Rena to become not just Little Albert's "nurse," but quite literally his mother, retrospectively very blatant (18). Rena's black identity only functions to further Chesnutt's racial irony here, as it offers a clear allusion for his readership to the antebellum practice of black slave women (wet) nursing the white babies of Southern aristocrats. In replacing John's deceased wife and Albert's mother, however, Rena inherits her position also as it identifies her racial and societal status as a Southern, aristocratic white lady.

With Tryon, as the white Southern knight, also courting Rena, the dynamic between the three characters achieves several important literary and rhetorical aspects. Firstly, the sexual conquest between John and George over Rena allows Chesnutt to "[symbolize] the uneasy dual threat posed by racial passing: miscegenation and incest"

(Fossett, endnote in Chesnutt 212). Because John sees Rena as a replacement for his wife and mother of his son, Fossett explains, "John acts as both devoted brother and would-be suitor" (Fossett, endnote in Chesnutt 212). Further, as implied by John's immediate attraction to his sister early in the novel, racial passing involves an actual threat of accidental incest: because hiding one's heritage is vital for passing as white, a meeting between independently white-passing siblings very well could lead to incest as both would be hiding their heritage from one another out of fear of discovery. In Chesnutt's novel, it is merely due to the circumstance of John's meeting Rena within the context of Patesville and the titular house that he recognizes her as his sister; his continued sexual attraction to her signifies the possibility, even probability, of incestuous relations due to racial passing. Sollors explains further that "the new taboo of miscegenation (the word originated in 1864)" as it is conflated "with the old taboo of incest," and in representing the "outer and inner boundaries to sexual choices, easily get confused in American race melodrama, merging two fears into a single, overpowering one" (302). Further, he writes, "[a]ccording to racist fantasies, black and white are separated by a natural repulsion, yet such repulsion is denied by the very presence of Mulatto characters, and very attractive ones at that. Hence the racist, too, has to make a taboo of the Mulatto. This is accomplished by attacking miscegenation as 'pollution,' as if it were incest" (303). In establishing the tension between George's pursuit of Rena as threatening miscegenation, and John's position as incestuous, Chesnutt therefore shifts Rena's moral transgression of "passing" into a (potential) sexual transgression, thus emphasizing Rena's impossible dual dilemma caused by her doubled identity.

Secondly, the implicit competition of John and George over Rena re-envision her gendered position: she is the commoditized trophy over which the two "suitors" fight. In contrast to what John has asserted earlier, the chivalric performances so ingrained in maintaining Southern white masculinity have not ended, and John and George continue to

battle over who will win the Queen of Love and Beauty. Yet this restaged battle not only informs Rena's feminine status, but, as Rudolph explains, it is also essential in John's formulation of his white manhood: "This dynamic, which thrives on the sexual barter of women in general, and the symbolic prize of Rena's racially indeterminate blackness that gets handed from John to George in specific, points to African American men's implications into the larger male-dominated sphere of white power" (29). As McWilliams establishes, although John believes "to rescue his sister from life as a Negro, [. . .] he brings instead another form of imprisonment – entrapment within white Southern ideology" (135). In other words, in re-enacting (and defining himself by) a white Southern masculinity which, at its core, depends on the subjugation and objectification of women, and on the trade of African American women's bodies in particular, John merely becomes a replication of the white Southern aristocrat rather than an advocate for Rena. Chesnut therefore locates in Rena's double jeopardy of gender coupled with race, again, the natural handicap that prevents her from succeeding.

Lastly, and derivative from the second point, the sexual dynamic between the characters of John, George, and Rena creates another erotic triangle in accordance with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's study of desire and power. As touched upon in an earlier chapter, Sedgwick relies on René Girard's tracing of "a calculus of power that was structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle" in his study of European literature (21). Sedgwick holds that, "in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links either of the rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (21). Further, Sedgwick finds that "the use of women by men as exchangeable objects, as counters of value," fulfills its "primary purpose of cementing relationships with other men" (123). In Chesnut, this establishes Rena, then, "as the valuable object that gets bartered from her

father-like sibling John to his friend and soon-to-be brother-in-law George, exchanging youth and beauty for an even firmer link with the wealth and prestige of the Tryons”<sup>11</sup> (Rudolph 32). As Rudolph argues, it is this bond between the two active members of the erotic triangle, that, albeit diminished, allows John to remain a respected member of white Southern society even after George discovers the siblings’ black ancestry. The fact that, later in the novel, George ultimately “shall never be able to think of you as other than a white man” despite easily discounting Rena’s whiteness, thus suggests that Sedgwick’s erotic bond between John and George is *more* intense than either of their bonds to Rena (107). This is further supported by the fact that John vanishes almost completely from the novel immediately following the revelation that Rena is not entirely white. In any case, Rena, because of her identity as affected by both racial heritage and gender, remains highlighted as Chesnutt’s tragic victim of (inalterable) circumstance.

The erotic triangle in *The House Behind the Cedars* therefore reveals the role gender plays in the passing plot of the novel and also, in its ostensible description of contemporary societal circumstances “as they really were,” in larger society. Rudolph explains how, despite the general, to-be-expected uncertainty among scholars as to how many African Americans actually did historically succeed in passing, historians generally do agree that due to the “fewer gender-inflected obstacles racially indeterminate African American men had to face, such as care for families and restricted social mobility, [they] could pass in greater numbers” (33). Consequently, Rudolph argues, Chesnutt might have

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<sup>11</sup>Rudolph’s reading here focuses on the fatherly role of John’s and leaves out the sexual dynamic of Rena’s having taken the place of John’s wife and Little Albert’s mother. In congruence with Ferguson’s argument that, perhaps, Chesnutt considered women in general as less able to function in the public sphere due to their lack of logic and rational thought, Rudolph traces the different challenges regarding passing posed to Rena due to her gender. Although Rudolph ultimately offers an analysis of how John’s – and consequently Albert’s – whiteness is affirmed through the erotic triangle’s exchange of Rena as a commodity, her insights are therefore highly contributive also to my efforts in examining Rena’s role as the dually compromised female character in the novel.

modeled his light-skinned character John as “[faring] better in the postbellum racist South because his masculinity enables him to more easily bypass a racial past that is predominantly transacted over the African American woman’s body, her symbolically exaggerated sexuality and her reproductive role in birthing babies that may or may not look black” (33). Chesnutt certainly emphasizes George’s anxiety specifically about his bloodline’s continuation, after finding out about Rena’s “black streak [which] would have been sure to come out in some form, sooner or later, if not in the wife, then in her children” (155). While for George, Rena’s blackness thusly poses a threat to the whiteness of his future children, for John, “Rena’s value as a racially indeterminate black woman rests on her ability to authenticate and simultaneously enrich his and his son’s whiteness” (Rudolph 35). In this sense, then, making his sister, “a woman of its own blood” (18), the (surrogate) mother of his child, John reinforces his and his son’s whiteness much more than Rena’s.

Examining the role African American motherhood plays historically and in the novel, then, allows us to further reveal Chesnutt’s criticism of how racial lines, arbitrarily drawn to begin with, are blurred further with the consideration of gender. As Rudolph explains, during Reconstruction (the time in which the novel is situated), “[t]he powerful remnant from slavery that children will always be classified according to the mother’s racial status, known as *partus sequitur ventrem*, ensured that mixed-race children of African American women remained disenfranchised, yet the same logic becomes muddled once a white mother is involved” (39). For John, being Ms. Molly Walden’s son means to be denied “his father’s name and forced to bear the name of his Negro mother” (McWilliams 136). Yet, as we know, John refuses to remain thusly unnamed in his white identity and instead utilizes the only physical heritage besides his whiteness his father has left him – the books he loses himself in and whose characters inspire his and Rena’s identities – to name himself. The passage describing John’s childhood reading and the

source of his later identity, which, "for different reasons, Richard Brodhead has identified as the novel's 'primal scene,'" is important also, however, because it not only "depicts literary affiliation but enacts one of its own" (Hack 114-115). Hack notes Chesnut's reworking a scene directly from Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* here, down to such details as John's and David's libraries being both left to them by their dead fathers, the collections containing largely the same works, both accounts specifically focusing on the escapism of either character in reading, and both emphasizing the importance of reading on the characters' later development. Although brief, Hack argues, Chesnut's invocation of Dickens' semi-autobiographical novel here achieves a lot, particularly in "[speaking] to [John's] claiming of his white ancestry and to the privileged status that makes white ancestry worth claiming" (117). However, in explicitly rejecting his maternal heritage and the name that comes therewith, "the very passage John lights upon to assert his whiteness, his connection to his 'white fathers,' signals the rejection or even negation of mixed-race progeny such as himself" (Hack 118). This becomes even more emphasized in the figure of Little Albert, and John's almost desperate attempts at cementing his son's fragile identity as white.

After all, it is Little Albert's paternal lineage, through John, not his maternal lineage via John's unnamed and dead wife, that makes the child's whiteness fragile. However, as Rudolph explains, "the rule that children follow the mother applied equally to the mixed-race children of free white women," such as to Albert as the son of his white mother, but "stringent nineteenth-century ideas about white women as strongholds and carriers of racial purity put the equation of mother-child racial status in question once confronted with dark-skinned children of white mothers" (39-40). In other words, Chesnut's readership would have considered the miscegenation between a white woman and a black man as a very different transgression more akin to rape than if it had been a white man and a black woman – such as George and Rena. Albert's whiteness (as well as



the absence of his mother<sup>12</sup>) surreptitiously confirms his father as white which, in turn, confirms Albert's whiteness. Even further, in rejecting his own mother's (black) heritage, and positioning himself and Rena on the white side, "John has not only manipulated the color line in favor of his own passing, [but he] has also positioned himself as the male arbiter of such a line, in the process gendering the racialized politics of passing" (Rudolph 40). Furthermore, in thus arbitrating the color line according to his own needs, John imposes on Rena a white-passing, yet markedly African American racial identity. Rudolph notes how the scene in which John takes Rena from her mother's house remarkably "resembles the violent separation scenes characteristic of antebellum slave-auctions" during which Ms. Molly pleads with her son at his feet while "John assertively exercises a white masculinity that eerily alludes to the callousness of men who carelessly destroy black family ties in order to satisfy their own individual needs and, meanwhile, indexes the antebellum practice of seizing beautiful African American women as mistresses" (40). In insisting on "Rena's qualities as surrogate mother [which] references a historically embedded need for African American women to do the work of nurturing white offspring into genteel Southernness and upper-class manhood," John quite literally makes his sister his son's nurse (Rudolph 41). Rena's "hypothetical question" whether George would still love her "if I were Albert's nurse" therefore is not hypothetical at all, and consequently the reason that George's hypothetical answer "seemed to fit the question, but in fact, Tryon's mind and Rena's did not meet" (61). Even more importantly, it is John's imposing a blackened status to her in her role as Albert's wet nurse, that silences Rena and forbids her from exposing her secret to her fiancé, not her performance of white feminine gentility, since it is first and foremost "the future of his child [which]

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<sup>12</sup>Rudolph specifically remarks how "[t]aking the white woman out of the present might have been one way for Chesnutt to avoid the hot-button topic of interracial sex between an African American man and a white woman that was almost always polemically reframed as rape" (38).

must not be compromised” (58). It is with Albert in mind that John argues for Rena to remain silent about her racial heritage, although he pleads with her in terms of George’s sake. Both as a woman and as an African American, Rena is therefore put into a position to “regard silence in the light of self-sacrifice” (58). Thus, once more, Chesnutt emphasizes how Rena’s dual identity forces her into an impossibly and doubly silenced existence, at least as long as she remains under John’s charge.

Chesnutt’s positioning of Rena as a maternal figure to Albert seems quite intentional and symbolic of the larger commentary his novel offers regarding race in America. Gleason and Mohr have both noted the strong role that Chesnutt’s female characters have in his novels toward the advancement of the African American race. Gleason argues that “Chesnutt seems fully aware that women are at the very core of the race question in the South,” particularly in regard of “[i]ssues of genealogy and reproduction” (37). Sollors goes even further and suggests that (black) authors like Chesnutt often “have used this theme as a national allegory” which “sometimes suggest white America as a father figure, black America as a mother, and the offspring as the problematic, truly American heir who is denied his/her birthright and inheritance by his/her father” (305-6). Applying this allegory to Rena, then, reveals how it is her female, maternal identity that holds her back, while John’s fatherhood makes him white. As a woman, Rena is inextricably connected to her familial heritage and issues of caring not just for her future family (as John does), but also for her “past” family, her mother. Tellingly, it is precisely this familial care that leads to George’s discovery of her racial secret, since her mother’s falling ill brings her back to her hometown, where her race is known and she is thus placed within her racial context. Yet Chesnutt emphasizes the role of motherhood as inescapably informative of Rena’s identity even further; right after George discovers Rena’s true identity, George’s inquiry about who lives in the titular dwelling is answered as “A cullud ‘oman, suh, [. . .] Mis’ Molly Walden an’ her daughter

Rena.” In thusly echoing the last line of the novel, Chesnutt not only neatly foreshadows Rena’s impending “death” in white society, but also connects her inextricably to her mother. Other than John, who has always claimed his identity as his (white) father’s son, Rena remains tied to her mother not just by the legal standard of *partus sequitur ventrem*, but also particularly because of her gender: Rena is specifically named as and will always remain her (black) mother’s (black) daughter.

Rena’s identity is unshakenly fixed as her black mother’s daughter at this, the midpoint of the novel, and she herself consigns to this as her ostensibly most “natural” one. Rena emphasizes her place to John when she muses, “A man may make a new place for himself – a woman is born and bound to hers. God must have meant me to stay here, or He would not have sent me back. I shall accept things as they are” (125). She also refuses to leave her mother again and notes that “[t]his shall be my home while she lives, and if I leave it again, it shall be for only a short time, to go where I can write to her freely, and hear from her often” (127). This, of course, requires from Rena to fully embrace a black identity, since trying to pass, as we have seen, means to leave her mother behind to be communicated with only through clandestine measures. Rena instead “turns her sorrow into empathy for those of her race” and decides to use her educational advantage to the advancement of her race in becoming a schoolteacher (McFatter 205). As Mohr points out in her analysis of several of Chesnutt’s works, “Chesnutt does not put black or white men in the position of advancing society, but hands this imperative to women,” and, most often, mulatto characters like Rena (428). Further, Chesnutt often specifically invokes the feminine qualities attributed to women during Chesnutt’s time, such as Rena’s intuitiveness and sensitive nature. These drawn out attributes of his characters, according to Mohr, thus “[exemplify] Chesnutt’s specific use of female characters to address the means to further society and illustrates how white and ‘colored’ women can work together to accomplish the ‘moral progress of the American people’ (*Journals* 140) by educating

‘colored’ people” (431). With the example of Rena, Chesnutt also shows, that, “[i]n order for black women to continue to create the black middle-class system, they need to acknowledge and embrace their heritage” (Mohr 440). This again confirms Chesnutt as seeing black women at the core of “nursing” the African American race to a more advanced position via teaching, a school teacher already being a quite maternal position. Therefore, even though Rena is positioned on the other side of the color line in the second half of the novel, her maternal role remains.

Rena’s most “natural” identity as being that of a (black) mother is further emphasized by George’s continuous struggles to see her whiteness as anything but a performance. Immediately after finding out her heritage, George dreams of Rena: “He dreamed of her sweet smile, her soft touch, her gentle voice. In all her fair young beauty she stood before him, and then by some hellish magic she was slowly transformed into a hideous black hag” (102). Toth argues that, George’s dream reveals how “on an unconscious level, George believes that Rena is not simply performing a set of actions labeled white by the dominant culture – sentiment, grace, or purity – but performing the whole white body” (83). Of course, Rena’s smile, touch, beauty, and voice, in other words, all of Rena’s physical attributes, have always been hers even if the affectations regarding their use were performed or learned. And even though Rena’s outward appearance, especially when taken together with her learned manners, make her the perfect Southern lady and should be proof to the contrary, George’s most “gruesome fear” is that Rena’s dark blood somehow will negatively manifest itself in the future and “one of their children might show even the faintest mark of the despised race” (142). For George, then, as for John, white womanhood depends not on appearance or manners, but on the recursive affirmation of his own (male) whiteness, and consequently, the whiteness of his future children.

Because whiteness (or at least white appearance) in *The House Behind the Cedars*

is thus established as the most important entity to be preserved or established for “Future Americans” – the children and potential children of the novel’s characters – the question of what constitutes post-Reconstruction whiteness and who is tasked with nurturing it leads to a contradictory tension for George. This tension is emphasized in George’s angry inner monologue toward Rena after he observes her dancing with Jeff Wain: “With the monkey-like imitativeness of the negro she had copied the manners of white people while she lived among them, and had dropped them with equal facility when they ceased to serve a purpose. Who but a negro could have recovered so soon from what had seemed a terrible bereavement?” (154). Here, George sees Rena’s devotion, her sentimentality, and her love as a mere performance she has enacted in her bid to pass as white. In other words, for George, “love” is something only white people are truly capable of experiencing while black people merely imitate it. The way he sees it, “[a] woman of sensibility, as this one had seemed to be, should naturally feel more keenly, and for a longer time than a man, an injury to the affectations; but he, a son of the ruling race, had been miserable for six weeks about a girl who had so far forgotten him as already to plunge headlong into the childish amusements of her own ignorant and degraded people” (154). George doubts the genuineness of Rena’s feelings due to her race and considers her black blood as only capable of manifesting itself in an accordingly negative way, thanking God that he had not “joined his blood to hers by the solemn sanctions of church and state” (154). What is particularly notable in this scene is how it repeats the novel’s continuous equation of the “future” with (apparent) whiteness or at least white-ness and the nurturing of children, whereas the “past” refers to blackness, a heritage that better remains hidden. As reflected not only in John’s, but also Ms. Molly’s never-to-have-happened marriage, and, most importantly, George and Rena’s failed engagement, the novel promotes a view that “[m]arriage is about making a promise to the future, a promise that should effect a break with the past” (Chakkalakal 93). This promise to the future, then, is in George’s mind

most specifically connected with the idea of the joining of blood, and thus in the appearance of the future Americans he will raise.

George's observation of Rena's dance with Wain is necessarily limited, and, because of the doubled narration of this scene from both characters' point of view, the reader knows that Rena is much more emotionally affected by her failed engagement than George can observe. In George's thoughts, Chesnutt reflects his anticipated audience's stereotypical expectations from a black character, including the idea of moral and sentimental inferiority. For Chesnutt's audience as for George, "the 'body of the Negro' was 'the black antithesis of classical whiteness,' made to occupy the site of abjection, lack, or grotesquerie" (Kirk Savage, qtd. in Toth 75-76). This can also be seen in the character of Plato, Rena's student and George's former servant-child: admired for his comical acrobatics and subservience, George pays Plato to put on a show to entertain Blanche Leary, who finds him "a funny little darkey" (164). Despite not being his master anymore, George exploits Plato's simplemindedness and desire to please not only by imperiously asking him to do tricks and entertain his friend, but also in further pursuing Rena. In the sarcastically named Plato, the novel demonstrates how "blackness is a source of entertainment and the butt of jokes – from Chesnutt as well as from the characters he creates" (Trudier Harris, quoted in McWilliams 143). The child is marked by his strong accent and subservience, explaining how he is "Gwine ter school, Mars Geo'ge, [. . .] larnin' ter read an' write, suh, lack de w'ite folks" (164). Unmistakably marked through description, dialect, and demeanor, Plato's name only further parodies the black stereotype he represents in his contrast to the classical white aristocracy of George's. As Chametzky notes, for Chesnutt "[t]his kind of condescending rumination by the narrator is [. . .] a strategy for disarming the Northern white reader. That is, by seeming to have his sentiments echoed, the reader would not be alienated, and the burden of Chesnutt's message could be obliquely presented to him" (68). What this strategy of distraction

emphasizes, then, is how it masks over “George’s own changeability and performances,” since Chesnutt, in contrast to George, continuously emphasizes “Rena’s *constancy*, her lack of change” (Toth 83). After all, as the narrative passages from Rena’s point of view show, Rena remains true to herself, her devotion, and her willingness to self-sacrifice in nurture; in short, Rena remains the same Rena George has loved in every aspect, except in his newly discovered awareness of her past.

In contrast, the novel continuously emphasizes George’s, along with white society’s, changeability and performances. Chesnutt seems to affix permanence and innate identity to Rena, who, ironically, naturally inhabits all the attributes and traits Southern white society so admires and desperately seeks to perform. Toth notes, however, that “[c]learly this argument for Rena’s naturalness is too simplistic; it belies the text’s own recognition that passing requires keen ‘observation’ skills, ‘knowledge of correct standards of deportment,’ and the ability to modify one’s conduct accordingly” (Toth 87). Although perhaps sometimes taken too far, it is nevertheless striking how the novel portrays Rena as representing the perfect ideal of white Southern womanhood much more so than her truly white female peers. Blanche Leary, for example, has to “[exert] all her powers to interest and amuse the man she had set out to win,” the same man who was so easily captured by Rena’s apparently natural composure. While George “to his pleased surprise, discovered in [Blanche’s] mind depths that he had never suspected [. . .] he could not, of course, know how carefully she had studied them” (163). In contrast to Rena, then, Blanche has to work to get George to show an interest in her, and, compared to Rena, she “seems only a pretender to those values associated with white womanliness” (Toth 87). Similarly, George’s rejection of Rena as soon as he finds out her dark past makes clear that, as with the particularly pronounced performance of white knighthood during his courtship of Rena, George Tryon “has been *trying on* faithfulness, chivalry, and courageousness – all along” (Toth 84) and that the “masquerade” had never really been “over” (44).

Compared to Blanche's manipulation and "George's performance of white masculinity, Rena's own act seems much tamer" and also much more natural to her identity. As Toth argues, Chesnutt here "invites us to compare these characters' performances, asking us to consider which are more disingenuous, which are more hypocritical, and, certainly in the case of George, which more destructive" (87). Despite Rena's white-passing being treated as a moral transgression and thus anticipating his contemporary readers' expectations, then, Chesnutt contrasts her transgression with white societies' pretensions to what they are not naturally, and presents it as disproportionately less deceitful.

It is only in the role that is presented as her most natural, the role of the colored caretaker, that Rena finds her voice. As Mohr argues, Chesnutt saw education as a main factor "in determining a black person's possibilities for societal advancement" (425). In making Rena a schoolteacher for the colored children at Sandy Run, then, Chesnutt not only emphasizes Rena's role in contributing to the advancement of the black people, but also makes her an active agent in what is otherwise a male-dominated society. She knows that "for every child she taught to read and write she opened, if ever so little, the door of opportunity, and she was happy in the consciousness of performing a duty which seemed all the more imperative because newly discovered" (172). In her role as a schoolteacher, Rena is thus able to reconcile the silences imposed on her by her white gender-role with her hidden blackness in a voiced advocacy for her charges. Daniel Worden has remarked how, while Rena had been in Clarence earlier in the novel, Ms. Molly's voice is given expression via Frank Fowler, since Ms. Molly cannot write. While the dark-skinned "Frank's writing gives voice to a pained and suffering mother" in this way, Ms. Molly's letters are sent in pre-addressed envelopes so that, since he is "[w]riting in the South, Frank's voice is always already enveloped within a white form" (Worden 9). Taking Frank's letters as a metaphor for Rena, means that "[t]he racially indeterminate voice is marred by its inscription as black and its enclosure within a white sphere of circulation" so



that Rena's removal from Clarence frees her from being circulated within white society, most explicitly from being traded among John and George (Worden 9). In embracing her black heritage, Rena thus finds a voice of advocacy for her students as well as herself. The fact that she is light-skinned – enclosed, one might say, in a white sphere – certainly contributes to its strength and authority, as Rena continuously attracts the attention of white people such as the test giver, the people she meets on the road to Sampson County, or George's mother.

At several points during her time in Sampson County, Rena forcefully uses her voice, always in advocacy for either her students or herself. When she first encounters Mrs. Tryon, unaware of who she is, Rena can reply “simply and directly” to the question about her race which only “[a] year and a half earlier” would have caused her “some display of self-consciousness” (167). However, the attention caused by her white appearance may lend her voice strength, but, as a woman, she remains “at risk in any environment predominated by patriarchal power coupled with lust” (McFatter 205). Because “Rena had fully and firmly made up her mind to sacrifice her life upon this altar” of elevating children's minds through education (172), the sexual attentions from her host, the mulatto Wain, and later from George as well constitute a “trying ordeal” for her (171). She nevertheless loudly advocates for herself: forcefully removing herself from an unwelcome embrace by Wain, moving out of his house, asking her students to accompany her home, and most powerfully, in a letter to George denouncing his advances: “You are white, and you have given me to understand that I am black,” she writes (179). Rena specifically charges George with *making* her black in his unwillingness to look “past” her heritage when he could have made her white through their “future” marriage. As Watson argues, this charge “outlines not only Rena's complexity as a character, but Chesnut's overall indictment of a society that allows color prejudice to destroy even the strongest of love relationships” (54). Here, as in his utopian plan for “Future American” racial

assimilation via miscegenation, Chesnutt “reveals the absurdity of making marriage a matter of race, rather than mutual desire and love” (Chakkalakal 92). Further, in a redistribution of power now that Rena is no longer forced to hide her past, “it is she who rejects him by clearly establishing her own ‘voice’ of determination in epistolary form” (Watson 54). When Rena points out that, due to George’s designation of her as black, their lives must necessarily be racially segregated, she becomes “a strong spokesperson or tool used by Chesnutt to point out the realities of social injustice and how it sometimes impedes or prevents expressions of love between people of different races” (Watson 55). Most importantly, however, Rena remarks that “[a]s a white man, this might not mean a great deal to you; as a woman, shut out already by my color from much that is desirable, my good name remains my most valuable possession” (180). With this, Rena not only notes the doubled oppression she experiences because of both her race and her gender, but she also directly references her name – Rena Walden, the name she was given by and through her (black) mother. While Chesnutt hereby again subtly foreshadows the conclusive line of the novel, he emphasizes black motherhood as the “most valuable” entity to be preserved, both for Rena, and in the larger context of improving race relations and social injustices in the American South.

Rena’s advocacy for her chosen cause and herself finds its peak when she chooses to escape rather than face both of her potential seducers. Having been trapped in the woods by the pursuits of Wain and Tryon, she is confronted with having to choose the path that contains the lesser of two evils for her. She can expose herself to the explicit rape threat of Jeff Wain’s “evil passions which would stop at nothing” (188). Or she could choose to encounter the “eager and excited” George Tryon (188), who “could never marry her now – but he must see her” (184). Either choice, however, means that Rena is taken advantage of for the sake of either of the men’s needs, “placing her reputation at Wain’s mercy, and [charging] herself with a burden of obligation toward a man whom she wished

to avoid and had refused to meet” (189). So she chooses the only option that leaves her dignity intact: “She turned and fled, and to avoid possible pursuit, struck into the underbrush at an angle which she calculated would bring her in a few rods to another path which would lead quickly into the main road. She had run only a few yards when she found herself in the midst of a clump of prickly shrubs and briars” (189). As Worden argues, “Rena’s descent into the briar patch plays upon Joel Chandler Harris’s well-known version of the Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby story” (11). In that story, Brer Fox encounters Brer Rabbit being inextricably stuck to the Tar Baby. In seeking revenge for humiliations in other stories, Brer Fox wants to hurt Brer Rabbit as much as possible, and chooses the exact method of torture Brer Rabbit pleads with him not to use – to fling him into the briar patch. Of course, Brer Rabbit’s pleas are a ruse as he was actually born and raised in a briar patch, so that, “[i]n the classic trickster tale, the briar patch is a safe haven” (Worden 11). Accordingly, Rena’s retreat into the briar patch not only means for her to escape the men wanting to lay claim to her, but also foreshadows her return home to where she was born and raised.

In true fashion of the tragic mulatta narrative, following her night in the briar patch, Rena falls deathly ill and ultimately dies. Many scholars have lamented what they perceive as Chesnut’s compromising one of his most complex characters by resolving the novel with her demise, and argued that this stereotypical resolution constitutes Chesnut’s capitulation to the demands of and expectations from a white literary marketplace. McFatter reads Rena’s death a little bit differently, however, and argues that Rena explicitly “chooses death over life” when she escapes from her seducers not once into the briar patch, but a second time toward Patesville (205). As Dorothy Ayers Counts observes, “revenge suicide is a political strategy because of the element of culpability. The suicide makes certain that others know why [a woman] has taken her life and who she holds responsible for her unbearable situation” (quoted in McFatter 206). McFatter sees Rena’s

last words to Frank, “my good friend – my best friend – you loved me best of them all,” as her relieving only him from culpability for her death and implicating all the others who have claimed to love her (203). Other than what Ferguson has noted as Frank Fowler’s name indicating how Frank may “foul ‘er,” it is this, one of the darkest-skinned characters in the book, that is revealed as the most faithful and of the truest disposition, thus proving white audiences’ racial expectations as untrue. Further, in choosing suicide, Rena “ultimately [acts] out against, rather than merely reacting to, oppression” and although she “may appear to be a stock sentimental heroine [sic] whose requisite fragility results in her death,” she, in fact, “chooses death as a means of overcoming oppression and as an act of vengeance” (McFatter 201). Reading her death as an active suicide rather than a passive calamity that befalls her, then makes her death perhaps the most powerful and forceful statement she makes throughout the novel. With it, she loudly proclaims her claim to dignity and autonomy in a patriarchal society which doubly treats her as a commodity to be traded. She also lays a final claim to her maternal name, as the last line of the novel eternally and explicitly names her as “Mis’ Molly Walden’s daughter Rena” (204).

In thus lending Rena her strongest voice in her quintessentially feminine role as a nurturer and race advocate, Chesnutt shows how he sees his solution to race relationships in America in a reconsideration of maternal versus paternal motivations. As Sara Ruddick explains, “[m]aternal thinking [. . .] derives from the practice of mothering and reflects an attitude of ‘holding,’ a disposition necessary to the protection and growth of a child,” which stands in opposition to the paternal instinct of “acquiring” (quoted in McFatter 207). In considering the imperial and capitalistic nature of Southern race relations during Reconstruction – with the always present, very recent ghost of the violent ownership of black bodies – the “recognition of the priority of holding over acquiring . . . distinguishes maternal from scientific thought, as well as from the instrumentalism of . . . capitalism” (Ruddick, quoted in McFatter 207). Chesnutt saw women in general as more politically

capable than men since “[t]heir sympathies are apt to be in support of those things which are clean and honest and just and therefore desirable – all of which ought to make them a valuable factor in government” (quoted in Knadler 445). Invoking Rena’s maternalism and making her the “black mother” of a future post-race America, then, not only echoes Chesnut’s ideal “Future American” as a racially unmarked nurturing force, but also points toward the literally fatal detriment sexism poses in realizing such a future.

As Susan Fraiman has noted, black maternal identity, specifically in “the figure of the mammy,” marks “the historical nexus of sexism and racism” since it “stands for exclusion on two levels, females from patriarchal society and black people from white society, embodying the ‘invisibility’ of motherhood” (Susan Fraiman, quoted in Janis 267). This is especially true for Rena while she passes in white society, and it carries over into her black existence in the second half of the novel. Rena dies because her gender precludes her from carrying her heritage into the future. However, in embracing herself and her heritage, Rena dies childless, but not hopeless, maternal, but not invisible. Chesnut has her find a powerful voice of advocacy for black people, including herself, in embracing a maternal fostering role in her teaching and in claiming autonomy in choosing death over exploitation. In Rena’s reality, an emancipated voice of advocacy for the future of black Americans is still tragically inhibited especially for women, and especially for their future children because of *partus sequitur ventrem*. Thus, in the contrast he draws between John and Rena’s fates, Chesnut points toward the fatal flaw her gender yet poses for a Rena whose identity is constantly defined by the past, as opposed to a forward vision in which black mothers can foster a future that includes educated, whitened children. Further, Chesnut also links Rena’s situation as (maternally) advocating for a forward-looking vision in regards to the situation of black people in America with his own role as an author. In making Rena’s maternal voice visible, Chesnut offers her character and the novel as a whole as a meta-commentary on his own situation as a black author in a

white literary marketplace. When he specifically refers to the character of Rena as his “favorite child” of “my own people” he quite literally assumes a maternal role over her, only further emphasized by his long period of “nurturing” the character from her name-sake short story into the final novel (quoted in Gleason 30). Read in this light, *The House Behind the Cedars*, among all his fiction, thus makes perhaps Chesnut’s loudest political commentary about how patriarchally informed violence makes race relations in America impossible to solve, while also offering maternal thinking as an alternative that could ultimately lead to a better, more perfect, future America.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## “THE OVER-TONE DIVINED BY THE EAR BUT NOT HEARD”:

## MARIAN FORRESTER’S VOICE

As Cather revealed in an 1925 interview with Flora Merrill, the writing of *A Lost Lady* was very much influenced by Cather’s desire to represent “a woman I loved very much in my childhood, [. . .] not like a standardized heroine in fiction, but as she really was.” The main character of the novel, Marian Forrester, is based, as we now know, on Lyra Garber, an apparently quite captivating woman in Red Cloud during Cather’s childhood. Cather added, that, for her, the primary “question was, by what medium could I present her most vividly, and that, of course, meant the most truly” (Merrill). To achieve this goal of capturing the spirit of what she meant to represent in Marian, Cather chose to abandon a first-person narration in favor of a third-person narrator with a focalization largely, but not exclusively, through the character of Niel Herbert. However, this stylistic approach raises the immediate question of why Cather chose to provide her readers with Niel’s often self-interested, unreliable, and flawed interpretations of Marian rather than letting the character speak for herself, or, at least, offering an omniscient, Jamesian third person narrative portrait. *A Lost Lady* is primarily about Niel’s and other characters’ impressions and interpretations of Marian, rarely affording the main character her own voice and, at times, even violently silencing her. In order to uncover Marian’s voice as it reverberates throughout the novel, then, we must first consider how Cather’s narrative choices may lead to added interpretative layers of focalization through Niel and other

characters, but they also keep the experience of Marian fresh and in the moment. In this chapter, I will analyze how Cather creates explicit silences by limiting the consciousness in focalized narration – leaving things unsaid while still conveying meaning – to create a realistic and present experience of Marian in the novel.

Since Cather explicitly claimed to have wanted to create a fictionalized version of Lyra Garber “as she *really* was,” it may be useful to briefly consider the relationship of novel writing to representations of the “real.” In terms of genre, *fin de siècle* American realism certainly lays its own claims to reflecting life as more “real” in literary representation, famously denouncing overly sentimentalized or sensationalized popular (mass) literature – especially that by women writers such as Fanny Fern, who was regarded as low-brow. In literary scholarship, Cather is variously regarded as a realist, a romanticist, or modernist, but her fiction generally defies easy classification, and, as Stout mentions, “she belongs either to none of these categories or to all” (168). Cather herself seems to have considered “realism” to be a self-explanatory concept and even, in many of her letters, “to have begged the epistemological question of the unreliability of knowing, despite her own subtle manipulations of narrative perspective that would seem to enact such unreliability, and to have conceived of the real as, in essence, the accurate” (Stout 169). Further, Cather seems often to have postulated “an impressionist theory of knowing,” considering it “so difficult to convey the reality of beauty that one could only write about the effect it had on one, not the thing itself” (Stout 169, 170). In *A Lost Lady*, Cather appears to have realized such an impressionistic approach, even doubling up Marian’s effect not just directly on the reader, but also as focalized through various characters.

For Stout, Cather’s approach to realism is intricately tied to descriptive attributes in the language of her novels. She argues that “Cather’s first definition of realism, then, seems often to have been accurate seeing and accurate rendition of the seen, or if not that,



then the version of the seen that one's own perspective shapes or allows one to see" (170). Stout cites a 1902 letter to Dorothy Canfield in which Cather specifically "links truth with seeing"<sup>1</sup> (171). As evident also in such details as marginal notes in her nature handbook, handwritten sketches, and other textual artifacts, Cather tried "to observe the natural world as closely as she could and to describe it as minutely, in as accurate language as she could" making her fiction "'realistic' through its recording of such visual detail, or facts" (Stout 171, 172). In *A Lost Lady*, the reader is offered plenty of visual descriptions about Marian, a narrative burden largely displaced onto focalizing characters such as the adolescent Niel. However, aside from describing the sound and quality of her voice, Niel provides us with very little about the content of Marian's words – in terms of expressing her dreams, her aspirations, her wishes, her inner self, the expressive content of her words – which largely remains unspecified, unnamed, and undescribed. The reader "sees" Marian, primarily through the perspective of the adolescent Niel interspersed with occasional focalizations through other characters and rare explanatory additions from a largely unobtrusive, even reticent, narrator. But Marian rarely expresses herself directly; in other words, we do not "hear" her.

Especially in regards to Marian's voice expressing herself, Cather's realist representation "as she really was" is clearly subject to much more complex Lacanian considerations about the relationship of language and reality, and specifically about how to create experience through words. Swift points out how Cather's "'lively fascination' with

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<sup>1</sup>During the writing of Stout's article, Cather's letters had still been subject to the (in)famously known publications and quotation restrictions dictated by Cather's will, so that Stout is forced to paraphrase here. She notes that Cather describes to Canfield a visit to a Chester, England jail mentioned in an A. E. Housman poem, which she wanted to see for herself. Noting the accuracy and realism in Housman's poem with the actual scenery at the jail, Cather thusly "links truth with seeing" (Stout 171). In the since released and publicized Cather letters, the direct quote of Cather's reads: "Of course they do, for the jail, which is the most grewsome building the hand of man ever made, is on a naked hill right over the switch yard and station, so you see 'forlorn' was not put there to rhyme with 'morn'. Somehow it makes it all the greater to have it all true" (Jewell and Stout 63).

names and naming things” in the 1920s contributes to “adding her voice to a widespread literary lament over the slipperiness and unreliability of post-Saussurean language” (Swift 24). In representing Marian as a realist, literary version of what she intended her to be, it is not enough to simply describe and record accurate language; Cather clearly also considered the nature of linguistic representation itself. As Swift points out, in “The Novel D meubl ,” her essay about the craft of novel writing, Cather describes her struggles with an “essential textual anxiety concerning stories that can’t be told, relations that can’t be named; it is as though language busies itself with demonstrations of what it *can* do, while failing to articulate what is precisely its most necessary object, the ‘real,’ the truth, ‘what really happened’”<sup>2</sup> (Swift 31). Because, in writing *A Lost Lady*, Cather is representing a personality from her past, a memory – a fictionalized Lyra Garber as she experienced her in her childhood – her authorial problem becomes the unreliability of language in the creation of a past experience. Although accurate description and minute detail of observation set the stage, so to say, in a realistic representation of the elements in the setting, words seem insufficient in capturing the full, three dimensional, immersed experience especially of a person. Of course, manipulating language to serve precisely these slippery representational purposes is the very art of novel writing, and Cather very carefully crafts her language to create experiences that are *descriptive*, yet not *prescriptive*. To illuminate this, Swift explains that “[i]n psychoanalytic practice, the ‘real’ is the unfantasmized, unrepresented *event* toward which analytic interpretation directs itself: that which, stripped of all later distortion and *m connaissance*, *really* happened. Lacan calls it ‘the first encounter . . . that lies behind the phantasy’” (24, emphasis in original). For Cather’s (re)creation of her childhood experience of a person, then, this

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<sup>2</sup>Swift is discussing “the thing not named” in “The Novel D meubl ” as it applies to *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* here. Since many of his considerations are directly applicable to *A Lost Lady* as well, I am directly transferring them in this chapter for my use.

means that she writes against the fact that “this ‘real’ is in the analytic situation always available to the present only as a missed encounter, at best an after-the-fact construction” (Swift 24). Cather therefore needed to recreate her primary experience of the woman in writing more so than simply describing a person, or a series of encounters, after the fact. *A Lost Lady* is about the effect of Marian on others, which defines her.

In order to achieve a realistic representation of the *experience* of Marian, Cather thus gives the reader such experiences from multiple perspectives, which achieves a more fluid effect than a single narrator could produce. In *My Ántonia*, for example, Cather has Jim Burden narrate nearly all of the text after the introduction, which makes the “my” in the title his possessive pronoun – he represents and interprets Ántonia, and she is primarily his own experience, Jim’s “version” of Ántonia Shimerda. In contrast, as the indefinite article of *A Lost Lady* indicates, Niel does not have such control over the main character, and Cather does not limit “Marian Forrester” to a single perspective. As Cather noted herself,

in order to portray Mrs. Forrester it was necessary to show her as she was reflected in the minds of *a number of men*; the young man who was disillusioned was no more necessary to the portrait than the butcher boy who brought the flowers at the time of Forrester’s death, but he was more directly connected with Mrs. Forrester’s career than the butcher boy, and therefore he figured more importantly in the story. (interview with Burton Rascoe, 22 February 1924, emphasis mine)

Adding focalization through a variety of characters therefore not only allows the reader access to various primary experiences of Marian. It also requires readers to analyze the perceptions by other characters through their motives, so that Marian ultimately emerges as an enhanced, more three-dimensional, more real figure than would be possible

through a single point of view description. And while the primary focalization still resides with Niel, he grows throughout the novel from an adolescent boy to a worldly adult, offering a more fluid perspective which shifts according to his personal growth. Further, Cather purposefully distances the overall narration from his sole point of view, and subtly inserts a narrator who represents the collective voice of the community – who is not a character herself, but who establishes Marian as considered from multiple perspectives.

Yet Cather multiplies not only the perspectives from which the reader experiences Marian, she also doubles up on the reverberations of silences, specifically silences induced by not naming things. In defining Marian most prominently through her sexuality, Cather emphasizes the echoes of silence as they function on a pre-linguistic, primal level of reality formation. In other words, by repeatedly drawing the reader's attention to the relationship between words (expressions) and the creation of reality (impressions), Cather reminds us continuously how meaning is very much dependent on the person creating it, which applies to us as readers of her words as much as to the characters interpreting Marian's. Like sex, which remains a typically undescribed act in society, in terms of her identity, Marian's interiority too is generally an undescribed entity within the novel, yet expressed through sex. Because specific actions are left unnamed and up to the imagination of the reader, "sex" creates itself as a reality on the same primal level within the narration as Marian, and which Lacan has theorized as pre-linguistic experience. As Swift has explained with the example of *Sapphira*, Cather expresses in *A Lost Lady* "quite fully (in the symbolic familial vocabulary refined by European psychoanalysis elaborating the theories of Freud and Jacques Lacan) the frustrating exigencies of relation between two registers or contexts for human experience: on the one hand, the symbolic, verbal order of naming, representation, and language in general, and on the other, a nameless primary 'reality' antecedent to language" (Swift 24). Especially through Niel's adolescent, oedipal understanding of Marian's sexuality, Cather creates a primary,

unnamed reality of experiencing her for the reader. In this way, she circumvents what Lacan has lamented as “the limit or horizon of memory and figuration” in her narration, but in creating Marian through her sexuality, she uses the linguistic boundaries of signification to her own representational advantage. As Swift explains, “[w]ords are in an obvious way substitutes, symbolic tokens of absence; in Lacan’s famous formula, ‘the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing’” (26). However, because words are Cather’s tools in creating Marian, she ultimately employs them to recursively recreate realities that are unnamed, un-signified, and unmentioned. Marian’s definition through her sexuality replicates this pre-linguistic experience of reality especially well: because “we” (as a result of societal taboos) do not talk about sex, sex exists largely as a primal concept in the experience of it in our minds, only insufficiently describable and described. In fact, our concept of “sex” may be more “real” precisely because of the absence of words describing it, because we are the ones creating that reality, our impressions, in the absence of reductive, and prescriptive symbols and articulations. For Marian, that means that her *actual* sexuality (and identity) is relative to the *created* reality perceived by us as her readers: we create Marian, along with her sexuality, through experiencing her alongside the characters that focalize her for us.

Trusting Cather’s choice to portray Marian through other characters’ layered interpretations therefore means to accept these additional impressions for what they are, rather than fighting against them to find a “true,” explicitly expressed Marian. If the “true” Marian is to be found primarily within the interpretations of her by other characters, then we need to consider those voices, and, perhaps more importantly, the motives and biases behind them in interpreting Marian, as equally important as her expressions of herself. Another, even more important consideration is therefore the absence of her voice, the nature of Marian’s silences, and her being silenced, and what the impressions are about Marian that those silences create for the reader. As Cather contends in her own essay

about authorial craft, “The Novel D meubl ,” “[w]hatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, it seems to me, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself” (6). In considering *A Lost Lady*, this statement not only applies to Cather’s creation of the character of Marian, but also reverberates in Marian’s silences.

The narrative itself begins with a contextual description of the setting by a third-person, reticent narrator. Immediately, Cather lets the reader know that this will be a retrospectively told story from “[t]hirty or forty years ago,” defined by the memory of the narrator (3). The rather vague chronological reference within an entire decade also sets the expectation of relative unreliability, as stories told from memory naturally always contain some embellished detail and some forgotten aspects. However, simultaneously, this narratological unreliability “allows the reader’s eye, along with her [Cather’s] own, to focus on the selected pieces that are kept,” providing an emphasis on the aspects Cather wants to foreground (Stout 172). Further, as Funda points out, “[w]hen the narrator of *A Lost Lady* introduces us to the setting by saying that the Forresters’ house on the hill ‘was not at all remarkable,’ she suggests, by contrast, that the people inside the house *are* remarkable in some way that the novel will set out to define”<sup>3</sup> (90). While the narrator thus establishes the focus to be on the Forresters, she also creates a certain nostalgia for the older, pioneering times of conquering the West, of which the gentlemanly, rail-road building “Captain” Daniel Forrester is an artifact. For example, the Captain relishes and indulges in the mere beauty of his land, while “[a]ny one but Captain Forrester would

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<sup>3</sup>As Funda points out in her footnote, Cather scholarship has traditionally assigned female pronouns to Cather’s ungendered narrators, such as the one in *A Lost Lady*. Susan Rosowski also refers to the narrator in this novel as “she” (Funda 111).

have drained the bottom land and made it into highly productive fields” (5). Yet, even more captivating than the Captain’s genteel persona is, of course, the titular character, his wife. As the narrator explains, when encountering Marian Forrester, “[e]ven the hardest and coldest of [the Captain’s] friends, a certain narrow-faced Lincoln banker, became animated when he took her hand, tried to meet the gay challenge in her eyes and to reply cleverly to the droll word of greeting on her lips” (5). Marian is the kind of woman who “never stopped to pin up a lock; she was attractive in dishabille, and she knew it” (6). In addition to reflecting the kind of pastoral beauty the Captain so clearly appreciates in the land, Marian also defines the concept of ladyhood since “whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was ‘lady-like’ because she did it,” at least within the relatively narrow setting of the novel, the tiny town of Sweet Water (6). In short, the first chapter of the novel establishes the Forresters as a remarkable couple in an otherwise fairly unremarkable town, as they are remembered retrospectively, thus establishing the novel’s focus on them in this fairly limited, place-specific narrative.

The most prominent character through which the narrative is focalized is, of course, the adolescent boy Niel Herbert, whom the reader gets to meet in the next chapter. The twelve-year-old Niel and another four boys – George Adams, Ed Elliot, and Rheinhold and Adolph Blum – ask Mrs. Forrester’s permission to go fish in the marshes of the Forresters’ bottom land, which she grants, later in the day also serving them cookies by the stream. The boys, who had been wading in the water more than fishing are surprised by Marian’s confession that she herself sometimes enjoys wading in the water, upon which George exclaims, “But you can swim, can’t you, Mrs. Forrester, [. . .] Most women can’t” (12). Proclaiming this to be untrue, at least for women in California, where “everybody swims,” Marian immediately is distinguished from the women – and, by extension, the larger society – of Sweet Water (12). She is unlike anyone the boys know in their limited experience and space, appearing novel and wondrous to them, and “a very

special kind of person” (12). Marian’s appeal to the boys is certainly informed by their young age and limited world knowledge, so that her spending the winters in Colorado makes her “an excitement that came and went with summer” (23). As Niel muses a bit later in the novel, “[c]ompared with her, other women were heavy and dull; even pretty ones seemed lifeless, – they had not that something in their glance that made one’s blood tingle” (32). He finds it “strange that she should be here [in Sweet Water] at all, a woman like her among common people” (32). Funda notes that “Mrs. Forrester’s story can evoke romantic ideals of love and loyalty,” as they do for Niel, “but in reality her charm is predicated more on her singularity than her relations with others” (90). Niel’s perspective sets up Marian not only as not really belonging in Sweet Water society, but he also establishes a hierarchy which puts her above the “common people” of Sweet Water. In other words, Niel, and to a lesser degree the other towns-boys, set up Marian as an ideal of ladyness, informed merely by her exotic appeal to them rather than by any true characteristic of hers. While this immediately establishes Niel, the main focalizer of the novel, as unreliable, it also imposes an instantaneous silencing on Marian. Since Niel’s view of Marian is informed by his fantasized idealizations of who he wants her to be, Marian’s character is doomed from the beginning to ultimately disappoint these expectations. Yet, because the reader also perceives Marian primarily through Niel via the third person focalized narrative, the novel as a whole imposes this idealized view on Marian which the character seemingly cannot escape. Nevertheless, because Niel’s idealizations are created in “real time” along with the reader’s progress through the novel, rather than through a retrospective telling, they function to establish Marian as an experience through the reading process itself; in other words, although the narrative offers some forebodings about its ending, it keeps the reader actively engaged in the moment.

Not all townspeople in Sweet Water share the boys’ idealistic admiration of Marian, however. In the same chapter as we learn about the boys’ special regard for Mrs.



Forrester, we also encounter Ivy Peters, a “rude, arrogant” “boy of eighteen or nineteen” with a constant “defiant and suspicious” demeanor and “a superior, patronizing tone” (13). Engaging the boys in conversation about hunting after Mrs. Forrester has left them, he relays his intention to poach on the Forresters’ land, against which George warns him. Ivy replies that Mrs. Forrester “can’t say anything to me. I’m as good as she is” (14). With this statement, Ivy makes clear not only that he does not share Niel’s hierarchical placement of Marian above him; he specifically considers her no better than himself. But Ivy also establishes himself in contrast to the Forresters with regard to the land: whereas the Captain explicitly preserves the marshes for their beauty and Mrs. Forrester enjoys the land for its natural provisions, Ivy sees it as an opportunity for exploitation. The dynamic established in this scene becomes fulfilled when later in the novel, after Ivy has gained control over the land, he actually drains the marshes to reap its profits. Bower points out how, in the contrast between Captain Forrester’s and Ivy Peters’ regard for the same land, Cather establishes “a broader narrative of western development, so that together the two men stand in for the two different waves of settlers” (66). As Niel nostalgically muses later in the novel, the Captain is one of the Old West’s settlers who really were “dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold” (89). Ivy, in contrast, represents the new generation, “who had never dared anything, never risked anything,” who would “root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous, easy life of the great land-holders” and “destroy and cut up into profitable bits” “[t]he space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer” (90). Within this competing dynamic, Marian’s marital connection to the Captain means that she enforces the aristocratic and aesthetic values her husband represents and that she rejects Ivy’s intrusive and exploitative intentions. Marian’s identity as his wife becomes inextricably entangled with the Captain’s pioneering spirit, which defines her despite not being part of

his generation. Whereas Ivy represents a progress into the future which seems exploitative, the Forresters are strongly associated with the past, and Niel's nostalgic desire to preserve past idealisms as represented by both of them. For Niel in particular, Marian is admirable as and because she is the Captain's wife, and many of the values he admires in him are directly applied to Marian as well.

While, in this manner, Cather offers the reader an early, alternative interpretation of Marian through Ivy's nonchalant attitude about her, she also deepens the bond not only between Marian and Niel, but also to the reader's identification with Niel's point of view. Ivy is established as a cruel, violent antagonist, who "was an ugly fellow, Ivy Peters, and he liked being ugly" (15). He has the kind of repulsive personality that not only violently intrudes onto the Forrester's idyllic land and spoils the towns boys' enjoyable afternoon with nature, but, within this paradisiacal setting, creates perhaps one of the most harrowing and poignantly memorable scenes of the novel. Using a slingshot to stun and catch the, as Niel emphasizes, female bird, Ivy violates a woodpecker in one of the most cruel ways imaginable:

"Now, you watch, and I'll show you something," said Ivy. He held the woodpecker's head in a vice made of his thumb and forefinger, enclosing its panting body with his palm. Quick as a flash, as if it were a practised trick, with one of those tiny blades he slit both the eyes that glared in the bird's stupid little head, and instantly released it.

The woodpecker rose in the air with a whirling, corkscrew motion, darted to the right, struck a tree-trunk, – to the left, and struck another. Up and down, backward and forward among the tangle of branches it flew, raking its feathers, falling and recovering itself. [. . .] There was something wild and desperate about the way the darkened creature beat its wings in the branches,

whirling in the sunlight and never seeing it, always thrusting its head up and shaking it, as a bird does when it's drinking. Presently it managed to get its feet on the same limb where it had been struck, and seemed to recognize that perch. As if it had learned something by its bruises, it pecked and crept its way along the branch and disappeared into its own hole. (17-18)

As Elz points out, the woodpecker in this scene serves as a powerful metaphor for Marian in the rest of the book: “[j]ust as the mutilated female woodpecker flounders while trying to make progress, Marian whirls as she attempts to reestablish herself after her husband experiences a financial crisis and dies” (17). And, similarly to the woodpecker’s finding her perch, Marian too knows which place in society offers security for her, “so she struggles and racks her feathers, but she does succeed” (Elz 18). The woodpecker’s fate in this scene thus strongly resembles the path Marian will take in the future, thus foreshadowing her larger situation within the novel’s plot.

Even more than the bird serving as a metaphor for Marian, this scene also tells us a lot about Niel and about Ivy, making their motives in interpreting Marian throughout the novel more lucid. Niel, in an attempt to “rescue” the bird “and put it out of its misery,” falls from the tree and breaks his arm (18). Extending Elz’ metaphor, then, means that the woodpecker scene foreshadows Niel’s goal to ascend to Marian’s level in order to apply his idea of care, or rescue, to her. In contrast, Ivy never finds it necessary to ascend to the level of the woodpecker, instead violently bringing her down to his level, as he will do later in the novel to Marian. Neither character, however, recognizes Marian’s right to autonomy and self-determination for her own life throughout the novel (especially as independent from those who have no legal recourse over her, such as her father or husband). In this sense, both Niel and Ivy deny the validity of Marian’s expressions—both silence her by refusing to hear her articulations of herself, instead substituting their own

interpretative meanings into what she tries to say. They hear her voice, but not its expressions. While Ivy's motives in silencing Marian are entirely self-focused and egotistical, and, like his intentions for the land, highly exploitative, Niel too fails to recognize that she holds an experience outside his own limited, nostalgically informed interpretation. In such a distinction as Niel makes between grand homesteaders such as the Captain and hand-workers like the crude Ivy, Bower explains, it ultimately "falls to 'ladies' like Marian to preserve these divisions, just as she does at the beginning of the novel, when Niel breaks his leg<sup>4</sup> attempting to rescue that blinded woodpecker, and Ivy carries him to the Forrester's house, intending to use his rescue as an excuse to 'sit down in the biggest leather chair and cross his legs and make himself at home'" (66). Putting Ivy in his place, in accordance with Niel's sense of propriety (and signaling his sense of the Forrester's superiority), is accomplished here by "Marian's 'ladylike' demeanor, signaled by her 'delicate' voice, [which] effectively enforces the difference between a 'farmhand' and the Captain" (Bower 66). This distinction, however, is merely artificial, established through Niel's sense of nostalgia for past values and anxiety about the future. And because Niel's nostalgia is contingent upon specifically the Captain's lived aesthetic, the hierarchic distinctions he establishes between Ivy and the Forresters depend on the Captain's authoritative presence, even if it falls to Marian to enforce them. In other words, Marian's authority derives from her husband's status, not from herself.

It is notable also within the context of the woodpecker as a metaphor for Marian that Cather chose specifically this species of bird to associate with her. As Stout notes, Cather was a particularly minute observer of nature, evidenced for example by her heavily annotated field guide, in which she noted corrections and additions to the descriptions

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<sup>4</sup>Niel, in fact, breaks his arm, perhaps metaphorically reflecting how compromised and ill-considered, broken, the hand is he intended to lend the woodpecker.

provided (Stout 171). For such an acute observer of nature, it surely is no accident that the character of Marian is represented by a woodpecker, which, while capable of producing some chirps and sounds, lacks the ability to sing, instead communicating with other woodpeckers through drumming. In other words, a woodpecker, like Marian, inhabits a special position in that it does not have a voice recognizable by other birds – only those of its exact kind – and is incapable of expressing itself meaningfully outside that context. In this sense, then, it may perhaps be more accurate to say that Marian, like a woodpecker among songbirds, does not have a language that is understood in Sweet Water society. In her article, Elz contrasts the bird metaphors for Marian in *A Lost Lady* with those for Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and finds that, in both novels, birds serve “as a metaphor for the entrapment the protagonists experience” so as “to reveal the positions the protagonists find themselves in and the movement they make over the course of the novels as they determine and pursue their dreams” (14). For Elz, the woodpecker represents Marian's desperate maneuvers to reposition herself in her familiar, wifely role as a True Woman, while particularly the parrot and mockingbird, as well as the Icarian white bird in Edna's suicide scene, reflect Edna's struggle (and ultimate failure) to situate herself in an alien situation she is unsuited for. In this interpretation, neither Marian nor Edna have the ability to express themselves. In terms of voice, however, following through with associating both main characters with their respective birds shows subtle nuances in Marian's inability to self-express and Edna's inability to self-articulate. Edna, like the parrot and the mockingbird in the beginning of *The Awakening*, has a language; she is simply incapable of making herself understood and express herself accurately. In contrast, Marian, like the woodpecker, lacks speech in the sense that there is no language, no ornithological song, no lyric, no words available to her as a primal condition of her existence – she will simply never be heard for her meaning. While Edna may exist in a lonely state of perpetual miscommunication, and fail because of it, Marian never had the

tools necessary to express herself to begin with – she has always been silenced – and, ironically, succeeds in situating herself because she defines herself within this non-verbal world. Also like the woodpecker, Marian is a solitary being – unlike Edna, who desperately seeks to express herself to others, she does not depend on, rely on, or define herself according to others’ interpretations, especially women’s, and creates her own reality. She makes her place be the perch that supports her – her husband – regardless of what that makes her to those around her. In other words, as long as she is safe on her perch, it does not matter what or who others take her to be, and she neither cares (nor, really, is able) to correct them. Marian has quite expressive, auditory vocalizations, which she uses to assert her space – her laugh, which often synecdochally stands in for her voice, for example. Yet she is denied an expressive language, constantly existing in the spaces between words, and remaining unarticulated.

Marian’s unarticulated, expressionless identity, and the definition of her as a primal, pre-linguistic experience is further emphasized by Niel’s decidedly oedipal impulses in focalizing her for the reader.<sup>5</sup> Particularly notable in this context is the eroticized, yet maternally charged atmosphere Niel describes in Mrs. Forrester’s bedroom after breaking his arm during the failed woodpecker rescue:

He was in pain, but he felt weak and contended. The room was cool and dusky and quiet. At his house everything was horrid when one was sick. . . .  
What soft fingers Mrs. Forrester had, and what a lovely lady she was. Inside the lace ruffle of her dress he saw her white throat rising and falling so

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<sup>5</sup>Fisher-Wirth attributes “Cather’s fascination with Lyra Garber” to the fact that she “was perhaps a simpler, less threatening version of the fascination with her own mother, with whom her relations were difficult and in whose footsteps Cather firmly did not intend to follow” (36). Similarly, O’Brien attributes Cather’s lesbianism to her choosing male focalizers in much of her fiction (such as Niel here or Jim in *My Ántonia*), arguing that “the male mask allows Cather to explore a woman’s passion for another woman,” also further supporting Fisher-Wirth’s oedipal considerations (593).

quickly [. . .] The little boy was thinking that he would probably never be in so nice a place again [. . .]

“There, he looks better now, doesn’t he, Mary?” Mrs. Forrester ran her fingers through his black hair and lightly kissed him on the forehead. Oh, how sweet, how sweet she smelled! (20-21)

In this scene, the novel shifts from the nostalgic perspective of the community in the opening pages to Niel’s exclusive perceptions as he contrasts the smells, sounds, sensations, and sights in Marian’s bedroom with those in his own home. This contrast is important not only because of the special emphasis on Niel as still a “little boy” despite his decidedly sexualized focus on Marian’s throat, but also because, as established in the very next paragraph, Niel is a maternal half-orphan, knowing only the poor housekeeping skills of some “relation, a spinster from Kentucky,” rather than true maternal attention (21). As readers, we perceive the thusly eroticized maternal Marian in the present tense through Niel’s focalization, rather than from a grown narrative voice, who retrospectively recreates boyhood. This emphasizes Marian’s maternal attributes alongside her eroticism as, through Niel’s perspective, Marian becomes a “fantasy mother” with whose sexuality he will ultimately have to grapple (Fisher-Wirth 37). Marian’s association with the mother also explains Niel’s preoccupation with the Captain as an almost fatherly, exemplary persona to whose status Niel aspires and looks up to.

This becomes all the more significant in the novel as the following narrative continues a few years later, after an accident of the Captain’s makes the Forresters’ presence in Sweet Water permanent, and economic hardships isolate the town from gentlemen of the Captain’s stature. Crop failures have forced several ranchers, including Niel’s biological father, to leave the area, so that the now nineteen-year-old Niel is left to navigate his life without any direct parental supervision at all. Living with his uncle,

Judge Pommeroy, Niel assists in Pommeroy's law office and grows closer to "all the Judge's friends, and especially Captain Forrester, [who] dropped in there to talk oftener than ever" (25). The reader learns much of what there is to know about the Captain and his history through his own telling at a formal dinner party Niel is invited to. Despite his accident and some financial trouble, which Niel grimly notes seems to leave the Forrester's "extraordinarily poor" "like everybody else" in Sweet Water, the Captain insists on maintaining his stature (29). As Niel seems to especially admire in the Captain, "[h]e was a man who did not vary his formulae or his manners [. . .] His clumsy dignity covered a deep nature, and a conscience that had never been juggled with" (39). Even as an invalid, "Captain Forrester still made a commanding figure at the head of his own table," authoritatively carving the turkey, and gentlemanly ensuring all guests are properly served (38). Niel's perceptions regarding the Forresters, and particularly Marian, then, become informed primarily by his identification with and sympathies for the Captain in the oedipal triangle between the three characters. As the narrator explains, "it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her" (65). According to Freud, "[i]n the normal development of the little boy's progress toward heterosexuality, he must pass, [. . .] through the stage of the 'positive' Oedipus, a homoerotic identification with his father, a position of effeminized subordination to the father, as a condition of finding a model for his own heterosexual role" (Richard Klein, qtd. in Sedgwick 23). Especially because of the novel's emphasis on Niel as yet an adolescent boy who so far has "no learned conversation" with women (28), and his established strong maternal attachment to Marian, the lens through which Niel focalizes Marian for the reader is therefore defined by the Captain as an authoritative father figure.

Although Niel's considerations of Marian for the reader are strongly affected by his filial attachment to and identification with the Captain, however, Daniel Forrester is



given an independent voice in the novel, separate from Niel's focalizations. During such moments as when Niel admires Marian's earrings, when the Captain is not even present, for example, his voice nevertheless reverberates in Niel's conscience, telling the reader that "although he had given her handsomer ones, [he] liked to see her wear these, because they had been his mother's. It gratified him to have his wife wear jewels; it meant something to him" (31). The Captain's authority over Niel is especially palpable in the abrupt shift of the narration from what is clearly Niel's limited point of view, Marian being "the only woman he knew who wore earrings," to the free indirect discourse of an intrusive Captain's explanation of their significance to him personally in the next sentence (31). The narration offers no subtle, fluid introduction of a change of perspective here, instead forcefully inserting the Captain's authoritative voice in a scene focalized through Niel, thus re-emphasizing the Captain's ever-present, definitive influence on both Niel and Marian. As we learn during the dinner party, this time narrated from the perspective of Marian, "[h]er husband had archaic ideas about jewels; a man bought them for his wife in acknowledgement of things he could not gracefully utter. They must be costly; they must show that he was able to buy them, and that she was worthy to wear them" (41-42). The Captain's voice being channeled through Marian's perception here in indirect discourse as if she were a voice box for his expectations shows not only his authority and the silenced state of his wife. It further highlights the intimacy in their husband-wife relationship through her acute, demonstrated awareness of his most deeply held values, values that need no mentioning, no uttering, and no direct expression. As Marian herself, the values that define her worth too are inexpressible and instead are created in the silent, yet pregnant with meaning, understanding about the significance of leaving things unsaid.

While the values expressed by Marian's jewelry serve to display the Captain's enhanced status as being able to afford such expensive adornments, they serve first and foremost to display Marian's worth as the Captain's wife, including those things that are

intimate and unutterable. Specifically, it is not just that Marian is commoditized as a sort of trophy wife, it is also Marian's wifely services – her unmentionable sexuality – that is put on display in being represented by the jewels. Even though the relationship between the married couple is no longer *actually* sexual, the *potential* of Marian's sexuality reflects back on the Captain as her husband. As such, the Captain has the exclusive authority and (even legal) right to Marian's sexuality, yet due to their age difference and as established for the reader through Niel's perspective, he takes on a more paternal role over her. Even in comparison to Niel, the Captain emphasizes how Marian "seemed about the same age" as "[i]t was a habit with him to think of Mrs. Forrester as very, very young" (63). In taking on such a non-sexual, paternal role – as opposed to an erotic, husbandly one – however, the Captain is still able (and fully authorized) to engage in the exchange market over Marian's sexuality. Like a father simultaneously advertising and preserving his daughter's sexual potential to future suitors, then, the Captain presides over the social economy of Marian's sexuality, which is symbolized by the lavish display of her jewelry.

Other than Niel, whose actual adolescent naïveté and Freudian denial of maternal sexuality prohibit him from realizing this gendered, authoritative dynamic yet, Marian herself is acutely aware of the commoditization of her sexuality especially in connection with her role as a wife in an economically secure marriage. As Fisher-Wirth explains, for Niel, "by the time of the novel, [the Captain's] relations with his wife fulfill the fantasies of children: they are loving but not sexual, and so the father-figure is present, his authority reassuring, but the mother remains untainted and accessible to the child" (41). The Captain, standing as an authoritative example for the old pioneering values, thus epitomizes the patriarchal traditions Niel wants to preserve first and foremost for himself, but which he projects onto Marian as well. In other words, because Niel too, albeit for slightly different reasons, is interested in preserving the claim to Marian's (untainted) sexuality, Niel perceives overtly expressed sexual interest in her as a threat. During the

dinner party, for example, Niel senses the sexualized “restless, muscular energy that had something of the cruelty of wild animals in it” in Frank Ellinger, which, “despite knowing nothing bad about him” – and being oblivious to his sexual connection to Marian which Cather starts to imply here – has Niel feel “something evil” (37). The “evil” Niel senses here is of course the sexual threat Ellinger poses to Marian perceived purity, and thus her value. In contrast to Niel, however, as Cather emphasizes later, the Captain, who “knew his wife better even than she knew herself,” and, “knowing her, he [. . .] valued her” is quite well aware of Marian’s sexuality and the way in which she is able to manipulate its commoditization to her advantage (122). As Fisher-Wirth puts it, “the roles they both play help to maintain a drama of sexual display and commodification” that serve to preserve Marian’s marketability (42). The Captain’s benefit in this implied bargain is to establish a comfortable and reputable home in Sweet Water, “with a wife like Mrs. Forrester” (43). While the Captain’s use of simile here emphasizes the relative interchangeability of Marian, she is specifically contrasted to the Captain’s first “poor invalid wife who had never been happy and who had kept his nose to the grindstone” (43). It is notable in this context, as revealed later in the novel, that the widowed Captain had initially gotten himself into Marian’s graces by accepting her own temporary invalidity – both physically in regards to her broken legs and reputationally through her association with her adulterous ex-fiancé – since she, prior to her accident, “had noticed him very little, – she was off every day with the young men” (141). In rescuing Marian from both of these disabilities, the Captain thus trades the youth and beauty of Marian’s for her economic security. In turn, Marian offers her graces as the Captain’s wife to adorn the house in Sweet Water to his pleasure – a place, as the reader may remember, to which the Californian Marian does not belong, and which, as she repeatedly tells Niel, she finds “bleak” with “nothing for me to do” (64). As both are clearly aware, however, the Captain’s age difference to Marian of

twenty-five years<sup>6</sup> necessarily makes this bargain a temporary arrangement, as she will surely outlive him. The Captain's preservation of Marian's sexual value therefore serves to ensure her future survival after his death. Of course, all these circumstances are yet to be unraveled by Niel later in the novel, yet Cather's allowing the Captain's consciousness to reverberate in free indirect discourse through the narration here establishes the limitations yet of Niel's observations and considerations regarding Marian while allowing the readers glimpses of insights which yet elude him.

The commoditized nature of Marian's sexuality becomes even more explicit in the next chapter, in which, for the first time in the novel thus far, the narration moves away from Niel entirely and even offers one of the rare instances in which Marian is allowed to express herself freely. Under the pretense of going "to cut cedar boughs for Christmas," Marian and Frank take a private sleigh ride alone together (50). In reference to Mrs. Ogden, who, along with her husband and daughter had attended the previous night's dinner party, Marian wonders whether the way "his ladies [. . .] almost extinguish" Mr.

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<sup>6</sup>The Forrester's age difference is mentioned on page 6 of the novel. Based on the narrative provided by the Captain at the dinner party, "of how he came West a young boy, after serving in the Civil War, and took a job as driver for a freighting company that carried the plains from Nebraska City to Cherry Creek," I estimate the Captain to have been roughly Niel's age, around 20 years old, in the late 1860s. I'm basing this estimation on the assumption that the Captain served during the later years of the Civil War, when he was 18 years old and did not require his parents' permission, and the fact that, after an indefinite amount of time serving as a freight driver, he refers to himself as "a young man," a moniker not yet afforded to the 19-year-old Niel. Discovering the hill upon which he later builds his house, the Captain details driving "a stake into the ground to mark the spot where he wished to build," to which he "did not come back for many years" (42). In those interstitial years, the Captain not only marries and is widowed, but his willow stake had time to grow into a tree, which leads me to an estimation of this period covering at least a decade, putting the Captain, at a minimum, in his thirties. It is not until "twelve years later" that he marries Marian, putting him in his mid- to late forties at the time of their marriage (43). This timeline is further supported by the mention that "[w]hen Marian Ormsby was nineteen," she is still engaged to her first fiancé, and she does not meet and marry the Captain until some time later (141). This would then put Marian in her early twenties at the time of their marriage. The duration of their marriage, of course, is not mentioned, but several references to the Captain's advanced age, and their marriage having taken place many years ago, suggest its duration to be in excess of a decade or two, making Marian at this point in the novel around forty – old enough to be considered a stable wife to the Captain, and young enough to still be attractive and to be remarried. Further, the fact that Marian in her infidelity seems to have no concerns regarding pregnancy may be an indication that she has reached a post-menopausal age at this point in the novel.

Ogden makes Frank “glad you never married” (51). With her question, Marian implicitly likens Mrs. Ogden to her own husband’s first wife: in the same way as the Captain’s first wife “had never been happy” and “kept his nose to the grindstone” (43), Mrs. Ogden too threatens to “extinguish” her husband’s “much livelier” ways (51). In likening Mrs. Ogden to the Captain’s first wife, Marian also simultaneously contrasts herself with both. Frank immediately picks up the same contrast in his reply that “I’m certainly glad I never married a homely woman. What does a man do it for, anyway? She had no money, – and he’s always had it, or been on the way to it” (52). Further, in referencing the exchange value of money as a reason for marriage, Frank acknowledges and affirms Marian, who certainly is anything but “homely,” in her intrinsic marriageable value independent of money. This is particularly significant since Constance, the Ogden’s daughter, had shown a marked interest in Frank the previous evening, so that Frank here implicitly makes an assurance to Marian that she needn’t be worried about this competition. Making herself entirely explicit in emphasizing that Frank “needn’t be so careful” about hiding their affair here, in the privacy of the sleigh, Marian laments how “[w]hen I’m off in the country for a whole winter, alone, and growing older, I like to [. . .] be reminded of pleasanter things” (53). Again, Marian here foregrounds her awareness about the temporary nature of the marital arrangement between her and the Captain, as well as her unhappiness in Sweet Water, and she is essentially advertising herself to Frank as his wife in the future – after the Captain’s death. Cather explicitly connects this self-promotion with Marian’s sexuality, which itself is explicitly expressed through her voice: seeking a good spot for their tête-à-tête, Marian directs Frank further on while Frank half-smilingly notices how “[t]he quality of her voice had changed, and he knew the change” (54). And yet, even in one of the most expressive scenes in the novel, when Marian is allowed to speak openly without her being contained by Niel’s focalizations, her voice remains expressive only in what it does not explicitly express – it is merely the “quality” of her voice, not her words,

that create meaning for Frank. In this way, Marian's use of explicit silence – of leaving things unsaid while still conveying meaning – echoes the larger way in which Cather uses language (and the absence thereof in the allusion to unnamable things) to portray Marian in the novel.

Similar to how Cather creates Marian through the in-the-present experience of her by the reader, so too is the nature of Marian's speech, especially when connected with the sexuality through which she defines herself, such that the essential realities about her self remain unnamed and meaning assumed through tone, sound, or inflection by her conversation partner. In the sleigh with Frank, it is the "quality of her voice" that implies her consent to sex with Frank. For Niel, Marian's mouth alone "could say so much without words" (27). Instead of words, what is most expressive for Niel about Marian's voice is the sound of "her inviting, musical laugh, that was like the distant measures of dance music," which essentially functions as Niel's synecdoche for Marian's voice in the absence of speech. Tellingly, it is also when Niel overhears Marian's "soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager," followed by Frank's "fat and lazy" laugh, that Niel puts two and two together about their affair. For Niel, then, Marian's laugh alone tells him more about her than words express, making her laughter one of her most expressive voice attributes – though not verbal. Again, although there is no explicit description of sex, Marian's laughter is specifically tied to her sexuality, serving as its referent in Niel's discovery. In this context, the sound of Marian's laugh becomes a non-verbal expression of her voice, and even her as a whole. Having heard her laughter in combination with Frank's means that, to Niel, "[g]race, variety, the lovely voice, the sparkle of fun and fancy in those [Marian's] dark eyes; all this was nothing" anymore (72). And yet, as the narrator makes sure to emphasize, "[i]t was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal" (72). This destroyed aesthetic ideal constitutes several things, first and foremost of course the fact that Marian's laughter, as representative of "beautiful women,

whose beauty meant more than it said,” reveals Marian’s unnamed sexuality (72) – her sexuality being something less than aesthetically pleasing to the still adolescent Niel who has already designated Frank’s virility as an unnamed “something evil” (37). Secondly, Niel loses his idealized version of a lady, defined by her role as a wife to the aestheticized, paternally authoritative status of the Captain. As Bower explains, after all, it is Marian’s “‘lady-like’ demeanor [which] not only [contains] her eroticism but also produces an essential difference between ‘bankers’ and ‘homesteaders,’ between those who value the land for its beauty and those who value only the profits they can squeeze from it” (66-67). As mentioned earlier when Marian tells the young Ivy his place on the porch, this differentiation between the Captain and more common people, in other words, the marital association that defines her as a lady, is achieved through the authority lent to her voice. For Niel, hearing Marian’s laugh in combination with Frank’s therefore means that she loses the tone of authority her association with the Captain gives her voice – an authoritative, paternal superiority which Niel has always found aesthetic – and with it, to lose her as a lady. And, although the reader is forewarned about the affair through the interjections of other narrative voices, the focalization through Niel’s naïveté makes his discovery of Marian’s (adulterous) sexuality – and the titular loss of a lady – a climactic and immediately informative, presently narrative moment for the novel’s representation of Marian.

Through Niel’s outrage at Marian’s aesthetic disassociation with her railroad aristocrat husband, Cather also again emphasizes Niel’s larger concern about the future of the pioneering spirit. As Bower notes, “Niel’s discovery of Marian’s infidelity [allegorizes] the degeneration of the American frontier” insofar as “[the] ‘something coarse and concealed’ that Niel locates within Marian’s desires represents the essential corruption of Ivy’s generation, just as her sexuality betrays the ‘aesthetic ideal’ that legitimizes class distinctions” (67). Gustke adds that “Mrs. Forrester, always ‘lady-like’

in the eyes of great men like Cyrus Dalzell and other ‘admiring middle-aged men,’ is valued [. . .] according to her marketability among businessmen; her beauty and charm serve to maintain the Captain’s capital and prestige” (180). In betraying the Captain’s status by seemingly independently outsourcing her sexuality to Frank, therefore, Marian subverts Niel’s patriarchal, even regressive, conviction that “the economy of exchange – of desire – is a man’s business” (Luce Irigaray, qtd. in Gustke 180). As Niel faces “that culturally feared and physically hidden female space which is the site and source of woman’s desire, and hence her beauty,” the novel’s central concern with “the nature of *what lies within*, the truth within or behind appearance” once again emphasizes the unnamable (and unmentionable) nature of Marian herself (Fisher-Wirth 38, emphasis in original). In other words, the novel’s major narrative concerns about (Marian’s) representation through language become reflected in and echoed by the things that Marian does not specifically name – for reasons of propriety, allure, or as part of a social contract with her husband, Frank, or Sweet Water society. These unnamed attributes include her sexuality, her commoditization, the mystery of her appeal – all of which are located within and enveloped by the silences created through each of the characters’ interpretations and assumptions, in short, by their individual creation of reality about the implicit, yet unstated content: their impressions about what is not explicitly expressed. Fisher-Wirth argues about Marian’s letter to Frank which Niel tries to hide from the Captain that “[the] letter with its envelope is the most eloquent of the stand-ins for Marian Forrester, for it foregrounds the relationship between trace and presence, or clue and crime, which the novel investigates in terms of female sexuality, and it emphasizes the relationship between all of these and the act of reading” (40). In the same way as Marian is created in the imagination of the various characters judging the traces she leaves, then, Cather too creates Marian’s as a presence by tracing her in the experiences which the reader derives from the points of view by various characters. In other words, leaving things unnamed and



words unwritten (or hidden) makes the language in the novel function for both Marian and Cather to circumscribe reality rather than (reductively) prescribing it.

This becomes perhaps nowhere more explicit in the novel than during the telephone scene, when Marian, after having found out via the newspaper that Frank married Constance Ogden after all, braves the raging rain storm and washed out bridge across the creek to use the telephone in the judge's law offices. For Marian, Frank's betrayal is first and foremost an economic one: despite having assured her that he would not marry for money, he does just that at a moment when Marian's sexual economy has become most vital to her survival. The Captain has betrayed his wife by choosing to preserve his reputation rather than her future two years earlier, when, due to the insolvency of a Denver bank for which the Captain's name "promised security and fair treatment to his old workmen and their friends," the Captain faces the choice of "either to lose his name or save it" (74, 75). Having chosen "those men with no capital but their back and their two hands" over his wife, "his name meant safety" only for those workers, but no longer for Marian. Marian is left with nothing but the house in Sweet Water – a place where she does not belong and which offers her no security – and to care for the Captain after he immediately experiences a stroke – a role for which she is ill-equipped and which "comes hard on her" (89). As Gustke explains, the Captain's betrayal thus "forces Mrs. Forrester to market her sexuality more and more blatantly, paralleling her loss of financial security with her loss of decorum: 'She seemed to have lost her faculty of discrimination; her power of easily and graciously keeping everyone in his proper place'" (177-178). The decline of the Forresters is underscored by the rise of Ivy Peters, who, having now acquired and drained the Forresters' marshes, jubilates that "[the] Forresters have come down in the world like the rest" (88). For Niel, as previously noted, this decline in the Forresters' status symbolizes the shifting generational approach to the settlement of the West, the aristocratic adventurers like the Captain now having to leave

“all the vast territory they had won [. . .] at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters” (89-90). Because, for Niel, the “possession of the ‘idea’ of Mrs. Forrester is indispensable to his growth as a young man” in defining his place within this rapidly shifting generational ideology (Gustke 181), he expects Marian “to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged” (145). In other words, Niel creates Marian as a static ideal born out of his patriarchally informed nostalgia for the authority of the old pioneers, which conflicts not only with the progress taking place regardless of his objections, but, more importantly, with her true self.

Marian, whose objective is to secure her survival in the new world she tries to navigate, needs to participate in the market economy she is familiar with – the exchange value of her body. She is “like a bird caught in a net,” for whom Niel’s nostalgia for the Captain is a by-gone idealism she needs to escape in looking toward the future (92). “Money is a very important thing” she tells Niel, emphasizing how her advancing age leaves her merely “two years, three years, more of this” life in Sweet Water caring for the Captain (96, 106). “I feel such a power to live in me, Niel,” she proclaims, elaborating about a Colorado dance she recently attended that she yet “looked well enough! [. . .] The men thought so. I looked happier than any woman there. They were nearly all younger, much. But they seemed dull, bored to death” (106). As Marian explicitly connects “life” with a future without the Captain, away from Sweet Water, she also implicitly connects her future with her beauty and the ability to attract men in spite of competing younger, but “dull” women. Consequently, learning about Frank’s marriage to the similarly “safe and pasty” Constance not only means his betrayal of the implicit marriage promise he has made to her, but, more importantly, his devaluing of her beauty and only market value she knows, as compared to the Ogden’s money (114). Her despair in the judge’s office as she implores Niel to ring Frank at the Colorado Springs hotel at which he is honeymooning thus is reflected in both the loss of her faculties through “alcohol or fatigue” and her

beauty as “[her] eyes were shrunk to hard points” and “[her] blue lips, the black shadows under her eyes, made her look as if some poison were at work in her body” (111-112). This is a visual judgment by Niel, however, to which the reader is privy. After warning Marian that “central will hear every word you say, remember,” he connects her with Frank, and as long as the tone of her voice maintains her lady veneer, he lets her talk without interfering: “He had steeled his nerves for wild reproaches [but the] voice he heard behind him was her most charming; playful, affectionate, intimate, with a thrill of pleasant excitement that warmed its slight formality and burned through the common-place words like the colour in an opal” (113). Contrasted sharply with her visual appearance, Marian’s “voice, it seemed to Niel, was that of a woman, young, beautiful, happy, –warm and at her ease, sitting in her own drawing-room and talking on a stormy night to a dear friend far away” (113). Again, the emphasis about Marian’s presence here lies on the tonal inflections of her voice, not by the words she says. It is her tone that preserves the illusion of her composure and visual appeal for anyone but Niel and the reader, and Niel thus means to preserve the appearance of the form her expression remains enveloped in. Once again, for Niel, Marian’s actual speech is as irrelevant to his conception of her as the content of her words ends up being for Mrs. Beasley; yet while Niel still places an inordinate value on preserving the idealistic form he has created in his mind about Marian, Mrs. Beasley already knows how neither content nor form nor even truth matter, linguistically, in creating meaning and reality. For Mrs. Beasley, the mere occasion of the phone call at all allows her to create her own version of reality in gossip. For Niel, words do not create reality, they merely circumscribe it, but Marian’s tone sets the occasion for Niel to shape his reality according to his expectations.

For much of the novel thus far, Marian has been primarily defined as a lady by the visual descriptions and impressions she leaves on the focalizing characters, reinforced and sometimes even substituted for, by the aural ringing of her laugh. For Niel, this has

changed upon his discovery of her affair with Frank, which, along with her laugh, has tainted her for him. Thus, in the telephone scene, Niel's primary goal is to preserve what he assumes is everyone else's perception of her still – the idealized lady figure whose tone of voice maintains and (re)enforces her lady-like status – nobody else, specifically Mrs. Beasley, in Niel's assumption, being privy to his view of Marian nor his knowledge about the affair. As soon as her tone shifts and her "voice was darkening with every word," she therefore threatens to destroy this veneer of composed ladyhood and publicly de-aestheticize herself along with her darkening voice (114). Wallace explains,

Marian's use of the telephone threatens to feminize and eroticize the telephone. Two gendered stereotypes are at work here – technology enables Marian to bring her intensely private concerns into public space and discourse, and at the same time that technology amplifies the possibility for a second gendered 'misuse' of the telephone: using it, as Mrs. Beasley will, as a source of gossip. (149)

Further, as the historically contextual "virtue of telephone users" lies in the telephone's use for business purposes (as reflected in its being in the judge's offices rather than the Forrester home), Marian's "using the telephone for pleasure" not only threatens to conflate the male and female spheres of public and private, but also the "business" of sexuality with the "pleasure" of female desire. This association of business and sexuality, as established by Marian's "willingness to use sex in exchange for economic security" thus also invokes her participation in "the institution of prostitution" (Gustke 184). Although, as "Emma Goldman argued in 1917, 'it is merely a question of degree' as to whether a woman 'sells herself to one man, in or out of marriage, or to many men,'" the conservatism in the town of Sweet Water, reflected by Niel's ongoing nostalgia, requires the social economy of sex to remain an acknowledged, yet unnamed thing (qtd. in Gustke

174). As Travis explains, “the cultural codification of sex and gender relations” causes even the law – represented by the judge’s offices – to not “recognize the participation of women in the conversation” about sex (“Sexual Evidence” 151). Marian is considered “the property” of the Captain, which makes Frank’s adultery legally actionable with “a heavy financial burden,”<sup>7</sup> and thus specifically determines a price for sex with her (“Sexual Evidence” 151). In speaking about her affair on the phone, Marian therefore ostensibly threatens to speak the unspeakable, and verbalize not only sexual desire, but also violate the unspeakability of the gendered social economy of sex.

Further, it is not only the social economy of sex that is unmentionable, but, inherently, also sex and sexuality itself. Travis notes, for example, that in adultery cases heard in court, the question of evidence, and thus, “the designation of the ‘crime’ of sexual trespass was itself inspired by the techniques of the literary in that it asked its litigants continually to imagine and to act upon offenses that were sometimes matters of allusion and representation” (“Sexual Evidence” 153). She explains further that, “[for] instance, the legal construction of narratives about sexuality was often founded upon the conspicuous absence about what sexuality entailed” (*Wounded Hearts* 97). Because “[a]dultery would be very difficult of proof” if evidentiary requirements included the “testimony of a disinterested eye-witness,”<sup>8</sup> such “‘direct proof’ of an adultery in criminal conversation cases was unnecessary” (Travis, “Sexual Evidence” 153). Instead,

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<sup>7</sup>Travis’ argument rests on her exploration of the legal concept of criminal conversation, which would hold the telephone conversation taking place between Frank and Marian to constitute “an action understood by civil law as the equivalent of adultery; it enabled a husband to bring damages against a third party for the husband’s loss of sexual relations with his wife” (*Wounded Hearts* 92). Travis here is interested in how masculine emotional pain is compensatable (and compensated) in *fin de siècle* law, and how that applies specifically to Niel’s appreciation of Marian in *A Lost Lady*. Although Travis’ considerations regarding male pain and Niel’s motivations is somewhat relevant to my argument about Marian’s voice, my focus within Travis’ concept about criminal conversation lies on the way in which feminine voices in general, and Marian’s in particular, are excluded and silenced from a sexual conversation already dealing in unnamed things.

<sup>8</sup>*Smith v. Meyers*, 52 Neb. 70; N.W. 1006, qtd. in Travis, “Sexual Evidence” p. 153

circumstantial evidence was entirely acceptable, as long as it was “convincing” (Travis, “Sexual Evidence” 153). Not only does the permissibility of hearsay evidence in the law establish sexual acts as belonging within the aural realm, even the “conversation” itself becomes an assumed, synecdochical stand-in for sex: “‘Secret meetings (particularly at night), telephone calls, displays of ‘playfulness’ or affection, exchanging ‘love letters’ or notes” suffice as “scenes of narration [. . .] to intimate that a ‘conversation’ had taken place (although one might not be able to establish that genital intercourse had occurred)” (Travis *Wounded Hearts* 99). In this sense, then, “Adolf Blum’s lack of ocular evidence” when he overhears Frank and Marian in the sleigh, is irrelevant to the establishment of adulterous acts. In the same sense, this means that Mrs. Beasley’s overhearing a mere telephone conversation between Frank and Marian (especially a secret one, at night) in itself is already enough – by court standards, and even more so in the much lower gossip standards of Sweet Water – to “prove” the reality of Marian’s adultery, regardless of the content of their conversation.

The telephone scene therefore points toward not only the nature of sexuality as an assumed, perpetually unmentioned, and unmentionable thing, substituted for with assumptions, representations, and speech acts by various actors. Marian’s sexuality similarly reflects how Marian’s voice is substituted for, silenced, omitted, and created through the imagination of the reader. As in the sleigh scene, the narrative relies on the implication of Marian’s tone of voice, or, in the window scene, on the expressiveness of her and Frank’s laughter to “describe” sex, just as how Marian herself is “described” through the implications about her in the experiences of the reader. With the relative exception of Marian’s recounting of meeting the Captain late in the novel – and even there, very few intimate details are relayed – Cather “leaves out any direct recounting of the flirtation or courtship, the wooing and sexual acts” (Stout 174). Certainly, this avoids “conventions that emphasized excitement and romanticized accounts of courtship, sex,

and marriage” as Stout argues, and it follows conversational conventions about explicitly sexual speech that persist to this day. But it also re-emphasizes the nature of sexuality as an unmentioned, assumed entity within the novel, to be created by the imagination of the reader. That is not to say, of course, that Marian and Frank do not engage in sex, but rather that sex is an essentially unnamed thing, whose reality is created between the lines in the reader’s imagination alone. This is equally true for Marian, who in the novel herself is created as an unnamed experience for the reader to be read through the interpretations and assumptions of the focalizing characters precisely in the same way as she is defined in the novel through her sexuality.

If, in both the sense of criminal conversation, and in regards to the unmentionability of sex, “speech acts might indeed be constructed as sex acts,” then female propriety – especially for a lady such as Marian – requires women to live a muted, silent existence (Travis “Sexual Evidence” 155). This is certainly the view that Niel takes in the law office during the phone call, when, at the “moment that quivering passion of hatred and wrong leaped into her voice, he had taken the big shears left by the tinner and cut the insulated wire behind the desk” (114). However, since the improper act lies in the telephone call itself – the envelope – not in the content of the specific words spoken, Niel does not, in fact, “save” her. As Funda notes, “Blinded by his misguided pride at rescuing her, Niel [. . .] fails to recognize that additional gossip about Mrs. Forrester might be sparked by her late night visit to Niel’s quarters or by the mysteriously snipped phone lines” (98). However, “at this point the gossip does not affect Mrs. Forrester; she ‘paid no heed’ to his warning about the operator, nor does she see Mrs. Beasley scurrying about the next morning” (Funda 98). Instead, it is the change of tone of her voice that betrays the “mask of charms, [. . .] a performance that masks [her] inner turmoil” she assumes initially, and to the dropping of which Niel objects by literally cutting her off (Funda 98). As Wallace argues, rather than saving her, “Niel has silenced her in time, restoring the

older chivalric order, preserving her status as ‘lady,’ at least for the time being” (150). For Niel, the “problem with Marian’s adultery [. . .] is not infidelity itself” but his need to rescue her from becoming “part of a public commodity culture, as when she becomes both sexually and commercially complicit with Ivy Peters” later in the novel (Wallace 150). However, in cutting the telephone lines, Niel not only cuts Marian off in the sense of literally silencing her, he effectively also cuts her off from her future life and community. Marian has never belonged to Sweet Water society, and she refuses to abide by the Mrs. Beasleys’ and Molly Tuckers’ expectations of her. She wants to live and dance in a place like Colorado, with a husband like Frank, a future from which both Frank’s betrayal and Niel’s cutting her off has alienated her. The novel’s titular reference to *A Lost Lady* is realized in this scene because, in cutting her off from her future, Niel has not only lost Marian as an ideal, but he has also caused her to *be* lost, after the Captain’s death, “like a ship without ballast, driven hither and tither by every wind,” and aimlessly trying to find her perch like the blinded, silent woodpecker at the beginning of the novel (131). And yet, even compromised as she is now, complicit with Ivy’s exploitations of her in both the economic and sexual sense, condemned, judged, and excluded by the townspeople, Niel feels “that the *right* man could save her, even now” (143, emphasis mine). The right man, for Niel, of course is a man of the Captain’s caliber, whereas for Marian it is one that offers her “life” in an economically secure future, away from Sweet Water.

In the last chapter, as Niel learns through a retrospective and, as the first chapter, chronologically indeterminate retelling by Ed Elliot, Marian does at last end up saved – if not in the same sense as Niel, in his boyhood naïveté, had envisioned. As Rosowski notes, “[t]he irony of Niel’s condemnation of Mrs. Forrester” lies in the fact that “only to Niel does Mrs. Forrester ‘belong’ to the past” and only in the (in)experience of the unworldly Niel does she belong to the Sweet Water of his boyhood (60). Mrs. Forrester herself “refuses to accept life on any terms; [. . .] She refuses to define herself in terms of death,”



and “[she] refuses to limit herself to the past” (Rosowski 60). Although Marian is never allowed to directly speak again – in fact, she is never even “present” in the last chapter – Niel’s “[passing] into a third, mature stage of development” means that “[t]he framework of Niel’s thought has shifted,” and with it, his relayed interpretation of Marian for the reader (Rosowski 61). In “no longer measuring Mrs. Forrester against his abstract standard of aesthetic perfection, but instead in terms of ‘life,’” Niel’s now mature consideration “testifies to Mrs. Forrester’s strength as a force for change” (Rosowski 61). For Marian, this means that her ability to adapt to change, to survive it, and to manipulate her assets – her beauty and sexuality – leads her to find her place. In embracing change rather than rejecting it, for example, she turns her otherwise as “quarrelsome and stingy” described new husband into “the kindest of husbands,” generous enough even to provide for the care of the Captain’s grave after Marian’s death (149). Niel leaves the reader, and himself, with the assurance that “she was well cared for, to the very end,” having performed her role as a lady enough to carve out a familiar perch, yet refusing to be entirely silenced out of living life on her own terms. In the end, it becomes clear that Niel, as a character, has had very little influence on how Marian Forrester defines herself and her life, despite his vital importance as the main focalizer to the narrative about her as a whole. This is to say that, despite the seemingly occluding force of Niel’s interpretations as the main focalizer on the reader, Marian ultimately defines herself independent of it, because Cather forces us to create her for ourselves alongside his version.

In her interview with Flora Merrill in 1925, Cather elucidates how she created Marian Forrester by resurrecting Lyra Garber’s effect on herself as a child as an experience for her readers. She states, “I didn’t try to make a character study, but just a portrait like a thin miniature painted on ivory. A character study of Mrs. Forrester would have been very, very different. I wasn’t interested in her character when I was little, but in her lovely hair and her laugh which made me happy clear down to my toes.” For this

reason, she notes, it was important for her to consider “by what medium could I present her the most vividly” so that “I could get her just as I remembered her and produce the effect she had on me and the many others who knew her.” Although she at first attempted to write the novel from a first person narrator’s perspective as Niel, she says, she ultimately decided against that approach. Lyra Garber, or better, the effect of Lyra Garber on the young Willa Cather, are like “a beautiful ghost in my mind,” created by “the memories of these experiences and emotions [which] have been like perfumes.” If Cather had described these fleeting impressions from a single perspective, she therefore would have not only risked to “call into question [. . .] the boundaries between fiction and autobiography,” but the narrative would also have restricted *A Lost Lady* to a single point of view, giving Niel a similar definitive control over Marian as Jim has over *Ántonia* (Swift 23). Yet Marian Forrester remains “intangible, the ephemeral embodiment of ideas, of images, of the effect a handsome and powerful woman has” on others (Gustke 177), precisely because Cather distances Marian from her own memories of Lyra in the same way as she distances Niel’s focalizations from the reader’s experience of Marian: “It is the difference between a remembered face and having that friend one day come in through the door. She is really no more yours then than she has been right along in your memory” (Merrill). To not lay claim to her experience and memory in the narrative therefore means for Cather to recreate this experience for the reader in real time as the narrative progresses. For the reader, it is therefore important to understand that Niel “isn’t a character at all; he is just a peephole into that world [. . .] only a point of view” (Merrill). Niel is important as a focalizer due to his physical closeness to Marian, yet it precisely his unreliability as a flawed (yet growing) focalizer, established in contrast with other points of view, that keeps Marian in the moment as we experience her in reading the novel.

In this way, Niel is not the only one almost voyeuristically spying on Marian in the novel, but from a larger perspective, the reader becomes a voyeur as well, peeking into the

momentary experiences of various points of view to catch a glimpse of Marian's appearance – both in the sense of her physical presence and her impression on others. Just as “the Sweet Water gossips chose particular stories” to tell about Marian as they interpret (and judge) her based on the momentary experience of her presence, the glimpses they catch through half-open doors and moments of being with her, so too does Cather choose which stories and whose experiences to tell “in order to portray [. . .] that which is characteristic or typical of a person” (Bergmann, qtd. in Funda 102). And, just as “[t]he gossip performance works by selection, an editing out of details that fail to fit the underlying paradigm,” so too does this approach to recreating the experience of a person work for Cather's memories. In *A Lost Lady*, Cather lets her focalizers “communicate to us [. . .] what they see and hear, appropriately investing it with feeling,” yet it is she who arranges these experiences “so that the scattered impressions can be assembled toward the effects” she desires (Murphy 235). Cather creates Marian for the reader through a series of momentary impressions – each capturing an ephemeral moment, a mood, an emotion, an overtone. And just as the viewer needs to take a step back to fully grasp the unity of the whole picture in an impressionistic painting, so too does the reader of *A Lost Lady* need to allow for the impression of Marian to assemble itself in the reader's current experience in order to fully grasp “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named” and to hear Mrs. Forrester's voice.

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