

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Kayleen Rose Kondrack for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 30, 2014.

Title: Vibrant Colors, Transient Shadows: Woman Artists and the Brushstrokes of Impressionist Sensibility in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

Abstract approved:

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This thesis explores the artistic imperatives and internal struggles of women painters in two novels, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). I identify Chopin's Edna Pontellier and Woolf's Lily Briscoe as painters who exhibit Impressionist strains, both in how they paint and how they see their surroundings. Their paintings are driven by mood; their Impressionist sensibilities influence their compositional processes. Yet, they are caught within representational dichotomies. Edna approaches her canvas with Realist goals, but her sensory perception and mood lead to her creation of unrealistic likenesses: impressions. Similarly, Lily is caught within competing styles of representation. But rather than moving between Realism and Impressionism, Lily moves between her Bloomsbury Post-Impressionist painterly tendencies and her Impressionist strains. Reading these texts through an Impressionist lens—and giving heed to the representational dichotomies that Edna and Lily are caught within—provides the

foundation for my reinterpretations of the ends of both novels: Edna's suicide and Lily's completion of her painting more than ten years after she starts it.

In Chapter One, I argue that Edna's Impressionist sensibilities influence her moods, perceptions, and sensations, causing her to render Impressionistic sketches when she creates, rather than the paintings of verisimilitude that she strives to capture as she paints by model and photograph. In my reading of the close of the novel, I claim that Edna's suicide represents a moment of artistic success, the only moment of artistic transcendence in *The Awakening*. In Chapter Two, I offer a new reading of Lily Briscoe. Typically understood as a Post-Impressionist artist, I find that her Cubist strains are in competition with Impressionist strains within the novel. In a reinterpretation of the ending of the novel, I find that Lily forges a balance between these competing styles, melding a harmony between Cubism and Impressionism in her final painting.

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Vibrant Colors, Transient Shadows: Woman Artists and the Brushstrokes of
Impressionist Sensibility in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Virginia Woolf's *To
the Lighthouse*

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Kayleen Rose Kondrack

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing English

Director of the School of Writing, Literature, and Film

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Kayleen Rose Kondrack, Author

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Vibrant Colors, Transient Shadows: Woman Artists and the Brushstrokes of Impressionist Sensibility in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Introduction

Thin, short brushstrokes portray morning mist and streaky clouds melding with the vibrant blueness of the sky, connected with the soft stillness of the sapphire sea—a moment of stillness, of the artist's sensory perception of the atmospheric setting. Soft sunlight accented with subtle colors skimming across the water brush up against shimmering colors fused amongst the coastal shoals. A lively intermingling of flowers sits next to the sea and sky. This is one description of an Impressionist scene—with focus on vibrant color, light contrast, and melding between elements. In



Figure 1. Childe Hassam. *Poppies, Isles of Shoals*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 50.2 x 61 cm.

both European and American Impressionist works that focus on natural environment, we often experience this melding of seas, skies, and flowers. Both Kate Chopin and Virginia Woolf illustrate woman painters in their fiction that experience and

consider—and sometimes paint—such Impressionistic natural scenes. American Impressionist Childe Hassam, though often recognized for his portrayals of bustling city life, captures such a scene in *Poppies, Isles of Shoals* (1891). When reflecting on

his new approach to painting, inspired by the French Impressionists, Hassam claims that the “the painter was always depicting the manners, customs, dress and life of an epoch of which he knew nothing. A true historical painter, it seems to me, is one who paints the life he sees about him, and so makes a record of his own epoch” (qtd. in Weinberg et al. 4). Hassam holds true to this seemingly anti-Realist statement in his Impressionist works, often illustrating moments of the natural beauty and life around him.

The soft, caressing waves of Grande Isle and the sky melding with the ocean off the coast of Cornwall set the scenes for Edna Pontellier’s and Lily Briscoe’s experiences with painting in Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. My readings of *The Awakening* (1899) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) illuminate their Impressionist strains.

Published less than thirty years apart, a transatlantic perspective finds these novels illustrating woman painters whose art is driven by their moods and Impressionist imperatives; this focus enables the texts to be read and understood in new ways. The Impressionist strains present in Edna’s and Lily’s moods, compositional processes, and sensory perceptions deeply influence their feelings about their paintings, as well their approaches to creating art. Though both characters exhibit and internalize Impressionist sensibilities, my chapters argue how Edna and Lily struggle within dichotomies between competing styles of painterly representation—Edna between Realism and Impressionism, Lily between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.

Reading these novels through their representational dichotomies and Impressionist strains explicates the stakes of my argument, laying the foundation for my reinterpretations of the endings of both novels. In this thesis, my readings of the texts are differentiated from previous Chopin and Woolfian scholarship, discovering how a focus on Impressionism opens a door to reading Edna's and Lily's painterly sensibilities anew.

Chopin scholars have typically focused on Edna as a failed artist—or even overlooked Edna's identity as a painter—when examining her suicide. Of the scholarship that considers Edna's suicide—drawn from such scholars as Deborah S. Gentry, Elizabeth Nolan, and Sandra Gilbert—the possibility of interpreting Edna's death in light of her functioning as an Impressionist sketcher has gone unexplored until now. Chapter One argues how Edna's suicide demonstrates how she functions as a successful Impressionist sketcher, a crafter of *esquisses*. Edna swims into an Impressionist sketch of the natural setting at her suicide, illustrating her painterly triumph. She is only a failed artist in terms of being unable to create Realist artwork or crafting Impressionist *tableaux*. I view Edna's awakening in terms of her initially awakening to the possibility of artistic creation, followed by her increasingly functioning as an Impressionist sketcher as she becomes highly attuned to her atmospheric surroundings and bodily sensations. As Edna begins to function as a painter, she simultaneously begins to “[cast] aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin 79), and thus seeks a life as an autonomous painter as she recedes from her domestic duties. Her art is driven by her mood, just as Lily's compositional process is.

Many Woolf scholars, such as Diane Filby Gillespie and Roberta White, predominantly view Lily as a product of Bloomsbury Post-Impressionism. While I agree that there are Post-Impressionist strains at work within Lily's compositional process, I find that Impressionist strains within the novel are particularly noteworthy and must be examined further. In "The Window," Lily is caught in this dichotomy, of a conflict between Impressionist versus Post-Impressionist styles—including Cubism and abstraction—as she seeks to find harmony in these artistic imperatives and modes of painterly representation. These forms are important for both the visual artist and novelist, for both Woolf and her painter sister, Vanessa Bell. In "The Lighthouse," however, Lily's puzzlement over competing styles of representation focuses to a challenging dichotomy between French-inspired Impressionism and Bloomsbury's Post-Impressionistic experiments with Cubism. I argue that Lily locates and forges an intersection between Impressionism and Cubism; this Impressionist-Cubist harmony characterizes Lily's completed painting in "The Lighthouse."

As women artists, Edna and Lily experience much opposition to and hesitation of their compositional processes. We can recognize the unforgiving, judgmental, and traditional patriarchal forces that work against both characters' painterly motivations in the novels. Edna's hesitations as an artist, as well as her perceived shortcomings within her paintings, are seen frequently in *The Awakening*; we repeatedly witness her stress over the outcomes of her portraits of her human models, disposing of many of her works. We also experience Lily's hesitation as a woman artist frequently; one such instance early in the text recounts how Lily thinks that "of all that only a few random marks scrawled upon the canvas remained. And it would never be seen;

never be hung even, and there was Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, ‘Women can’t paint, women can’t write.’” (Woolf 51). Since Lily does not yet have a clear vocation as an artist, she intermittently reminds herself that her paintings are destined to not be seen after their creations. Yet, this does not keep her from creating; even the persistence of Charles Tansley’s misogynistic view does not obstruct her vision. She does battle against these thoughts and stereotypical forces in order to craft art, for they get in the way of her compositional process and threaten to obliterate her painterly vision that she needs in order to craft the picture.

Similarly, Edna does not have a vocation as a painter, yet Chopin hints at the possibility of a painterly vocation toward the end of the novel when Edna begins to sell her sketches and considers “going abroad to study” in France (Chopin 127). I recognize the importance of this detail in the text, for many American painters journeyed to France during this time to learn from leading French Impressionist artists. Monet’s home and garden in Giverny was a particularly popular place for American and European Impressionists alike to be drawn to its vibrantly colorful atmosphere, a setting prime for Impressionist painting focused on natural environments.

As Joe Houston, Dominique H. Vasseur, and M. Melissa Wolfe say within *In Monet’s Garden*, many American artists, such as John Singer Sargent and Theodore Robinson, who visited Giverny were “quick to adopt an Impressionist brushwork and palette,” which accompanied “flickering, spontaneous brushwork” (15). Monet’s move from Paris to Giverny can be seen as his “search for a modern subject that was his and his alone—art made from a garden of his own creation” (13). Beginning in

1887, William H Gerds explains, Giverny became the most significant Impressionist art colony in Europe (20).

The gardens at Giverny were perfect for Impressionists' palettes, offering "complementary and contrasting blossoms" (Hill 4). In *The American Impressionists in the Garden*, May Brawley Hill describes how "at high summer, a visitor would be immersed in prismatic hues and myriad textures trailing and climbing plants' blurred edges...For the last decades of his life Monet would concentrate on painting these gardens that inspired Americans who came to visit" (5). Hill describes artists being drawn to Giverny because of the "intimacy, privacy, and immersion" available within the environment (9).

Amid the coasts of Grande Isle and Cornwall, Edna and Lily demonstrate how their environments provide this "intimacy, privacy, and immersion," environmental factors that heavily influence their moods, as well as the Impressionist strains in their work. Both Edna and Lily seek solitude and desire to be alone with their thoughts, yet paradoxically yearn for human connection and intimacy with their natural environments. In their particular environments, both Edna and Lily demonstrate a keen awareness for noticing Impressionistic characteristics about their surroundings. We see this through their internalized experiences in the texts, as well as through the authors' general narratives. One such prominent Impressionistic characteristic that Lily and Edna recognize frequently—whether in their surroundings or in their art—is the gentle melding between colors and objects within their settings. Monet's *The Seine Near Giverny, Morning Mists* (1897) illustrates this Impressionistic melding of color and object perfectly. The sky and foliage meld with the seine—a mingling of



Figure 2. Claude Monet. *The Seine Near Giverny, Morning Mists*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 88.9 x 91.4 cm.

elements and colors that makes it so they are rather undistinguishable from one another. The lights that are accented within the sky and along this river are also highlighted with subtle colors and shadowing.

Impressionist painting can be described as a movement toward representing greater

luminosity on a canvas than typically expressed in Realist painting. For Impressionists, “the use of high-key, saturated color was seen as the best method for rendering brilliant sunlight effects, and the application of paint in small touches was viewed as useful for conveying precise color values as well as suggesting the vibration of atmosphere” (Hill 25). This achieved vibration of color, light, and atmosphere is very important throughout this thesis, particularly when analyzing artistically compositional scenes, as well as when using Impressionist paintings as reference points for analyzing the texts.

Barbara H. Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry also offer several important characteristics of this painting mode:

Impressionism disdains established hierarchies of subject, order, and finish; avoids clear narrative; embraces the spontaneous; is alert to the trivial incident; and empowers the ordinary viewer, insisting on his or her engagement with and esteem for fragments of familiar—specifically local and national—experience (4)

Edna and Lily encounter local, immensely personal, experiences in their painterly modes. As you will see in most of the included paintings within the chapters, there is a lack of narrative pictured. From Edna's and Lily's compositional processes and painted results, we can also understand how their arts—and many of their experiences—function in terms of Impressionistic moments.

In *Painting Light*, Iris Schaefer, Caroline von Saint-George, and Katja

Lewerentz examine key techniques of Impressionist painters:

To capture impressions of fleeting moods, which Monet stated as the goal, was carried out primarily in the open air, where light and colour exhibit the greatest interplay and not only set the tone for, but also quickly became the theme of the Impressionists. In their paintings, light would...dominate everything. With its radiance (which prevents even shadows from appearing simply dark anymore)...matter which is colourless in nature, such as water and air, is thereby just as coloured as objects whose own colours the painting of the Impressionists seemed to call into question (26)

This “interplay” between light and color is essential to Edna's and Lily's perceptions, as we see their attention to shadows and color contrasts frequently in the novels. This use of Impressionist colors allows for “further possibilities for creating harmonies and expressing sensations through [the artists'] tonalities and their methods of application” (39). In Impressionist painting, the artist's sensory perception is one of the keys to creation; I will focus heavily on this aspect in both texts as I argue how both characters channel their Impressionist sensibilities.

In my first chapter, I explore how Edna's artistic position rests within a grey area between Realism and Impression. I examine how she is situated in this representational dichotomy by how she attempts to paint in a Realist mode, yet crafts art in an Impressionist mode, much to her disappointment and frustration. In addition to her perceived failure to paint according to visual reality, Edna's Realist imperative

is most predominantly featured by how she selects to paint by model and photograph for the majority of the novel. Only Edna's approach to her canvas is informed by Realism; what she crafts, how she sees her surroundings, and how she functions according to mood are extremely Impressionistic.

When discussing Realist art of the mid-nineteenth century, Gerry Souter relates its importance to the birth of photography in the 1840s: "The capturing of reflected light in an infinite scale of values preserved in silver halide crystals and fixed with hyposulphite forever democratised reality upside down and backwards on glass and paper, and held a mirror up to nature with the click of a mechanical shutter" (7). Then, Realist painters had the opportunity to paint alongside "photography's faithful translation of light and shadow into a reproducible image" (8). It is this "faithful translation"—this visual accuracy—that Edna wishes to capture when painting her models, such as Madame Ratignolle and Alcée Arobin, to then realistically translate to her canvas. Yet, I argue that her Impressionistic sensibilities and mood determine that she function as an Impressionist painter, and more specifically, as an Impressionist sketcher.

A focus on Impressionist versus Realist styles in Chapter One transitions to a concentration on Impressionism and Post-Impressionism in Chapter Two. During the exploratory onset of the Post-Impressionist era in England, Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina explains how prominent Bloomsbury artists—Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant—began to use bolder colors, such as new pinks, greens, and ochres, as well as bolder brushstrokes than their traditional artistic trainings encouraged in art academies (11). The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1912 displayed

Bloomsbury art alongside French works; the Bloomsbury artists experimented with African Shapes, Greek nudes, French light and coloring, Pointillism, abstraction, and Cubism (11-12). For the purposes of my second chapter, I will be focusing on French Impressionism, abstraction, and Cubism when discussing the woman artist in *To the Lighthouse* since I see Lily draw upon Impressionist and Post-Impressionist styles of representation—often at odds with one another—during her described compositional processes in the novel.

I draw upon a reoccurring metaphor in the novel to illustrate this representational dichotomy—of Lily’s painting that must obtain a balance between Impressionist and Post-Impressionist strains. Woolf shows how Lily *sees* “the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral” (51). This metaphor allows the reader to be gracefully elevated to Lily’s vision of what a painting must achieve, one that is simultaneously representing softness and toughness on the canvas. Furthermore, the painting’s color “burning on a framework of steel” is reference, if unintentionally, to the Cubist styles that Bloomsbury Post-Impressionists were experimenting with. Meanwhile, the “light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches” suggests the importance of light and shadow effects to Lily, an imperative that is central to French Impressionism—as we see expressed vividly in Monet’s paintings. The butterfly shadow metaphor is one of a soft, delicate caress which casts an Impressionist picture. My aim is to focus on the dichotomy in existence here—a representational dichotomy between competing styles that is similar to what Edna struggles with. Lily desires the steel-like toughness of a Cubist, Post-Impressionist painting, yet she also sees a butterfly-like tenderness of

light and an Impressionist melding of elements on the canvas. This resurfacing metaphor of the dichotomy between the butterfly's wing—an Impressionist strain—and a framework of steel—a Cubist strain—are central passages to my argument of Lily achieving a representational balance—a harmony—between these styles.

This thesis emphasizes the understanding that Impressionist painting can be characterized as an environmental or perceptual moment. Art exists in the stream of time, illustrated by how the events of the 1910s, including World War I, profoundly impacted Bloomsbury art. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily strives to step outside of the stream of time with her painting of Mrs. Ramsay at the close of the novel. She tries to defy the passage of time—or return to a moment—prior to Mrs. Ramsay's death, as well as the war which changed the entire composition of the Ramsay family. Lily is trying to hold onto a vision of Mrs. Ramsay that seems as fleeting as a moment—attempting to return not only to a moment, but to an earlier style of painting that can illuminate such a moment that has been lost due to the war, as well as to the deaths that result in “Time Passes.” As Lily's artistic vision overtakes her, she confronts a major aesthetic problem, both of how to stylistically represent Mrs. Ramsay and her own environment on the canvas. I find that Lily's composition takes on the manner of an Impressionist painting that also holds onto particular Post-Impressionist characteristics.

While Cubism breaks down forms into components, Lily brings forms into unity in her painting in “The Lighthouse.” Cubism is comfortable with overlapping collage and excites at the fragments on a canvas, yet Impressionism melds colors and objects together on the canvas, while abstraction finds pleasure in resisting realistic

interpretation. Chapter Two explores this representational dichotomy and produces a reinterpretation of Lily's final painting in the novel. Chapter Two argues that while Lily finds herself in the grey area between these styles, she forges ahead, adventuring into an Impressionist-Cubist style.

Both Edna and Lily are set into highly Impressionist scenes at the ending of their respective novels. Edna swims out into an Impressionistic painting at the close of *The Awakening*, while Lily's completion of her painting at the end of *To the Lighthouse* is enveloped in Impressionistic prose. While analyzing Impressionistic narrative is not the focus of this thesis, one must recognize Chopin's and Woolf's inclusion of narrative saturated with Impressionistic strains. We often see these Impressionistic scenes when Chopin and Woolf describe the moods and artistic motivations of their painterly protagonists. Not only do we experience Impressionistic scenes in relation to the characters' Impressionist sensibilities, but also in several environments that Edna and Lily experience—gardens, sea shores, horizons beyond the visible ocean waters.

Chapter I

Sketching the Artist's Mood of the Impressionist *Esquisse*: The Woman Painter in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

In *The Awakening*, Chopin's last novel, the protagonist Edna Pontellier is not just a painter. More specifically, this chapter argues that she is interpretable as an Impressionist sketcher whose Realist approach to the canvas keeps her dissatisfied with her painted results. My reading approaches the novel chronologically, while intertwining both how Edna paints and sees according to her Impressionist sensibilities. Though we do not experience many passages where Edna is explicitly painting, we do witness her interests with—and reactions to—her paintings, as well as how she views her surroundings in an Impressionist light.

While Edna approaches the canvas with a Realist imperative—to represent her models with verisimilitude in her painting—I will show how her sensibilities and the results of her sketches are Impressionistic. The term “sketch” is oftentimes deployed quite freely within a variety of contexts when referring to Impressionist paintings. For my purposes, following the precedent of many Impressionists themselves, a sketch is a rapid execution of the artist's perception—light, atmosphere, color—drawn from the sensory experience of the artist. Chopin illustrates a focus on light, atmosphere, and color in a multitude of scenes in *The Awakening* and in relation to Edna's sensory experience and perception as she becomes a painter of Impressionist sketches.

To analyze Edna Pontellier's art as Impressionist sketches, we must first delve into Chopin's connection to French Impressionism. Strikingly, Chopin's 1894 diary is titled “Impressions.” The title of this diary could reflect her knowledge of and

connection to Impressionism. Emily Toth's intriguing biography of Chopin, *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, discusses the influence that French Impressionist painter, Edgar Degas, likely had on Chopin. More than a quarter of a century prior to her writing of *The Awakening*, Chopin's and Degas' conversations certainly fed into her writing, even if unintentionally. Toth recounts that "several years before he became known as an Impressionist and a sketcher of lovely ballerinas," Degas spent several months living with his uncle on Esplanade Street in New Orleans during 1872 (73). Drawing several comparisons between Chopin and Degas—both were solitary strollers, lovers of art and music, and quite lonely to an extent because they were away from their birthplaces—Toth keenly infers the importance of this relationship. This was Chopin's most notable connection with the art world of her time, listening to stories of Degas' friends and happenings in French society.

There are several connections between Degas' painterly friends and Chopin's characters in *The Awakening*—such as Mademoiselle Reisz, Adèle Ratignolle, and Léonce Pontellier. Yet the most relevant to this thesis' exploration is the connection between Edna and one of Degas' female friends: artist Edma Pontillon (215-6). Not only is Edna Pontellier's name uncannily similar, but Edna is also characterized quite similarly to Edma Pontillon's experience as both a painter and wife. Interestingly, Pontillon was the sister of Berthe Morisot, one of the most prominent female Impressionists alongside Mary Cassatt. Pontillon was devoted to her painting for many years beside Morisot. However, Pontillon decided to marry in 1869, consequently giving up her painting, becoming what Toth characterizes as "one of her husband's possessions, and her life was one of sadness and unfulfillment" (74).

Chopin does not draw an explicit connection between Edma Pontillon and her creation of Edna Pontellier in her journals or letters, though we should recognize how it is plausible to see how the person and character are intertwined. While some scholars, like Toth, refer to the connection between Impressionism and Chopin's work, much is to be inferred from the novel itself of her exposure to Impressionist painting in particular. Certainly, her relationship with Degas and knowledge of Berthe Morisot and Edma Pontillon inform her approach to Edna's experience as a woman artist in the novel.

One can see how Degas' ideas about art—in addition to his friends' biographies—drift into Chopin's novel; the importance of their relationship cannot be overlooked in relation to viewing Edna as an Impressionist sketcher who fails to become the kind of artist, wife, and mother that Chopin's 1890s society would view as acceptable. At the close of *The Awakening*, Edna refuses to continue sacrificing her art—a regret that Edma Pontillon experienced following her marriage to Adolphe Pontillon—and chooses death instead, a death characterized within a setting profoundly reminiscent of an Impressionist sketch, which will be explored specifically in the last section of the chapter.

Sketching a Historical Interpretation of Edna's Impressionist *Esquisse*

In order to examine the ways in which Edna functions as an Impressionist sketcher, we must consider the features of an Impressionist sketch. David Park Curry describes particular paintings considered to be Impressionist as “freely sketched” with “quick strokes” (7). Many artists considered to be under the umbrella of American Impressionism, such as William Merritt Chase, oftentimes freely sketched their work

with the use of oil on canvas or panel, crafting textured surfaces with quick, short—essentially *sketchy*—strokes. Chase’s *A Mandolin Player* (1880) illustrates these sketchy, visible brushstrokes that denote the rapidity of his compositional process. In *Aisthesis*, Jacques Rancière describes his notion of artworks in terms of their surfaces



Figure 3. William Merritt Chase. *A Mandolin Player*, 1880. Oil on panel, 25.4 x 17.7 cm.

within a discussion of French artistic expression during the transition into the twentieth century:

A work exists, as a self-sufficient unity, to the extent that the potentiality of an open whole is expressed within it, a whole that exceeds all organic totality. Strictly speaking, there are no forms. There are only attitudes, unities formed by multiple encounters of bodies with light and other bodies. These attitudes could also be called surfaces. For surfaces are something entirely different than combinations of lines; they are the very reality of everything we perceive and express... (163)

Rancière intertwines “surfaces” with “attitudes,” which I cite because it relates

to the intertwined nature of Edna’s attitude with the surface of her canvas; here, we can think of her sketching in terms of the emotionally textured aspect of Impressionist sketching. Rancière also draws on the connection between surface and what we perceive; his reference to light effects and importance of perception also relates to the idea of the Impressionist sketch.

Mary Stevenson Cassatt, one of the most prominent women Impressionists, is described by Griselda Pollock as an “overtly aware feminist thinker” who strove to

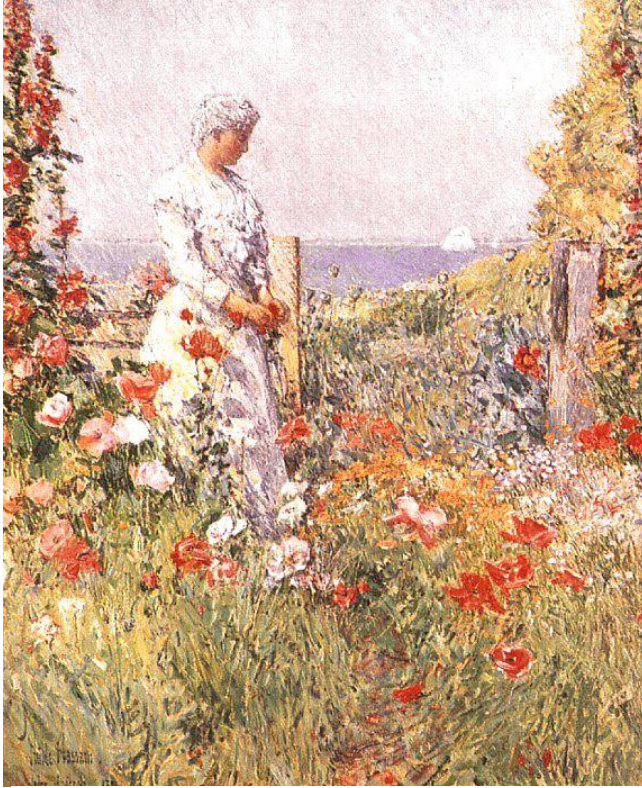


Figure 4. Childe Hassam. *Celia Thaxter in Her Garden*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 56.5 x 45.7 cm.

“place women fully *in the picture* of contemporary life—as subjects rather than objects” (154). Many of her works can be described as sketchy images with chalky surfaces (Curry 9). Cassatt found that sketching with pastel also helped to capture and accent ephemeral light effects (21); emphasizing the effects and colors within light was overall very important to the

Impressionists. Several of the American Impressionists who studied abroad in Paris, like Childe Hassam (27), also found this same emphasis on looser brushwork and lightened palettes effectively captured sketched light effects with minimally blended colors. I find that Chopin’s focus on light effects in key artistic passages throughout the text demonstrates how the frequent Impressionistic atmospheres of Edna Pontellier’s surroundings are intertwined with the Impressionistic sketches that she crafts. As a result, I see how Edna’s environment—whether her surroundings are emphasized in terms of darkness or lightness—feeds into her mood, which then ultimately is the starting point for creation of her sketches.

Sketching may additionally refer to a short amount of time in which an artist paints a piece. Essentially, sketching can be a rapid execution of creation—typically

with minimally blended strokes—on the canvas. When analyzing John Singer Sargent’s portrait of *Madame Errazuriz* (1883-4), Curry describes the painting as a sketch performed with a rapid moving brush, likening the female model to being caught in an “outdoor snapshot” (13). In this chapter, I also explore the connection between photography and painting when discussing Edna’s use of Alcée Arobin’s photograph to aid in her artistry, an artistry that also depicts a conflict between a Realist imperative—painting by model and photograph to craft accurate visual representations—and Edna’s Impressionist strains in her thoughts and work. Sketches, generally understood to be painted in a short amount of time, may also leave empty space on a canvas, just as Julius LeBlanc Stewart’s *Flowers in Her Hair* (1900) illustrates. I find that this is a typical visual distinction between Impressionist

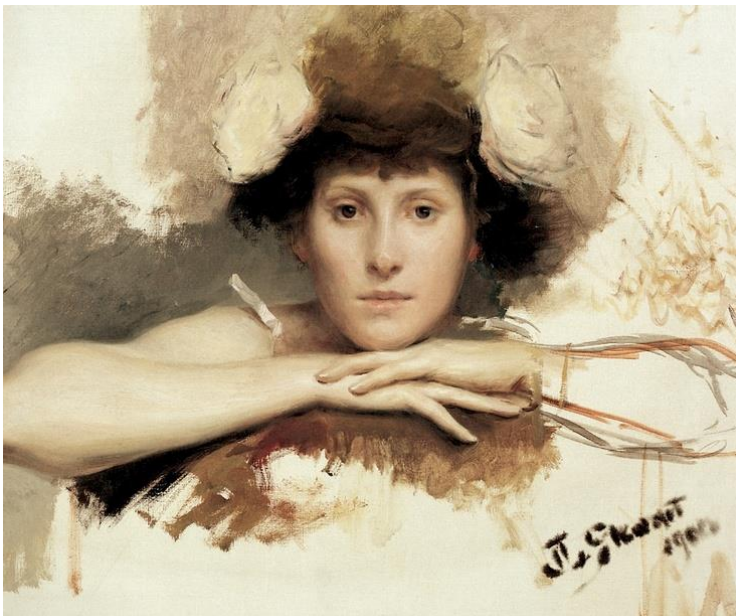


Figure 5. Julius LeBlanc Stewart. *Flowers in Her Hair*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 48.3 x 60.3 cm.

sketches and “more finished” paintings.

In commentary on his painting, *The Sketchers* (1918), Robert Henri reveals his view of sketching, ultimately shedding light on how sketching may have been viewed by many American artists and

specifically how this practice differentiated from other painting styles and methods of composition. Henri claims,

People say, 'It is only a sketch,' [but] it takes the genius of a real artist to make a good sketch...to represent air and light and to do it all with such simple shorthand means. One must have wit to make a sketch. Pictures that have had months of labor expended on them may be more incomplete than a sketch (qtd. in Curry 67)

Henri's passionate view about sketching can be likened to Mademoiselle Reisz's profound exclamation that one must possess a "courageous soul" to be an artist (Chopin 86). Edna claims that she has "persistence" as an artist—as she strives to turn her *esquisses* into works of *tableaux*—yet neither character acknowledges or pinpoints what kind of an artist Edna is. Henri claims that crafting a successful sketch can only be done through the "genius of a real artist." I argue that Edna is such an artist as Henri describes, though scholars of *The Awakening* typically either overlook Edna's identity as an artist or label her as a failed artist because of her ultimate suicide—marking her as a tragic figure who cannot overcome the adversity of her time.

Henri's sense of—and appreciation for—the value of a quickly created sketch, versus a more labor-intensive painting, connects to Claude Monet's view of sketching. My definitions of *esquisse* and *tableau* are drawn from Monet's views, who clearly distinguished sketches from finished paintings, leading the Impressionist movement and profoundly capturing the attention of both European and American painters. It is important to recognize how Monet and his contemporaries typically distinguished or classified paintings when approaching an analysis of Edna as a sketcher. For Monet, *tableaux* describe fully finished canvases, while *ebauche* refers

to the first stages of work on a canvas. The *ebauche* could characterize a work considered to be incomplete by the artist, or perhaps the preliminary stages mapping out sketches on a canvas prior to painting. John House claims Monet did not consider a summary-like *ebauche* to be complete, but “used the terms *esquisse* and *pochade* to describe quickly worked canvases that he considered to be complete in their own terms, but not brought to a degree of finish that would qualify them as *tableaux*” (46). Therefore, one can think of an *ebauche* as preliminary or incomplete, while an *esquisse* refers to a “resolved, successful sketch” (47). I argue that Edna’s paintings are *esquisses*, rather than *tableaux*. I also assert that Edna is dissatisfied with her paintings not because she has shortcomings as an artist, as many scholars assert, but rather because she crafts Impressionist *esquisses* when she aims to perfect *tableaux*. However, she does encounter societal pressure to create a *tableau*, rather than *esquisse*—inevitably a factor in her decision to commit suicide at the close of the novel.

It is also essential to this chapter to note the history of these terms that Monet and many of his contemporaries used to describe and categorize their own works. For example, the meanings of terms like *esquisse* and *étude* have evolved. Specifically, *esquisse* and *étude* did refer to preparatory work for more developed, larger works—*esquisse* being a “rapid notation of the whole composition” and an *étude* referring to a “closer study of a part of it” (47). However, these notations began to be seen by the French Impressionists as independent sketches “complete in their own terms,” rather than preparatory for a larger work (47). Though Monet did not consider his *études* to be entirely complete, he did occasionally exhibit them. For House, *esquisses* are the

“happy sketches that would be spoiled by reworking” (46); oftentimes, these quick notations could capture the atmospheric effects of the impression created on the canvas, becoming complete enough for the artist, yet not always for the art critics who sometimes referred to such sketches as hasty, superficial, and incomplete (45). Like many of the art critic contemporaries of Monet, Edna focuses on the shortcomings of her sketches, feeling that they are not complete pictures that master the model that she wishes to realistically represent on the canvas.

Monet’s *Impression, Sunrise* (1872)—dubbed the painting giving the Impressionists their name—is what House calls a “rapid sketch of fleeting

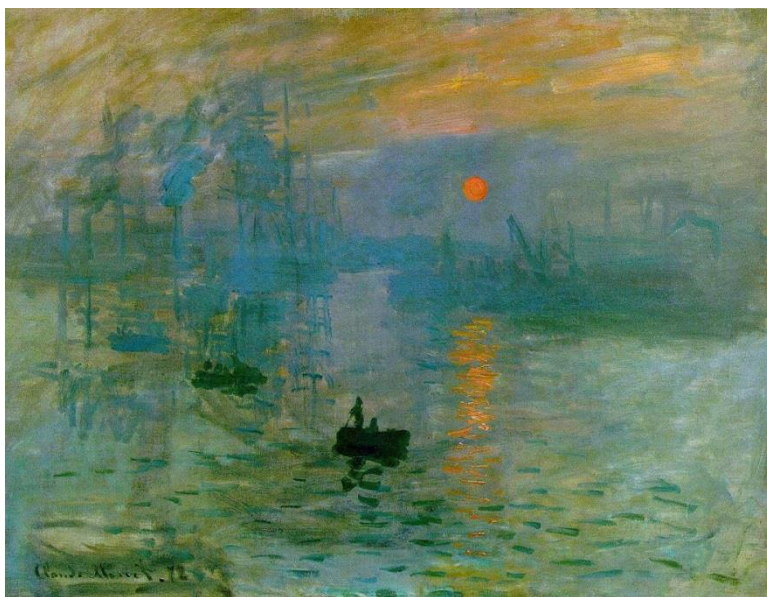


Figure 6. Claude Monet. *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872. Oil on canvas., 48 x 63 cm.

atmospheric effects”: an *impression* (54). House also points out that the Impressionists’ distinctions between *esquisses* and *tableaux* illustrate their position in the development of the modern world. Specifically, House

claims that “in their sketches, they cultivated the personal, the individual; and in their *tableaux* they found a form of expression that allowed them to strike a balance between private and public, in the individual entrepreneurial world of the dealer/collector market” (69). In the upcoming discussion of key passages, notice

how Edna's sketches certainly focus upon the personal and the individual. She focuses her artistic endeavors upon models—chosen among her friends, family members, and various acquaintances. Uninterested in painting aspects of public life, she focuses instead upon trying to depict an intimate portrayal of one model at a time.

Edna as Temperament Painter and Impressionist Sketcher

Edna's sensory perception enables the creation of her sketches. Mood is the creative starting point for Edna's impressions of her live models—fitting well with the Impressionistic imperative, which emphasizes the essentiality of the artist's perceptions and sensory experience when painting. I argue that Edna is a temperament sketcher: one who sketches impressions of what she sees according not only to her individual sensations at the moment, but from her present state of mind and body. Her art is entirely driven by her mood and current temperament. This is supported by her statement that perhaps she “shan't always feel like [painting];” Edna becomes an artist because she “[feels] like painting” (Chopin 79). Edna's identity as a painter is informed by her moods and bodily sensations, yet she crafts impressions when she strives to capture an objective reality of her human models. In fact, I argue that she is interpretable as a *juste milieu*—a painter caught within the undistinguishable grey area between art reflecting the tradition of Realism versus Impressionism, ultimately struggling with styles of representation. While a *juste milieu* painter may be considered the “happy medium” painter between both of these traditions, Edna feels and voices her dissatisfaction with being unable to capture the real—and rather one's unrealistic likeness—when she paints sketchy portraits of her friends and family members.

Edna's current temperament and sensations transform into paint. Though she tries to avoid creating impressions—and instead to capture a more objective nature of her subject like what her view of a photograph should be able to do—she is nevertheless stilted by her intense sensory perception. Edna cannot help but paint her models filtered through her highly subjective mood. A goal of Impressionist painting is to illustrate impressions and likenesses; the Impressionist painters were concerned with the subjectivity and perception of the artist. However, Edna attributes her sketched unrealistic likenesses—*impressions*—as failed attempts to capture a more objective image of her model, a snapshot of reality. It is precisely her mood and increasingly attuned senses and perception that keep her drifting in a realm between a Realist tradition and Impressionist tradition for representing her vision on the canvas.

Upon her first described “mood” in the novel, Edna's senses and temperament seem to be out of her control: “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood” (28). Edna's mood overtakes her and she is overcome with tears. Notice here how Chopin describes Edna's mood as if it were an Impressionist sketch, emphasizing the shadowy and misty characteristics of such a pervading impression, her mood “like a shadow, like a mist.” There is a contrast between light and dark in this passage, where Edna is positioned in a hazy contrast between summer's light and a shadowy mist—a contrast of light that is highly characteristic of Impressionist painting.

While the shift from her usual temperament seems odd to Edna at this early point in the novel, it is merely the prelude to a series of moods that jumpstart, dictate, and influence her artistic endeavors, as well as unconsciously shape the results of her paintings. Here, I see mood as the jumping off point for Edna to create a sketch. Furthermore, she begins functioning *like* an artist prior to beginning to physically paint, an interpretation that I have not encountered in the current body of Chopin scholarship. This chapter explores Edna's temperament and shifting moods during her time as a painter, as well as prior to painting her first sketch. Chopin's allusions to Edna's growing sensory perceptions and sensations throughout the novel can be interpretable as part of her identity as an artist as she functions in an Impressionist tradition with her sketches. Most scholars tend to focus on Chopin's descriptions of her sensory perceptions as only depicting her sexual awakening. Rather than viewing Edna's awakening as one of her own sexuality and desires, my reading of the text instead interprets Edna's awakening in light of how she functions as an Impressionist sketcher, as well as how Chopin characterizes Edna's suicide through exceedingly Impressionist narrative.

Edna slips into this mood once again shortly after her next visit to the sea; the ocean's "soft and languorous" breeze "charged with the seductive odor of the sea" continues to this dark mood—a kind of subtle, slowly igniting blaze within her (33). The "sonorous murmur" and "imperative entreaty" of the Gulf beckon her to accept this reoccurring mood (34). This mood is not only one of her sexual awakening, but one of her awakening to the *possibility* of artistic expression: "A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her—the light...moved her to dreams, to

thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears” (34). As she develops this “inward life which questions” (35), Edna begins to find painterly motivations. The artist senses, perceives, and expresses. Edna’s mood—one of “shadowy anguish” and discontent—is the internal beginning to Edna striving to express herself through art when she cannot in other societal ways. The “dreams” and “thoughtfulness” that she experiences in this passage illustrate the stirring of her dormant artistic ambitions. It is moments like this where Edna lives through her senses and mood, letting herself become absorbed into her bodily sensations. This is how I see Edna beginning to function as an artist prior to sketching her first painting.

At this point in the novel, Edna’s often “absorbed expression” has the power to seize and fix her features into “statuesque repose” (37). Overtaken by this unfamiliar new mood, Edna is enfolded into an Impressionist sketch, the Grande Isle environment described in highly Impressionistic terms—the atmosphere around her softly melting, caressing. We see that “the voice of the sea is seductive” to Edna now; her senses are beginning to govern her thoughts, the sea “inviting [her] soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” (35). The “touch of the sea” becomes “sensuous” for her, having power to “[enfold] the body in its soft, close embrace” (35). Several characteristics of Impressionist paintings are highlighted in this passage, most notably softness and sensations. The softness of colors melting into one another through minimal blending is highly characteristic of an Impressionist tradition; the natural environment acts to charge Edna’s Impressionistic painting style here prior to her lifting a paintbrush.

In this scene, one can see the gentleness of Monet's sea in *Impression, Sunrise* that accentuates softness in scene and color. Edna sees "motionless sails against the blue sky," making a "delicious picture" for her to gaze at (37). As a woman transitioning into an Impressionist style of creating art, it seems fitting here that Edna finds peace in scenes that capture stillness, for Impressionist paintings lack narrative and focus on a single moment—the atmosphere of the artist. In this case, Edna revels in an environment that sets "motionless sails against the blue sky," melding the sea with the sky; it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins, just as in *Impression, Sunrise*. Chopin not only describes Edna as artfully existing in "statuesque repose" in Impressionistically crafted scenes, becoming attuned to her environment through an "absorbed expression"—a mood—that visits her, but additionally emphasizes the solitude needed for this experience. Thinking of her environment as an Impressionist artist reveals how extremely individual this experience is for Edna. This subjective individuality relates to the frequently personal content found in Impressionist sketches, which shy away from depicting public life.

In her solitude, Edna's vision of a "summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean" visits her (37). Her vision looks back to her pre-marital days, recalling how she "traversed the ocean of waving grass...[her memories] melted imperceptibly out of her existence" (39). Notice how Edna's vision of memories in Kentucky are described in Impressionistic terms—a vision that melts into and out of her psyche. Her vision of Kentucky enfolds itself in her mind, but only momentarily. She experiences this memory in an Impressionistic



Figure 7. Claude Monet. *The Artist's Garden at Giverny*, 1900.
Oil on canvas, 81.3 x 92.6 cm.

temporality, focusing on the momentary nature of the environment—the “waving grass” and “meadow that seemed as big as the ocean.” The natural elements meld into one another within her vision. When viewing Impressionist painting, such as a Monet

garden setting, we can see how the elements of the canvas—the textures, colors, objects, and light contrasts—melt into one another in the picture.

When Edna begins to paint, Chopin continues to emphasize her moods and connections to her environment, particularly ones that depict natural images, shadows, and soft light. For example, Edna considers how

it was a large, beautiful room, rich and picturesque in the soft, dim light... [Edna] stood at an open window and looked out upon the deep tangle of the garden...amid the perfumes and the dusky and tortuous outlines of flowers...seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet half-darkness which met her moods (74)

Edna considers this room to be picturesque because of the manner in which the “soft, dim light” accentuates its beauty; Edna marvels at the power that light has to add beauty to a setting. Here, we can see that Edna’s Impressionist strains draw her to focusing in on light contrasts within a setting, while simultaneously urging her to call

upon her senses to inform herself about how she feels about the environment, all factors that are determined to “[meet] her moods.” Her mood dictates how she will experience the scene and what specific elements her senses will focus in upon.

Recognize here how Edna’s senses are enthralled as she takes in the “sweet half-darkness” of the setting and the “perfumes” emanating from the garden.



Figure 8. Claude Monet. *Monet's Garden at Giverny*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 81.5 x 92 cm.

Furthermore, Edna sees not individual flowers in the garden, but a “deep tangle” that emphasizes the “dusky” light of the evening and the “outlines” of the flowers. Painting gardens with focus on light contrasts and the intertwined outlines of

the flowers, each flower’s outline caressing the next, makes each one undistinguishable as an individual flower. I see this kind of Impressionist garden particularly highlighted in Monet’s *In the Woods at Giverny* (1887), *Monet's Garden at Giverny* (1895), *The Artist's Garden at Giverny* (1900), and *A Pathway at Monet's Garden Giverny* (1902), where many of the colors and outlines of the stems and blooms imperceptibly melt into one another.

Several passages illustrate how Edna's art becomes increasingly governed by her moods. When envisioning her time with Robert,

it moved her with recollections. She could hear again the ripple of the water, the flapping sail. She could see the glint of the moon upon the bay, and could feel the soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind. A subtle current of desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn (80)

Edna's current mood—one filled with longing and desire for the past—keeps her from focusing on her sketch here. Though we do not see Edna painting, but rather the distraction to her painting, Chopin offers us a glimpse into the particular mood that threatens to stilt her artistic endeavors. This “subtle current of desire”—an emotional and bodily desire—interrupts Edna's painting. Instead of being able to harness her emotions into her art, a depressed mood obstructs her ability to interact with the canvas, “weakening her hold upon the brushes.”

Not only do her sensual aches for Robert affect her mood, keeping her from creating art, but so too does the weather. Chopin illustrates the disconnect between Edna and her artistic creations on particularly gloomy days: “When the weather was dark and cloudy, Edna could not work. She needed the sun to mellow and temper her mood to the sticking point...she drew satisfaction from the work in itself” (96). The only condition that needs to be stable for Edna to create a sketch is for her mood to be one of an even temperament. When she slips into one of her moods of shadowy anguish—oftentimes evoked by unfavorable weather conditions and memories of Robert—she cannot channel her mood into a sketch: “On rainy or melancholy days Edna went out...or else she stayed indoors and nursed a mood with which she was becoming too familiar for her own comfort and peace of mind” (96). When Edna's

art is stifled by weather that inflicts her with melancholia, we can recognize the subtle, yet monumental, connection between Edna's mood and painting.

We can see how Chopin illustrates the precise conditions for when Edna can create art; she can only engage with sketching when her mood is right and her sensations are healthily connected to her environment: "There were days when she was very happy without knowing why...when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth" (80). This passage emphasizes colorful tones and pleasant fragrances igniting Edna's passion for painting; an environment pleasing to her senses enables her to illustrate atmospheric effects in the form of a sketch. Since this particular pleasant mood is often fleeting, one can infer that her crafting of a painting must take place in a relatively short amount of time, a temporality characteristic of Impressionist sketching, rather than the crafting of an Impressionist *tableau*, which takes longer to carefully design, execute, and complete.

Just as Edna experiences artistically productive days through a happy mood, she too experiences moods that disengage her from her work, as we have seen: "There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why...when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium...she could not work on such a day" (80). It is notable that when Edna experiences "such a mood" that her instinct is to visit Mademoiselle Reisz, which I see as an attempt for Edna to reconnect with her own art. Edna finds her music both calming and inspiring; Mademoiselle Reisz is the picture of an autonomous woman artist who likes to dismiss societal domestic

obligations and pleasantries in favor of her art. This is an artistic autonomy that Edna seeks as well.

Mademoiselle Reisz is disagreeable to others at Grande Isle because she is solitary and refuses to conform, perhaps characteristics necessary to be an autonomous woman artist in Chopin's society. But even when Mademoiselle Reisz leaves a "rather disagreeable impression" upon her, Edna cannot help but feel "a desire to...listen while she played the piano" (80). As she listens to Mademoiselle Reisz's music, Edna did not know when the Impromptu began or ended...The shadows deepened in the little room. The music grew strange and fantastic...shadows grew deeper...[music] floated out upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air" (86). Notice how the passage here presents several words and phrases that depict an Impressionist strain in the narrative. The fact that the song seems to have no beginning or end is Impressionistic in the way that elements within an Impressionist painting meld into one another, rather than being explicitly distinguished from one another.

Here, we also see a reference to Chopin's attention to shadows in particular settings she encounters. It is important to note how the shadows affect the environment of this little room, a central characteristic of Impressionist painting. The music is also described as "floating," a word that signifies the softness of the art and additionally alludes to Impressionism in this narrative. It is also significant that Mademoiselle Reisz's music—her art—loses itself "in the silence of the upper air,"

essentially joining with the environment like elements joining together within an Impressionist painting.

As I have argued, Edna's current mood—and accompanying sensual bodily experiences—are directly tied to how she experiences her environment. In order to view Edna as an Impressionist sketcher, one must see how Impressionist sketching imperatives relate to her sensibilities and moods. The atmospheric effects that Edna encounters and considers in the novel first weigh upon her mood and then her ability to create art as a result. When she considers her Grande Isle setting, the smells and sensations of the ocean air, she encounters a picture that inspires her painterly spirit:

There were strange, rare odors abroad—a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and damp, new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near. But the night sat lightly upon the sea and the land. There was no weight of darkness; there were no shadows. The white light of the moon had fallen upon the world like...softness of sleep...[The sea] swelled lazily into broad billows that melted into one another...[breaking] upon the beach in little foamy crescents that coiled back like slow, white serpents (49)

Notice how the picture presented is highly Impressionistic, focused on attention to possible light contrasts, bodily sensations, and a soft melting together of the environmental elements. Edna's gaze at this environment is immediately drawn to what she smells; her notions of the scene are entirely fixated upon her bodily experiences, sensing a "tangle of the sea smell" and a variety of "strange, rare odors." Furthermore, Edna's glance is drawn toward recognition of light contrasts and shadowing. While she notes that the light contrasts are currently very mild, due to there being currently "no shadows," Edna nevertheless considers these light effects, just as an Impressionist sketcher would need to do. The "white light of the moon" contributes just enough light to satisfy Edna's reoccurring need to dwell on light

effects. The environmental elements that illuminate this picture of the sea and fading day for Edna is also described in Impressionist terms; the waves of the sea “melted into one another” in this environment.

The emphasis on the environmental elements melting into one another is further emphasized as Edna “ turned her gaze seaward to gather in an impression of



Figure 9. Childe Hassam. *Moonlight*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 65.4 x 92.1 cm.

space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her fancy” (49). Her perception of the view is reminiscent of colors and environmental elements complementing one another in an Impressionistic painting. The elements are not so much blended into one another or layered upon each other, but melded together in a complimentary manner. This description is reminiscent of Childe Hassam’s *Moonlight* (1907), which illustrates this soft melding between objects, colors, and lights. Hassam alludes to his

sensitivity to light and color in *Moonlight*, as even in this nocturne, he shows us glowing shimmers on the waves, as well as strokes of violet and turquoise along the isle; this is an Impressionist sensitivity that we can see within Edna. In *The Awakening* passage, the “vast expanse of water” melts with the “moonlit sky.” While Chopin shows us that these two central elements meet one another, gently aligning themselves with one another, they do not overlap or blend into one another, but rather meld into one another. Essentially, we can think of the sea and sky as complimenting each other; one is not more significant than the other in an Impressionist painting, while they also do not collide into one another as one may expect from slightly later styles of painting, such as some Post-Impressionist and Cubist artworks could illustrate.

The importance of space is also referred to in the scene; a consideration of space on the canvas is important to Impressionists in general, but also to Impressionist sketchers specifically. An Impressionist artist of *esquisses* does not feel the need to fill an entire canvas; instead, she or he may choose to leave empty space—whatever may feel right to the artist’s perception given the particular scene or choices for the temporal execution of the sketch. In this passage, we also see Edna receiving an “impression” of the setting; this is how she processes her surroundings—based upon impressions that she receives. Her impressions of environments, as well as her models, are intertwined with the art that she creates. She cannot separate how she views and processes the world—through impressions—when she works at her canvas, no matter how dedicated she may be for the majority of the novel to separating her impressions from what she represents through painting. Edna’s mood,

one currently that fancies the feeling that this environment brings her, is intertwined with the sensual impression that the scene invites her to experience—the sights, odors, and emotions.

A Devotion to Realist Representation: Edna's Likeness for Models and Photographs

I now turn to passages that specifically deal with how Edna paints by model, where I will discuss further how she yearns to create *tableaux*, but creates the *esquisse* instead. Her choice to paint by model also illustrates how she wants—and expects—to encounter the real in her paintings, yet crafts unrealistic impressions. I argue that her devotion to a Realist imperative of painting is determined by her need to paint by models; this reoccurrence is found throughout *The Awakening*.

The passages in this section illuminate the Realist strains in her art, existing in conflict with Edna being driven by her moods and sensual perceptions as we have encountered in the previous section of this chapter, demonstrating how she thinks and functions as an Impressionist. Rather than focusing on the artist's sensory perceptions, dramatizing light effects, and illustrating unrealistic likenesses of subjects as Impressionists seek in their work, Realists strive to portray objective reality in their work. Unlike Impressionism, Realism depicts detailed, precise, and accurate portrayals on the canvas. The objectivity, honesty, and precision that describe this Realist style characterize Edna's painterly approach to the canvas; however, she fails to meet these Realist criteria when actually crafting her art. While she chooses human subjects from various social classes, typical of a Realist style, to depict in a similar manner—Madame Ratignolle and her housemaid, for example—

Edna is unable to represent her human models with visual accuracy that rejects Impressionistic idealization or embellishment.

We see Edna's devotion to painting by live models and striving for realistic representation when looking at passages that describe Madame Adèle Ratignolle in her company. Edna demonstrates a tendency to admire and gaze upon Madame Ratignolle's appealing physique: "Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna" (32). Edna is captivated by her friend's beauty, hoping to accurately represent her precise image "some day" in

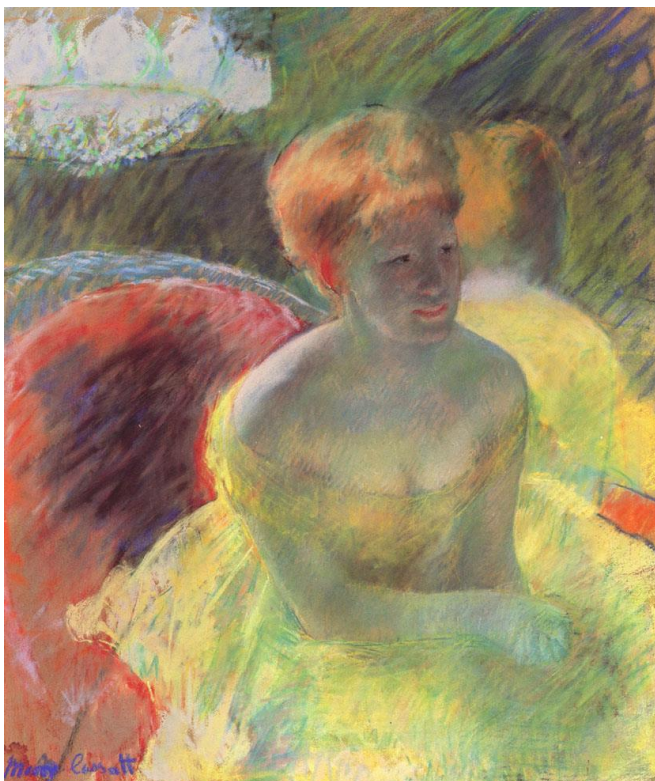


Figure 10. Mary Cassatt. *Lydia Leaning on Her Arms, Seated in a Loge*, 1879. Pastel on paper, 54.9 x 45 cm.

one of her paintings (77). In this scene, Chopin describes Edna handling her brushes with "a natural aptitude" as she begins to paint her selected model "seated there like some sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color" (33). We see here that Edna's Impressionist strains leave her fascinated with the colors in her environment, as well as with depicting such

colors in her painting. One can envision one of Mary Cassatt's Impressionist sketches here as Chopin describes the light glinting on Madame Ratignolle's skin.

Yet, I see this Impressionist strain in her art in conflict with a Realist imperative to create. This conflict is illustrated by how the image of Madame Ratignolle that Edna desires to represent on the canvas is one highly Realist, wanting to accurately portray her “wholly bare arms” and “[expose] the rich, melting curves of her white throat” on her canvas (74). Notice how Edna’s behavior—her admiring gaze—toward Madame Ratignolle’s physical beauty demonstrates her devotion to wanting to represent her appearance with Realist verisimilitude. For Edna, an impression of Madame Ratignolle’s physical beauty falls short of her artistic expectations.

While we are not invited to view Edna’s internal compositional process, we nevertheless do experience her dissatisfaction with her sketches at an early point in the novel. After “surveying [her] sketch critically” of Madame Ratignolle, Edna “drew a broad smudge of paint across its surface, and crumpled the paper between her hands” in response to her dissatisfaction of this sketch (33), for Edna rejects art that does not portray accurate representation of a model. I find that she wishes her painting to be as true on canvas as it is true to her eyes when staring at Madame Ratignolle. We see Edna reject her sketching at this early point in the novel because “the picture completed bore no resemblance to Madame Ratignolle” (33). While there may in fact be a resemblance present, it is only one of unrealistic likeness, which Edna’s Realist imperative deems inaccurate and characteristic of failure. Instead of treating her portrait of Madame Ratignolle as a learning experience, she hastily destroys the evidence of such perceived failure. It is also important to note that she begins by destroying this artifact of hers by first painting a “broad smudge”

across it, both literally and metaphorically marking it as an impression that is unfit to be looked upon, according to Edna's actions in destroying it.

Shortly after, following this failed attempt at creating a realistic *tableau* of Madame Ratignolle, Edna seeks "words of praise and encouragement" from her friend by sharing her "roll of sketches" (77). When Madame Ratignolle exclaims that her "talent is immense," Edna experiences a "feeling which bordered upon complacency" (77-8). This interaction demonstrates that while Edna may feel it characteristic of women artists to outwardly seek praise and recognition as an artist from external sources, the returned praise is not valuable because she disingenuously sought after it in the first place. Edna does not need praise to be reassured of her intentions to paint; she paints because of her interest in it—because she claims to "feel like painting" (79). Her senses and particular moods attune her to creating on the canvas. Rather than genuinely struggling with whether she should continue painting, Edna, in her position as woman artist, instead puzzles over styles of representation. Her position denotes the reason for why she asks for reassurance from Madame Ratignolle, a woman whose image she cannot accurately capture, whose picture she hopes to "be able to paint...some day" (77). Outwardly acting as though she is not deeply connected with her art, Edna keeps a few of her paintings, while giving most to Madame Ratignolle (78).

In the next passage, notice how Edna's representational practice is riddled with conflict between Impressionist and Realist traditions. When Edna is "disturbed with dreams that were intangible, that eluded her, leaving only an impression upon her half-awakened sense of something unattainable" (54), one can discern both

Chopin's Impressionistic tendency as writer, while also seeing Edna's struggle with representation boiling to the surface unconsciously. While many scholars, such as Peggy Skaggs and Sandra Gilbert, may determine that this "sense of something unattainable" refers to Edna's process of awakening to her sexual desires and opportunity to refute her domestic roles, I view this passage as alluding to her desired style of painterly representation—of a Realist tradition—as what is sought yet "unattainable." Therefore, it is extremely fitting for this sensation—this subtle notion—to come to Edna in the form of an "impression," illustrating this representational conflict that is present in scenes when she is not painting or examining her sketches.

Edna extends her focus on her central model, Madame Ratignolle, outward to other familial relations and acquaintances in her quest to realistically represent their images on her canvas: "For a time she had the whole household enrolled in the service of art... The quadroom sat for hours before Edna's palette... the house-maid, too, served her term as model when Edna perceived that the young woman's back and shoulders were molded on classic lines..." (80). Edna is drawn to women models in particular whose bodies she finds naturally appealing according to traditional standards, favoring Madame Ratignolle's milky white skin and the structure of her housemaid's back. Emphasizing her liking for traditional feminine beauty reveals Edna viewing these women as if they are Grecian sculptures, "molded" for her viewing and subsequent attempted Realist depiction on the canvas. Edna's attention to—and appreciation for—these examples of feminine beauty compels her to portray

their images with visual accuracy on her canvas. However, her sketched impressions fail to depict these “classic lines” of their bodies on her canvas.

While Edna appears most fascinated with painting from women models, there are a few men that she attempts to paint. For example, “upon [her father’s] arrival she began by introducing him to her atelier and making a sketch of him...Before her pencil he sat rigid and unflinching...” (90). In contrast to her female models, her male models, such as her father or Alcée Arobin, are not described with any traditional indicators; in fact, they are hardly given any description. We do not see Edna being transfixed by any of the male figures that she wants to paint; this apparent lack of bodily interest in her male figures does not hold her back from attempting to paint them, however. When having her father act as a model for her canvas, we see Edna creating a preparatory *ébauche* with her pencil prior to sketching his likeness with paint. This is the only time in the text that we witness Edna engaging in preparatory sketch work; all of her other works that Chopin refers to suggest painted sketches, or *esquisses*.

In addition to Edna’s dedication to painting by models, demonstrating her Realist aspirations, we must also look to an example of Edna attempting to paint by photograph. This painting by photograph, like model, is an example of a Realist devotion acting against her Impressionist sensibilities. As Robert is “turning over magazines, sketches, and things” in Edna’s house, he picks up a photograph of Edna’s latest model for her sketches. Robert exclaims ““Alcée Arobin! What on earth is his picture doing here?”” Edna responds that she attempted ““to make a sketch of his head one day”” and that Arobin thought the photograph would help (122). Here, we

see the effect of Arobin's traditional notions of realistically represented art encouraging Edna's Realist devotion. By giving her a photograph, Arobin acknowledges that Edna's Impressionist sketches are failed attempts to capture realistic likeness. It is important to consider how attention to Realist artworks increased during the mid-nineteenth century with the introduction of photography, which spurred many artists to produce works that appeared realistically objective and true to visual appearances. Here, we see the remnants of this Realist imperative acting within Edna, as reinforced by Arobin.

To recognize the complexity of a photograph acting as an artifact of the real, as well as Edna's conception of a photograph, I turn to Ian Bogost's theory of photography, which refers to photographs as traditionally being understood as a "way of looking." For Bogost, the photograph not only offers a representational view of the world, depending upon the framing and exposure, but also offers an automatically encyclopedic rendition of a scene—the "photographic apparatus's ability to record actuality" (52). While I acknowledge that photographs can be viewed as artifacts of verisimilitude, consider how Edna's experience of viewing the photograph is determined by her Impressionist sensibilities. Both Edna and Robert view and consider Arobin's photograph, yet do not perceive the same pictured reality. Edna sees another failed attempt at creating realistic images in her painting, while Robert is struck with jealousy and infers what he believes are the physical shortcomings of Arobin's physique:

"It was at the other house. I thought it had been left there. I must have packed it up with my drawing materials."

"I should think you would give it back to him if you have finished with it."

“Oh! I have a great many such photographs. I never think of returning them. They don’t amount to anything.” Robert kept on looking at the picture. “It seems to me—do you think his head worth drawing?” (Chopin 122)

Viewing the photograph remains an entirely subjective experience for both characters. Edna’s Impressionist sensibilities do not allow her to separate her subjective viewer reality from a traditional standpoint of believing photographs to be artifacts of the real that can lend to painting with visual accuracy. Her perception of photographs—as artifacts of the real—leads Edna to believe that she can go beyond illustrating likenesses of her models in her *juste milieu* sketches. Her reference to having “many such photographs” of her models suggests that she does believe them to be objective representations of reality. With these photographs of visual accuracy, Edna hopes to get her *esquisses* of her models to more realistic representations of her models’ precise physical characteristics. Although she has a Realist imperative to paint by photograph, attempting to utilize the technology of verisimilitude, Edna’s recognition that the photographs “don’t amount to anything” illustrates how the realistic visual image of Arobin in the photograph does not enable Edna to craft a picture in a Realist mode. While her painting by photograph illustrates her Realist imperative, her sensibilities as an Impressionist force her to continue crafting Impressionist sketches, much to the disappointment of Edna even at this point in the novel.

We can see Edna’s troubled attempt to craft realistic paintings with the help of photographs, revealing another way in which she is an Impressionist artist, while her attempt to paint by photograph illustrates how these traditions are in conflict within her work. She likens the two together, painting and photography, by calling upon the

inspiration of a photograph to aid her painting toward a Realist style. Paintings—even those crafted in a Realist mode—do not come as close to depicting reality as photographs attempt to. The surface level, the realistic diminutive details of the Arobin photograph are actually trivial for Edna's creation of art, for she remains unable to capture a snapshot of what Arobin looks like visually and transfer his realistic likeness to her canvas; this is because any apparent objectivity of the static photograph becomes highly subjective as its realistic image is filtered through Edna's Impressionist perception of it.

The only time Chopin reveals Edna to be working without a model or photograph to guide her sketch is toward the end of the novel: "She had worked at her canvas—a young Italian character study—all the morning, completing the work without the model; but there had been many interruptions, some incident to her modest housekeeping, and others of a social nature" (118). This one instance of Edna painting solely from her own vision is extremely significant; notice here how she invokes her imagination in order to complete her "work without the model." Chopin specifically points out for us that Edna is able to now create without models. One can then infer that she is becoming more comfortable with creating from her senses, her perception, her vision—simultaneously giving into, or even harnessing, her Impressionist tendencies. In this passage, we notice Edna devoted to a painting that is not meant to be a realistic representation of something or someone literally present in front of her.

Just prior to her suicide, Edna is described as working on her canvas with such fervor:

...all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference...Edna worked several hours with much spirit. She saw no one but a picture dealer, who asked her if she was going abroad to study in Paris. She said possibly she might, and he negotiated with her for some Parisian studies to reach him in time for the holiday trade in December (127)

Since no model is described in this passage, it may be that Edna is continuing to paint from her vision, not as reluctant to paint impressions as we see her desperately trying to avoid for the majority of the novel. In this time, where Edna has apparently lost “all sense of reality,” the only company she chooses to allow in her presence is an art dealer. This is no accident; Edna’s passion for art increases in her final days, while many other motivations and considerations continue to fade for her. She even considers Parisian studies at this time, an important experience for Impressionist painters to experience, as Chopin would have been well aware of since having known Degas. Multiple references to painterly studies with Laidpole, as well as this reference to a painting experience in Paris, certainly allude to a possibility for Edna to take on painting as a vocation.

Edna’s Suicide: A Failed Realist Painter and a Successful Impressionist Sketcher in the End

The following pages of this chapter not only reinterpret Edna’s death in terms of focusing on her artistry, but also illustrate how my interpretation of the ending differs from scholars who view Edna’s suicide in response to her sexual awakening or her failed attempts at art. I will show how Edna swims out into one of *her* sketches at the close of *The Awakening*; the overwhelming number of sensations she encounters through what she sees, hears, and smells figure both into Edna’s mood and the mood of the sketch of the Gulf that Chopin illuminates for us. In this scene, Chopin

captures the essence of a sketch; one can hazily see Edna's naked figure positioned out in the sea with the colors of the fading sunlight melding into the shimmering blues of the Gulf.

My interpretation argues for Edna as both a failed artist and successful artist—as a failed artist of the Impressionist *tableaux and* as successful Impressionist sketcher. By contrast, scholars of *The Awakening* overwhelmingly assert that Edna is a failed artist at the end of her journey. Consider, first, Chopin's contemporaries' critical deductions of the close of the novel; I will then turn to prominent late twentieth and early twenty-first century critical interpretations of the novel.

While Chopin is not typically considered a feminist by scholars of her work, we know *The Awakening* was published in the societal context of the New Woman era; therefore, Edna's character and death certainly aided in provoking the critical hailstorm from her readers that followed its publication. In *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*, Emily Toth and Per Seyersted refer to contemporary criticism of *The Awakening*, which received overwhelmingly harsh reviews as a “a morbid book,” “a story of a lady most foolish,” and a novel that “leaves one sick of human nature” (295). However, in 1899, amidst a bombardment of undeserved criticism, *Book News* harkens the novel as remarkable: “In reading it you have the impression of being in the very heart of things, you feel the throb of the machinery, you see and understand the slight transitions of thought, the momentary impulses, the quick sensations of the hardness of life, which govern so much our action” (qtd. in Toth and Seyersted 295). The reviewer in *Book News* describes Chopin as “an artist in the manipulation of a complex character, and faulty as the woman is, she has the magnetism which is

essential to the charm of a novel” (295). In response to the majority of the severe criticism of this work, Chopin likely realized that her writing career was almost over and that she could not write about life as she saw it. Unfortunately, her published response to the criticism was one that blamed Edna for the troubled societal stirring that the reception of the novel elicited:

Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest inclination of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late (qtd. in Toth and Seyersted 296)

Deborah S. Gentry views Chopin’s statement as an “ironic ‘retraction,’” arguing that Chopin definitely carefully planned out the progression and ending of the novel. Gentry positions this idea as Chopin seeing Edna as “doomed,” rather than “damned” (20). Reflecting on the criticism of the novel’s ending throughout the years, Gentry characterizes Edna’s suicide as defiant by the terms of conservatives of the 1890s, or even as unnecessary by liberal scholars of the 2000s. I agree with Gentry that the novel foreshadows Edna’s suicide (44)—and even that Chopin was purposely doing so despite her later retraction, one that devastated her. This devastation was likely spurred by experiencing that she was not able to represent such female—and artistic—motivations in her St. Louis society of 1899. While I align with Gentry on the foreshadowing of Edna’s suicide, I view this foreshadowing in light of artistic terms. More specifically, Edna’s trials with becoming an artist—a woman who wants Virginia Woolf’s notion of “a room of her own” and to follow her inspirations and

sensations—foreshadow her inevitable death, particularly one which emphasizes artistic vision and illustrates an Impressionistic atmosphere.

Edna's awakening—referred to by George Spangler as entirely sexual, both spiritual and sexual according to Sandra Gilbert, or one that is about awakening to her own individuality as Peggy Skaggs claims—is often overlooked as an awakening to her artistic expression. This journey of her painterly awakening begins early in the novel following her first swimming experience, and more importantly to my interpretation, the onset of her first recognizable mood.

Elizabeth Nolan views Edna's suicide as a rejection of the “demands of familial responsibility”; her last act as one of “refusal to compromise rather than defeat” (125). I find Nolan's characterization of Edna's death aligns with scholars who view the death as triumphant because of her refusal to compromise. This refusal to compromise can be extended to Edna refusing to compromise her life as an artist as well. Nolan is one of few scholars who mentions Edna's connection to sketching and mood:

...disappointed with her early mimetic sketches, Edna Pontellier embarks on a journey of artistic experimentation. Seeking to free herself from the limits of realistic representation, she begins to paint intuitively. Surrendering herself to the vagaries of feeling and mood, she attains moments of transcendence during which she can work spontaneously in ‘sureness and ease’ (119)

The ideas in this passage, though insightful, are not explored further, for Nolan is more concerned with focusing on Chopin's local color fiction. Nolan claims that Edna is disappointed with her earlier sketches, though I think there is a lack of textual evidence to suggest that Edna gets to a point in her sketching where she feels satisfied with her work; we do, however, experience glimpses of her working without models

or at least feeling more confident and devoted to the act of painting. Certainly Edna feels the need for her sketches to be ones of realistic representation, which I equate to being devoted to a Realist mode of painting in this thesis. While Nolan claims that Edna begins to paint intuitively a while after beginning her journey as an artist, I argue that Edna is dissatisfied with her sketches throughout precisely because she does paint intuitively; and her sketches crafted through her sensations and perception—and most importantly her current mood—are exactly the variables that influence her *esquisses*. Nolan's description of Edna entering moments of transcendence during her work through her feelings and moods definitely harkens to the approach to Impressionist sketching—even to Robert Henri's notion of the genius of the sketcher.

Peggy Skaggs views Edna's suicide in terms of her identity: "Edna's sense of herself as a complete person makes impossible her role of wife and mother as defined by her society, yet she discovers that her role of mother also makes impossible her continuing development as an autonomous individual" (111). This struggle with identity seems broadly assessed; I feel that it can be more specifically understood in terms of her identity as an artist.

If we are to recognize an identity struggle within Edna's psyche—influencing her decision and way of dying—then one must consider that Edna's suicide is significant as societally defying her role as mother, as well as wife, because these societally dictated roles stilt her from developing not simply as an "autonomous individual," as Skaggs claims, but furthermore as an autonomous painter. Her

societal roles of wife and mother make it challenging for her to develop as an artist. For Edna to paint, her sensations must be focused on her work.

As I have argued, her mood must be in the right state to coerce her compositional process forward. To be able to develop as an autonomous artist, Edna seeks the “pigeon house”—a place “so cozy, so inviting and restful” for her to paint (Chopin 102). But even with this space of her own, Edna feels the pressure of being a woman experiencing conflicting duties to her family and to her art. Thinking about her children prior to her suicide demonstrates how her familial obligations impede her motivations to be a self-governing individual—a self-ruling painter: “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them” (138). This inner conflict that challenges her capability to be an autonomous painter is one factor that compels her suicide, for she, upon beginning to paint, had “resolved never to take another step backward” (79). Her suicide, then, is a step forward, at least in relation to her art—an action that demonstrates her autonomy as a painter and her refusal to be “overpowered” by others.

Gentry claims that Edna’s death is like a “dreamlike trance, a fantasy,” which suggests a “tone of peace and escape” (43). While I think it is notable to view this scene as dreamlike, scholars often overlook interpreting this ending in light of Edna’s painterly motivations, desires, and identity. Sandra Gilbert is one particular scholar who sees Edna as triumphant, rather than defeated in her death: “swimming away from the white beach of Grand Isle, from the empty summer colony and the equally

empty fictions of marriage and maternity, Edna swims, as the novel's last sentences tell us, not into death but back into her own life, back into her own vision, back into the imaginative openness of her childhood" (57). I agree that this is a triumphant scene, but also one that evokes a feeling of desperation and longing for what cannot be. On the other hand, George Spangler concludes that the closing of the novel is "unsatisfactory because it is fundamentally evasive" (253); he views Edna as completely defeated by her loss of Robert—the suicide depicting a "paradox of a woman who has awakened to passionate life and yet quietly, almost thoughtlessly, chooses death" (254).

In the final scene, Edna approaches the Gulf at Grande Isle, quietly following her imperceptible draw to the beckoning water. Her perception is a haze of fleeting memories tied to the bodily sensations that she experiences: "Her own like experiences 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" (133). While Edna's mental faculties are predominantly set into the background of the scene—memories seeming "far away, unreal...half remembered"—her bodily actions and experiences are entirely driven by her mood. In this final scene, Edna is led by her bodily sensations and mood to her death. As an Impressionist sketcher, I argue that it is fitting that Edna's sensations are central to this passage; her experience is based on odors, a tingling pain of ecstasy, and a darkened mood. The atmospheric impression of the scene depicts an Impressionist sketch.

Edna finds herself “...thinking of the blue-grass meadow she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end” (139). Notice here how Chopin once again, much like the effect of Mademoiselle Reisz’s playing of the Impromptu, describes Edna’s experience in terms of “no beginning and no end.” The narrative here demonstrates the Impressionistic allusion to being caught in a moment. There is no attention paid to temporality and narrative within an Impressionist painting, which is reminiscent of how many of Edna’s experiences and memories—of her Kentucky upbringing particularly in this passage—are characterized as having no clear beginning or ending.

As we descend to the water with Edna, the sea itself becomes a subject in this scene: “The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million

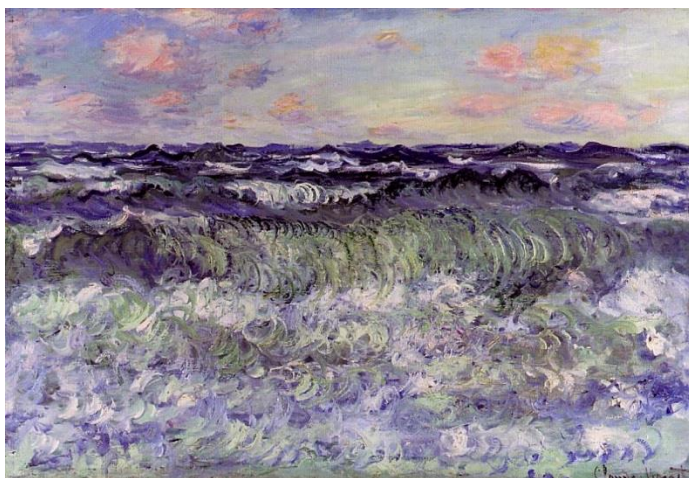


Figure 11. Claude Monet. *Sea Study*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 50 x 73 cm.

lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (138).

Chopin invites us to marvel, first, at the light effects within

the environment. Like in an Impressionist painting where the environmental elements of a canvas tend to be represented equally with one another, we see the “million lights of the sun” set with—and harmonizing with—the sea. Furthermore, “the foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles...The

touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (138).

When the “voice of the sea” and its “foamy wavelets” come into contact with Edna’s body, one can picture these two subjects as elements on a canvas melding into one another. Edna’s contact here with the sea is a melding experience, suggesting the gentle joining together of objects and subjects within an Impressionist painting. This melding of objects and colors, as well as accenting lights and shadows with color, is reminiscent of Monet’s *Sea Study* (1881).

In the background of her mind, Edna hears Mademoiselle Reisz exclaiming, “and you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies” (139). Yet, Edna—as a creator of *esquisses*—does dare and defy. The very notion of sketching goes against mid-late nineteenth century cultural constructions of what to expect from a completed Impressionist painting, or *tableau*, as we see emanating from Monet’s contemporary art critics for example. If Mademoiselle Reisz believes Edna is pretentious to call herself a painter, and if Edna truly believes it, then this echo is really only depicting how Edna is a failed artist of the Impressionist *tableaux*. It does not necessitate that she is a failed artist of Impressionist sketching.

Indeed, as House claims, the Impressionist sketch is mainly concerned with the personal and individual, while the *tableaux* oftentimes attempts to balance private and public life (69). This scene is highly personal, aligning well with an Impressionist imperative of the *esquisse*: “...she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her... She felt like some new-born creature...” (Chopin 138). Chopin’s reader is allowed a

glimpse at this sketch—both at the physical setting and at a display of Edna’s perceptions of her sensual experiences as a woman who has awoken not only to her sexual desires, but more importantly to her calling as an artist whose mood directly feeds into her artistic expressions. Here, Edna’s body is joined with her environment, appearing on the same plane with the “open air,” “the sun,” “the breeze,” and “the waves that invited her.” This soft joining together of the elements aligns with what an Impressionist painting does, while we focus in on an extremely private, sensual scene that is characteristic of Impressionist sketches in terms of content.

In the final line of the novel, we are presented with language that asks us to consider bodily sensations, focusing on the surrounding odors and colors of the moment: “She looked into the distance... There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (139). This final passage depicts an Impressionist moment because it is characterized by several Impressionist attentions to sensations, space, light, and temporality. I choose the word “moment” to characterize this passage also because there seems to be no discernable beginning or end to this expression of an Impressionist scene. There is a lack of temporality that we experience in this moment. Edna looks out “into the distance,” but we can’t see how far that distance is; she locates nothing in particular in the sea beyond. The sea itself acts as a never-ending expanse here for Edna because we cannot see what is within her view, leading me to believe that there is empty space left around this sketch of Edna’s moment. The final words of the novel paint us a moment of the environment, and give us a glimpse of Edna’s sensations as she is both artist and a subject in the painting here, but we do not experience a final narrative action. When considering

this final passage in terms of a sketch, it is fitting that there is a lack of narrative action showing what happens next; the following suicidal action is only alluded to in the sketch, much as an Impressionist sketch could suggest, but not tell the story of the subject on the canvas.

It is no coincidence that Chopin chooses to draw similarities between her protagonist and Edma Pontillon; Edna's awakening and death must be considered in terms of her functioning as an artist, and more specifically, as an Impressionist sketcher whose *esquisses* are governed by her mood. Chopin illustrates a vision-like or dreamlike scene amid Edna's end in the waves, but my view of this scene as an Impressionist painting—one of Edna's very own sketches—has gone unconsidered until now. We witness Edna awakening to her “situation as a woman” and to “her quest for identity through a life of significant action...[choosing] suicide as the only means available to achieve her goal” (Gentry 45), as Gilbert's and Gubar's feminist reading determines in claiming that Edna has embarked upon a “life of ‘significant action’”(Gilbert and Gubar 42). But we can additionally view this transformation as an awakening to her situation as a woman painter.

I argue that we must negotiate a balance between these two overriding viewpoints of viewing Edna as either triumphant or defeated at the close of the novel. Classifying the ending as one of triumph or defeat—as societally defiant or unnecessary—seems entirely too simplistic. Many Chopin scholars overlook Edna's artist identity in the final lines of the novel; I find she is *both* a “triumphant” and “defeated” painter. She faces defeat at being able to craft an Impressionist *tableau* or capture realistic likeness on the canvas, yet she simultaneously triumphs in being a

successful Impressionist sketcher who can portray unrealistic likenesses, or impressions, on her canvas.

Chapter II

Envisioning an Intersection between Impressionism and Cubism: The Bloomsbury Woman Painter in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Quentin Bell claims that for Virginia Woolf and his mother, Vanessa Bell, “the visual arts were supremely important or—and for Virginia this was of the highest importance—the belief that truth may be apprehended not only by means of ratiocination but by way of intuition and sensibility” (28). Such “intuition and sensibility” predominantly guides Lily Briscoe’s production of her art in *To the Lighthouse*, though she struggles with styles of representation—struggles that have historical connections to the loss that accompanies the World War I era, but more importantly to this chapter, historical connections to two central painterly modes of representation: Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Lily attempts to be true to her vision as an artist against strong patriarchal forces that we recognize at work in the novel. Woolf’s fictional construction of Lily Briscoe is additionally inextricably tied to the progressions and transitions of the Bloomsbury artists.

Woolf was intrigued by the similarities and differences between painting and fiction, an interest strongly influenced by her relationship with her painter sister, Vanessa Bell, and other Bloomsbury friends, such as artists Roger Fry and Duncan Grant. In *A Studio of One’s Own*, Roberta White emphasizes the nervousness that Woolf experienced in “[presuming] to reveal the consciousness of a painter at work” as Lily struggles “toward an artistic vision that will free her from the heavy weight of the past” (85). Woolf’s depiction of the woman painter, one who is unsure of artistic representation, is strikingly convincing. This crafting of Lily Briscoe is often viewed in light of Bloomsbury aesthetics and the Post-Impressionist styles that Bloomsbury

artists encountered. Rather than struggling “toward an artistic vision” that is freeing, I argue that Lily does ascend into her artistic vision—strongly emphasized by her bodily sensations and mood—both in “The Window” and “The Lighthouse” sections of *To the Lighthouse*. While we can view her compositional struggles and artistic visions in light of internal struggle against societal expectations and patriarchal forces that we recognize surging within the novel, I am more interested in Lily’s puzzlement in response to prevailing representational styles for illustrating the domestic elements of her paintings—depicting human relationships, and most importantly, Mrs. Ramsay on her canvas.

In order to engage with Lily’s struggle between the Post-Impressionist and Impressionist strains in her work, we must first turn our attention to how Woolf scholars typically view Lily as a Post-Impressionist. Drawing a connection between Lily and Bloomsbury artists demonstrates this adeptly. Re-examining this connection will allow my view—of Lily being caught in between competing imperatives of French Impressionism and Post-Impressionist experimentations with Cubism and abstraction—to be differentiated from Woolfian scholarship, as well as to set the stage for a re-evaluation of Lily’s painting of Mrs. Ramsey in “The Lighthouse,” which I argue establishes a harmony between these competing styles.

Connections can and should be drawn between Vanessa Bell and Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, though connections between Fry’s and Lily’s theories of painting are much more common amongst scholars. When comparing Lily’s consciousness with many letters and statements concerning Bell, it is hard to resist paying heed to eerie coincidences. In *The Sister’s Arts*, Diane Filby Gillespie reports

Bell oftentimes being apologetic when exhibiting enthusiasm for her own work, which is an attitude similar to Lily's in the novel (201): "Lily Briscoe struggles to keep the visions of other painters from obliterating her own immediate responses" (284). In the novel, it is explained that Lily "had been to Brussels; she had been to Paris, but only for a flying visit to see an aunt who was ill. She had been to Dresden; there were masses of pictures she had not seen; however, Lily Briscoe reflected, perhaps it was better not to see pictures; they only made one hopelessly discontented with one's own work" (Woolf 74). In "The Window," Lily is so terribly self-conscious and hesitant about her work that she fears looking at other artists' work. A lack of education and opportunities to make art into a vocation, as a male contemporary artist could potentially do, are also important factors to consider when viewing Lily's reluctance to share her art—her vision—with other eyes that are bound to be judgmental.

When William Bankes, whom Lily admires immensely, approaches her canvas, her first inclination is to prevent him from looking at her creation: "She would have snatched her picture off the easel, but she said to herself, One must. She braced herself to stand the awful trial of some one looking at her picture...the deposit of each day's living mixed with something more secret than she had ever spoken or shown in the course of all those days was an agony. At the same time it was immensely exciting" (55). Lily feels overwhelmed, ecstatic, and exposed at the prospect of someone viewing her art, an experience that Bell is noted for undergoing as well, though Lily does not have the opportunity to share her work publicly as Bell was able to through Bloomsbury exhibitions.

Like Bell, Lily is a painter who guards herself from outwardly expressing her commitment to her work, thereby preventing exposure to criticism or judgment. For example, whenever Lily outwardly expresses any dissatisfaction with her work, such as to William Banks, she disingenuously remarks that it is not of much importance—that she paints because it simply interests her. White claims that Lily’s “outwardly timid, awkward, and unprepossessing” demeanor helps her to “carefully guard the secret of how much her art means to her” (86). Lily “would always go on painting, because it interested her” (Woolf 75), though in truth, this statement is disingenuous, for her commitment to her painting is extremely deep. Similarly, Bell makes several of these self-depreciating comments about her work and aptitude as an artist in letters to Roger Fry.

Both sisters, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, are often associated with modern French painting. According to Gillespie, Bell identified herself as an Impressionist, claiming that light was her primary interest in painting. However, Gillespie points out that Bell is as “concerned with underlying structure as with surface effects of light” (285). Woolf did not identify herself as an Impressionist, though certainly an Impressionist tendency is in action in her art, particularly when we experience her languorous descriptions of environments via melding lights, seas, skies, and flowers. We also see Woolf’s Impressionism within her narrative when discussing the effect of impressions upon Lily’s perception, as well as upon her consciousness throughout her nonfiction. In “Modern Fiction,” for example, Woolf discusses “myriad impressions” that come over the mind like “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (287). Despite these Impressionist strains in their arts, both

sisters did seek formal structures to deliver coherence in what Gillespie calls the “seemingly chaotic and continual change” (285) that characterized England in the 1910s and 1920s. Some Post-Impressionist and Cubist styles can provide such structure.

While I find Lily functioning as an Impressionist painter at times in *To the Lighthouse*, we must recognize the complexity of this classification. More specifically, Lily exhibits Post-Impressionist and Impressionist strains in her work, a painter caught in a dichotomy between the Impressionism that characterizes Claude Monet’s artwork and the Post-Impressionist experimentations that draw upon abstraction and Cubism that link to Bloomsbury art. Lily’s painterly ambitions demonstrate an Impressionistic fascination with light effects, as well as a geometric imperative to use abstract shapes, yet construct elements of the canvas together—identifying problems and finding answers in order to solve representational problems by piecing objects together to create a balanced and unified whole. Lily is drawn to finding balance and coherence on her canvas. We recognize how Lily rejects traditional notions of painterly Realism in the novel, which I will look to as the foundation for moving into how she vacillates between Impressionist and Post-Impressionist styles both mentally and physically. My reading of the novel through an Impressionist lens allows for my reinterpretation of the ending. This chapter will explore Lily’s competing Impressionist sensibilities and Post-Impressionist tendencies, and then ultimately identify the balance she achieves between these competing styles of representation—forging an Impressionist-Cubist complex to

complete her painting in “The Lighthouse,” following much bewilderment, uncertainty, and perceived failure on her part.

Lily’s Anti-Realist Imperative: Contrary to William Bankes’ Standpoint

When analyzing Lily’s painterly vision in “The Window” that begins to illustrate her struggle between an Impressionist style versus Post-Impressionist style of representation, I consider the Bloomsbury abstraction that its artists toyed with most prominently in their earlier Post-Impressionist paintings. At the end of 1913, Bell, Grant, and Fry decided to turn from figuration in their compositions to “a more geometrical style,” favoring “purely abstract painting”—not the abstraction of “free-flowing compositions” (Reed 148), but the kind that emphasizes shapes. This geometrical style of abstraction seeps into Woolf’s depiction of Lily Briscoe, particularly in “The Window.” As Mrs. Ramsay sits “in the wicker arm-chair in the drawing-room window she wore, to Lily’s eyes, an august shape; the shape of a dome” (Woolf 55). Woolf makes it very clear that this is part of Lily’s vision, glimpsed through her “eyes.” Here, the shape that the chair and Mrs. Ramsay create is more important than the details of either the individual object or subject. We get a glimpse of Lily as an abstract geometer in this passage, viewing and representing her human subject as a dome on the canvas, unconcerned with the detailed physical characteristics that would concern a Realist painter. While here we see Mrs. Ramsay represented as a dome, we later see her and James depicted as a triangle. Yet others, if they are even permitted to see Lily’s painting, do not agree that an abstract dome or triangle should represent a—if not the—human subject of a painting.

An example of this geometric style, which can be a part of abstract painting and under the larger umbrella of Post-Impressionism, arises when Lily and William Bankes discuss one of her paintings toward the beginning of the novel. Their conversation concerning Lily's painting clearly demonstrates why Lily is frequently associated with Bloomsbury Post-Impressionism amid Woolfian scholarship. We can recognize how William Bankes is a representation of a Realist tradition of painting that Lily purposely objects and works against.

Tapping her canvas, Mr. Bankes inquires what Lily wants to indicate by a "triangular purple shape in the picture," which Lily responds is "Mrs. Ramsay reading to James," but "she knew his objection—that no one could tell it for a human shape" (Woolf 55). For Lily, impressions and abstractions are more significant and truer to her vision than working toward depicting Mrs. Ramsay and James from a Realist traditional standpoint that would try to capture visually accurate, detailed likenesses of both models: "But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? he asked. Why indeed?—except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness" (55). The Impressionist side of her painting is also demonstrated in this passage when she focuses in on her use of light and shadow in the picture; Lily believes that "a light here require[s] a shadow there" on the canvas. Paying close attention to light effects is particularly important to Impressionist painters. She is moving toward Impressionism at this point, though her Impressionist strains become much more vivid in "The Lighthouse." Lily feels there must also be balance between the two styles, but at this point in her art, she feels as though representing her human models

through abstract shapes speaks most poignantly to her vision, an aspect of her vision that demonstrates a Post-Impressionist strain.

In this scene, William Bankes acts as a manifestation of the Realist tradition, and despite his liking for Lily, cannot see or understand Lily's vision or her explanation for choosing abstract shapes to represent people. William Bankes scrutinizes Lily's canvas under "scientific examination," considering the "relations of [the] masses, of lights and shadows" of her painting (Woolf 56). Christine Froula claims that Lily seeks to get at "reality behind appearances" (142), just as Woolf seeks to paint "truth beyond appearances" in *To the Lighthouse* (148). This "reality behind appearances" can be represented through abstractions and impressions; these



Figure 12. Vanessa Bell. *Self-Portrait*, 1915. Oil on canvas laid on panel, 63.5 x 45.7 cm.



Figure 13. Duncan Grant. *At Eleanor: Vanessa Bell*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 56 cm.

non-realistic styles of representation that differ from what William Bankes has seen from accomplished painters enables Lily to view human relations more keenly through her art.

Froula considers this dialogue between William and Lily to be a “dialogue on those rival gods realism and abstraction” (141). More specifically, “William’s conventional realism presumes and values visible resemblance; Lily’s impromptu manifesto links her composition’s formal abstraction to a psychic and metaphysical quest in a world founded on loss” (Froula 141-2). William’s notion of depicting Mrs. Ramsey on the canvas in terms of realistic likeness also demonstrates his need to represent—and give credit to—her beauty. Here, Lily can be connected to Bell, whose artistic ambition strove to go beyond traditional conventions of passive, feminine beauty.

Consider particular Bloomsbury paintings as a stylistic and visual frame of reference for understanding Lily’s connections to Post-Impressionist art. In her *Self-Portrait* (1915), Bell presents herself in what Christopher Reed describes as “an environment of rectilinear and angled forms resembling her abstractions—an “insistently modernist background” that “exaggerates her body’s bulk,” her left shoulder looming “out of proportion with the right, crowding the canvas edge as if to push into the viewer’s space” (172). In contrast, see how Duncan Grant’s portrayal of Bell, *At Eleanor: Vanessa Bell* (1915), remains linked to conventions of traditionally perceived femininity that Bell’s self-portrait disputes. In Grant’s portrait of Bell, she is leaning back—rather sunken—into the armchair; her hands gently rest upon her lap as she passively gazes upward, a position which emphasizes the perceived feminine

bone structure of her cheekbones, chin, and neck. The contrast between Bell's portrayal and Grant's, who is recognized as an unconventional male artist of Bloomsbury, illustrates a gendered power play of whether to represent a woman's body in terms of conventional feminine styles. Both Duncan Grant and the character of William Bankes—despite their respect and admiration for their particular woman artist friends—are shown here as unable to get past a traditional notion of representing feminine beauty in a passive, conventional manner.

“The Window” into Domestic Space: Lily Briscoe's Bloomsbury Post-Impressionist Strains

I find that how Lily works with the relations between elements on her canvas is intertwined with how she sees human relations; her contemplation of human relationships, to put the same point in the other way around, is central to her compositional process. This connection will be explored in greater depth later in the chapter. Lily's vision for her canvas does not need to be one that values realistic interpretation and exact likenesses of models, as William Bankes would expect of art. Instead, Lily is spurred on to represent human relations, the Post-Impressionist domestic setting, and Mrs. Ramsay's impression in a way that puts artistic Realist imperatives aside. Instead, she focuses on getting beyond surface-level realistic interpretation.

Bloomsbury's artistic interests in unrealistic interpretation and domestic space are highlighted in Woolf's fiction. In Reed's *Bloomsbury Rooms*, he explores the “imagined and created modes of modernism that sustained” Bloomsbury's artists and emphasizes their “recognition of the importance of domestic space” (277), a recognition that acts as a contributing guide to Lily's work. A fascination in painting

with new colors also accompanied the Bloomsbury artists' interests in domestic space. Such use of Post-Impressionist color is highlighted in many of Bell's paintings in her colorful blocky style, which often depicted undetailed—or even blank—facial characteristics of her human subjects. Similarly, Lily's approach to painting wants to represent her vision of the model, even if that may be with a shape or outline, as we have seen. In *Virginia Woolf at Asheham* (1912), Bell emphasizes Woolf's armchair with a vibrant reddish-orange, while Woolf's facial characteristics and expression remain rather abstractly represented. At the same time, her figure and the armchair dominate the composition of the domestic setting.

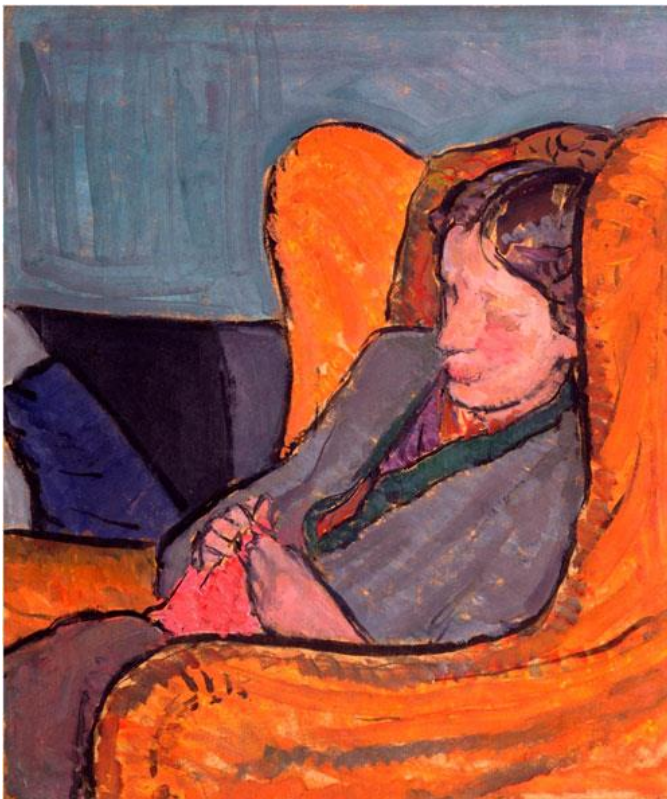


Figure 14. Vanessa Bell. *Virginia Woolf at Asheham*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 40 x 34 cm.

We see this anti-Realist imperative stemming from several of the Bloomsbury artists. For example, in a 1916 letter to Fry, Grant wrote that he wanted to paint “less and less from life and more and more from drawings” in order to “paint unrealistic realistic works” (qtd. in Reed 176). This Bloomsbury “ambition to distance art from reality” (Reed 176) is also an ambition that

characterizes Lily's drives as a painter in the novel.



Figure 15. Vanessa Bell. *Interior at Wissett Lodge*, 1916.

An imperative to get away from painting realistic life is found in Bell's *Interior at Wissett Lodge* (1916) and Grant's *By the Fire* (1916). In Bell's composition, a woman and a few domestic items—pitcher, wash basin, wastebasket—are represented in white, set against a bright blue background that contains what appears to be a floral wall painting. Reed asserts that the “effect is to meld figure and decoration, so that they are pulled into the same plane: the stuff of the house and its



Figure 16. Vanessa Bell. *Frederick and Jessie Etchells in the Studio*, 1912. Oil on board, 51 x 53 cm.

inmates become, in this vision, one” (176). Therefore, I interpret the elements of the painting as existing equally. More specifically, the objects and subjects in the composition are illustrated on the same flat plane, rather than within relations that depict their inferiority or superiority to

other elements.

Prior to 1916, Bloomsbury artists frequently utilized abstraction in their compositions through a focus on the domestic setting. The domestic settings are represented as what Reed calls “rectilinear patches of flat color” (148), illustrated in some of Bell’s paintings after 1912, such as her portrayal of the Etchells artists at work in the Asheham studio. Bell’s painting, *Frederick and Jessie Etchells in the Studio* (1912), employs bright greens, reds, and oranges, the composition offering several bold contrasts in color. Jessie Etchells’ red stocking is revealed as she is positioned in front of a vibrant red curtain, highlighting the juxtaposition of differing colors. The doors to the studio are open in the piece, revealing blocky layers of warm colorful tones—the blue of the sky, green of the garden, and the orange of the walkway.

Similarly, Bell’s *The Bedroom, Gordon Square* (1912) illustrates the modernist domestic setting that is extremely geometric, portraying an abstractly



Figure 17. Edgar Degas. *After the Bath, Woman Drying her Neck*, 1898. Oil on canvas, 62 x 65 cm.

painted woman—blank-faced and naked—alone in a bedroom, offset against a rectangular red backdrop resting against the side of the bed and in front of the window frame. The geometric nature of the woman, bed, and window frame, though overlapping one another, are

set together in an oddly complimentary manner that recognizes the flatness of the board. The abstract, geometric background honors the flatness of the board. A flatter composition such as this resists realistic readings (Reed 152), and these flat compositions picturing a female figure can be interpreted as empowering for the modern woman who is not depicted inferiorly to her environment, a tendency quite apparent in many French Impressionist paintings, particularly amongst paintings of female nudes or ballerinas, such as in some of Edgar Degas' works—a vulnerability pictured in *After the Bath, Woman Drying her Neck* (1898).

The relations between subjects and objects—between abstract shapes—on the canvas are important to consider when analyzing Lily's artistic style. It is the



Figure 18. Vanessa Bell. *The Tub*, 1917-18. Oil and gouache on canvas, 167 x 108.3 cm.

relations between the shapes that Lily is concerned with as she contemplates human relations alongside her painting. This equality between the artistic elements on the canvas is reminiscent of Bell's *The Tub* (1917-18). Notice how the elements on the canvas are distributed equally; the bather, towel, and pitcher exist on the same plane. Froula claims that

Lily's art seeks to "bridge the gap between herself and every other human being"

(145), though I see the bridge as more personal than outward; she seeks to “bridge the gap” between herself and Mrs. Ramsay most importantly. Therefore, it is not so much a bridge between the known and unknown life that Lily seeks to cross, but dearer to her personally, she wishes to bridge a gap between Mrs. Ramsay and herself by constantly selecting Mrs. Ramsay as her chosen model, delving into a fascination with this motherly woman who is so foreign in design to herself. Yet, Lily is enchanted by this mother-woman, contemplating Mrs. Ramsay’s relations with others and even painting such relationships, such as between Mrs. Ramsay and James, which she depicts as a geometric shape.

We see Lily’s consideration of human relations alongside her painting throughout the text. One example occurs when she contemplates her connection to Mrs. Ramsay: “Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired” (Woolf 54). Here, Lily toys with the idea of emotionally melding herself with Mrs. Ramsay based on their relationship, desiring a relationship of “unity.” This idea foreshadows the representational unity that she seeks between relations on her canvas that she ultimately encounters in “The Lighthouse.”

Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina explains how Roger Fry’s perspective on “modern art, on painterly ways of seeing the world, affected the painters and writers [of Bloomsbury] alike” (11) in *A Room of Their Own*. In response to what is now known as the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1910, much of the British public responded to this art—“an audience barely acquainted with Impressionism”—with discomfort and even shock because of art’s new use of colors, lines, and lack of

narrative (Gerzina 11). One of Woolf's famous claims is that "in or about December 1910, human character changed," referring to her excitement over the innovation of the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition (qtd. in Reed 87). Woolf's biography of Fry stated that he was "'amazed and amused' at the general uproar and personal notoriety aroused by his exhibition" (qtd. in Reed 65). Nevertheless, Fry sought to alleviate the public's discomfort with this new form of art—a "new way of seeing, of representing the truth of what the artist actually saw" (11): Fry claims that

in no previous exhibition of modern art has the purely decorative quality of painting been more apparent. If only the spectator will look without preconception as to what a picture ought to be and do, will allow his [or her] senses to speak to him instead of his common-sense, he will admit that there is a discretion and a harmony of color, a force and completeness of pattern, about these pictures... (qtd. in Gerzina 11)

Fry's urging of "what a picture ought to be and do" eloquently describes Lily Briscoe's Post-Impressionist strains as an artist.

To be a successful artist, and be true to her artistic vision, Lily must "allow [her] senses to speak to [her] instead of [her] common-sense." This "common-sense" notion can transcend to meaning the patriarchal forces surrounding her on all sides, urging her to create art in a particular fashion, or perhaps not at all as Charles Tansley's voice echoes in her mind how "women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf 51). Fry's conviction for artists to follow their senses is a particularly essential guide for the Post-Impressionist artist. Lily also seeks "a harmony of color" on her canvas; she desires a feeling of unity between the objects and colors represented. Feeling this "force" that Fry describes—an imperative that drives Lily forward to solve the problem of disunity and reconcile any initial flaws in her design that do not accurately represent her vision—she seeks to join the pattern together in

unity, to complete her methodically crafted painting through these Post-Impressionist strains.

Lily Caught in a Representational Dichotomy: Competing Imperatives between Post-Impressionist Strains and Impressionist Sensibilities

To understand how Lily's Impressionist strains influence her painting, it is essential to explore what Lily sees as an artist—her sense, her vision. Lily tries to transpose her vision of the scene to the canvas, but she struggles with representation: “But this is what I see; this is what I see” (Woolf 23). Lily struggles with her self-confidence as a painter, most notably in “The Window.” Looking to her painting, “she could have wept. It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad! She could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealized; that was how Pounceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that” (51). The problem here is Lily's hesitation to trust her vision, to get beyond the vulnerability she feels with representing her art in a way that contradicts traditional, patriarchal forces.

Her style of representation does not align with how a notable male artist, Pounceforte, would create through a Realist tradition. Woolf illustrates this reoccurring problem that Lily faces, yet Woolf's constant reminders of this problem demonstrate her acute recognition of exactly how it could likely function for a woman artist in her time. The pressures that Lily feels from male gazes at—or even nearby—her work make it difficult for her to paint. We see this representational struggle as gendered when Mr. Ramsay is near Lily when she is trying to paint:

But with Mr. Ramsay bearing down on her, she could do nothing. Every time he approached—he was walking up and down the terrace—ruin approached, chaos approached. She could not paint. She stooped, she turned; she took up

this rag; she squeezed that tube. But all she did was to ward him off a moment. He made it impossible for her to do anything (152)

Lily desperately fiddles with her painting materials in an attempt to harness her painterly vision to create, yet Mr. Ramsay's presence renders her artistic capabilities momentarily immobile. Lily finds herself struggling to hang on "as a faller clutches at the turf on the edge of a cliff" (146), a metaphor that is one of many that Woolf relates to Lily's artistic ambitions throughout the novel. As a woman artist struggling with competing styles from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, Lily feels herself teetering on the edge of a cliff against strong patriarchal forces that tell her how she must paint (1920s British society), what she must paint (William Bankes), or even that she should not paint at all (Charles Tansley). With Mr. Ramsay's gaze "bearing down on her," Lily struggles to focus on her art and avoid the "ruin" and "chaos" that his presence yields for her compositional process. Undoubtedly, we recognize how Woolf encounters this similar problem as a woman writer, as clearly expressed in *A Room of One's Own*.

In the conversation between Lily and William Bankes, we not only see Lily's embrace of Post-Impressionism and subsequent rejection of Realism, but can additionally witness her Impressionist sensibilities. When William Bankes cannot understand why this purple shadow does not look like Mrs. Ramsay and James, Lily responds that the picture is not of them—rather the "picture must be a tribute" (56). The picture is not of Mrs. Ramsay and James—at least "not in his sense" (56), but rather in her sense. Therefore, Lily explains, Mrs. Ramsay and James may be revered by other senses—"by a shadow here and a light there" (55). This focus on the essentiality of the senses when painting is also a key aspect of Impressionism.

Lily tries to share a piece of her vision and her sense for painting with William Bankes, though quickly realizes that it is impossible; her vision is entirely private and cannot be extended to an external viewer. In the following passage, we see the beginning of a dichotomy between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism that exists in Lily's compositional process:

And [William Bankes] indicated the scene before them. She looked. She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself, without a brush in her hand. She took up once more her old painting position with the dim eyes and the absent-minded manner... becoming once more under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children—her picture. It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken (56-7)

The first half of the above passage demonstrates the extremely personal nature of Lily's compositional process, one that appears very Impressionistic. Her perception—"her picture"—is not something that can be understood by anyone else, for it is very private. Impressionist painting tends to deal with the private, the personal, the intimate—not as interested in public life. This is why we so often see Impressionist paintings dwelling in gardens and seascapes. When there are human subjects present within Impressionist paintings, it is typically of a single person or instead demonstrating relationships between small numbers of individuals. We see these relational moments expressed in many of Mary Cassatt's works of mothers with their children.

Woolf also describes this process in terms of impressions, where Lily must surrender herself to her vision—the way she views her surroundings and the relations

within it—in order to create. In these first few lines of the passage, we see that Lily’s process is not one of careful planning, but is one that stems from her perception of the moment and of her current environment, one that beckons her to be “under the power” of her sensory perception—her “vision”— in order to feel how she should see the canvas.

While Woolf illustrates Lily’s Impressionist sensibility, I must also draw your attention specifically to the representational struggle that is emerging: her “question.” Lily feels that this “question” is one of “how to connect” the masses in her picture. I see this uncertainty in terms of Lily running into a stylistic problem, one that specifically needs balancing between competing forces. Seeking a “unity of the whole” picture, Lily considers several Post-Impressionist options for balancing the “masses,” or elements, on the canvas. It is important to note that she considers moving “the line of the branch” or to “break the vacancy in the foreground by an object.” These considerations of lines and breaking relate to Post-Impressionist styles; the mention of a line is atypical of Impressionist painting, but is very common in Post-Impressionist art. Furthermore, the consideration of disturbing space on the canvas is reminiscent of Cubist art, which thrills at breaks and interferences on the recognized flat canvas. Lily’s thoughts about how she may go about this representational problem also suggests a rather methodical and formal approach to fixing the picture; these rather Cubist technical considerations do not align well with the immediately previous lines about Lily Impressionistically noting light contrasts and harnessing her senses in order to create.

Despite how William Bankes may have crafted the painting, Woolf shows how Lily sees “the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral” (51). For a brief moment, the reader is gracefully elevated to Lily’s vision, one that simultaneously represents softness and toughness on the canvas. Furthermore, the painting’s color “burning on a framework of steel” is a reference, if unintentionally, to the Cubist styles that Bloomsbury Post-Impressionists were experimenting with. Meanwhile, the “light of a butterfly’s wing lying upon the arches” suggests the importance of light and shadow effects to Lily, an imperative that is central to French Impressionism. The butterfly shadow metaphor is one of a soft, delicate caress which casts an Impressionist picture. There seems to be a dichotomy in existence here: Lily desires the steel-like toughness of a Cubist, Post-Impressionist painting, yet she also envisions a butterfly-like tenderness of light and an Impressionist melding of elements for her canvas.

Lily Seeks “The Lighthouse”: Encountering Representational Problems and Finding Harmony between Post-Impressionist and Impressionist Styles

In this section, I build upon Woolfian scholarship that recognizes Lily rejecting Realism, typically distinguishing her as a Post-Impressionist with connections to Bloomsbury art. As we have focused on how Lily rejects Realism and how she waves between thinking like an Impressionist and functioning as a Post-Impressionist, my interpretation differs from those previously explored. While Lily’s representational struggle continues from “The Window” to “The Lighthouse,” I also find her Impressionist sensibilities becoming more prominent in the final section of the novel. While she does not stray from the Post-Impressionist strains in her art,

particularly in relation to Cubism, I see her simultaneously harnessing her Impressionist sensibilities in order to complete her post-war painting.

After the war and Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily Briscoe returns to Cornwall to finish the painting that she began ten years prior of Mrs. Ramsay in her domestic setting. Upon her arrival, she instantly feels that she "must escape somewhere, be alone somewhere... When she had sat there last ten years ago... There had been a problem... Move the tree to the middle, she had said. She had never finished that picture" (151). Reminiscing, Lily thinks "she would paint that picture now. It had been knocking about in her mind all these years" (151). The picture "knocking about in her mind" refers to the years during the war, as Woolf alludes to in the dreamlike set of magnified moments within "Time Passes."

In order to complete this picture—to fix it—she must solve the problem existing in her previous painting in "The Window"—a painting that I view as unsuccessful because Lily has not yet found a way to reconcile her Impressionist sensibilities with her Post-Impressionist imperatives to create. Alongside the changes that the war spurred for the Bloomsbury artists, Lily likewise shies away from abstract, geometric styles of representation that are so central to her previous painting and compositional process in "The Window." I argue that Lily's potential overuse of abstraction and geometric shapes in "The Window" figures as one of the problems that Lily is trying to fix in this next painting of Mrs. Ramsay, a stylistic action Bell, Grant, and Fry strove to make in their post-war paintings.

Depicted in the novel through the somber stillness and blurriness of "Time Passes," the war impacted Bloomsbury artist's attitudes toward using abstraction in

their paintings. Bloomsbury artists turned back to earlier styles of representation, though more toward their earlier pre-war personal identities and tendencies as artists than to more traditional Realist styles. The letter correspondence between Bell and Fry during 1916-1919 demonstrates such a turn in their artistic approaches; Fry sought to return to what he calls his “idea of construction,” “throwing off [Bell’s] impressionism” (qtd. in Reed 162). While Fry purposely moved away from abstraction, Bell also sought to—as she puts it—“paint much more solidly” (qtd. in Reed 162). Reed expresses the change in Bloomsbury art eloquently when he says “what came to an end when the Bloomsbury artists abandoned their experiments with abstraction was not simply a particular form of the group’s visual practice,” for World War I “brought an end to that coherence”—their coherence as “an avant-garde alliance united” by “efforts to develop new forms of art” that their devotion to “abstract painting had embodied” (163). In her biography of *Roger Fry*, Woolf refers to the inevitability that a “break must be made in every life when August 1914 is reached,” a statement entirely fitting with this Bloomsbury artistic retreat (qtd. in Reed 166), or perhaps more appropriately, what I believe is a transition—not necessarily the retreat that Reed refers to. Through the changes stemming from the war, Woolf looks back to the late Victorian period through a modernist perspective, which contributes to her crafting of a woman painter such as Lily Briscoe in the late 1920s; it seems likely that this desire for seemingly simpler, less chaotic days contributes to the extent to which Lily’s Impressionistic sensibilities arise, and converge, with her Post-Impressionist functionalities.

In response to the recognition of the war marking a significant shift in Bloomsbury artistic attitude, Reed claims that Bell and Grant sought to reach back to an “ideal distant in both time and place” because of “their rejection of an increasingly hostile and dangerous present” (177). In her vision of “The Lighthouse,” Lily too looks back to a near distant past to channel Mrs. Ramsay’s essence into her painting. In a 1921 art critique, “Extremes of Modern Painting,” Frank Rutter claims “since 1918 there has been a general return to realism, but the experiments of the extremists are not valueless. They have widened the horizon of painting and opened the road to a new realism in which the firm structure and rigid design of the Cubists will be combined with a truth and beauty of colour derived from the Impressionists” (qtd. in Reed 214). Furthermore, in the immediate post-war era, Bloomsbury artists were “intrigued by French artists’ re-engagement with pre-modern styles, particularly Pablo Picasso—the “prince of Cubism”—who also seems to work more toward immediate realism during this time (Reed 214). Another notable French Post-Impressionist, Matisse, also “reversed his evolving abstraction to re-examine late nineteenth-century conventions of style (brushy variations on Impressionism) and motif (especially harem images and domestic interiors)” during the war (214). While Lily may be interacting with this “new realism” that Rutter describes in her post-war painting at Cornwall, it is her Impressionist sensibilities that demonstrate a return to pre-war styles, perhaps seeking the soothing simplicity and temporal indecipherability of Impressionist art.

Consider how Lily frames the question of relations on her canvas. This question of the “relation between those masses” on her canvas is one that previously

puzzles her in “The Window” because she fails to balance between relating the elements on her canvas through an Impressionist style or Post-Impressionist style: “She pitched her easel with her precise old-maidish movements on the edge of the lawn... Yes, it must have been precisely here that she had stood ten years ago. There was the wall; the hedge; the tree. The question was of some relation between those masses. She had borne it in her mind all these years. It seems as if the solution had come to her: she knew now what she wanted to do” (151). This passage can be interpreted as Lily now realizing that she must focus more heavily on correctly representing—to her vision—the relations between objects and subjects on her canvas. Relations between masses on an Impressionist canvas would be depicted through a soft melding into one another, while a Post-Impressionist canvas would likely focus on layering effects, or even overlapping tendencies, between elements. Here, Lily believes that the “solution” has arisen, though Woolf does not share what that solution is.

Encountering Continuing Representational Problems in “The Lighthouse”

Lily’s Impressionist and Post-Impressionist strains are specifically, simultaneously in action during her compositional process. The representational problems that she encounters here lead up to my interpretation of the close of the novel where Lily forges a balance between these competing styles.

First, along a very Impressionist vein of painting, Woolf continually emphasizes the importance of Lily’s sensations and mood when articulating her vision in “The Lighthouse.” Lily views the boat carrying Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James while pondering Mrs. Ramsey’s character: “Yes, that is their boat... with

greyish-brown sails, which she saw now flatten itself upon the water and shoot off across the bay...The sympathy she had not given [Mr. Ramsay] weighed her down. It made it difficult for her to paint” (174). In Impressionist painting, the artist’s sensations of the given moment are essential for creation. Here, we see the guilt that she feels for refusing to give Mr. Ramsay the sympathy he desires from her seeping into her sensations when painting, distracting her from her artistic vision. This changing in mood creates an additional obstacle that adds to her difficulty in capturing her vision through paint.

As we follow Lily’s gaze toward the Ramsay boat in the water, we also receive a picture of the view that contains a Post-Impressionist characteristic. Lily does not only focus upon the juxtaposition of the “greyish-brown sails”; she also notices how the boat “flatten[s]” against the water, as if she is gazing upon and recognizing a flatness of canvas upon which to paint. Honoring and utilizing the flatness of a canvas—of a scene—lets us glimpse Lily’s Cubist style of taking in a scene.

White characterizes Lily’s struggle to paint as an “inward one that tests her intellect and spirit; it involves violent and lacerating encounters with grief and a feeling of inner mutilation” (86). While I agree that Lily’s struggle to represent her vision on the canvas is one that tests her spirit as an artist, and particularly as a woman painter struggling with styles of representation, I do not concede that this struggle is one of metaphorical self-mutilation and violent encounters with grief. Instead, her grief at the loss of Mrs. Ramsay brings on necessary sensations that enable Lily to interact with her artwork both bodily and mentally such that she can

ultimately find her style on the canvas—representing her complete vision—that encapsulates who she is as an artist.

As Lily continues to compose her picture, Woolf reveals how Lily's art demonstrates her beliefs about human relationships, which also seems to be a Bloomsbury belief. In a rather Post-Impressionist manner, Lily thinks about the importance of knowing the outline of a person: "But this was one way of knowing people, she thought: to know the outline, not the detail, to sit in one's garden and look at the slopes of a hill running purple down into the distant heather" (Woolf 198). Thinking of people in terms of outlines extends to many Post-Impressionist works that utilize a blank-faced style of a human subject, unconcerned with detailed facial characteristics. While we also see Impressionist paintings with often undetailed facial characteristics, it is not as common to have no facial characteristics present. In the second half of this passage, after we get the sense of the importance of one's outline, Woolf delivers an Impressionistic "garden" scene, allowing us to envision soft "slopes of a hill" melding with the vibrant "purple" colors of flowers extending into the distance—into more "heather." With this highly Impressionist description of a garden scene, one can call upon an image of Monet's home and garden in Giverny, France, which drew countless Impressionist painters to the splendor of its vibrantly colorful environment. Garden scenes are overwhelming the most popular environment for Impressionist painters to portray with lively pastels and oils, allowing for intriguing color plays between blooms and sunlight.

Additionally, while pondering the character of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily finds that she, as Gillespie points out, must ultimately distance herself (174), for it is better to

know “the outline, not the detail” of people; one must mollify “the impertinences and irrelevances” (Woolf 161). Lily is really concerned with encountering and channeling the essence of Mrs. Ramsay into her picture, rather than worrying herself with the details that are typically informed by what she thinks of as “grotesque” notions (200). For Lily’s Post-Impressionist style, the outline can be the essence that she seeks. Furthermore, this outline can additionally bring meaning to Lily’s focus on Mrs. Ramsay’s relations with her surroundings. It is the outline of a person on a canvas in a Post-Impressionist painting that can exist on the same plane as other elements; the outline is what nudges up against or blends into nearby objects.

When in an act of composing, Lily sees her art as looking at structural patterns and human relationships. In the following passage, first recognize how her Cubist style is at work as she composes, then secondly how her Impressionist style is paradoxically at work as she recomposes. As she contemplates the relationships between the Ramsay family members, she is constantly in an act of composing and recomposing her art: “...stirring the plantains with her brush. Half one’s notions of other people were, after all, grotesque...She raised a little mountain for the ants to climb over. She reduced them to a frenzy of indecision by this interference in their cosmogony. Some ran this way, others that” (200). We first see Lily “stirring the plantains with her brush,” an act that is uncharacteristic of the short brushstrokes and minimally blended surface of Impressionist artwork. The fact that she is “stirring” suggests that Lily is implementing more blending upon a surface, making it become smoother—both characteristics of Post-Impressionist artworks. She is dissatisfied with the notions of people that we experience in life; these notions could be viewed as

impressions of people, an example of Lily being dissatisfied with obtaining impressions of her human art subjects. This dissatisfaction is in conflict with other points in the novel where Lily is more interested in capturing the outline of a person.

Notice how the ants that she has depicted on her canvas originally are here interrupted by her Cubist imperative. By raising a “little mountain for the ants,” she causes “interference” in not only “their cosmology,” but also in her competing compositional sensibilities. The “mountain” acts as a mechanical break within the picture, causing a slight amount of chaos for her ants now scattering in different directions—an amount of chaos that Cubism delights in. In Cubist works, objects are often assessed and broken up to then be reassembled in a different manner, just as we see Lily doing to her ants. After Lily causes disarray for her ants, we see her “a little while later...smoothing a way for her ants” (201). This example of Lily disassembling and reassembling—acts of recomposing—her picture suggests Cubism at work in her process. Lily considers this act further:

She was not inventing; she was only trying to smooth out something she had been given years ago folded up; something she had seen. For in the rough and tumble of daily life, with all those children about, all those visitors, one had constantly a sense of repetition—of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations (201-2)

Lily doesn't see these acts of composing and recomposing as “inventing,” feeling as though this process is a continuation of the painting that she left incomplete before the war. Following an extremely Cubist passage highlighting the disassembling of her ants, this scene has several Impressionistic traits. When considering the Ramsay family, Lily is left with a “sense” of their lives. Instead of considering these individuals separately, Lily thinks in terms of a general “sense,” or impression, left

upon her mind of their daily lives. The reference to “one thing falling where another had fallen” suggests a habitual, never-changing temporality; we receive Lily’s thoughts in the form of a moment where time seems to stand still. This moment, then, “chime[s] in the air” and causes “vibrations.” These descriptions are reminiscent of not only the momentary temporality of an Impressionist painting, but it is also important to note the vibrations of this moment, where the brushstrokes of a scene in an Impressionist painting are meant to illuminate rich vibrations of melding colors.

In these passages where Lily works with the plantains and ants on her canvas, she contemplates the Ramsay family. She works with the plantains in her picture as she considers the complexity of knowing people, for one generally just has insubstantial, “grotesque” notions, or impressions, of people. As she reduces her ants to “a frenzy of indecision,” Lily recounts the past bustling of the large Ramsay family. Some, like Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, are in a way like ants because they are habitual, monotonous creatures, yet appear to always be incessantly busy with handfuls of hollow domestic concerns. Not only do we experience how Lily’s compositional process ties to her impression of human relationships, but we simultaneously experience both her Impressionist mindset and Post-Impressionist style present.

Lily’s fascination with representing Mrs. Ramsay on her canvas is partly due to her interest in domestic life, elevating the mother figure that is Mrs. Ramsay. Gillespie claims that “to present a reality so complex, Woolf thinks not only temporally, but spatially” shown by how Lily “tries to capture the essence of Mrs.

Ramsay, she paints by ‘tunneling her way into her picture, into the past’ (174). I see this tunneling that Gillespie refers to when Woolf describes how “Lily stepped back to get her canvas—so—into perspective”; she considers how “it was an odd road to be walking, this of painting. Out and out one went, further and further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea. And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there” (Woolf 175). Not only does this passage visit the hesitation that Lily repeatedly encounters when painting, but also shows how she is “tunneling her way into her picture” as she swirls her paints with her brush and applies her colors to the canvas.

While I agree with Gillespie that Lily does mentally and emotionally delve into the past to “capture the essence of Mrs. Ramsay,” I do not find that Woolf is trying to illustrate a “reality.” Rather, I believe that both author and character seek to get beyond the harshness and limited nature of perceived reality to get to senses, impressions—to the one knowable essence of a person, of a human relationship. In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf’s discourses on fiction shadow *To the Lighthouse*. To get at human character—to get at Mrs. Ramsay—one must first get at consciousness: “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (287-8). In this notable passage, Woolf deemphasizes the importance of time and perceived reality for a described consciousness that is highly Impressionistic.

Finding Harmony Between Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Styles

In addition to examining the vexed intertwining of Lily’s compositional process and her consideration of human relations, it is also essential to continue an

analysis of both the consistencies and transitions that Lily’s artistic drive makes from “The Window” to “The Lighthouse.” On the surface, Lily’s stylistic tendencies of Impressionism and Cubism seem to be at odds with one another, yet I will examine in this section how she works to bring the two styles into harmony in her *tableau* of Mrs. Ramsay. This specifically works by her trusting her Impressionist sensibilities that lead her to depicting light effects and melding colors on her canvas.

Additionally, she harnesses the strength of a Post-Impressionist style to achieve the harmony that she needs.



Figure 19. Claude Monet. *Woman with a Parasol*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm.

In accordance with Lily’s French Impressionistic tendencies, Woolf’s descriptive narrative of how Lily acknowledges her environment demonstrate qualities reminiscent of Monet paintings. This occurs when Lily watches the boat that holds Mr. Ramsey, Cam, and James: “So fine was the morning except for a streak of wind here and there that the sea and sky looked all one

fabric...clouds had dropped down into the sea...the air were a fine gauze which held things and kept them softly in its mesh” (Woolf 185). Envision a Monet sky, brushstrokes that signify wisps of clouds melded into the vibrant blueness of the sky,

which is reminiscent of the sky that Monet's wife and son are pictured against in *Woman with a Parasol* (1874). Then, imagine this Monet sky paired with the sapphire of the sea, an atmosphere pictured from Lily's viewpoint. Crafting a fabric of "sea and sky" that is all one continuous passage allows us to experience the melting of colors and objects within an Impressionist painting.

Additionally, Lily's attention to contrasts of light and shadow stems from French Impressionist influence. As she paints, Lily sees someone stirring just inside the house, unknowingly creating a shadow in the setting that Lily aims to represent on her canvas: "Mercifully, whoever it was stayed still inside; had settled by some stroke of luck so as to throw an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step. It altered the composition of the picture a little. It was interesting. It might be useful" (204). This passage emphasizes the important role that shadows play in the composition of Lily's painting. Moreover, Lily's inclusion of geometric abstraction is still present in her painting, yet to a very minimal extent now. Instead of Mrs. Ramsay being represented by a dome, or her and James as a triangle, Lily instead thinks in terms of shapes when considering light contrasts, such as "an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step." Here, even though Lily is still thinking slightly geometrically, she has transitioned to thinking geometrically in terms of Impressionistic light contrasts. Therefore, she is no longer representing human subjects as shapes as she did in "The Window"; now, she pays particularly close attention to the shapes that shadows cast within her environment. These shadows that she notes are created by nature, rather than through the recognition of human subjects as shapes.

A consistency that Lily maintains from her aesthetic mode from “The Window” is her firm belief in how the painting should be both a gentle, soothing caress of color and harmony, while at the same time also woven tightly together—an impenetrable pattern stitched together. The beginning of Lily’s vision illustrates this idea of what painting must be: “beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses” (174). The first half of this passage prior to the semicolon depicts qualities of Impressionist painting; here, we receive the metaphor of the “butterfly’s wing” again, which suggests such an extreme delicacy of a creature that even one small mishandle by a human hand can result in its death. These are the dangers that Lily feels the pressure of in her painting; one wrong stroke of the paintbrush can mean failure. At the same time, the “butterfly’s wing” represents a natural patterning and melding of color unexplainably exquisite. Even this creature’s wing can represent these stylistic modes for Lily, who can appreciate the elegance and gentleness of the creature’s vibrant colors “melting into another,” yet would also admire the intricate designing of the patterned wings. In order for her painting to be “beautiful and bright,” Lily strives to depict colors that are vibrant, crafting a painting that is Impressionistic “on the surface,” while her Post-Impressionist imperative aims to tightly knit the patterning of the painting together beneath such tender melding in color. Lily must harness the Impressionists’ power for colors “melting” into one another in a “feathery and evanescent” way with the Cubists’ reliance on clamping

the elements of the painting “together with bolts of iron,” creating art that cannot be unmade even with the power of a “team of horses.”

Lily’s compositional process and struggles with representation in “The Lighthouse” can be analyzed through passages of compositional strife: “she began to lay on a red, a grey, and she began to model her way into the hollow there. At the same time, she seemed to be sitting beside Mrs. Ramsay on the beach... Lily, painting steadily, felt as if a door had opened, and one went in and stood gazing silently about in a high cathedral-like place, very dark, very solemn” (174-5). For Woolf, Lily’s compositional process is one of quiet, aloneness, and contemplation, riddled with uncertainty as she feels herself gazing in “a high cathedral-like place, very dark, very solemn.” Not long after this somber contemplation, Lily considers fleeing from this internal struggle by jettisoning herself from a cliff: “She heard the roar and the crackle. The whole sea for miles round ran red and gold. Some winey smell mixed with it and intoxicated her, for she felt again her own headlong desire to throw herself off the cliff and be drowned looking for a pearl brooch on a beach” (179). This returning metaphor of hesitancy and self-doubt is often attributed by scholars to her struggle as a woman artist. White describes “the risks women experience when they begin to work seriously as painters,” specifically describing Lily thinking of herself as “venturing down a dark corridor, swimming in high seas, or walking on a narrow plank above water” when she paints (13); but we can furthermore view these metaphors in terms of coping with competing representational imperatives to create.

In order to solve the problem of balance in her painting—one that I see as a balance between Impressionism and Cubism—Lily must locate a representational

intersection and forge a unity between the elements on her canvas; to achieve this compositional harmony, she must trust her vision:

The wind had blown the trail of smoke about; there was something displeasing about the placing of the ships. The disproportion there seemed to upset some harmony in her own mind. She felt an obscure distress. It was confirmed when she turned to her picture. She had been wasting her morning. For whatever reason she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary (196)

The “razor edge of balance between two opposite forces,” which I understand to be Impressionism and Cubism, must be obtained in order for Lily to feel as though she has gotten her painting right—accurately representing her vision that calls for the relations on the canvas to represent both an ironclad impenetrability of Cubism and also the soft, melting light effects of Impressionism. Lily contemplates what this problem of balance may be:

There was something perhaps wrong with the design? Was it, she wondered, that the line of the wall wanted breaking, was it that the mass of the trees was too heavy? She smiled ironically; for had she not thought, when she began, that she had solved her problem? What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything. Get that and start afresh; get that and start afresh; she said desperately, pitching herself firmly again before her easel (196)

Lily realizes that she has not yet “solved her problem” as she had previously imagined upon returning to her painting. To get at this problem—one of representational balance—we see Lily contemplating the relations between the elements on her canvas. Lily’s question of whether the “line of the wall wanted breaking” refers to an object on her canvas, an object representative of the stylistic obstacle she faces. To achieve such balance between styles, we see Lily here

wondering whether an aspect of Cubism is the most appropriate next step to break down this obstacle—“the wall”—in the design. A reference to “breaking” an element on the canvas refers to Post-Impressionist and Cubist strains of painting, while Impressionism strives to illuminate objects as gently coming together in a picture. Next, notice how Lily questions that “the mass of the trees” may be “too heavy” in their relations to other elements, a characteristic on a painting that a Cubist would be perfectly comfortable with, but we see Lily’s Impressionist strain feeling unsure about. Yet, she recognizes that she must grasp “that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything” before she can find the balance on the canvas that she seeks. She must reconcile the Post-Impressionist strains of her work with her Impressionist tendencies in order to be ready to start a fresh painting that may lead to balance and completion:

It was a miserable machine, an inefficient machine, she thought, the human apparatus for painting or for feeling; it always broke down at the critical moment; heroically, one must force it on. She stared, frowning. There was the hedge, sure enough. But one got nothing by soliciting urgently. One got only a flare in the eye from looking at the line of the wall, or from thinking—she wore a grey hat. She was astonishingly beautiful. Let it come, she thought, if it will come. For there are moments when one can neither think nor feel. And if one can neither think nor feel, she thought, where is one? Here on the grass, on the ground, she thought, sitting down, and examining with her brush a little colony of plantains. For the lawn was very rough. Here sitting on the world, she thought, for she could not shake herself free from the sense that everything this morning was happening for the first time, perhaps for the last time... (196-7)

Even in thinking about her painting, we see Lily’s Impressionist sensations competing with her Cubist critical eye that focuses on breaking down components on the canvas, as well as ideas. She finds that her ability to create “always broke down” when she most needs it; this is an example of Lily’s Cubist strain emerging. She is not

allowing her sensations and perception to be master of her creating art at this moment, which an Impressionist imperative encourages. Instead, she considers that she must “force it on”—force herself to create, rather than letting the atmospheric impressions of her surroundings, as well as her perception, steer her painterly motivations. When Lily is forcing herself to think about Mrs. Ramsey in an attempt to beckon her vision onto the canvas, her art is stifled. It is only when she begins to give into her sensations and to “let [her vision] come” that she is able to begin creating a painting that is true to her vision. This becomes a moment where Lily can “neither think nor feel” as she begins to give into an Impressionist imperative that lets her relax her perplexed, unsure conscious, and rather subconsciously channel a painterly mood driven by sensory perception.

This interpretation—a return to Impressionism taking place in this passage—is compelling, given that Lily’s thoughts of frustration over design quickly turns to an inventory of her surroundings, an environmental impression which then feeds into her art. The proceeding few lines illustrate this focus on her surroundings as she feels the roughness of the grass, hardness of the ground, and the inexplicable draw to “[examine] with her brush a little colony of plantains.” Notice how Lily feels herself “sitting on the world at this point,” suggesting the extremely humanist imperative of Impressionist painting; the art is all about the environment, perception, and sensations of the artist—nothing else matters when creating.

Woolf describes a kind of trance that Lily descends—or rather transcends—into as she nears completing her painting: “She had let the flowers fall from her basket, Lily thought, screwing up her eyes and standing back as if to look at her

picture, which she was not touching, however, with all her faculties in a trance, frozen over superficially but moving underneath with extreme speed” (204). Lily recognizes her “faculties in a trance” where she does not seem to have control over her bodily movements either, inadvertently letting “the flowers fall from her basket.” Here, Lily is “frozen” in her painterly vision, giving way to the Impressionist strain in her work, letting her mood and senses govern her creation. Instantaneously, we are told that while Lily’s body is transfixed, her mind is also “moving underneath with extreme speed.” It seems as though there are two competing painterly mental imperatives at work here, giving into her Impressionistic bodily sensations, yet also her mind working rapidly, even mechanically, along a Cubist line of thought.

Then, Lily envisions painting—what she can do with a canvas: “...had she not the faculty of obedience to perfection?...Down fields, across valleys, white, flower-strewn—that was how she would have painted it. The hills were austere. It was rocky; it was steep” (204). While the majority of Bloomsbury Post-Impressionist paintings dwell on domestic setting, Lily currently sees a painterly vision that deals with content typical of Impressionist painting *en plein air*. We see Lily throughout the novel having a Post-Impressionist fascination with painting domestic settings and domestic figures; nevertheless this free-flowing natural scene travels out in scope from an immediate natural environment to imagined fields, valleys, and flowers beyond. This Impressionistic vision also illustrates how Lily must be in a particular artistic mood to create: “Her mood was coming back to her. One must keep on looking without for a second relaxing the intensity of emotion, the determination not to be put off, not to be bamboozled. One must hold the scene—so—in a vise and let

nothing come in and spoil it” (204). Notice how Lily’s painterly vision works in terms of a “mood,” one that she must relax into with an “intensity of emotion” that illustrates how her Impressionist sensibilities are central to painting. Lily feels how delicate this painterly mood is for her—an Impressionist sensibility that can easily slip from her grasp, leaving her to verge on the brink of failure without its sensory guidance.

Lily’s ongoing vision of Mrs. Ramsay becomes more concretized as she gets close to finishing her painting, Mrs. Ramsey appearing in her chair knitting:

“Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!” she cried, feeling the horror come back—to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? And then, quietly, as if she refrained, that too became part of ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair, with the table. Mrs. Ramsay—it was part of her perfect goodness—sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked her needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat (205)

This passage illuminates both Lily’s Impressionist and Post-Impressionist strains working together to achieve this vision of her friend. First, Lily’s Post-Impressionist imperative views all of the elements in this vision becoming on the same level; her “ordinary experience” is equal to “the chair” and “with the table.” This leveling of the elements of the vision can be likened to the prominence of recognizing and harnessing the flatness of the canvas in Post-Impressionist paintings—demonstrating the power to depict a human subject as neither superior nor inferior to one’s surroundings, but rather existing on the same even plane.

Secondly, we see Lily detecting how Mrs. Ramsay “cast her shadow on the step,” paying heed to an Impressionist quality that would be essential to depict on the canvas with hints of color playing in the shadow. In accordance with this

Impressionist vision, Gillespie points out how Lily “in her grief cries out Mrs. Ramsay’s name” and is “comforted by her recognition that she can understand and use in her painting the dead woman’s creative ability to make life stand still” (74-5). The idea of making life stand still is also a highly Impressionistic sentiment, an Impressionist painting characterizing the artist’s perception of a moment.

Near the close of the novel, Woolf crafts an Impressionistic painting with words that Lily becomes a part of: “‘He must have reached it,’ said Lily Briscoe aloud, feeling suddenly completely tired out. For the lighthouse had become almost invisible, had melted away into a blue haze, and the effort of looking at it and effort of thinking of him landing there, which both seemed to be one and the same effort, had stretched her body and mind to the utmost” (210). In this passage, one sees Lily, or at least her Post-Impressionistic outline looking out to the lighthouse, which is melding with “a blue haze” so that it is now impossible to discern where the lighthouse ends and the blue haze of the sky and ocean begin. Like a Monet Impressionist sketch, the natural elements on the canvas meld together, while the blueness of the sky and ocean are simultaneously layered together as is more typical in Post-Impressionist painting.

At this point, Lily’s painting is juxtaposed with the Impressionistic setting that Woolf highlights: a picture within a picture that can be compared to the “historical quotation” style of several Bloomsbury artists. The narrative describing Lily’s painting of Mrs. Ramsay is set within Lily’s contemplation of Mr. Ramsay, Cam, and James heading to the lighthouse. Bell’s *The Open Door* (1926), for example, offers the “motif of windows or open doors that look like framed pictures, placing even the

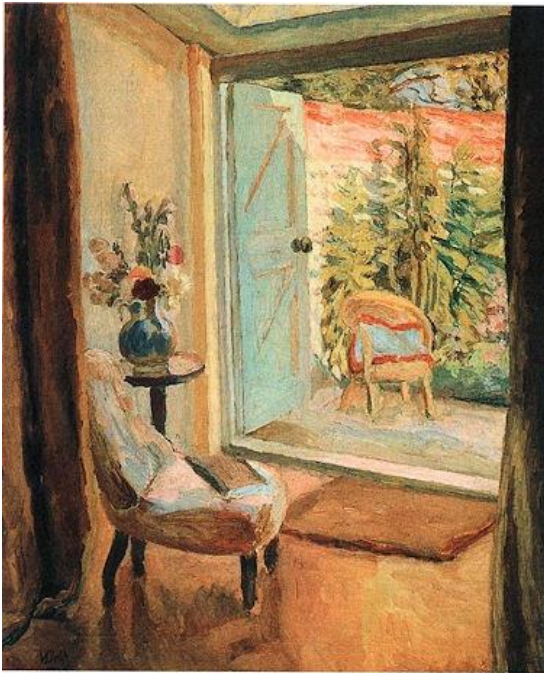


Figure 20. Vanessa Bell. *The Open Door*, 1926. Oil on board, 75 x 62.3 cm.

natural environment in artful quotation marks,” making “frames within frames and repetitions of color and line present the garden as a picture in a picture” (Reed 247). This “historical quotation” of oil on board presents a domestic setting in much more subtle colors than several of Bell’s pre-war paintings. Far from a geometric abstract approach, this painting looks similar to an Impressionist composition from Monet’s time.

At the close of the novel, Lily’s distinct point of view is represented subjectively: “‘He has landed,’ she said aloud. ‘It is finished’” (Woolf 211). In the final lines of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf prolongs what I believe to be an Impressionist moment: “There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something” (211). There is a mixture of Post-Impressionist and Impressionist qualities on this canvas, where the painting’s final balancing between its Impressionist “greens and blues” and Cubist “lines running up and across” is almost achieved. Lily considers that her painting “would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred” (211). Even though the image of Mrs. Ramsay

on the steps has now dissipated, her “blurred” canvas waits for the final balancing mark.

This scene illustrates Lily’s possession of her painting: “with a sudden intensity, as if she saw clearly for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre” (211). Woolf does not reveal what the finishing line painted in the center of the canvas represents, but one can discern that it is the line of the lighthouse. Froula claims that “with the past laid to rest, her picture shimmers in ‘all its greens and blues,’ colors of earth and sky and the bay brimming with things and lives” (172). Yet, Lily must find the center; she finds the center by selecting the mark of representation for the lighthouse, producing a completed Impressionist-Cubist painting: “It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (211). Thus, the pattern is complete; Lily’s “problem”—or really what seems to be multiple problems—with representation have been resolved.

But how does the mark of the lighthouse fix the representational problems that Lily encounters? What does the mark of the lighthouse do for the composition of the painting as a whole? In search for this question, I come to a discussion within a letter to Roger Fry of Woolf claiming that she “meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse,” explaining that “one has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another” (qtd. in Banks 228). It is fascinating that Woolf leaves the symbolism of the lighthouse ambivalent, desiring the reader to draw meaning from it. Most importantly

in this letter, Woolf describes how there must be a “central line” that holds a design together; this notion of how fiction works for Woolf extends to how to view Lily’s painting—most notably her painting of the line “in the centre” of her canvas, completing the design.

The painting of this final line unites the elements on the canvas; we can look at this line “in the centre” as the mark which completes and balances the painting. While scholars typically view this final painted line as symbolic of the lighthouse, I extend this reading to also viewing this harmonizing line in light of the balance between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism that Lily achieves in this final scene. Lily’s painting is informed by both Impressionist and Post-Impressionist styles, which renders her unsure of her artistic expression for the majority of the novel until this glorious moment in the narrative when she senses the completion of the painting, perceived with the centered line. This line in the center of the picture is meant to obtain balance between the elements on the canvas, while also signifying an equality between traditionally competing styles of design. Since both Impressionist and Post-Impressionist styles are utilized during the crafting of this final painting, we can then see how it is essential for this balancing line to be portrayed in the middle of the canvas, giving equal representation to both Impressionist and Cubist styles of creation.

Lily’s moment of painterly triumph aligns with Edna’s suicide. As I have argued, Edna’s Impressionistic death reveals triumph in relation to her ability to craft Impressionistic sketches. Like Lily, Edna refuses to compromise herself as an artist; but unlike Lily, Edna chooses death rather than struggling forward to achieve a

representational balance in her art. Whereas Lily finds a representational balance, Edna remains unable to reconcile her Realist approach to painting with her Impressionist strains in a balancing act at the close of the novel. Instead, Edna's suicide illustrates how she fully gives into her Impressionistic sensibilities—her sensations and accompanying mood leading her out to the water—to an Impressionistic moment of simultaneous triumph and defeat.

In her final painting of the novel, Lily's attention to soft light effects, melded colors and objects, her environment and sensory perception—her Impressionist vision—are met by her devotion to Post-Impressionist styles of layering bold colors and objects, outlining domestic scenes and human subjects, configuring elements on the canvas tightly together. In the final moments of her life, Edna's Impressionist sensibilities meld with the Impressionistic narrative that Chopin paints—illustrating a Monet seascape, the quiet stillness of the intimate moment, the artist's sensory perception of her atmosphere.

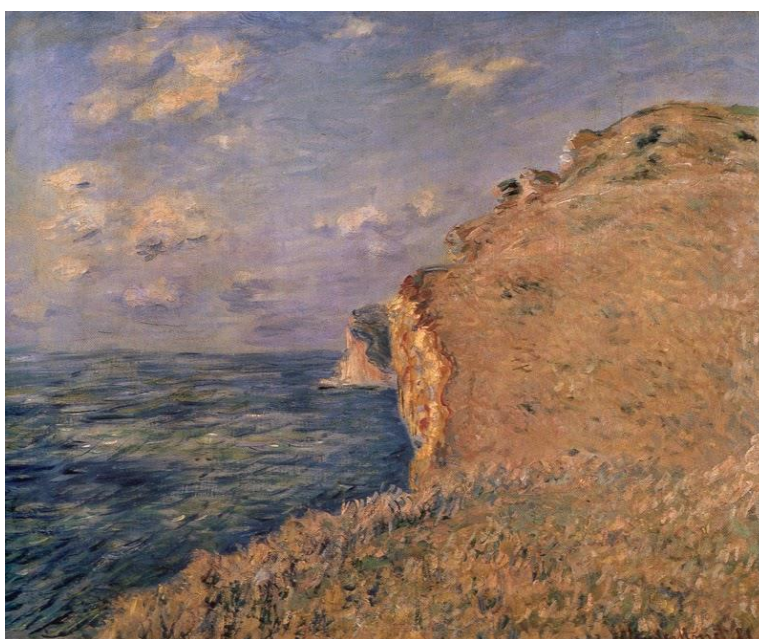


Figure 21. Claude Monet. *Cliff at Fécamp*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 80 cm.

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