FEMALE VICTIMHOOD AND SUICIDE IN THE NATURALISTIC NOVEL

By

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td></td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY</td>
<td></td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td></td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</td>
<td></td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2</td>
<td>LITERARY NATURALISM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beginnings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Naturalism in the Novel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critiques of Naturalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Reforming Nature of Naturalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuing Influence of Naturalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3</td>
<td>THE WOMAN IN THE NATURALISTIC NOVEL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE UNMARRIED WOMAN IN STEPHEN CRANE’S</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREET</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4</td>
<td>THE UNMARRIED WOMAN IN EDITH WHARTON’S</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE HOUSE OF MIRTH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5</td>
<td>THE MARRIED WOMAN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE MARRIED WOMAN IN GUSTAVE’S MADAME BOVARY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6</td>
<td>THE MARRIED WOMAN IN KATE CHOPIN’S</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE AWAKENING

7  SUICIDE AND THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST  165

   Maggie’s Suicide  167
   Lily’s Suicide    173
   Edna’s Suicide   175
   Emma’s Suicide   179

8  RECONCILING NATURALISM AND SPIRITUALITY AS DEFINED IN GAUDIUM ET SPES  185

   Man as a Social Being  188
   Man and the Spiritual  190
   Human Dignity         192
   Suicide and Self-preservation  193
   Human Will and Freedom  196
   Atheism and Anti-clericalism  198
   Marriage and Family   202
   Human and Social Culture  206

9  CONCLUSION  209

BIBLIOGRAPHY  218
ABSTRACT

This literary study explores the female condition in four naturalistic novels, namely, Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Street*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, and Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. The purpose is to reconsider the context of “woman” in this genre by extending from dialectical views with positive and negative connotations towards a reimagining of the “female” with some degree of agency despite claims of “determined conditions” in naturalism. The study’s examination of the heroine’s interplay with “forces” in society illustrates that as exemplified in my chosen novels, these “forces” do not demonstrate total control of an individual’s fate. In exploring the female condition in the novels, the study goes through three steps: namely, examining the condition of the female protagonist in society, analysing the relation between suicide and the role of free will, and investigating the role of the spiritual dimension within the frame of *Gaudium et Spes* for issues raised in the novels.

In relation to the female condition, the study incorporates important issues on female disempowerment and displacement namely, commodification, conspicuous consumption, consumerism, and rugged individualism culled from Marxist-Feminist criticism, Foucault’s and Beauvoir’s concepts on power or free will, and discourses on spirituality within the frame of *Gaudium et Spes* to clarify issues on marriage, family, human dignity, and self-preservation raised in the novels. It is found that the female protagonist’s non-conformism and defiance of societal “forces” are expressions of willpower that compromises self-preservation and continuity. Despite the socio-cultural disadvantages experienced by the female protagonist, her tragic fate is the result of her choice that suggests a clamour for spiritual regeneration. Her misdirected passions and quest for individuality and self-fulfilment imply a need for something more, which links to the spiritual dimension of her nature. Spirituality within the tradition of *Gaudium et Spes* highlights the good of the human person with the acknowledgment of divine will, the same aspiration (with emphasis on social awareness) that naturalism conveys for humanity, with its lens however on individual will. Hence, the criticism on naturalism’s reductionist treatment of the non-physical and intense focus on the physical social realities actually point to the same aspiration that *Gaudium et Spes* projects – the betterment of the human condition and humanity as a whole.
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Preface

I am an educator from a Catholic University in the Philippines where I teach Language and Literature courses. With the maxim, “Veritas Liberabit Vos”, our university aims for the total formation of the person through the course offerings from our various departments so that, all undergraduate students are required to enrol in Basic Courses (such as Religious Studies, English Language and Literature, Philosophy, Sociology, Economics, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Physical Education, and the like) for the first two years of their university training. The university mission is not just concerned with the intellectual, social, and physical development of the person, but also his or her spiritual formation. We require Religious Studies for our students because we are a Catholic University. We want their Christian spirituality enhanced. Since our orientation as Catholic educators is linked with such spirituality, its integration in the teaching of literature enriches our aim for the spiritual advancement of our students. We regard the physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual development of our students equally important for their wellbeing so that they can function as “men and women for others” in society. One of the rationales of my thesis is that literary criticism through my analysis of the human condition and role of agency in naturalistic literature can be a venue for a deeper examination of spirituality, in this instance through the framework of Catholicism. In this study, my analysis of the novels suggests that naturalistic literature, although known for its incongruities in its depiction of harsh realities, has an implicit aim at social awareness made possible through better understanding of issues on gender inequalities and other forms of displacement for the improvement of human conditions in society.

The conservative orientation of Philippine Universities and Colleges, particularly with regard to curriculum offerings, contributed to my rationale for examining naturalist literature. Literary naturalism is less explored in Catholic universities. When I was an undergraduate and graduate student, I had limited exposure to literary naturalism particularly the novels in this genre. My orientation is more focused on the standard forms of literature i.e. Shakespeare’s works, Romantic Literature, Metaphysical Poetry, Greek Mythology, British Literature, American Literature, and Philippine Literature in English. Although three of the naturalistic novels under study are categorised as American Literature, they are not taught or assigned in universities perhaps because they are not popular or considered standard literature suitable for students in my country. I thought that an exposure to naturalistic literature with its choice of controversial subject matter and themes might sound somewhat radical in consideration of our orientation, but it can serve as an eye opener for
the traditional mind especially in its treatment of women and their position in patriarchal societies and agenda on social awareness. The addition of naturalistic novels to our curriculum will help facilitate learning more about what are known in the Philippine educational system as Significant Human Experiences (SHE) in literary studies and thereby promote literary appreciation and criticism through the reading of literature untethered by cultural prejudices and preconceptions. This suggests that a work of art like naturalistic fiction must be judged not only on the technical analysis of critics but also on how its meaning or implications through the Significant Human Experiences (uncovered in the context) can move its readers.

Not all naturalistic literary texts feature suicide. However, one of the social realities conveyed in the novels under study relates to suicide. The theme of suicide is controversial within the Philippine cultural context. The main reason is that we are a predominantly Catholic country, and we consider that suicide carries a stigma. It is not an open theme for discussion. It is perceived as anathema to life, a divine gift. The religious and the faithful consider life on earth important for the continuity of future generations. The families of those who commit the act suffer from indignity although priests do not decline church services for them. Despite the cultural and religious sensibilities attached to it, I chose to discuss suicide in the novels to explore some of the important issues about spirituality which it raises.

Suicide in literary naturalism unveils a transposition of the human instinct for self-preservation. To explore the female desire for self-immolation in the novels sheds light on this idea of female self-preservation reversal with its intended meaning and addresses the question of suicide for a better understanding of the physical and non-physical causes, drives, and implications. The study links the idea of suicide to female agency and clamour for spiritual regeneration with a focus on the protagonists as beleaguered human souls in their search for personal integrity and hunger for love in their ensnarement. As a woman, I can relate to what the protagonists in the novels have undergone, how they cope with inner emptiness and how they struggle in their solitariness and lack of support system. In this thesis, I focus on the female experience, her societal condition, and the spiritual dimension in naturalistic literature.

I chose spirituality within the framework of *Gaudium et Spes* because I wanted to know more about human spirituality, particularly Catholic spirituality which is my orientation. I reflected on the highlights of the Vatican document and related them to the experiences of the protagonists in regard to important issues on the female condition, marriage, family, human dignity, and self-
preservation because they are raised in the novels. In my thesis, I discuss spirituality as defined in *Gaudium et Spes* in the spirit of a desire for renewed spirituality and fresh hope amidst the harsh social realities that humanity is confronted with daily.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We must place women, femininity, and feminism at the center of naturalism if we are to understand it, and understand it we must. For we still dwell within the moment of its genesis and its momentum. (Stimpson in Fleissner x)

Stimpson’s assertion provides a starting point for this thesis. Women as characters in naturalistic literature are perceived to have undergone a kind of transformation compared to their predecessors who are known for their acceptance of traditional roles in the domestic arena. This shift disengages earlier patterns and perceptions of womanhood or femininity because women start to evolve as they exhibit forms of dynamism beyond the norms. Their progression into the “spaces previously considered the spheres of men” (Goldman 71) challenges social-cultural benchmarks. No longer content in their distinctive position in society exemplified in the literature that precedes naturalism, they pursue specific freedoms for expression of individuality. Fleissner notes that aspects of life that had been thought to form a more or less unchanging backdrop for larger social-historical events, and thereby able to be taken for granted rather than scrutinized in themselves, thus come forward for the first time as significant elements of the [naturalist] story line. The modern woman can emblematize this shifting sense of nature’s relation to social-historical time, for ... she herself represents that part of life once conceived as timelessly ‘inert’ which can now be seen stepping forth onto the stage of history. As a result, the possibility of what her still-unfolding story might look like and mean, how she might come to ‘know herself’, becomes the major focus of narrative interest for the naturalist text. (6)

This “stepping forth onto the stage of history” results in perceptions of female displacement that paved the way for a “reductionist treatment of naturalism” (Brennan 12) by commentators
at the time the novels were published, and the perception of naturalistic literature “in a certain way” (i.e. unfavourably in literary criticism). In the modern era, “naturalism is seen as either fatalistic or nostalgic in the face of modern life”:

If fatalistic, it depicts modern individuals bereft of agency or vitality, dwarfed by a cityscape of soulless mechanical dynamos, spiralling steadily downward in ‘plots of decline’; to the extent that ‘nature’ survives here, it does so in the distorted form of traits linked to decadence or atavism. If nostalgic, the reverse is true: naturalism goes along with a renewal of what Roosevelt called ‘the strenuous life,’ returning masculine power and adventure to a vitiated modernity by rediscovering the freedoms and struggles associated with a still wide-open, un tarnished natural landscape. (Fleissner 6-7)

I would like to reconsider the context of “woman” in this genre by extending from dialectical views with positive and negative connotations, towards a reimagining of the “female” with some degree of agency despite claims of “determined conditions” in literary naturalism. My analysis of the heroine’s interplay with “forces”¹ in society will attempt to show that these “forces” do not demonstrate unqualified control of an individual’s fate as exemplified in my chosen novels. To explore the female condition and agency in the novels, this study goes through three steps, namely, examining the socio-economic condition of the heroine within patriarchal structure and the interplay of “forces” in her society that includes gender relations, disempowerment, displacement, and ideologies in relation to the female condition, analysing the relation between suicide and free will, and investigating the role of the spiritual dimension for relevant issues raised in the novels. My work aims to demonstrate how the heroine positions herself in society despite the tension between materialism (physical) and spirituality (non-physical), and between individuality and conformity.

¹ The word “forces” in naturalism has a special connotation in literary criticism because it has reference to the environment, heredity, instincts or impulses. Hence, it is put in quotation marks in this study.
The study incorporates discourses on spirituality (within the framework of one particular exemplary statement of doctrinal spirituality) to clarify issues on marriage, family, human dignity, and self-preservation raised in the novels. Several works on naturalistic texts have examined interrelated discourses of power relationships, economic production, and gender definitions. My work seeks to extend these entwined discourses to include spirituality to explore how it “marks out the visible from hidden realms of experience, and how it defines the modalities that allow subjects to gain access to either of them” (Den Tandt 8).

Grimmitt states that spirituality refers to a “human capacity for a certain type of awareness, the activation of the human capacity for self-transcendence and movement towards a state of consciousness in which the limitations of human finite identity are challenged by the exercise of the creative imagination” (125). Because of the diversity and complexity of spirituality, I have framed my use of a spiritual discourse in this thesis through Catholicism (as outlined in more detail below). In Wright’s examination of embodied spirituality, “literature is consistent in refusing to equate spirituality with religion, and in insisting that spirituality is a broader and more universal concept” (9). However, as Wright argues, the push to “avoid reducing spirituality to, or identifying it with, any specific cultural tradition” (9) dislocates and decontextualizes spirituality, stripping it of any material content and purpose. He writes:

Spirituality is inevitably contextualized within a worldview, an underlying metanarrative concerning the basic truth of the reality we indwell, whether it be that of a diversity of religious and theological traditions embodied within specific religious communities, a universalised theology emanating from the western liberal academy, or stories rooted in the perspectives of romanticism, secularism, naturalism, postmodernity of the host of New Age Movements. (17)
I acknowledge there are diverse understandings of spirituality, so for the purpose of this thesis, I identify a specific discourse through the use of Christian spirituality framed within the Catholic document, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.

*Gaudium et Spes* promotes Christian spirituality by encouraging humanity to extend awareness of the spiritual human dimension and strengthen it in order to prevent the lagging “spiritual advancement” amidst the increasing “intellectual formation” (6) among humankind. The document claims that the search “for a better world” must correspond to humanity’s spiritual advancement (6) in the quest for the “true, good and beautiful” (85). *Gaudium et Spes* therefore serves as a guide for humanity on Christian spirituality. It links spirituality directly to the questions about family, marriage, society in relation to male and female roles and social positions raised in the novels. With its stand on a human being’s dual nature i.e. “body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (4), the document encourages the individual person to recognize the non-physical dimension to secure permanence or stability for the experience of life because when man\(^2\) “recognizes in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being mocked by a fantasy born only of physical or social influences, but is rather laying hold of the proper truth of the matter” (14).

The Vatican document upholds its spiritual thrust with the idea of an individual person as a “social being” (13) who belongs to a social structure. Therefore, he or she is expected to share in the free interchange of ideas and feelings with others in society; otherwise, man “can neither live nor develop his full potential” (13). Man is not meant for a “life of isolation, but for the formation of social unity” (30). These “social ties” which include his “family and political

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\(^2\) The use of “man” in this study is for the purpose of consistency with the Vatican document, *Gaudium et Spes*, which considers “man” to include both male and female.
community, relate with greater immediacy to his innermost nature” (24) that is made aware of “the deepest longings of the heart” which “is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer” (39); hence, the document underscores the importance of social order and interaction to enhance the “qualities of the human person” and safeguard his or her rights in society (25).

The inclusion of *Gaudium et Spes* in my work therefore encapsulates spiritual values aimed at established social institutions such as marriage and the family, subjects that I will discuss in connection with the female condition and position in society. My understanding of naturalism’s choice of subject matter portrayed in graphic detail is that it aims to have an impact on readers in its presentation of social ills that beset humankind (as explained further in the chapters on unmarried and married women). This suggests that the naturalistic novelist wants to effect change in the historical or material situation and human consciousness and thus campaigns for life’s ideals that may have indirect links with spirituality in the Christian tradition such as the eradication of the ills in society in order to promote human dignity and true freedom, the common good, and a just world. The naturalistic writer may be unaware of such connection to the non-physical element because it emphasizes the visible or physical dimensions perhaps for narrative-objective effect. However, the naturalistic writer searches for the ideal in society through his exposition of life’s incongruities via the male and female experiences. I would like to explore literary naturalism in order to show that its vision for human societies, despite its lens on social ills and the physical, suggests a call for spirituality, “a larger concept that deals with meaning, purpose, and direction in life” (Baker 361). This clamour suggests a longing for something more in the female experience slanted on the physical or material human dimension.
Waaijman claims that spirituality denotes “the realm of the inner life” such as “purity of motives, affections, intentions, inner dispositions” or “the analysis of feelings” (361). Baker expounds on the idea of spirituality as follows:

The word 'spirit' addresses the 'life principle,' 'the thinking, motivating, and feeling part,' or the 'life, will, consciousness, and thought.' The English word 'spirit' is derived from the Latin word 'spiritus' which means 'breath, air, life, or courage.' Spiritus is derived from the Greek word 'pneuma' meaning 'breath' or 'air,' and we find a comparable Hebrew word for spirit, 'ruach,' which means 'wind,' 'breath,' or 'spirit.' We are 'inspired' to take in something, which enables us to develop an interpretation or perspective on the world. Spirit then, is that which animates, gives life, vigor, passion or in other words, that which gives us a reason for functioning. Spirituality is what gives meaning to everything else in one's life.

'Spiritual' is defined as 'of the spirit or the soul, often a religious or moral aspect' and 'of, from, or concerned with the intellect, or what is often thought of as the better or higher part of the mind.' Spirituality then, focuses on a belief in, or a relationship with, a higher power; it is the aspect of life that gives purpose, meaning, and direction, and which may encompass religion. When many people think about spirituality, they confuse spiritual with religious, but spirituality is more than a religious belief. Spirituality is a larger concept that deals with meaning, purpose and direction in life. (361)

The choice of the novels for this study is based on the identification of the authors with naturalistic proclivities, that is, their choice of subject matter, their deployment of a foregrounded objectivity, and their interest in determinism. They will be examined “in order to determine their peculiar characteristics” as Walcutt asserts, so that literary writers are not labelled realists or naturalists just because of their “place in the growing consciousness of the period” (11). In line with this argument, I include Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* as part of the group of novels for analysis in this study. As a novelist, Flaubert resisted the label of realist or naturalist. Cowley writes that Flaubert “was a predecessor and guide of the French
naturalists” (434), and Loomis suggests that Flaubert is grouped with the naturalistic writers (188). Flaubert depicts naturalistic leanings in his portrayal of the economic impact on the protagonist and non-regulation of sexual appetites and passions. His novel’s inclusion will complete the line-up of novels with suicide themes for this study.

The other novels included for analysis are Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Street*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. They are chosen for this study because they are categorized in literary criticism as naturalistic novels and include the suicide of their female protagonists. A number of naturalistic novels focus on male protagonists or male suicide i.e. Jack London’s *Martin Eden*, Benjamin Franklin Norris’ *McTeague*, and Theodore Drieser’s *Sister Carrie*. The scope of my study is restricted to novels with suicidal heroines. Crane and Wharton’s novels represent two unmarried heroines from underprivileged and privileged social classes while Flaubert and Chopin’s novels represent two married heroines from less privileged and privileged social classes.

**Significance**

Naturalism is known for its slant towards the physical or material aspects of the world. But the naturalistic novels in this study show the incompleteness of systems based purely on materialist elements, through the evident sense of lack and loss in the experiences of the female protagonists, and the various kinds of conflict which lead to their fate. Acknowledging the spiritual dimension and sensibility implicit in the novels brings a fully human element in the reading experience. Reader experience is enriched through an awareness of the dual nature of humankind – the physical and spiritual dimensions and the importance of cultivating not just the physical but also the spiritual aspect of a person’s nature as implied in the novels.
This study clarifies issues on gender relations and power struggle in the naturalistic novels, and deepens an understanding of the importance of considering spirituality in literary study. For example, a discussion of female issues will help reinforce instruction in gender studies in the Philippines and promote social awareness through naturalistic literature to students of Catholic schools and universities in the Philippines as well as to literary scholars in other countries. Naturalism is less explored in the Philippine Curriculum in Literature in Catholic schools and universities due to its perceived incongruities, and my dissertation will provide a venue for a better understanding of the naturalistic woman with her physical-material concerns and need for spirituality for a sense of meaning and direction in her connections with the world. This study hopes to reconceptualise the female experience and bring out the richness in the reading of literary naturalism beyond the borders of conservatism and presumptions.

In 2007, Grauke claims that “very little has been written about the topic of suicide in American literature, particularly literature of the nineteenth-century, and relatively little has been written about suicide in literature in general” (1). Since this study also examines female suicide represented within the cluster of naturalistic novels, it will therefore help to fill the gap and encourage other researchers to contribute to the body of meagre studies on suicide in literature particularly in naturalistic novels.

Outline

Chapter one presents the introduction which includes the focus of the study, explanation for the choice of novels and inclusion of Gaudium et Spes, significance of the study, chapter outline, and methodology that incorporates important ideological concepts on
female disempowerment, Foucault’s and Beauvoir’s concepts of power and free will, and spirituality within the framework of Gaudium et Spes.

Chapter two focuses on literary naturalism. It presents the critics’ observations about naturalism in general for a deeper understanding of this genre in literature and literary criticism. This chapter is categorised into the following sections namely, beginnings of naturalism, naturalism in the American novel, critiques of naturalism, definitions, social reforming nature of naturalism, and the continuing influence of naturalism.

Chapters three and four explore the female condition as represented by the unmarried female protagonists in Crane’s and Wharton’s novels. These chapters incorporate concepts on female disempowerment and ideologies in relation to the female condition. This chapter considers how the notion of “female” and “victimhood” are constructed within the naturalistic genre: issues of female disempowerment namely, commodification and consumption, rugged individualism, social ostracism and other socio-cultural disadvantages are examined. The novels attempt to show that although female victimhood is the effect of the interplay of “forces”, another key factor comes into play in line with Beauvoir’s assertion that suggests a connection with the female spirit, will, or choice: “If woman discovers herself as the inessential and never turns into the essential, it is because she does not bring about this transformation herself” (8).

The married woman is the focus of chapters five and six as represented in Chopin’s and Flaubert’s novels. In these chapters, the analysis of the construct of the woman focuses on married women as wives and mothers and the question of traditional female roles and social position, their relationships with husbands, children, and other men in their search for individuality and self-fulfilment.
Chapters five and six centre on textual analysis in order to explore the female condition in the novels, and examine the female experience, her position in society as woman, wife, and mother. These chapters will show how the female protagonists are portrayed in their attempts to address inequalities and in their search for alternatives within a patriarchal tradition that surrounds them. The four novels used for this study will show the differences within the genre of naturalism in the representation of “female”, the social status of the female protagonist, and the concept of freedom in response to the naturalistic notions of determinism.

Chapter seven presents a critical analysis of the representation of suicide in the novels. In this chapter, close attention is given to the interplay of “forces” and the role of free will that lead to the protagonist’s fate. It examines the representation of female suicide as deliberate and accidental acts as well as the meaning and implications of suicide. The fate of the protagonist will then be juxtaposed with the fate of the other female characters who embrace the life affirming stance as answer to the challenges they face. It attempts to show that the spiritual human dimension such as a sense of purpose and direction as reflected in the Vatican document can fill the cracks in the female experience by providing a balance to the physical existence of the naturalistic woman.

Chapter eight explores the topic of spirituality within the context of Gaudium et Spes to clarify important issues on marriage, family, human dignity, free will, and self-preservation raised in the novels under study. It explains naturalism’s recognition of the non-physical human dimension despite naturalism’s focus on the physical material reality and perceived reductionist treatment of the non-physical. It presents the female need for spiritual regeneration as suggested by their experience of inner vacuum. The chapter attempts
to reconcile literary naturalism and spirituality by showing the importance of examining unexplored connections where their seeming contradictions point to the same conclusion - the aspiration for better human conditions and experiences in society, *Gaudium et Spes*’ vision similar to literary naturalism’s agenda.

Chapter nine presents the conclusion of this study.

**Methodology**

This literary study uses the descriptive-qualitative method of research that engages with Marxist-Feminist criticism, Foucault’s and Beauvoir’s concepts of power, and discourses of spirituality within the framework of *Gaudium et Spes*, an important Catholic document that serves as a guide for the whole of humanity in its observation of lagging “spiritual advancement” amidst the increasingly “intellectual formation”. It is a critique of the female condition and experience as reflected in the naturalistic novels in this study. Gender relations, female agency and displacement are examined by borrowing Marxist notions of capitalism, female commodification, conspicuous consumption, consumerism, and rugged individualism. I borrow from feminist work to centre the female experience of these social and political ideologies. Employing Foucault’s notion of power allows me to explore the relationship between dominant patriarchal power and, at a micro level, the power of individuals to influence their own lives. Beauvoir’s use of power supports this idea of the absolute ontological freedom of each individual.

The Marxist Concept as Applied in Literature

Marxist criticism highlights the term “ideology” which refers to a “belief system”, a product of “cultural conditioning” (Tyson 56). Marxist criticism therefore is a literary approach that aims to “identify
the ideology at work in cultural productions” such as literature, for example, and “analyse how that ideology supports or undermines that socioeconomic system (the power structure) in which that cultural production plays a significant role” (60). My work merely engages with the ideologies at work in the female protagonists’ society. These ideologies are important in relation to “victimhood” and the female condition that this study focuses on. These ideologies are capitalism, female commodification, conspicuous consumption, consumerism, and rugged individualism. Commodification refers to “the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign exchange value” (62) while conspicuous consumption refers to buying costly stuff or services to impress other people with his financial capability or wealth (62). I relate these concepts in connection with the material circumstances or historical situation of the female protagonists. I discuss how these ideologies affect the protagonists’ position in society as well as their socioeconomic classes, and show how they challenge the status quo either for survival (for underclass protagonists) or to uphold equality with men (for middle class protagonists). I also present how they are affected by their choices as a result of their individualism and social detachment.

Karl Marx claims that society is split up “into two great hostile camps, into two great classes, directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (7). The bourgeoisie “control the world’s natural, economic, and human resources” while the proletariat are “the majority of the population who live in substandard conditions and who have always performed manual labor – the mining, factory work, ditch digging, railroad building – the fills the coffers of the rich” (qtd. in Tyson 54). Those who are in the “underclass and the lower class are economically oppressed; they suffer the ills of economic privation, are hardest hit by economic recessions, and have limited means of improving their lot” (55). Karl Marx empathises with the “modern labourer”, a representative of the working class, who “instead of
rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class” (26). My discussion of Crane’s Maggie and Wharton’s Lily engages with the concepts of capitalism, female commodification, consumerism, and rugged individualism because they belong to the underclass or less privileged families and the ideologies presented relate to their condition in a capitalistic society.

Although Karl Marx refers to the two classes of his society whom he labels as the “oppressing and oppressed classes” (24), Tyson claims that the categorization of Marx is still relevant in the modern times because the socioeconomic classes still exist in a capitalistic society where the “upper class and ‘aristocracy’ are economically privileged” who “enjoy luxurious lifestyles”, and “are least affected by economic recessions, and have great financial security” (55). Thus, Marxist criticism suggests that “economic power” is the motive for all human activities whether “social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on” (54). In my analysis of the material circumstances of the female protagonists in the novels, the socioeconomic iniquities and disadvantages they experience are explored.

The Feminist Concept as Applied in Literature

The study also engages with feminist’s concepts of gender relations and power struggles in my analysis of the position of the female protagonists in society as portrayed in the novels. There is a close relationship between Marxist and feminist ideologies because both highlight forms of inequities and disadvantages experienced by men and women in society. The feminist issue in this study is limited to the woman with her subordinate position in a societal structure while Marxist concern focuses on men and women in general,
particularly the oppressive condition of the marginal or underclass and instances of imbalances of the more privileged class. These issues relate to the unmarried and married female protagonists in the novels. This study, however, does not engage with a Marxist concept of class power where the proletariat or working class unites in consciousness and overthrows their oppressors, the bourgeoisie and aristocratic group in a capitalistic society, in order to form a classless society where equality among humankind is reached. As already mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, this study limits the use of Marxist criticism to the culture of capitalism, commodification, rugged individualism, and other forms of displacement that the female protagonists are challenged with because my concern is with the potential for these representations of femaleness to include self-agency. These same issues relate to the feminist concerns because they are forms of displacement in the female experience.

Both Marxist and feminist ideologies highlight equality and human dignity for a meaningful life in society. Thus, feminist advocates consider how women can empower themselves more if they are involved in “sisterhood” or group movement that supports members in their struggle against inequities and other forms of imbalances. Similarly, Marxist advocates consider how the working class referred to as the “proletariat” can empower themselves through group action to defend their rights for equal opportunities and economic privileges as workers. Since my study focuses on the individual female experience reflected in the novels, my discussion is restricted to exploring the “socioeconomic conditions” of the protagonists in their struggle for survival and equality with men. The use of feminist criticism takes a look at society where male consciousness is presumed dominant; hence, my analysis of the female subject considers gender relations and displacement within the operations of a male-centred society with a focus on the heroine’s
relationship with her family, friends, and other characters in the novel.

In my interpretation of the social position and fate of the female protagonists, I bear in mind Foucault’s concept of freedom and power. My analysis of the female position is anchored on his concept on human agency and transformation amidst societal structure:

I think there are a thousand things that can be done, invented, contrived by those who, recognizing the relations of power in which they are involved, have decided to resist them or escape them. From that viewpoint, all my research rests on a postulate of absolute optimism. I don’t construct my analyses in order to say, ‘This is the way things are, you are trapped.’ I say these things only insofar as I believe it enables us to transform them. (1980/2000, 294–5)

The concept above is linked to my analysis of female fate to demonstrate that individual power or empowerment in the naturalistic novels under study is possible because a woman has a choice, an idea that negates the assumption of determined conditions in naturalism. Foucault hints that one has a choice, and the status quo can be changed. For instance, it is a choice to belong to a group or sisterhood or to persist in individualism and become society’s pariah. Foucault does not believe in the statement, “This is the way things are, you are trapped”. He says that a person can always transform things because he or she has power and free choice. Foucault’s idea of individual willpower and rejection of determined situations is also mentioned by Gandal: “Foucault wrote that history is contingent and that the present situation can always be undone if we know how it got put together” (Gandal 205). Foucault’s concept of power is similar with Simone de Beauvoir’s already quoted affirmation of female empowerment: “If woman discovers herself as the inessential and never turns into the essential, it is because she does not bring about this transformation herself” (8). Hence, my analysis of the female
position and fate is also anchored on this concept which suggests female transformation through self-empowerment.

Schmitz writes that “Foucault explores the ways in which the use of language is a manifestation of power” (142). Schmitz further adds that Foucault claims that “discourse, the use of language, is not something free from all constraints, but instead is tightly controlled and organized” (142). This suggests that due to the implied codes in society, language and free expression may be affected. The use of language is discussed in my analysis of the relationship struggle and communication issues between the married female protagonist and her husband. The inhibitions of self-expression for the unmarried protagonist are discussed in relation to the interplay of “forces” in her environment and her relationships with other characters.
CHAPTER 2

LITERARY NATURALISM

Beginnings

Naturalism in literature began in the 1860s in France with Emile Zola as the founder. The term “naturalism” was first used by Zola in these years (White 522). Naturalism appeared in a range of writers in the 1860s-1890s. It was a time in France where scientific inventions burgeoned and Darwin’s theory of evolution was applied not just in the sciences but also in other fields such as literature. In the book, Le Roman Expérimental, first published in 1880, Zola argues that great literature applies the method of a scientist whose serious concern with details is required for accurate data collection resulting from impartial observations (10-19). Similarly as the founder of naturalism suggests, the literary writer adopts the scientific method of detachment and objectivity in the study of human beings to create an honest representation of reality.

Zola reinforces the idea of naturalism, declaring determinism to “dominate everything” (18). He considers both heredity and surroundings to have a “great influence on the intellectual and passionate manifestations of man” (19). Zola argues that the function of a novelist is similar to a medical practitioner involved in experimentation and observation in order to come up with an accurate depiction of natural phenomena. He points out that “novelists are the examining magistrates of men and their passions” (10) and like a doctor, the novelist “should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings, and as the physiologist operates on human beings” (18). Zola’s book discusses the function of a novelist in the crafting of his work and on his
insistence that literary naturalism incorporate the concept of scientific determinism. Zola’s insistence on the process of observation and objectivity in the narrative portrayal of realities relates to his vision to integrate modernism in fictional works as instanced in the innovations of the time in science where he expects writers to apply the principles of naturalism in literature in their efforts at truth depiction. In a recent article (2012), Lehan argues:

Naturalism emerged as a response to romanticism and as a product of ideas taken from Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. The romantic element supplied the ideal that most naturalistic writers seek, and the Darwinian/Spencerian element supplied the forces that they must confront (229).

Geismar traces the development of literary naturalism as a school from Zola who “formulated, in a grandiose but inspiring manner, its principles and objectives” and calls it “realism plus science” (3). He says “European naturalism attempted to dispel the superstitions and prejudices of its own period; to see human character in a pragmatic light, and social environment as it actually existed” (3).

In a 2003 article, Fiorenzo Conti and Silvana Irrera Conti offer a further discussion of the relationship of literary naturalism and science (865). These writers document the relation between science and literature exemplified in Zola’s literary formula and the scientific activities of the physiologist Claude Bernard. The Contis present a concise account of the influence of science on literature through the works of Bernard and Zola. They explain that Zola campaigns for the “application of Bernard’s ideas on experimentation to novel writing” (866) and refers to Bernard’s original terms such as “determinism”, “milieu”, “experiment”, later emphasized by Zola in Le Roman Experimental. Zola suggests that because “scientists aim to explain the laws of the physical world, the naturalist novelist should work on the laws governing human behaviour” (866). Both authors note that
Zola shared his interest in science with other French writers namely Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert (866).

Zola’s scientific interest in naturalistic literature refers to the method of constructing fiction through a study of the “environment” as setting and the application of a detailed analysis of the characters’ physical and psychological traits, according to F. Brown (qtd. in Conti and Conti 866). Zola argues that “if the experimental approach leads to the knowledge of the physical life, then it must also allow to understand the emotional and intellectual life” (866). Fascinated by the scientific changes that occurred during his time (868), and through his encounter with the scientific writings of his medical practitioner friend, Zola requires that the scientific method be applied in literature, particularly the novel. The method is done through observation in order to establish the “facts or phenomena” in the literary construction. He insists that the traits of the “physiological man” be observed or investigated substantially because he claims that literature is a realistic portrayal of the truth (865).

In a 2013 article, Nicholas White suggests that Zola’s “naturalism” represents a lengthier realistic literary tradition illustrated by the “modern epic of Balzac’s La Comédie Humane” (522). Zola’s “theory of naturalism” was “inspired by Claude Bernard’s Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale (1865) or Introduction to the study of experimental medicine (523). White argues that Zola’s naturalistic novel is categorised into two plot structures: “the rise and fall of modern tragedy” and “the pessimistic anti-plot”. The first naturalist plot structure presents “ignoble protagonists (who) are pushed down the slope towards their nemesis by supra-individual forces explained in materialist terms” while the second plot “is in a double sense platitudinous, given its flat narrative trajectory and listless characters” (522). These characters are imbued with “drives” Zola refers to as the “language of temperament” (522).
The example of the first plot structure is Zola’s novel *Thérèse Raquin*, which depicts a female protagonist who is “nervous” (“hence typical of the hysteria associated with transgressive female desire by the voyeuristic male gaze of nineteenth century medicine and literature”) (522). Flaubert’s novel *L’Education Sentimentale* is an example of “pessimistic anti-plot” because “it points more accurately to the self-immolatory impulse of much twentieth century art.” (523) White comments that Zola’s *Rougon Macquart* is a criticism of the “excesses of Napoleon III’s Empire” (525) and he suggests that “Zola was more of a reformist than a revolutionary” (525). It is Zola’s novel *L’Assommoir* that “brought naturalist writing to the attention of a mass public” (525). White reveals that Zola uses Flaubert’s writing method:

Zola borrows, mostly clearly from Flaubert, the technique of free indirect discourse, referred to as *style indirect libre*. Rather than passively conveying the facts of the story as if in some caricature of naturalism, the narrator borrows the perspectives, and indeed language, of his characters. The blurring of first- and third-person viewpoints allows the narrator to inhabit their mindset temporarily. This slippage between quotation and narration foregrounds the common verbal wealth of representative politics and fictional representation. (527)

Through the novels of Zola, White comments that “naturalism in general brings back to life two bodies repressed by the wider society of middle-class Frenchmen with whom its narrators identify: the working-class body and the female body” (528). He adds that the novels of Zola were “habitually popular among undergraduates” in Zola’s time, which sometimes irked “sober academics” (White 530). His works attracted literary writers, making naturalism influential beyond the boundaries of France:

It is one of the characteristics of Zola’s fiction that it has attracted the empathy of other practitioners of fiction more than the admiration of academic critics. It is also true that French naturalism was particularly influential outside of France,
not least in North and South America as well as Germany and Spain. (529)

Finally, despite the criticisms of naturalistic fiction, it is actually consistent in its portrayal of “authenticity, sincerity, and social morality” (530) and it is important to view it “as a reaction to early modern [i.e. realistic] and then Romantic intellectual literature” (530).

**Naturalism in the American novel**

In 1890 - 1910, the naturalistic movement flourished in America through the literary works of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London (Pizer 189). They were inspired by the principles of naturalism exemplified in the writings of Zola. Pizer’s 2006 article explains that American naturalism “was principally an offshoot of French naturalism and especially of the work and literary theories of its founder” (189). The first group of American novelists then picked up from naturalism and included “all the disturbing new ideas of European thought in the late nineteenth century’ (Geismar 3). However, they “converted the European movement to particular American purposes but that each artist - as every artist does - adapted a loose structure of prevailing ideas to the needs of his [sic] own temperament and the purposes of his [sic] own craft” (3). The first group of American novelists who adapted naturalism, namely Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, Ellen Glasgow, and Theodore Dreiser whom Geismar calls as “rebels and ancestors” (3). They were followed by the second group of more familiar American novelists, the “master-craftsmen” composed of “Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and William Faulkner” (4) who “reflected in the aesthetic area the unbridled individualism of their social and economic environment”(4). Geismar’s work highlights the development of literary naturalism in America that
extends until 1940 and he mentions Crane as one of the pioneers of American naturalism.

Lehan examines naturalistic fiction to show how Zola applies the biological theory of Darwin to narrative use. He discusses the “confluence of Darwin’s thought and Zola’s narrative practices that led to American literary naturalism” (xxv). Lehan’s major claim is that “naturalism evolved out of literary realism and functioned as narrative mode, creating its own version of reality” (252). He adds that “a particular ideology” is never a part of naturalism but some writers noted for being naturalistic practitioners infuse such ideology in their works. Lehan mentions in particular London and Sinclair who turn to socialism for political answers, Wright, Algren, and Dreiser to communism, and H.G. Wells and Farrell to utopian theory (252).

The capitalistic ideology depicted in naturalism presents commonplace characters that belong to the lower echelon in society. This relates to Lehan’s observation that naturalism depicts “primarily ordinary people, often financially strapped, compulsively driven by desires for love (sex), power and money” (253). Their “obsession in love and money have their origins in a residual, naturalistic self” (xxiii), and he affirms that naturalism exposes a “civilization that is a jungle or wilderness in disguise” (xxiii). In his 2006 article, Lehan writes that in literary naturalism, a human being is “a product of his temperament in a social context” (47). In his 2012 article, Lehan notes that “naturalism is the product of the radical shift in cultural meaning that came with the... transition from the agrarian to an industrial society” (229). He adds that the “naturalistic novel examined in detail the fate of the farm worker (the peasant in France) who was now being displaced from the land, moving to the city to find work in the new factory system” (229). The study re-examines the unique experience of the female protagonist preoccupied with farm
work or engrossed with drudgery in the factory in capitalistic societies.

Naturalism rewrites the “romance, producing less elevated characters and situating them in a more amoral world” (Lehan 253) where the naturalistic writers, for instance, convey their “outrage at the money system that allowed profit at the expense of a helpless public”. Lehan cites Norris and Twain who protest about “land grabs by the railroads”, Dreiser who reproaches “big developers for their manipulation of public utilities” and Sinclair who gets enraged at “rat dung in the sausage” (253). He goes on:

The naturalist often identified with the downtrodden or underdog. If there was anything to bewail, it was life itself. When the naturalist did appeal to the sentiment, it was to elicit reader sympathy for the social situation that produced the deprived, misplaced characters that made up the naturalistic world rather than to suggest the innate goodness of human beings. (254).

Citing the naturalistic novels of Norris, Pizer reveals that the characters of Zerkow in *McTeague* and S. Behrman in *The Octopus* are an allusion to the “ancient Shylock image infused with elements drawn from events and ideas of Norris’s own time and place” (65). Pizer claims that other writers, on the other hand, are less direct, “but all reflect in varying degrees beliefs derived from a contemporary ethos that denigrated the Jewish presence in America” (65). Conversely, the novels of the aforesaid naturalistic authors showing the link to the Jewish people are simply expressions of a “greater need in America for social justice and personal freedom” alluding for instance to Dreiser’s involvement in “left wing politics”, Garland’s “desire to improve western farm conditions”, Norris’ criticisms on “monopolistic business practices” and Wharton and Cather’s “sympathetic portrayal of women seeking to break down barriers against individual fulfilment” (66).
Lawlor writes that naturalistic Western novelists “construct images to preserve as well as to analyse wildness” (187). She suggests that natural determinism relates to technological determinism as a concept where men “foster the illusion that things simply happen, beyond their control, in a kind of religiously articulated force” (188). She explains that “the naturalist world of the West is appropriated by the science of naturalist literature, its vigour given over to the energetic controls of determinist thinking” (188). To illustrate her point on wildness and primitivism in Western literary naturalism, Lawlor points to the novels of London and Norris that integrate an interest in death and savagery. Her examples are the ghastly beheading scene in *The Red One* by London and the “gravediggers’ pleasure in mixing writing with death” through the creation of “unnecessary rhymes and jingles for the unknown dead” (190) as portrayed in Norris’ *The Strangest Thing*. Lawlor argues that the concept of evolution and French literary naturalism challenge traditional romanticism in the United States (2) with “its sense of free agency” (4) and discusses “naturalism’s reductions of human character and of social development to the terms of a strict environmental determinism” (4). Lawlor criticizes naturalism’s process of reality portrayal that parallels the functions of a “camera” and other equipment that suggest the capturing of images that paint frozen objectivity and emotional disconnectedness.

Naturalism’s intellectual coldness and its harsh schemes of human development, as well as its technological bent – its attachment to apparatuses like the camera, the telegraph, and mining equipment – suggest a tough-minded, disciplined methodology that might seem an appropriate antidote for a culture whose economic patterns, social mores, and even national identity were undergoing what would later look like paradigm shifts. (6)

For Lawlor, naturalism has not provided a “lasting framework for explaining the conditions of Euro-American life after 1890” (6) because it “sponsored a reductive account of culture and character”
which makes it not very appealing “to substantially alter the romantic tendencies of the national imagination” (6). However, the complication in “westernist plots, characters, and landscapes” brought about by naturalism has lasting effects in regard to “the tones and textures of romantic Western narratives in the generations that have continued to produce such stories long after the 1890s” (7). Lawlor concludes that the “preoccupations with the wild and primitive in human” preserves Western romanticism as a literary mode because it does not favour the “reduction of human behaviour and cultural development” with the non-emphasis and reductionist treatment of “choice and individual responsibility” (12). In other words, the literary genre that precedes naturalism has been preserved despite the naturalists’ efforts at literary emancipation because of the criticisms on the wild or primitive in human conduct and less consideration of autonomy in the narrative.

Lee Clark Mitchell evaluates the naturalistic novels’ style of writing. He explains that these novels have “attracted a surprising amount of recent attention among critics” (118). He observes that naturalism “has captured the strange middle ground that lies between popular discourse and literary value” and notes that “its narratives still enjoy a mass audience, at least in many cases, and yet it has also been granted legitimate if grudging status by the academic establishment” (118). Mitchell claims that despite naturalism’s “narrative and stylistic innovations” in American fiction, the novels of Dreiser, Norris, London, and Crane have been “fixtures” in the canon of American literature and are “still read and taught” (118) in western countries. Mitchell acknowledges twentieth century’s well-respected and foremost naturalist writers:

Naturalism in turn influenced major authors in the twentieth century, including prominently William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, but perhaps most obviously John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, John Steinbeck, and Richard Wright – each of
whom separately, distinctly helped to keep the naturalist label alive. (125)

Mitchell traces the influences of the nineteenth century naturalistic writers to the twentieth century naturalists such as Faulkner, Farrell, and Steinbeck to name a few. Mitchell suggests that naturalistic literature is still being read, taught, and discussed in literary criticism. He has not addressed, however, the social position of the female protagonists in the selected novels for this study.

Gina M. Rossetti, writing in 2006, highlights the primitive in the naturalistic and modern novels and defines the primitive as non-American (3) as a result of the “vanishing American” (i.e. a notion of identity associated with early colonial America) that took place during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a period in the American history where the “rise of industrialization, the increase of the immigrant population, and the varied uses of nativism” (4) were echoed in the literature of the period. Rossetti focuses “on the primitive as primordial beast, as the brute working class, as the immigrant, as the modernist artist, and finally as the racial exotic” featured in the naturalistic novels of Nella Larsen, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Jack London (5). The author aims to show the manifestations and transformation of primitivism in literary naturalism because she argues that the latter is not just about “pessimistic determinism” but also about the creation of “contradictory images” and the “devolution” of “character and all those who encounter him or her” (5). Rossetti asserts that naturalism “rebukes the primitive for his or her debasement” and its rise is a “self-serving” act for the modernist artist. This act implies that the primitive is “aestheticized and, in its racial manifestation, fetishized in order to comment about the position of the privileged, modernist artist” (5).
Rossetti defines the primitive in naturalistic novels as “the dominant culture’s projection of its internal fears, anxieties, and attractions” (6) and clarifies that the primitive represents the “member of the lower socio-economic classes, can be of ethnic or racial origin other than Anglo-American, and can personify an abstract quality” such as “overt sexuality or moral debasement” (6). Rossetti comments that “naturalism and modernism rely on the primitive to flesh out subject/Other, American/alien, and artist/conformist binaries” (175). She notes that “the primitive allows for an erasure of the line that separates naturalism from modernism” which means exploring the naturalistic novels “in terms of their larger cultural milieus” where their narratives portray diverse “images of the primitive so that one might understand the complex, social, cultural, and historical forces that are at work in the naturalist and modernist literature” (176). Rossetti puts emphasis on “the shared fears, fascinations, and preoccupations of the literary movements” (176), but she steers clear in defining naturalism and modernism.

In 2004, Fleissner writes that there emerges a new kind of heroine in naturalistic novels (i.e. *Sister Carrie, The Yellow Wallpaper*) where determinism gave way to compulsions echoed in Hurston and Walker’s fiction. Compulsion “breaks down the split between the self-governing subject and the governed one, insisting that some of the trap is built from within” (279). This implies that the heroine strives to govern herself, for instance, by renouncing her own desires (279) as a result of her obsession with freedom (280) in these two novels. Fleissner notes that one distinctive feature of literary naturalism is “an ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion...that has the distinctive effect of seeming also like stuckness in place” (9). She cites several novels such as *Sister Carrie, The Yellow Wallpaper*, and others where the heroine is involved in “repetitive compulsive everyday actions” suggesting a semblance to women fraught with “indecisive behaviour” (9). Such naturalism’s “stuckness in place” is associated with “the
figure of the modern woman” with her ambitions and struggles and “inner life” (12-13). Highlighting the importance of nature in literary naturalism, Fleissner explains that nature is not just about the “presocial wilderness” in the texts but “an important feature within human social life, various everyday rituals taking place around the fact of embodiment” Fleissner refers to as “sex, birth, death, illness, cleanliness, etc.” (9-10).

Fleissner takes another look at naturalism by considering the principle on determinism that takes the form of compulsions where the heroine is obsessed with repetitive actions, and nature is no longer only confined to heredity and environment but also to a modern woman’s everyday routine. This routine comprises life processes such as birth, death, illness, sex, cleanliness and the like. Fleissner’s work foregrounds thoughts about the heroine’s preoccupations represented by the modern woman that may relate to the heroines in the novels of Flaubert, Crane, Chopin and Wharton to represent the European and American women of the nineteenth century. However, while Fleissner’s book focuses on naturalism and determinism in the form of compulsions, the struggles of the women Fleissner discusses are restricted to African-American novels.

Wilson highlights the variations of sincerity in naturalistic novels. For instance, Wilson argues that despite the naturalists’ assertion of representing “life as it is truly lived” (524), they seem to suggest man’s will is an essential component in naturalist fiction, and he comes up with various notions of sincerity from naturalistic writers as follows:

Phillips spoke of sincerity as an “atmosphere”; London called his realism “impassioned”; Sinclair prided himself on working “from the inside”; and Norris said what mattered most was how you, the writer, chose to see things. In other words, for all their reputed reverence for factuality, the naturalists put their
stock in positive thinking – specifically, in a confidence brought to bear upon skills of narrative voice (524).

Sincerity in naturalistic novels suggests an issue for Wilson. He cites Lichtenstein who maintains that there is a shift in the “balance of literary power” because instead of originating ideas for literature from the authors themselves, these ideas come from “publishers and editors” (525). This makes Lorimer declare that “publishing” is now “the business of having ideas, and finding men to carry them out” (cited in Wilson 525). Such “reorientation” Wilson claims may raise substantial impediments to the idea of sincerity with the following questions:

How could one purport to author an “investigative” work when in fact the idea has been fleshed out in advance? How could one be sincere in the marketplace which, as Norris himself said, was turning out “made to order” books? (525)

Schmitz comments that in Michaels’ The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism, the economy, similarly termed “money economy”, “the bourgeois economy”, “desire” (feminine), and “excess” “cannot be personified” and “does not have interests” (901) and that the anti-capitalist in naturalistic novels hints at “fear of desire, dread the market”, and “disgust of excess” as portrayed in Howells’ The Rise of Silas Lapham (903). Such claims suggest that naturalistic writers promote traces of hostility for capitalism in an economic society they are part of, hence, the interplay of conflicting tension. Schmitz explains, moreover, that Michaels “exposes the essentialism and bafflement of naturalist writing” (904) and promotes the latter’s work as an important contribution to the “reading of American Literary naturalism” (904).
Critiques of Naturalism

Zola was criticised for his choice of underclass characters and their life stories. It was suggested that *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), was “contaminated by the degeneracy of its subject matter” and Zola was forced to defend the novel (White 523). On the other hand, American naturalistic novelists “were frequently assailed for their seemingly over-critical and thus negative view of the ills of American society” (Pizer 189). Middle class families were not encouraged to buy their novels for home consumption (189) due to naturalism’s seeming disregard for “absolute standards of morality and free will” (Lehan 47) and portrayal of “degeneration and personal decline” (48). However, despite these criticisms, “naturalistic novels continue to come out, to exhibit unmistakable signs of life and vitality, and to capture the largest reading audience” (Geismar 195) through its depiction of ordinary people juxtaposed with the privileged minority.

Barker discusses Hermann Bahr’s criticism of Naturalism in Europe particularly in Vienna and Germany. Zola has been known to have exhorted literary writers, novelists in particular, to apply the scientific method of truth portrayal in literature through objectivity. However, Barker suggests that Bahr is less convinced of the narrative approach of naturalistic literature because he favours the “subjective rather than the objective truth as a measure of art, in the relativisation of truth to something found only within the self” (627). Bahr is inclined to shifting “the accent in literature away from the object towards the peculiar reception by each individual” in which “a person experiences that inner truth, so that what becomes foremost is not the artist’s capacity to record objectively what he has observed, but rather the perception itself” (627). Bahr’s preference for subjectivity is further explained: “Sensitivity to experience thus becomes the measure of the artist, with the ‘Nerven’ acting as antennae which pick up the signals to be transmitted into artistic
expressions” (Barker 627). Bahr does not disparage naturalism though despite his minimization of its narrative method, but he encourages writers to rely more on their “sense perception” (627).

Barker explains that Bahr’s arguments for subjectivity in portraying truth bear semblance to the “Romantic conceptions of art” (628). Barker, however, clarifies that Bahr may be strong in his criticism of literary Naturalism, “but there can be little doubt, given his regard for the importance of ‘Nerven’, that his personal view of Naturalism is of something fundamentally positive in that it gave direct rise to the new art” (628), that is, modernism. And although Zola’s naturalistic formula for literature is criticized by European writers in his time as suggested by Barker, naturalism in literature received less criticism in the USA and other parts of the world.

Pizer’s 2010 article criticizes Mitchell’s interpretation of London’s fiction, To Build a Fire. Pizer points out how Mitchell “misreads” London’s work when he suggests that the characters are portrayed under “determined conditions”. Pizer implies that it is true that the “world under certain conditions, can be an extremely dangerous place” (223). However, he suggests that in London’s To Build a Fire, agency exists, particularly man’s potential to interfere with the process of external forces. He declares:

If through ignorance, inexperience, false self-confidence, and the ignoring of what others have learned and told us (all weaknesses shared by the man) we challenge these conditions, we are apt to be destroyed by them. (223)

Referring to London’s fiction, Pizer claims that if the reader “accepts that the story’s theme does not revolve around determinism but rather the problem of survival in an inhospitable world, the story aligns itself with the other major naturalistic texts with roughly similar themes” (223). Pizer discusses two examples of naturalistic novels to illustrate his point. These novels are The Open Boat by Stephen Crane
and *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser. Pizer writes that both Crane and Dreiser portray main characters who are “neophytes” trying to survive in a harsh world that “threatens to engulf and destroy them” (223). He explains that these characters may have been threatened by the environment they are in, but they are somehow able to muddle through their situations. For instance, Crane’s “inexperienced sailor” in *The Open Boat* survives the shark-infested waters following the wreckage of his ship while Dreiser’s Carrie lives despite the prospects of facing the “inhospitable and threatening” conditions in the big city (Chicago), namely, the “sweat shop” (factory work) or the “daily grind” of a “working wife and mother” (224). Carrie chooses a third option and that is as a “kept woman” not knowing of the possible risks of this course (224). Pizer’s comments that Carrie’s situation arises “from mankind’s [sic] distance in time from both the instinctive survival wisdom of the animal and man’s yet to come full control of his circumstances by the use of his reason” (224).

In his observations on the criticisms of naturalistic novels, James T. Farrell asserts that literary criticism must not be limited to a set of rules that a piece of literature or fiction is known for. He suggests that literary criticism focus on the human connection of literature to the reader. He explains:

> I would say that when you read a book, the handling of your emotions, the resolution of your own feelings is much more important than any kind of judgment you make whether the book is good or bad, especially if that judgment is made in terms of questions which are pseudo-philosophical and pseudo-scientific (257).

Farrell’s novels were examined by literary critics, and he seems to insinuate that as a novelist, he must not be labelled naturalist. He explains that he had already published five novels and a number of short stories before he came across Zola’s work, *Germinal* (249). Also, he seems to hint that critics refrain from labelling a literary
work, for instance, as realistic, romantic, naturalistic, and the like because he suggests that the reading of fiction is for literary appreciation. Critics usually examine fiction based on its elements or guiding principles because of their knowledge of critical theories. He wants this trend in literary criticism to change by asserting that fiction should be “read in terms of some of the premises and criticisms of the critics of naturalism”, and then consider the following questions: “Do you get any fresh insight? Do you learn anything? Are you excited? What happens to your emotions” (257). His assertions on how to read literature serve as guiding principles that he wants critics to apply. My hope is that the focus on female victimhood and experience (in the novels) renews a re-examination of how naturalistic literature can be read or understood beyond the borders of presumptions.

Loomis defends the naturalistic novel from “self-respecting critics” (188) who charge that naturalistic writers are “arrant pessimists notoriously addicted to depressing surroundings and unhappy endings” (189). These critics believe that literature “should not upset one’s ideas about anything, and should be either soothing, inspiring or funny” (189). They argue that naturalistic writers promote “bestialism” and declare that “man is not a beast”. However, Loomis, in defence of naturalism, counters that in life, “human beings commit atrocities” and he challenges every man who “is without a streak of the beast in him cast the first stone at the Bête Humaine” (189). He retorts that naturalistic fiction’s “emphasis on the beast in L’Assomoir, Jude the Obscure, and Spoon River shocks the conventional critic who is accustomed to hear such things mentioned only over his after-dinner cigar” (189). Loomis adds that among the literary writers with naturalistic proclivities not spared by these critics are “Flaubert, Ibsen, Hardy, and (Edgar Lee) Masters” (188). Masters wrote Mitch Miller, Skeeters Kirby, The Nuptial Flight, Kit O’Brien, and The Tide of Time to name a few of his novels. Loomis claims that the naturalistic thinker believes that a human being is “a highly complex organism,
whose nature includes, besides the passions, a social instinct, an artistic instinct and a reason. In the harmonizing of all these factors lies happiness” (193) which he elaborates through suggestion:

To give controlled expression to the passions and to sublimate them, to enjoy the pleasures of social intercourse and social approval, to do things beautifully, and viewing all these things in their relation, to harmonize them by reason – this is the art of living. Individuals here and there may attain degrees of happiness in spite of, even by the partial denial of one or another of these four elements (193).

The re-reading of naturalistic literature is to extend beyond the notion of determined conditions to some degree of agency and the female desire for autonomy or personal integrity in her search for spiritual regeneration or connectedness with the self, others, or some positive force (i.e. Divine Power) for meaning or direction in this world.

**Definitions**

Definitions of naturalism generally emphasize social realities as subject matter, objectivity as an approach, and a philosophy of determinism. White defines naturalism as “a reaction to early modern and then romantic intellectual culture” (530) with its subjective method and regard for the beautiful. For Cowley, naturalism can be defined in two words: “pessimistic determinism”. He argues that naturalistic writers are determinists because they believed in some “abstract forces” that control human beings who are “absolutely incapable of shaping their own destinies” (414). He explains:

They regarded the individual as "a pawn on a chessboard": the phrase recurs time and again in their novels. They felt that he could not achieve happiness by any conscious decision and that he received no earthly or heavenly reward for acting morally; man was, in Dreiser’s words, “the victim of forces over which he had no control” (414).
Cowley claims that even Norris is “extreme in his magnification of forces and minification of persons” (414) and quotes his novel, The Octopus: “Men were nothings, mere animalculae, mere ephemerides that fluttered and fell and were forgotten between dawn and dusk” (414). Cowley elaborates on Norris’ idea of man’s nothingness and the immense power of “force” by quoting the latter’s work as follows:

Men were naught, life was naught: force only existed – force that brought men into the world, force that crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation, force that made the wheat grow, force that garnered it from the soil to give place to the succeeding crop (414-415).

Norris’ novels promote romantic optimism when he suggests that each individual person undergoes suffering “but the race goes on” (Cowley 415). It was from Zola that Norris “borrowed his doctrines” because Zola announces “his belief in the perfectibility of human race” and “a constant march toward truth” (415). Because of this search for truth, Cowley writes that Zola specifies that the goals of the writer should be to observe man’s behaviour “as if he were observing forms of animal life” (415). So instead of suggesting that determinism results eventually in pessimism, Loomis explains that “determinism is no foe to an optimism of the future” (197), and this idea has been applied in Norris’ fiction to confirm Zola’s conviction regarding the march of the human race towards perfection (Cowley 415).

Zhang lists three American writers who were influenced by the European naturalists, particularly by Zola. These American writers, Zang maintains, incorporated naturalism in their novels as depicted in Jack London’s The Call of the Wild, Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, and Ernest Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea. Zhang suggests that writers of naturalistic literature encourage the reader to think that the fate of the character is already “pre-determined, usually by heredity and environmental factors, that the destiny of humanity is
misery in life and oblivion in death and he/she can do nothing about it” (195). Zhang concludes that the naturalistic literature of London, Dreiser, and Hemingway shows scepticism and hostility to the idea of the “bourgeois individualism” and their emphasis on “irrational motivations for human behaviour, sometimes connected with sexuality and violence” (197). He explains that naturalism in American fiction as represented by the three novels highlights the “inhabitants”, generally “immigrants”, and those “belonging to a class-spectrum ranging from the destitute to the lower-middle class” (197). He concludes that naturalistic writers’ penchant for details in portraying the “lives of the downtrodden and the abnormal, their frank treatment of human passion and sexuality and their portrayal of men and women overwhelmed by the blind forces of nature still exert a powerful influence on modern writers” (197).

Walcutt claims that “literary naturalism may be defined in terms of subject matter, tone, and philosophy” (11). He explains that the tone of naturalistic literature is objective, “a dispassionate recording of precise detail” (11). He reminds readers, though, that the subject matter and tone of naturalistic novels are also incorporated in “any sort of novel – romance, thriller, or realistic study of manners” (11). However, a novel that contains subject matters considered out of bounds, and objectivity through detailed representation of realities is naturalistic only with the inclusion of determinism (11), echoing the kind of naturalism that is a “product of French literary invention” (Lehan 228). Walcutt suggests that novels must be studied “in order to determine their peculiar characteristics” instead of just condemning novelists as “journalists” or examining “their place in the growing consciousness of the period” (11) and labelling them realists or naturalists. He asserts that naturalistic writers consider actions that are influenced by “material forces – economic, social, physiological” (12) where free will and responsibility do not interfere with the process of external forces (12). Walcutt
evaluates the works of the naturalistic-inclined author, Harold Frederic who wrote *Seth’s Brother’s Wife* (1887) and *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896). Walcutt concludes that Frederic’s 1896 work is not a naturalistic novel because Frederic rules out the role of “the scientific detachment and the dispassionate comprehension of social pressures which are, in some degree at least, essential to naturalism” (22). Walcutt comments that Frederic is “inept” as a novelist because he fails “to make any operation of determinism control the pattern of his story” (22).

Writers advocating literary naturalism explain that since “human beings are in Emile Zola’s phrase, ‘human beasts,’ characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings” (Campbell 1). Campbell adds that texts on naturalism portray an “indifferent and deterministic universe”, where the “futile attempts of human beings to exercise free will, often ironically presented, in this universe that free will is an illusion” (1). Margraf’s article in 2005 confirms that naturalistic novelists believe that the human race is basically a “species of animals, devoid of free will to any considerable extent” (95) and suggests the concept of self-determination a human domain in question.

The new breed of naturalistic novelists and their major works of fiction on mid-twentieth-century naturalism are James Jones who wrote *From Here to Eternity*, Norman Mailer who wrote *The Naked and the Dead*, Nelson Algren who wrote *Never Come Morning* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*, William Styron who wrote *Lie Down in Darkness*, John Griffin who wrote *The Devil Rides Outside* and Feike Feikema who wrote *This Is the Year* (Geismar 1). Those in the academe and the “ordinary readers” have been presented by the naturalist writers with “a series of novels” where language is labelled “frank to the point of immodesty, in which the private lives of the characters – and often the private functions of the body – have been
described with a candor amounting to zealotry” (1). These novels dwell on “the sordid, the criminal, the brutal” (1), and disclose that “it is likely that the present younger generation of novelists in the United States are quite unaware that they are naturalists at all” (3). Naturalism as a literary genre, therefore, has thrived in the present times because of the shared thrust of writers for plausibility in their interpretation of social realities.

**Social-reforming nature of naturalism**

Loomis lauds the service of the Naturalistic school particularly the “cause of labor and the cause of women” (194). This suggests that naturalistic literature has “done enormous service for telling the truth and the whole truth about sex” (194). He points to the use and social message of naturalism through the works of Zola, Hardy, Wells, Galsworthy, and Masters as follows:

Zola built his ponderous engines of destruction up against the walls of clerical imposture and vice in many forms; Hardy battered at the undemocratic walls of Oxford colleges and laid bare the shallowness of revivalism; Wells in his Naturalistic period exploded the bladder of the patent medicine and the whole vast imposture of advertising; Galsworthy attacked a jingoistic patriotism, and enacted for us the farce-tragedy that is sometimes played under the title of “Justice”; and Masters in his *Spoon River Anthology* has pierced to the root of nearly every wrong and folly and sham that festers in the modern social body (194).

Walker questions the absence of women writers of naturalism which “has been the potent force since the 1890’s” (133). He reckons that the 1890’s generation of American naturalists is composed mostly of male writers such Norris, Crane and Dreiser and the twentieth century naturalistic writers who are also male: Farrell, Steinbeck, Dos Passos, and Mailer (133). He mentions the novels of women writers with naturalistic bents such as Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) and Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905) and
Summer (1917). However, Walker recounts that “the woman writer of the 1890’s whose work is most obviously and consistently the product of the intellectual and literary influences of naturalism is Ellen Glasgow” (134). The latter wrote The Descendant (1897) and Phases of an Inferior Planet (1898) where she depicts “biological and social forces” working against “human beings” (Walker 134). Glasgow refuses to be identified with the naturalistic movement of the period because her search is more focused on “truth” and not “sensation” (Walker 134). Despite Glasgow’s refusal to be allied with naturalism, Walker insists that her two novels illustrate her “distinct alliances with other naturalistic writers of the 1890s” (134). Glasgow admits however, that at a young age, she was able to read Origin of the Species by Charles Darwin and applied his theory in her novels according to Walker (135). Her admission implies that she was influenced by the scientific and literary innovations of her time and had a degree of familiarity with naturalistic tendencies through the writings of her contemporaries.

**Continuing influence of naturalism**

Marc Ratner, in a 1997 review, offers a summary of some studies on American naturalism. He comments that Pizer and Lehan “have seen naturalism as a continuing influence on modernist and post-modernist fiction” (170). Lehan’s argument is that “naturalism cannot be separated from the historical process that involved the change from a rural to an urban society, the growth of the middle class, the new technologies, and the power of money” (qtd. in Ratner 170). He also “argues convincingly that naturalism is more than a literary movement” because “it is linked to the historical processes of modernism rather than being limited to the heredity and/or environment of the characters in a novel” (170). He clarifies, however, that “American novelists, although occasionally sympathetic to the hardships of the working classes, depicted economic transitions
primarily from the middle class viewpoint” (170). Writing in 2012, Lehan’s concept of naturalism undergoes transformation from the original French invention when he claims that “naturalism as a literary movement was transformed...by the neo-realism of modernism, by literary and film noir, and by the constructed (i.e. paradigmatic) assumptions of postmodernism” (228).

While naturalism is perceived in literary criticism “in a certain way” (i.e. unfavourably), Lehan implies that there is an “optimistic element built into it” (48) when he suggests that the transformation (i.e. in character representation) points to a stride towards attainment of “perfection” hinting at some form of human accomplishment in relation to the “optimistic” aspect in naturalism:

This stems from the usually unexpressed belief that whereas the fate of the individual is circumscribed and destined to end in sickness and death, the fate of the species is to move ever onward and upward in an evolutionary march toward greater perfection (48).

In relation to naturalistic fiction, Lehan suggests that death is part of the process of evolution to create the perfect society until the human species that are left are only the best i.e. strongest and fittest or the society is transformed into a much better world where justice and equality are finally attained among humankind because the weaker elements in society are purged out. He claims that in Darwin’s theory of natural selection “species change through a process of adaptation to their immediate environment” (56). Lehan, alluding to Darwin’s theory, explains that “the best in the species are attracted to and mate with each other” which “leaves the worst in the species to mate and generate their own offspring” (56). He notes that the concept of “devolution and evolution” is contained in Darwin’s theory of evolution; however, he argues that naturalism is more focused on “evolutionary throwbacks than to its forward progress” (56). Therefore in naturalism, as Lehan elaborates, “images” of a person
are “competing within it” and they are “a more highly evolved [hu]man in our future”, as found in H.G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man*, and a “debased man ... who could become if moved back in evolutionary time”, as illustrated in Wells’s *The Island of Dr Moreau* (48).

Traces of naturalism’s influence are still reflected in mid-and late-twentieth century literature through the major works of James Jones, Norman Mailer, Nelson Algren, William Styron, John Griffin, and Feike Feikema, known as the new breed of naturalistic writers (Geismar 1). Its influence on major American authors and even on contemporary writers with a focus on social realities illustrates that naturalistic writing remains an active narrative genre available for novelists to explore and use.
CHAPTER 3

THE WOMAN IN THE NATURALISTIC NOVEL

Introduction

The ideology of female victimhood in naturalism is based on the idea of woman as incapable of self-transformation through free will. She is portrayed as an inferior human being, incapable of rational thinking and of making sound decisions in comparison with men. Therefore, she is perceived as powerless and her fate is determined by her environment and societal standards of conformity. She is thus considered less capable of self-actualization because her intelligence or rationality is held in question.

The history of Western society, as represented in literature, reveals that in the nineteenth century, woman’s image as subordinate to man is still the prevailing consciousness in society. This is the reason writers such as Fleissner, Campbell, and Showalter analyse how a woman is perceived and treated in literature before and during the nineteenth century in the West. However, they are not content in merely exploring female roles and conditions. They also focus on the social and environmental complications a woman is subject to because of perceptions of gender inequalities and their implications. These writers echo the concerns of renowned feminist thinkers like Beauvoir, Morgan, Freidan, Atwood, and Cixous.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that a society that underscores female disempowerment is fraught with a consciousness that promotes male advantage. This kind of society considers man “the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being” (770) while the woman is the “inessential” subject who is his “Other” (6) to suggest her dependence on him. Beauvoir further explains:
“Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (5-6). Tyson expounds Beauvoir’s idea on the perception of women in a male-centred society:

Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men. Thus, women are defined not just in terms of their difference from men, but in terms of their inadequacy in comparison to men. The word woman, therefore, has the same implications as the word other. A woman is not a person in her own right. She is man’s Other: she is less than a man; she is a kind of alien in a man’s world; she is not a fully developed human being the way man is. (96)

For Cixous, however, a society where hierarchical consciousness prevails is dictated by a language where “binary system” operates (583). Binary thought is defined as “seeing the world in terms of polar opposites, one of which is considered superior to the other” (Tyson 100). Therefore, if society’s orientation is geared towards a language that promotes “hierarchical binary oppositions”, such society thinks in terms of conflicting “polar opposites”. A social structure marked by perceptions of hierarchical polarities suggests the presence of dominance in society. Examples of “hierarchical oppositions” are: “activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, day/night, father/mother, head/heart, culture/nature, intelligible/palpable, logos/pathos, superior/inferior, high/low” (Cixous 583). This concept of binary oppositions is expounded by Tyson as follows:

Clearly, according to patriarchal thinking, the woman occupies the right side of each opposition, the side that patriarchy considers inferior – heart, mother, nature, palpable, moon and passivity – while it is assumed that the male is defined by the left side of each opposition, the side that patriarchy considers superior: head, father, culture, intelligible, sun, and activity. ...
In other words, patriarchal thinking assumes that women are born to be passive while the men are born to be active because it is natural for the sexes to be different in this way. Thus, if a woman is not passive, she is not really a woman. Of course, it follows that women are naturally submissive to men, that men are natural leaders, and so forth. (100)

Literary naturalism is concerned with the presentation of social realities. This means that what is seen and observed is important for the naturalistic writer for purposes of verisimilitude, social awareness, and realism in the name of truthful representation. Because of the hierarchical consciousness that dictates society before and during nineteenth-century literature, the content of naturalistic fiction still contains traces of the not-so-ideal female image when juxtaposed with the male image. Literary criticisms in regard to female victimhood in naturalistic fiction in general often present women as soulless marionettes devoid of freedom and intelligence within the patriarchal paradigms of authority. This chapter and the next chapter focus on reconceptualising the context of woman and victimhood in two of the novels in particular towards a re-imaging of the female with agency despite the presence of forces that disempower women. It will attempt to explore the heroine’s interplay with forces and its relation to her choice and fate in order to show that determinism in naturalism is sometimes overstated.

There are two categories of women that I will discuss in this chapter and chapter 4. They relate to their economic status and social position as unmarried women. Stephen Crane’s heroine Maggie represents the impoverished underclass woman while Edith Wharton’s protagonist Lily represents the privileged high society woman. My analysis of the texts will show that although victimhood is the effect of the interplay of “forces”, another key factor comes into play in line with Beauvoir’s assertion that suggests a connection with the female spirit, will, or choice: “If woman discovers herself as the inessential and never turns into the essential, it is because she does not bring
about this transformation herself” (Beauvoir 8). How she is positioned in society is revealed in my discussion of *Maggie: A Girl of the Street* and *The House of Mirth* in my analysis of the heroine’s society.

**THE UNMARRIED WOMAN IN STEPHEN CRANE’S *MAGGIE: A GIRL OF THE STREET***

**Maggie’s society**

Maggie’s slum society is governed by a system that reflects further stratification of the underclass. Hence, the slum inhabitants are categorized into those with means and those without means. Those with means are classified as blue collar workers e.g. bartenders, drivers, hemstitchers, sewers, and “street” workers. Those without means are the unemployed. Maggie’s society therefore categorizes the slum dwellers as powerful or powerless according to their economic status. The male slum characters are presented as powerful figures in society. Although some of the underclass female characters are powerful in her society, the heroine is portrayed as the embodiment of perfection and yet, she is perceived inferior as a woman due to a life of economic deprivation. The societal expectation of conformity is the major force that contributes to Maggie’s disempowerment, and influences her desperate struggle in the Bowery slums for a continued existence. Her actions may be subject to her society’s conventions due to female role expectations, and yet these movements somehow reflect the intelligence and decisions of the heroine.

**Female struggle for survival and workplace exploitation**

Women struggle for economic survival in the society represented in the novels in the naturalist era with the absence of support systems, particularly the family. They work outside of their
homes even if they lack the required qualifications as they are still in their formative years. But the only work available for them is in the factories. However, these factories are a venue for the abuse of female workers by capitalists due to unfair labour practices. Thus, the female situation within a patriarchal social structure that tolerates unjust workplace practices in a capitalistic economy suggests that a woman’s low position is unchallenged because the “masculine-economy” serves as a “locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously” (Cixous, Cohen and Cohen, 879). This situation persisted into the twentieth century and beyond. Beauvoir writes:

Economically, men and women almost form two castes; all things being equal, the former have better jobs, higher wages, and greater chances to succeed than their new female competitors; they occupy many more places in industry, in politics, and so forth, and they hold the most important positions. In addition to their concrete power, they are invested with a prestige by a child’s whole education: the present incorporates the past, and in the past all history was made by males. At the moment that women are beginning to share in the making of the world, this world still belongs to men: men have no doubt about this, and women barely doubt it. (9)

Although the heroine is depicted as having limited alternatives in the slums due to her deprivation, she manages to work in a factory. Her securing a blue collar job suggests agency and responsibility. Her movement into paid underclass work in a dehumanizing condition signifies from a Marxist perspective, a profit-oriented capitalistic economic structure (conveniently represented by Maggie’s fat, unpleasantly greasy, unconcerned employer). The employer builds his affluence at the expense of the workers, usually young, less educated women. In nineteenth century America, women were ushered into working in the factories and became victims of an unjust labour system. Maggie represents the nineteenth century New York worker who endures the factory’s degrading physical condition:
The air in the collar and cuff establishment strangled her. She knew she was gradually and surely shrivelling in the hot, stuffy room. The begrimed windows rattled incessantly from the passing of elevated trains. The place was filled with a whirl of noises and odors. (56-57)

The factory bears a resemblance to the oppressive nature of the heroine’s society. The novel’s indirect message invites readers to be more aware of the pitfalls of capitalism particularly the exploitation of workers. The female workforce is an object of greed and abuse rampant within a capitalistic system as illustrated in the recruitment of young workers receiving below the minimum wage. They are unschooled girls of immigrant families who go through poor working conditions for economic survival. Capitalism in the novel is presented in a negative light because it serves to advance employer welfare only while the workers are treated like soulless overworked machines. The novel of Crane encourages us to understand or sympathise with the marginalization of the underclass. It complements the naturalistic paradigm because Maggie highlights realism in its portrayal of social realities with a focus on verisimilitude in the representation of the character and her environment. Tyson explains:

...realism is the best form for Marxist purposes because it clearly and accurately represents the real world, with all its socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions, and encourages readers to see the unhappy truths about material/historical reality, for whether or not authors intend it they are bound to represent socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions if they accurately represent the real world. (66)

The Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective claims that in the nineteenth century, women were ushered into “the industrial capitalist mode of production—developments which had serious consequences for women and family” (330). Middle class women stayed at home while women from the lower class were enlisted to work in the factories because they represented cheap labour:
Working-class women were drafted into production as a source of cheap labour; bourgeois women remained in the home and were separated from production. In both cases, women were excluded from ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange (330).

The plight of Maggie as an underpaid and overworked factory worker points to a reality in nineteenth century America where girls flocked into "countless sweatshops":

Major urban centers attracted young women to or kept them in such work. New York, the center of the garment trades a city with countless sweatshops, sales and service jobs to fill, drew hundreds of thousands. The hard-pressed New York working girl, underpaid and overworked, became part of what cultural historian Robert Bremner calls the late-nineteenth century’s “discovery” of the wage-earning poor. (Hapke 43)

A number of tenement fictions written during the early part of the nineteenth century depict young working women of poor families (Hapke 44). The preferred characters of the era in these fictional works are wage-earning women “from the street gamin to the widowed washer-woman, the hod carrier to the sweatshop seamstress, the saloon keeper to the prostitute” (43) of the “urban world”. Hapke adds that a greater part of the working women “were immigrants or daughters of immigrants, young, unskilled and poor” (43). In the novel, Maggie’s portrayal as a daughter of an immigrant family suggests that she represents the daughters of impoverished immigrants who worked in the factories in the nineteenth century.

Marxism suggests that capitalism is an ideology that serves to enrich the upper class because they control the socioeconomic structure represented by the factory employer of Maggie. Workers in a capitalistic structure remain poor even if they spend years in the factories. This is one reason impoverished girls resort to working in the flesh trade on the streets because their potential income in this trade is perceived as much better than when they work in the
factories. Maggie’s presence in the factory symbolizes her struggle for economic freedom. This suggests though that despite her limited alternatives in society, the idea of female is constructed as choosing to work to sustain her survival in the harsh Bowery. The presence of poverty and female exploitation in a capitalist socioeconomic structure represents the forces of disempowerment in the heroine’s society.

**Society’s perception of woman and her position in society**

In Maggie’s society, power is relegated to men as exemplified by the male slum characters not only because they have economic advantage over women, but in heterosexual relationships, this power is also clearly delineated. The novel presents male characters, Pete (a suitor) and Jimmie (the heroine’s brother) as financially free with their jobs as blue collar workers. This power is reinforced by their physical prowess and extends to their relationships with women. When the heroine wonders that Pete “must have great sums of money to spend” (Crane 44), this reaction confirms that in her society, men have more spending power than women. This is supported by Deirdre David who writes that men dominate the “material or cultural arenas” (125). This further suggests that a woman depends on men because they can influence how society positions her morally and economically. It also shows that within patriarchal paradigms a woman’s emotions signify her as a weak entity. This implies that in Crane’s time, women were perceived as more inclined to sentimentalism and romanticism, with their focus on feelings, a perception reinforced by the proliferation of “sentimental romances” designed to cater to what were assumed to be a woman’s emotions or sentiments. Due to the spread of these types of novels in the nineteenth century, a father, according to Louis Budd’s summary, would encourage his daughter to “read history, works of truth, not novels and romances” so that she can get the “correct views of life”, “live pleasantly”, “do good”, and “learn to see the world in its true
light” (26). The effect of these novels on women was a concern of novelists that preceded Crane:

Many sentimental novels themselves worried about where the capacities for sympathy and for strong feeling could lead. Long before Mary Wollstonecraft complained of the "romantic unnatural delicacy of feeling" that "the herd of Novelists" glorified, those novelists themselves depicted the price that was often to be paid for sentimental susceptibility. (Mullan 249)

Women who “paid for sentimental susceptibility” were “reduced to weakness or illness by their sensitivities” or “driven to hysterical disorders” (249). In the novel, these external-physical adverse effects are less clearly demonstrated by the heroine. However, Crane follows the ideology of his time in depicting a woman whose feelings tend to direct her consciousness. This echoes Cixous’ binary language of oppositions such as “mind/heart” or “rational/irrational” (582) to indicate issues pertaining to gender relations and power struggle. Maggie, confined within patriarchal society, is positioned as representing the “heart” that suggests a woman occupies a low position in her society as compared with man who represents “mind” based on Cixous’ binary oppositions in a society’s hierarchical structure. Therefore, as a “feeling”-inclined woman, the heroine is perceived as less capable of rational actions. This is shown by Maggie’s intent to “please” Pete as she anticipates eagerly her Bowery dates with him. Perhaps this is indirectly linked to her desire to be saved from her impoverished situation. However, to represent the “heart” also implies she is a compassionate and good-natured heroine. But because she is a struggling underclass woman, it suggests she is dependent on strong men for economic survival. Despite this “heart” representation, it does not always follow that she lacks the freedom to challenge society’s social expectations for women, as I will show below.

Society’s perception of a “feeling” woman is established in the area of gender relations. For instance, being restricted between home
in the tenement and work in the factory, Maggie is portrayed as fascinated by a man’s presence when he appears for the first time in her house to see her brother, Jimmie. And Pete catches Maggie’s attention by impressing her with his outfit, confidence and superior stance, and tales of prowess. Although they still don’t know each other, she is shown to be attracted to him and is silently observing his conversations with Jimmie. She notices Pete’s appearance and gestures and thinks he is a man with a “sense of superiority”:

His hair was curled down over his forehead in an oiled bang. His rather pugged nose seemed to revolt from contact with a bristling moustache of short, wire-like hairs. His blue double-breasted coat, edged with black braid, buttoned close to a red puff tie, and his patent-leather shoes looked like murder-fitted weapons. . . .

His mannerisms stamped him as a man who had a correct sense of his personal superiority. There was valor and contempt for circumstances in the glance of his eye. He waved his hands like a man of the world, who dismisses religion and philosophy, and says “Fudge”. He had certainly seen everything and with each curl of his lip, he declared that it amounted to nothing. (38)

The narrative does not portray Pete in a positive light with his air of arrogance, poise, and self-confidence. However, it is because of his powerful physical stance in the Bowery that the disadvantaged heroine is in awe of him. Maggie thinks that “he must be a very elegant and graceful bartender” (38). When Pete animatedly regales Jimmie with stories of his conquests, he does it to impress Maggie. Pete is aware that Maggie is listening to him so he becomes “more eloquent in his descriptions of various happenings in his career” (42) and gives Maggie the impression that he is indestructible in his brawls. Maggie “marvelled at him and surrounded him with greatness” (43) so that when he leaves together with her brother, Jimmie, she is already thinking of Pete as a knight. She reflects “wonderingly and rather wistfully upon Pete’s face”, as she considers him with high regard:
... here was the beau ideal of a man. Her dim thoughts were often searching for far away lands, where, as God says, the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream gardens there had always walked a lover. (41)

Maggie’s thoughts reflects her idealism when she sees Pete as an ideal man and when she acknowledges God’s creations as she ponders on the “hills”, “trees”, and “gardens” that are made for man and woman united by love. And she is grateful to Pete for paying her attention. She perceives “that Pete brought forth all his elegance and all his knowledge of high class customs for her benefit. Her heart warmed as she reflected upon his condescension” (50). Maggie has only good impressions of him:

Here was a formidable man who disdained the strength of the world full of fists. Here was one who had contempt for brass-clothed power; one whose knuckles could defiantly ring against the granite of law. (43-44)

As a signifier for the text’s construct of woman in the 19th century, Maggie embodies idealism and romance within her harsh environment. Crane portrays her as easily taken in by stories of prowess from a “well-dressed”, self-assured man perhaps because she is young and hopeful of someone who can transform her deprivation. When Pete comes to her house one evening clad in another suit, he informs her that he will take her to a show: “Say, Mag,” he said, “put on yer bes’ duds Friday night an’ I’ll take yehs teh deh show. See?” (45). The novel shows that Pete does not request Maggie’s permission because he knows she craves his attention. Instead, he “commands” her to wear her best clothes on a Friday because he will take her on a date. This aggressive stance suggests the presence of male rule in Maggie’s society and imbalanced power relationship between man and woman from within the same impoverished class. Maggie’s idealism and romanticism is highlighted when she keeps on “making imaginary sketches of Pete and his daily
environment” (46) and thinks highly of him as someone imbued with exceptional dispositions: charming, popular, strong, and in high spirits:

She imagined some half dozen women in love with him and thought he must lean dangerously toward an indefinite one, whom she pictured with great charms of person, but with an altogether contemptible disposition. She thought he must live in a blare of pleasure. He had friends, and people who were afraid of him.

She saw the golden glitter of the place where Pete was to take her. An entertainment of many hues and many melodies where she was afraid she might appear small and mouse-colored. (46)

The more general "She" here, used in preference for the more particular "Maggie," suggests that it is innate for a young woman to indulge in romantic delusions where her naiveté and impractical idealism screens her perspectives to the truth about her real situation. Maggie is portrayed by Crane as more intent on how to please her man, a patriarchal value advocated by men of great minds represented, for instance, by Jean Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life sweet and agreeable to them – these are the duties of women at all times and what should be taught them from infancy. (qtd. in Morgan 33)

Another instance of the heroine’s romantic bent and idealism is reflected in her anticipation of a date with Pete. The novel portrays Maggie as worried about her lack of social experience in regard to attending popular shows and entertainments with a man. These shows are forms of amusements popular among the working class, and she does not want her man to be disappointed with her. Maggie’s
apprehension over Pete’s possible displeasure implies that young girls are primarily concerned with trivialities such as being particular about romantic dates and how men might react if they let them down. The text constructs the underclass, unmarried woman as more foregrounded on the present experience because money matters are relegated to a man. There is unequivocal delineation between male and female social expectations. As portrayed by Crane in the novel, men have financial advantage over women, and young girls like Maggie want their attention for the prospect of economic freedom. Marxist thought maintains that economic power is the motivation behind all actions in society (Tyson 53). This implies that a man who shows economic dominance enjoys good standing in society, and this perception is the reason she has a high regard for Pete. His financial advantage is reflected in his capacity to spend for popular entertainments and dates. Maggie’s eagerness for these dates and entertainments suggests she enjoys the arts and other creative expressions. These expressions reflect her hunger for experiences that make her feel good about herself because they make her forget temporarily her deprivation. However, Crane’s novel suggests that a woman’s orientation with sentimentalism or romance usually overtakes thoughts of economic alleviation through individual means, and it limits her perception of wider social realities. That is, her desire for melodrama and popular luxuries inhibits her ability to consider all of her socioeconomic options.

**Female commodification**

Before Maggie’s total submission to Pete, she appears the “apple of his eye”. However, when Nellie arrives in the scene after Maggie has come under Pete’s influence, Maggie is thrust aside. Pete’s interest in her physical presence or body wanes as soon as he sees Nellie. Therefore, Maggie’s representation as “female” suggests she is a commodity in her relationship with Pete. Her exchange value
(as a commodity) suggests she is a sex object man can discard any time after he uses her. Pete’s initial commodification of Maggie turns on the exchange of sexual gratification for the dates he takes her to. The sexual pleasure represents Maggie’s exchange value while Pete represents the superior creature as suggested by his capacity to buy. With economic advantage in society, Crane implies that Pete has the upper hand over women while Maggie’s youth and naïveté, slum education, and financial deprivation indicate she is an easy prey to male influence and charm. Maggie’s exchange value however is compared to the sign-exchange value of Nellie who is also thought of as a commodity because of her service in the flesh trade. However, Pete considers her a better “object” than Maggie because Nellie’s company can advance his image and social standing in the Bowery. The reason is that Nellie is perceived as a woman of “brilliance and audacity” (100). So, he leaves Maggie in favour of Nellie’s sign-exchange value. Pete’s mindset fits the characteristics of patriarchal society as Tyson describes them:

Thus, in a patriarchy, women are merely tokens, markers, commodities in a male economy. In other words, women function to display men’s relations to other men. To cite the simplest example, a patriarchal man who feels he must have a beautiful woman on his arm in order to impress other people isn’t interested in impressing other people. He’s interested in impressing other men. In short, patriarchy is a man’s world: men invent the rules of the game, they play it only with one another, and women are merely to be found among the prizes. (102)

Aside from the novel’s portrayal of Maggie as a commodity, she is not represented as an independent entity because she is perceived as male reliant. The novel shows that female fulfilment is realised through her relations with men. This is supported by Maggie’s assumptions that if Pete is her man, she will have the kind of life most women desire. In The Second Sex, Beauvoir reiterates one of feminist’s concerns with regard to the perception of a woman who is “defined” by her relation with men: “Humanity is male, and man
defines a woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (5). Maggie exemplifies the type of woman who admires men because they symbolize the power to transform people’s lives, particularly the lives of impoverished women. As a construct of the unmarried, impoverished woman, Maggie signifies the tension between patriarchal expectations and an individual woman’s desires, that is, while confined by patriarchal ideology, the female retains her own desires. Maggie experiences the tension between materialism (her economic needs) and spirituality (what she is supposed to do as an unmarried woman). Despite her good qualities as a gentle, meek, quiet, young woman, her abrupt decision to leave with her boyfriend for economic upkeep after her family abandons her is a sign of non-conformity against society’s expectations. Her social transgression is compounded when she is implied to have become the object of male consumption for survival after her boyfriend leaves her eventually for another woman. Her decision may have challenged society’s mores, but it demonstrates free choice and agency on her part. Her inherent goodness as a person oppressed by economic forces (i.e. extreme poverty) and loss of support system shows that survival and continuity depends not only on the inherent goodness of a person, but also on society’s (i.e. family) acceptance of her as a person worthy of compassion because man (male or female) is not meant for a “life of isolation, but for the formation of social unity” Gaudium et Spes highlights (30). Her dehumanized status stripped of dignity fraught with economic injustice in society is the outcome of rugged individualism and female commodification as examined in Marxist-feminist thought.

**Maggie’s family, female chastity, and redemption through marriage**

The novel shows that the female life of lack can only be redeemed through marriage. If she fails to find someone who can
offer her protection or marriage, her future is the deep East River where prostitutes in real life drowned themselves in the early nineteenth century New York slums (Pizer 38). Maggie represents underprivileged American females in the early nineteenth century where options are limited to two: marriage or death. The novel suggests that her society maintains certain conventions about marriage where a man marries a woman based on her untarnished image, her exchange value. A woman is expected to be “pure” before marriage while a man is expected to have sexual experience. This is the kind of consciousness preserved by the heroine’s family. For instance, when Maggie is scared at home due to the violence of her drunk mother, Pete appears at her house suddenly and urges Maggie to leave the house. Maggie’s mother, Mary, gets furious at her because she perceives that Maggie may have engaged in sex with Pete. The novel implies that Maggie’s mother has moral expectations of her daughter, that is why, she yells: “Go teh hell now, an’ see how yeh likes it. Git out. I won’t have sech as yehs in me house! Get out, d’yeh hear! Damn yeh, git out!” (67). Maggie is depicted as defenceless and guilty of a transgression she is yet to commit. She cannot argue with the false charges hurled at her. She trembles and she gets inhibited in her self-expression as her mother squats on the floor with her “red, writhing body” cursing her and driving her out of the house: “Go teh hell an’ good riddance” (67). The novel suggests that female displacement may be initiated by other women like the mother of Maggie, who, instead of looking after her daughter’s welfare as a member of her impoverished family, ushers Maggie into an uncertain, but most likely bleak future. Her mother shows her authority in the household, that is why, Maggie decides to leave with Pete quietly, an act that demonstrates she challenges society’s expectations for unmarried young women, and a sign of disregard for patriarchal gender roles in her society. The heroine’s exit from the boundaries of her family suggests agency, that there are moments where a woman is responsible for the choices she makes.
The novel presents Maggie’s mother as an image of authority and power perhaps because of her temperament. In patriarchy’s hierarchical structure, language is relegated to the powerful, in this instance, Maggie’s mother, while Maggie’s silence illustrates her lack of power for expression, perhaps due to her rawness as a young woman and her innate respect for the elderly. In terms of feminine language and freedom of expression, she is falling into what Cixous calls “the snare of silence” (881) and accepting disempowerment.

Maggie’s rejection by her mother stems from the latter’s belief that her daughter’s “transgression” has brought a “negative” image to the Bowery and to the Johnson family, in particular. This reaction implies that her daughter’s wholesome image, which has been tainted, is beyond redemption. Maggie’s “assumed” pre-marital sexual encounter with Pete breaks a social taboo, which is why, Mary says: “Yeh’ve gone teh deh devil, Mag Johnson, yehs knows yehs have gone to deh devil. Yer a disgrace teh yer people, damn yeh” (67). This means Maggie breaks one of the social conventions (held by her mother) that suggests a woman remain “pure” for her future husband because he alone has the right over her body, being his “Other” as Beauvoir suggests. Maggie’s “tainted” womanhood is a “disgrace” to the Johnson family from the perspective of Maggie’s mother. This means Maggie has brought disrespect or dishonour to the family “name”. Therefore, she has to leave the family sanctuary because she deserves only condemnation for her actions (as reflected in the impassioned statements of Maggie’s mother). The family’s rejection of Maggie is an example of rugged individualism from a Marxist perspective because Mary (Maggie’s mother) puts her own interest beyond her daughter’s wellbeing and survival in the Bowery. Tyson explains:

Marxist thinkers consider rugged individualism an oppressive ideology because it puts self-interest above the needs — and
even above the survival – of other people. By keeping the focus on “me” instead of on “us”, rugged individualism works against the well-being of society as a whole and of underprivileged people in particular. (60)

The novel shows that the society of Mary and Maggie considers sex off-limits for unmarried women. Maggie’s resolve to be with Pete indicates personal choice. She is perceived by society as an intruder “into the space previously considered the spheres of men” (Goldman 71). Society has expected views on sexuality for men and women which may point to a case of “double standard”. The expected female roles of the era determine that if a woman violates these roles, she deserves ostracism. The heroine’s eventual engagement in sex violates social expectations. In her society, women ought to remain “chaste” before marriage and faithful in her marital vows. On the other hand, her society is more tolerant of unmarried men with their sexual exploits given the patriarchal acknowledgment of male virility or masculine power. A good example is when Maggie’s brother makes two girls pregnant or when Pete engages in the implied sexual act (with Maggie or Nellie) without societal condemnation. The novel suggests that sex is understood as the exclusive domain of men (whatever their civil status is) while women are expected to experience it only in marriage.

Wyman writes about the supreme importance of female chastity and virtue among early American writers, those who preceded Crane:

Feminine frailty before masculine wiles or blandishment provided the chief subject matter for the first generation American novelists, who endlessly repeated the object lesson set by Clarissa Harlowe when she went off with Lovelace to ruin and an inevitable death of shame. W.H. Brown, Suzanna Rowson, Hannah Foster, their imitators and successors – all detailed the weakening of womanly virtue and the subsequent suffering brought about by a Providence justly upholding the absolute value of feminine chastity. Once a girl fell, she
invariably faced dishonour and death, unless, indeed, she evaded public shame by suicide. (167)

The implication is that in the world of these novels a woman’s chastity before marriage must be preserved because, however the sexual transgression comes about, the female is disgraced and excluded from society. Once married, she submits to the household master, serves him and his children, and practices self-sacrifice or renounces herself in lieu of economic security and protection from him. She is expected to be a selfless wife.

The novel suggests that if a woman is discarded by her man after a sexual experience, her only possible career for survival is prostitution. She does not deserve marriage to a man because her impurity will make her husband the butt of society’s jokes. His name is important in society. Crane’s novel also suggests that family ties and the welfare of its members are not considered very important among beleaguered American families in the slums of New York. This indicates therefore that social beliefs may supersede blood relations. In Marxist terms, family integration is affected by the influence of socio-economic forces. However, this does not mean that the family and its individual members are bereft of choice that naturalism highlights.

In her commentary on Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Tyson explains that in the patriarchal system “the moral structure rests on the stability of the patriarchal family and the patriarchal family rests on the conformity of women to patriarchal gender roles” (120-21). This is applicable to the 1890s New York depicted by Crane as well as to Fitzgerald and the 1920s. After Maggie disregards the expected feminine roles and conventions in society in her premarital sexual encounter with Pete, she turns to prostitution. Social authority demands that “women’s rejection of any aspect of their traditional role inevitably results in the destruction of the family and the moral
decline of society as a whole” (Tyson 121). And although society requires women to stay at home because they are “the standard bearers of traditional values” and must therefore be loyal to “traditional gender roles” for the survival of the “moral structure”, the economic system of the society that presents men with buying power, relies upon the maxim “a woman’s place is in the home” (122). Tyson notes that “another advantage of keeping women at home, modestly dressed and quietly behaved, was that it reaffirmed man’s ownership of women’s sexual and reproductive capacities” (122).

**Maggie’s sibling as image of male dominance**

The other family of the heroine is her brother. His character in the novel suggests evidence of male dominance (aside from Pete) in her society. Maggie’s relationship with Jimmie is an example of power struggle among siblings. His show of power is more physical than economic as represented through his display of violence. For instance, the novel depicts Jimmie as exhibiting savagery in the streets, fighting between Rum Alley and Devil’s Row urchins. When his buddy from the Rum Alley cautions him to distance himself from the Devil’s Row urchins, he simply retorts and brags that “dese micks can’t make me run”(5). And he wears “a look of a tiny, insane demon” (6). Jimmie is not only brutal to male Bowery urchins and other men; he is also cruel towards his own sister. For instance, when Maggie reprimands him for his street fights, Jimmie exhibits physical power by hitting her:

The little girl upbraided him, “Youse allus fightin’, Jimmie, an’ yeh knows it puts mudder out when yehs come home half dead, an’ it’s like we’ll all get a poundin’.”
She began to weep. The babe threw back his head and roared at his prospects.
“Ah, what deh hell!” cried Jimmie. “Shut up er I’ll smack yer mout’. See?
As his sister continued her lamentations, he suddenly swore and struck her. The little girl reeled and, recovering herself,
burst into tears and quaveringly cursed him. As she slowly retreated her brother advanced dealing her cuffs. (13-14)

The narrative is a blatant example of male physical power and abuse. It implies that sibling hostility and violence, as well as family dysfunctions, are a reality in the slums. Fitelson points to violence as “the predominant form of human communication” (186) in Maggie’s family, and he notes that life in the slums “is more evocative of life in the animal kingdom than it is of the world of civilized man” (188).

Through Jimmie, the novel shows that men make important decisions in romantic relationships. For instance, Jimmie resolves to abandon a woman after he sexually uses her. The novel shows that women pursue men when they are put in uncompromising situations as shown in the cases of Hattie and Maggie. Hattie pursues Jimmie because she is already pregnant with his baby. However, Jimmie decides that he does not want to see her anymore when Hattie confronts him “with an aggrieved air” (111). This is the reason he informs her at once to stay away from him as he exclaims with irritation to her face:

“Say, fer Gawd’s sake, Hattie, don’t foller me from one end of deh city teh deh odder. Let up, will yehs! Give me a minute’s res’, can’t yehs? Yehs makes me tired, allus taggin’ me. See? Ain’ yehs got no sense. Do yehs want people teh get onto me? Go chase yerself, fer Gawd’s sake”. (111)

The narrative does not present Jimmie in the best light. Through his character, the novel confirms the commodification of women in society, and men are not obliged to be responsible for their actions. For instance, Hattie’s body is presumed subject to Jimmie’s whim or decision. She is perceived helpless in her sorry state when she tracks Jimmie with perseverance after her sexual experience with him and her subsequent pregnancy. She pursues him even though she is belittled through verbal abuse. There is a clash between (male and female) wills, and the woman is in a position that projects female
marginality. However, this show of perseverance suggests that Hattie merely wants to reclaim her “good image” and save herself from society’s ostracism. She pursues him not only because of the physical connection, but also because of her need to be accepted as a woman who yearns for emotional connection and spiritual mutual love for a sense of purpose and direction in life. It is also presumed her baby will need a father’s love and support. As a signifier for the unmarried, lower class woman, Hattie has the strength of will to chase her own aspirations.

The culture entrenched in the consciousness of Jimmie prizes above all else toughness, the power to subdue the enemy. He believes it is something that every man should acquire in order to dominate the world. This means that man must possess physical power not just for others to look up to him, but more so for survival in the Bowery. Physical power coupled with a combative mind makes a man which strengthens further the patriarchal resolve that man maintain his influence in society. This belief in physical power is exemplified in Jimmie’s conception of himself in the following passages:

He maintained a belligerent attitude toward all well-dressed men. To him fine raiment was allied to weakness, and all good coats covered faint hearts. He and his order were kings, to a certain extent, over the men of untarnished clothes, because the latter dreaded, perhaps, to be either killed or laughed at. ...

Above all things he despised obvious Christians and ciphers with the chrysanthemums of aristocracy in their button-holes. He considered himself above both of these classes. He was afraid of neither the devil nor the leader of society. (30)

The quote suggests that for Jimmie who values physical supremacy, Christianity must be shunned because it entails an image of weakness as it addresses freedom from violence and any forms of physical power. Christianity promotes gentleness as opposed to violence,
individual submission, and sacrifice for the “common good” which are the ideals rejected by Jimmie. The novel implies there is tension between the physical and the non-physical as demonstrated by the characters. While the novel highlights the non-physical spiritual aspect through the disposition of Maggie and Hattie, it also underscores the importance of physical power among men as shown in Jimmie and Pete’s characters. The novel presents the clash between the physical and non-physical-spiritual human dimensions. From the feminist lens, however, this slant towards the physical suggests that men cultivate strength and violence in order to confirm their superior (physical) position in society. Crane’s novel even adds that Jimmie “became so sharp that he believed in nothing” (31). For instance, as a truck driver, Jimmie would fight with other drivers and notes the dignity of his lowly status: “He himself occupied a down-trodden position that had a private but distinct element of grandeur in its isolation” (31). Jimmie’s has a positive lust for violence:

He developed too great a tendency to climb down from his truck and fight with other drivers. He had been in quite a number of miscellaneous fights, and in some general barroom rows that had become known to the police. Once he had been arrested for assaulting a Chinaman. Two women in different parts of the city, and entirely unknown to each other, caused him considerable annoyance by breaking forth, simultaneously, at fateful intervals, into wailings about marriage and support and infants. (34)

Crane’s novel also suggests that male sadism (i.e. hurting women emotionally or physically) is acceptable. Female feelings are ignored or not considered important in a male world which is Maggie’s society. Jimmie’s lust for violence represents Bowery power. It is not just directed to his male enemies, but also to women who attract his ire. Hitting women, for instance as he does his sister Maggie, is done with the implication that they deserve it. The novel seems to show that Jimmie is a misogynist because he cannot see the troubled women he sexually exploits as human beings with feelings. This
absence of emotional response such as empathy and compassion presents the novel’s challenges of Christian ideology that encourages emotions of sympathy for another person. Jimmie’s violent environment is portrayed to have reinforced his emotional numbness, as in jilting women without remorse. This kind of attitude denotes female commodification and marginality intended for male advantage or pleasure. Through Jimmie’s attitude, the novel shows that to maintain machismo and male reign, conscience must not interfere with man’s inner territory. Physical power does not only imply spreading violence before his enemies and conquering them; it also suggests sexism and perhaps sadism. Tyson, in clarifying issues in feminism, notes the indicators of “patriarchal manhood”:

If men can’t achieve the unrealistic economic goals set for them in contemporary America, then they must increase the signs of their manhood in some other area: they must be the most sexually active (or make others believe that they are) or be able to hold the most liquor or display the most anger. It is not surprising, in this context, that anger and other violent emotions are the only emotions permitted, even encouraged, in men, for anger is a very effective means of blocking out fear and pain, which are not permitted, and anger usually produces the kind of aggressive behaviours associated with patriarchal manhood. (87-88)

To apply Tyson’s quote, the novel shows that Jimmie’s perceived sexual dynamism involving “two women” (34) suggests signs of “manhood” in his society. The only emotions he has are anger and lack of compassion. For instance, he displays anger when pregnant Hattie pursues him. Jimmie’s leaving her and the other girl suggests his rejection of romance and emotional commitment. He remains true to his nature, and that is, to be perceived “a ‘real’ man in a patriarchal culture requires that one hold feminine qualities in contempt” because they “are considered ‘womanish’, that is, inferior, beneath the dignity of manhood” (Tyson 88). This perception is the impetus for Jimmie’s conduct. He perceives women as sexual objects designed for his purpose. The novel suggests that (for him) the only
thing that matters in life is physical force as proof of male power. His sexuality is evidence of his “macho” image and influence over women. The novel also suggests that proper decorum may be beyond his understanding. This behaviour indicates that Jimmie’s consciousness in the harsh Bowery is a patriarchal orientation outcome geared to maintain man’s superior status in society as implied in Tyson’s explanation of the feminist views on patriarchal operations in society.

The signs of machismo are well-entrenched in the representation of the male characters. Their emotional capacity to empathize with family members who need help is blocked. For instance, when Jimmie’s sister, Maggie, turns to him for help after their mother disowns her, Jimmie is portrayed as showing no signs of emotional susceptibility because he abandons Maggie as well. Jimmie does nothing when their mother humiliates Maggie before the neighbours when she returns home after Pete rejects her:

“Dere she stands,” she cried, wheeling suddenly and pointing with dramatic finger. Dere she stands! Lookut her! Ain’ she a dindy? An’ she was so good as to come home teh her mudder, she was! Ain’ she a beaut’? Ain she a dindy? Fer Gawd’s sake!” (114).

The novel suggests that Jimmie upholds the patriarchal “signs of manhood” by keeping “unmanly” emotions such as sympathy under control. He has anger only for his sister when she turns to him for help: “Well, now, yer a hell of a t’ing, ain’ yeh?” He said, his lips curling in scorn. Radiant virtue sat upon his brow and his repelling hands expressed horror of contamination” (115). Maggie turns to him for help because of his perceived financial capabilities and because he is the remaining family she can turn to. But just like his mother, Jimmie upholds society’s expectations for women which means that because Maggie’s “transgression” has tainted the Johnson family name, he feels the “horror of contamination” while talking to her. Like his mother, Jimmie is also guilty of rugged individualism. There is no
sympathy for the circumstances of his sister, and the presumption is that he does not care for her survival. His capacity for fellow-feeling is blocked by his Bowery experience. This attitude suggests that individualism is a strong Rum Alley value, and it seems more important than familial connection. The values shown by his parents (i.e. violent, uncaring) are the same values that Jimmie acquires. The society positions the poor such as the Johnson’s dysfunctional family as bereft of empathy and sensitivity to the emotional needs of others particularly women in distress like Hattie and Maggie.

**Language and inhibitions of self-expression**

The language of Maggie is silence, a signifier of spiritual attribute because it symbolizes her inner goodness as a person. Throughout Crane’s novel, Maggie hardly expresses herself in response to the other slum characters. When Pete talks to her, for instance, she is portrayed as a woman who hardly verbalizes her views or asserts herself or gets angry because of her inherent gentleness and good disposition. Most of the time, she keeps quiet which suggests that society expects that a woman suppress her thoughts and feelings because language represents power appropriate for dominant men in a patriarchal structure. This is the reason Tyson says that “from a patriarchal standpoint, women’s perspectives, feelings, and opinions don’t count unless they conform to those of patriarchy” (91). This idea is demonstrated when Pete does not think highly of Maggie as a woman perhaps because her qualities of being gentle, good-natured, and pure in motives are a reversal of his personality as insincere, opportunistic, and unprincipled. Pete’s low perception of her as a woman may be related to her economic deprivation and lack of self-assertion. He feels embarrassed about her relationship with him when Nellie’s critical gestures seem to deride him for his romantic attachment to Maggie. Nellie informs him that Maggie is a “little pale thing with no spirit” taking note of her eyes: “There was something in them about pumpkin pie and virtue” (118).
Nellie’s statement makes Pete defensive, suggesting to Nellie that he is not really attracted to Maggie. He discards Maggie like an object when she appears in his workplace:

Say, yehs makes me tired. See? What deh hell deh yeh wanna tag aroun’ atter me fer? Yeh’ll git me inteh trouble wid deh ol’ man an’ dey’ll be hell teh pay! If he sees a woman roun’ here he’ll go crazy an’ I’ll lose me job! See? Yer brudder come in here an’ raised hell an” deh ol’ man hada put up fer it! An’ now I’m done! See? I’m done. (120)

The heroine’s response to Pete’s rejection demonstrates her reliance on men. Because of her deprivation, she meekly asks Pete where she can go, and he tells her without reservation to go to hell, the same response her family gives her. The novel shows that as a woman, there is consistency in her expressions by remaining quiet and unassertive despite the rejection. She exhibits feminine qualities that patriarchy expects of a woman: meek, ignorant, voiceless, destitute, and submissive. However, these same “feminine” qualities pave the way for her economic and social disempowerment and oppression. Tyson expounds on the idea of femininity from the point of view of patriarchy:

It is important to note, too, that the patriarchal concept of femininity – which is linked to frailty, modesty, and timidity – disempowers women in the real world: it is not feminine to succeed in business, to be extremely intelligent, to earn big bucks, to have strong opinions, to have a healthy appetite (for anything), or to assert one’s rights. (88)

Aside from society’s expectation of “feminine” traits that marginalize the heroine, the other forces of disempowerment in Maggie’s environment include her own family that represents a divisive unit in society that propels her entrance into the flesh trade. The other force is the gossiping neighbours who condone her mother’s lambaste and humiliation of her before their presence. They are also to blame for her social ostracism. Another force is Nellie, the leader of
the group of bar girls. She represents the powerful image of a shrewd and practical prostitute. She socially oppresses her by alienating her and treating her indifferently in the presence of Pete. Nellie criticizes Pete for his connection with Maggie, and her dismissal of Maggie implies she is someone inferior with second-rate qualities unworthy of male attention. Female victimhood in Crane’s novel is moulded by patriarchal ideology, the commodification of women and rugged individualism, yet within the confines of this framework, there are moments where the unmarried woman asserts her free will as shown in her struggle for survival in the Bowery. Maggie’s struggles for survival are construed as challenging female roles and expectations in a patriarchal society. Her actions represent free will and female agency.

**Female beauty and inherent goodness**

The surroundings of Maggie symbolize filth and decadence as shown by the violence-riddled inhabitants in the tenements, her uncaring family, oppressive women in the flesh trade, exploitative capitalist employer, insincere boyfriend, and corrupt men she meets on the Bowery streets. However, her immigrant beauty seems unscathed by the corruption in the Bowery. Her mother is pictured as a representation of everything that is decadent implying Maggie’s likely future if she survives into old age in her environment. Crane describes both daughter and mother as poles apart in relation to their physical features and attitudes, which make Irving speculate why Maggie is linked with the vulgarity of her family.

Initially, Maggie is the physical and moral antithesis of her mother in every respect. She is presented as the archetypal melodramatic heroine, a role that entails "vulnerability and a kind of passivity" as well as "perfect goodness" (Grimstead 174). She seems merely to lack the correct environment in which she might come to embody the ideal of American womanhood. At first sight, therefore, Maggie seems an anomaly. We have no idea how such a gentle, attractive girl
could have come to find herself in the company of the Johnsons. (10)

The novel suggests that Maggie’s inherent goodness is reflected in her behaviour as being trusting, grateful, and gentle in her ways. For instance, she is perceived to have pure intentions in her idealistic assumptions with Pete by not thinking negatively of him. Her initial admiration for what Pete can do is without a hidden agenda. Even when Pete rejects her afterwards, she goes away silently. Her silence therefore connotes spiritual attribute (as has been mentioned in an earlier page), and her pure intent suggests her inherent goodness as a woman in the slums. Pizer comments that Maggie “functions as an almost expressionistic symbol of inner purity uncorrupted by external foulness” (168).

**Female fate**

With the heroine’s passing away, Pete is shown as spending time with Nellie and her cohorts in a bar. He buys them more drinks and offers Nellie some money perhaps to show off his material means. This ironical scenario shows he is extremely drunk, and he tries to make his “illustrious” (46) companions, the prostitutes, confirm to him that he is a good man:

“An’t’ing yehs wants, damn it,” said the man in an abandonment of good will. His countenance shone with the true spirit of benevolence. He was in the proper mode of missionaries. He would have fraternized with obscure Hottentots. And above all, he was overwhelmed in tenderness for his friends, who were all illustrious. . . .

“An’t’ing yehs wants, damn it,” repeated he, waving his hands with beneficent recklessness. “I’m good f’ler, girls, an’ if an’body treats me right I – here,” called he through an open door to a waiter, “bring girls drinks, damn it. What ‘ill yehs have, girls? An’t’ing yehs wants, damn it!” (139)
Pete’s display of generosity to Nellie and the bar girls with his drinking splurge is unexpected for a person of his character who consistently shows his toughness and strength with women. However, he becomes “sentimental” all of a sudden. His conversations with the bar girls express “the tender regard he felt for all living things” emphasizing “the purity of his motives in all dealings with men in the world” and speaking of “the fervour of his friendship with those who were amiable” (141). Pete’s eyes get moist: “Tears welled slowly from his eyes. His voice quavered when he spoke to his companions” (141). This show of emotion suggests that his conscience is perhaps disturbed because it means he believes he causes Maggie’s ruin. His unexpected generosity with the bar girls implies a show of economic power to solicit emotional consolation particularly from Nellie who ironically dumps him and collects all his money when he drops unconscious on the floor due to his drunkenness:

The women drank and laughed, not heeding the slumbering man in the corner. Finally he lurched forward and fell groaning to the floor.

The women screamed in disgust and drew back their skirts.

“Come ahn,” cried one, starting up angrily, “let’s get out of here.”

The woman of brilliance and audacity stayed behind, taking up the bills and stuffing them into a deep, irregularly-shaped pocket. A guttural snore from the recumbent man caused her to turn and look down at him.

She laughed. “What a damn fool,” she said, and went. (146-147)

The women are portrayed aware of the hypocrisy of patriarchal expectations. Despite their status in underclass society, they project power and courage over the male subject. One of the reasons for their courage is traced to their organized group, actually a feminist thrust echoed in Morgan’s book, *Sisterhood is Powerful*. They may be
susceptible to physical abuse (as practitioners in the flesh trade), but their bonding becomes a sanctuary that protects them from other forms of exploitation. Their bonding denotes they are social beings who can rely on each other for survival if they work together as a group. So even if Pete has economic clout, the scene suggests they overpower him with his display of emotional weakness (as evidenced in his drunkenness) and subtle solicitation of sympathy for likelihood of guilt appeasement over Maggie’s fate. The novel also suggests they know how to manipulate male emotions because they have the numbers as a unified group with a voice. That is why, for Pete, they are “illustrious” (140) in his eyes perhaps because he sees them as his equal, they being dominant and daring as represented by Nellie, “the woman of brilliance and audacity” (142), a phrase repeated often in the novel.

Maggie’s fate suggests a criticism of the hypocrisy of the Bowery dwellers who can only see the fault of the heroine’s choice of prostituting herself for survival. They are blind to her parents’ irresponsible upbringing of Maggie. Love is not a value within the Johnson family. The novel therefore portrays a satirical message about Christianity and the Christian believers’ false display of faith and seeming fanaticism without understanding or discernment. A good example portrayed in the novel is the woman from the tenement who consoles Mary about her loss by focusing more on Mary’s “pathetic” self as a mother because Maggie has been a “disobedient” daughter:

“Ah, what ter’ble affliction is dis,” continued she. Her vocabulary was derived from mission churches. “Me poor Mary, how I feel fer yehs! Ah, what a ter’ble affliction is a disobed’ent chil”. (149)

“Yer poor misguided chil’ is gone now, Mary, an’ let us hope it’s fer deh bes”. Yeh’ll forgive her now, Mary, won’t yehs, dear, all her disobed’ence? All her t’ankless behaviour to her mudder
an’ all her badness? She’s gone where her ter’ble sins will be judged”. (150)

The preceding quote highlights the Christian doctrine of forgiveness, and the portrayal of the scene shows Christian believers blinded by their own imperfections as represented by Mary and her friends. The scene in Maggie’s wake presents a criticism of believers misinterpreting the values and meaning of Christian spirituality. For instance, despite what has happened to Maggie, the blame is focused on her and not on those responsible for her debasement.

**Conclusion**

The societal expectations and material-physical circumstances are “forces” that challenge Maggie in society. However, the novel suggests she deserves a better environment because she is an image of inner goodness as suggested by her character, that perhaps it is her surroundings that are lacking. She embodies a spirit of purity, sincerity, and idealism that suggests a non-physical dimension embraced in Christian spirituality. All the people around her are fraught with behaviours opposite to Maggie’s. Their inhumanity is juxtaposed by her humanity. She faces deprivation as expected from her marginal status in society, but she has the spirit to work for her survival. And she does not verbalise her pain. However, she becomes an island bereft of a support system. Maggie desires social acceptance, but she is forced to be on her own, a pariah, as a result of society’s ostracism. As a signifier of “victimhood” and the female heroine, she stands separate and secluded, and while forced to fend for herself, there is a hint she has exercised a choice. The only way for her to earn a living is through prostitution or to return to the factory: she chooses the former. Her choice indicates free will despite the deterministic “forces” in her society.
The novel suggests that the heroine is the epitome of “perfect goodness” from the inside although she is not exempt from external physical exploitation. What happens to her implies that despite the “forces” that surround her, despite society’s limited alternatives for a woman like her, it is still her choices that matter, and her fate is the result of such choice. The construct of female “victimhood” in naturalism therefore takes into account the presence of female agency and free will as demonstrated in the novel. An example of free will is the heroine’s violation of societal expectations. Beauvoir’s unequivocal assertion suggests that a woman realize the transformation herself if she considers herself essential in society (8). Naturalism is not always about a woman’s fall as can be gleaned from the case of Nellie whose economic status in the slums is similar to Maggie. And determinism is an overstatement because Nellie has somehow survived, not just in the flesh trade. She is also successful in projecting herself as a woman who resists deterministic “forces” (such as the male impositions in society). The novel suggests that in societies where a woman has limited alternatives, she can still rise up from the challenge and emerge a strong person through the exercise of her free will, and no one can dampen her spirit for as long as she chooses to. Nellie’s “spirit” lies in her sense of continuity and self-preservation. And she lives to tell her story because she refuses to be subdued. Nevertheless, Nellie is a minor character and Maggie is the heroine. Our attention is more on Maggie’s fate (discussed in chapter 7) as a construct of unmarried female victimhood.
CHAPTER 4

THE UNMARRIED WOMAN IN EDITH WHARTON’S
THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Lily’s society

Wharton portrays a socialite-heroine from upper class New York in *The House of Mirth*. In this second novel, the heroine’s exposure to conspicuous consumption and crass materialism, exploitation and ostracism in high society shows a compulsion for lavish lifestyles in her pursuit of happiness. The traditional gender roles illustrate how both the male and female characters have internalized a patriarchal consciousness where male economic dominance is pervasive and female commodification a recurring phenomenon. Despite disempowerment concerns in society, however, the heroine’s interplay with external forces projects the presence of free choice as well as traces of tension between the physical and the non-physical human dimensions.

Lily’s family and lifestyle of conspicuous consumption

The operations of patriarchy in Lily’s society start from her family upbringing. Although these early familial influences have made an impact on her decision making skills, acquired social patterns and perspectives, female agency is apparent in her interaction with the family, a microcosm of society. In contrast to Maggie’s slum experiences, Lily starts off as affluent and confident about her future prospects. However, her education within the family structure is in her observations that a woman looks to men to provide the economic requirements she needs. Her mother’s upbringing of her suggests a focus on material considerations to fit in to a privileged world even if the main source of income is insufficient for household expenses. So
there are already undercurrents working within Lily’s own family. Although the image Lily’s family projects to high society is that they have material means, in truth, their finances are dwindling. And Mrs Bart shields Lily from the real situation, as an overprotective mother with a patriarchal consciousness, because she shelters Lily from the challenge of domestic realities by not letting her know of the actual status of the household funds. The outcome is twofold: Lily remains untrained in handling finances, and Lily’s mother strains to maintain appearances in the absence of funds, an attitude picked up by Lily in her adult years. High society women as represented by Lily and her mother reinforce the focus on conspicuous consumption and materialism and place importance on the physical or the material. What is underneath does not have value because it is hidden or not projected in society. Thus, the household catastrophe brought about by economic mishandling due to the family’s profligate lifestyle is screened off from the high society consciousness of the heroine. Wharton’s novel satirises the New York high society display of material excess and overindulgence.

There is a clash between the real and unreal in the novel, and this is shown through the characters’ attitude of keeping up appearances despite their actual circumstances. For instance, to keep up with their lifestyle in high society, Lily’s mother instructs her “to escape the dinginess if she could” (49). She personally believes that life is useless “if one had to live like a pig” (46). Lily shares her mother’s hatred for dinginess (52) who acknowledges that to “be poor seemed a confession of failure that it amounted to disgrace” (47). So, even though Lily is “ashamed of her mother’s crude passion for money” (48), she admits similarly her aversion for want:

Her danger lay, as she knew, in her old incurable dread of discomfort and poverty; in the fear of that mounting tide of dinginess against which her mother had so passionately warned her. (342)
The high society lifestyle of the family of Lily requires a number of house servants, expensive trips abroad and other extravagant indulgences. Lily’s father, however, spends his time outside the house looking for resources to support his costly family lifestyle. His absence from the house often makes her believe that his father spends all day “downtown” (41) presumably in search of the opportunity to make money. McEntyre writes: “His life is a round of futile effort to support the expenses of his family’s slow climb toward the barren pinnacle of social success Gryce inhabits” (84). In fact, Lily’s recollection of her father is that of a haggard looking man who seems too old for her mother despite the two year age gap:

Even to the eyes of infancy, Mrs Hudson Bart had appeared young; but Lily could not recall the time when her father had not been bald and lightly stooping, with streaks of grey in his hair, and a tired walk. It was a shock to her to learn afterward that he was but two years older than her mother. (41)

This recollection of the image of Lily’s father focuses on the worn-out physical appearance of a family breadwinner. The non-physical considerations such as the diligence and hard work her father has invested in to provide for the family’s lifestyle is not seen by Lily. When her father grumbles about the pricey flowers his wife wants delivered daily as decoration for the dining table upon Lily’s request (45), Mrs Bart shields the real economic situation of the household from her daughter again. This is demonstrated when she orders Lily to leave the living area at once so that she will not hear her parents’ arguments (45) as well as carefully instructing Lily not to talk to the servants (45). She also asks Lily to close the door so that the servants will not be able to hear them argue about the dwindling funds. This example shows that Lily’s mother is determined to keep up appearances so as not to damage their “affluent” image in high society. Mrs Bart’s life is explained through “a series of French and English maids”, “hurriedly ransacked wardrobes and dress-closets”, a “changing dynasty of nurses and footmen”, “precipitate trips in
Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking” (41). The lifestyle of conspicuous consumption hints at her excessive attachment to materialism that affects somehow the perception of Lily in regard to money and its connection to her existence in capitalistic New York high society. Lily is conveyed as perceiving the important role of sufficient money where her father is “always to blame for the deficiency” (42). Because Mrs Bart and Lily’s social activities are beyond their means, the apprehensions of the family are always financially related, implying yet again the focus on the physical aspects of life:

In this desultory yet agitated fashion life went on through Lily’s teens: a zig-zag broken course down which the family craft glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need – the need for more money. (42)

Lily’s father feels he is “ruined” (45) because he is under pressure all the time in the delivery of funds for his family. This indicates he struggles with the patriarchal expectations of him as a father and family breadwinner. His importance as husband to Mrs Bart is relegated to the provision he is able to offer because she expects him to fulfil his role as breadwinner, an obligation in the family patriarchal structure. The novel suggests that a man of his status and position is expected to produce more for the comfort of his family. In doing so, he becomes less involved in the rearing of Lily because most of his time is spent outside the house. Wharton comments that Lily “knew very little about the value of money” (44). The importance of hard work and living within one’s means has not been passed on to her by Mr Bart because she becomes a mere recipient of his diligence and struggle in search for family provisions. In a way, the father of Lily suffers from patriarchal expectations, and her sensitivity and appreciation for the efforts of others have not been well-developed. This means that because of Lily’s excessive focus on the physical, the non-physical aspects of her life have been neglected. At the same
time, her capability for independence with regard to the maintenance of her acquired lifestyle is affected.

The family’s conspicuous consumption and overindulgence precipitates the death of Lily’s father. Her father’s spirit is affected as a result of the family’s undue pursuit of the material as represented by money and its buying power. This echoes Gargano’s statement on money: “Money assures privilege, but privilege, too cheaply construed, dissipates into an expense of spirit and a waste of shame” (139). Mr Bart dies a sad man. His struggle to sustain the lifestyle of his wife and daughter in his role as breadwinner exemplifies his attempt at living up to society’s expectations. Nevertheless, Lily is relieved at her father’s death (46), suggesting she accepts positively his death. Her sense of compassion or sympathy for her father must have prevailed because he exists without receiving any emotional connection or support from her or her mother. For Mrs Bart, from the time her husband becomes less capable as a provider, “he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfil his purpose” (46). Lily’s mother therefore takes the view that a married man’s only purpose in society is to provide well for his family. In upper class social structure, she embodies the intransigent materialistic hardliner. It is Mrs Bart who “carefully molds Lily’s beauty into a high-end commodity” (Shinbrot 53). Mrs Bart remains hopeful that the face of Lily will save them from further insolvency. She is comforted by her reflection on Lily’s appearance:

Only one thought consoled hers, and that was the contemplation of Lily’s beauty. She studies it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian; and she tried to instil into the latter a sense of responsibility that such a charge involved. (47)
Mrs Bart’s consideration of her daughter’s physical assets suggest that a woman’s beauty is her exchange value in the marketplace of marriage as well as her source for economic salvation. This idea reinforces once more the commodification of women from a female perspective. However, Lily as a commodity is rare because of her distinctive beauty as suggested by Kassanoff: “Part of an endangered species, Lily is not so much a circulating commodity as she is a rare museum piece, desirable precisely because she is out of circulation” (68). In high society then, women, with material redemption in mind like Lily’s mother, remain the dependent counterpart of men who are continually looked up to for their financial capabilities. It is clear that social and economic inequalities between genders exist in high society, however men can be confined or restricted by these expectations too.

Mrs Bart dies eventually leaving Lily an orphan at the age of twenty nine. Lily’s mother dies of ”a deep disgust” because ”it was her fate to be dingy” and her “visions of a brilliant marriage for Lily had faded after the first year” (49). Mrs Bart’s dreams for herself and Lily are not realised because Lily delays her marriage, and she thinks more of what her physical beauty can achieve:  

There was in Lily a vein of sentiment, perhaps transmitted from this source, which gave an idealizing touch to her most prosaic purposes. She liked to think of her beauty as a power for good, as giving her the opportunity to attain a position where she should make her influence felt in the vague diffusion of refinement and good taste. (48)

The female exterior form in the nineteenth century is highly important because success depends on physical beauty if she intends to marry well. Success is associated with not just money but with mounds of it. She confides to Selden the importance of personal effects in order to “sell” herself in marriage: “If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for
herself” (22). Expensive clothes are understood as requirements for a high class marriage. Lily eventually determines to sustain her superior look through clothes, and for social compliance and adaptation, she makes appearances by living beyond her means. Doing so is a habit she acquired from her dead mother whose desire for the physical and material overwhelms her capacity to appreciate the non-physical and spiritual human dimensions.

**Societal expectations, female commodification, and marriage**

The social structure in Lily’s class promotes female commodification. Upper class women are expected to take care of their appearance in order to please the patriarchal subject. So, for women to have buyers in the marriage market, expensive clothes are a must. Lily confesses: “The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop” (22). While Lily is apparently confined by patriarchal ideology, she is not unaware of it. On the contrary, she acknowledges the importance society places on the superficial and physical. It is not surprising then that Lily goes to the “best dress makers” and specifies “just the right dress for every occasion” (309) to maintain an image of high society. She complains, though, that she is “always keeping herself fresh and exquisite and amusing!”(309). Her complaints point to her struggle in having to live up to social expectations. However, she crosses the line of social expectations for the woman in high society where feminine role assumptions are to be exercised dutifully. One example is when she ignites society’s speculations about the nature of her relationships with married men she associates with in social gatherings or approaches for financial advice.

Lily is portrayed a valued entity in her society, a good investment for wealthy men because of her physical beauty, her
exchange value. However, as a young woman, Lily gets distracted easily and misses a number of opportunities for marriage. For her marriage signifies female salvation because it secures her stable place in society. A marital partnership with someone wealthy enough for her not to think of money has become her goal and obsession, her gauge for successful living. She becomes accustomed to high society entertainments as evidenced by her attendance at the social gatherings in her friends’ manors where they eat dinner, play bridge and engage in “high society” gossip. In fact, Selden observes that Lily’s exquisite beauty has been affected by time because it is “beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing” (13). She enjoys European cruises with royalty and other members of high class society, paid for by her friends. It is in these social gatherings that she displays her expensive clothes perhaps for chances of getting the attention of men with economic power who might marry her. This fondness for a lavish lifestyle reflects her materialistic tendencies suggesting a focus on the material and physical. Her display of beautiful clothes is in line with economic considerations, part of her quest to keep the lifestyle her mother wants her to sustain. Wharton writes: “She was fond of pictures and flowers, and of sentimental fiction, and she could not help thinking that the possession of such tastes ennobled her desire for worldly advantages” (48). Mary Wollstonecraft argued “against the infantilising effects on women of sentimental novels” (qtd. in Goldman 66), and a general presumption is that these novels may encourage idealism and blind one’s perception of social realities.

Claire Goldberg Moses claims that marriage in the nineteenth century is the “ultimate goal” of every young woman (35) so that to remain unmarried is her “worst fate” (Jules Michelet qtd. in Moses 35). In the novel, Lily always considers the prospect of marriage because it is the high society’s expectations of her as unmarried woman. As a teen-ager, she almost marries a prince, but she does
not give him her full attention, suggesting she is not yet ready emotionally for marriage which implies not just a consideration for the physical e.g. material benefits, but also the non-physical human dimensions. The novel leads us to think that if Lily was really focused on getting what she wants at a young age, she would have married for practical reasons. However, Lily’s exercise of free will or self-determination suggests that she may have delayed her marriage on purpose because she is hopeful she can still meet other prospects, and therefore, she will have better options due to her youth and idealism. Wharton’s narrative suggests that early marriage may block a woman’s creative pursuits because of the heavy responsibilities associated with being a wife-mother and domestic entrapment as the female fate. (Wharton, as a wife, enjoyed the privileged life. A “daughter of independently wealthy New Yorkers”, she “travelled extensively”, lived in mansions, and produced creative works) (Armbruster 110-112). Wharton may have implied that a young girl of nineteen like Lily ought to explore her world, and she can only do this by delaying marriage. Also, Lily’s consideration of the physical e.g. beauty and age, may have been instrumental in her lack of interest in marrying a prince old enough to be her father. This further implies that as a woman in the nineteenth century high society, she challenges the only road possible for women - marriage. Wharton’s novel suggests that early marriage is not the only path for a young woman to consider because the process to secure a man encourages commodification, and complete dependence on him represents a disregard of the female spirit for possibilities of productive endeavours through self-reliance. Lily’s delaying attitude to marriage bereft of the non-physical nexus may also hint of an inner resistance to purely materialistic considerations because of her implicit call for life’s meaning and sense of purpose. In a way, her requirements for marriage go beyond mere economic survival in high society. Lily’s authenticity as a woman precludes her from realising a marriage without love as suggested by Balkun: “Lily is authentic by virtue of
what she won’t do” such as to “marry someone she does not love” (92).

Wharton suggests that a woman’s role is to project a marketable self in society in anticipation of marriage proposals. With Lily’s parents gone without leaving her an inheritance of value, Lily’s last option is to keep her lifestyle through marriage. Dimock notes that “Lily is clearly caught up in the ethos of marriage” (64). Cao and Maguire refer to prostitution as “direct-contact sexual services performed for remuneration” (191) or monetary gain. Lily’s act of “selling” herself for marriage and sex is similar to “prostituting” herself for economic advantage. And her need for social acceptance makes her defy social expectations when she gambles even without enough funds. Judy, the party host, likes to gamble (play bridge), and Lily does not want to disappoint her because her parties are a marketplace or venue for Lily to “sell” herself for marriage. Thus, the social expectation that the female protagonist has defied is her gambling addiction. She gambles only because she wants to be a part of the upper crust group who gambles at social functions. This implies she values society’s acceptance. However, she is a single woman at twenty nine, and she is expected to conform to the values of her patriarchal society. For instance, as a single woman, she is expected to avoid gambling and to have her own family because she is already ripe for marriage which will add to the stability of her status in high society. “She becomes a parasite, increasingly dependent on her ‘host’ for the unsatisfying sustenance of condescension” (McEntyre 86). Despite her desire for social acceptance, she resolves to escape “dinginess” with possibilities of an upper-class marriage through free will. Wharton comments about the appropriate environment that Lily as a woman deserves:

No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in
an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in. (37-38)

Lily’s society dictates that marriage is the only vocation for a woman of her class. Selden asks: “Isn’t marriage your vocation? Isn’t it what you’re brought up for?”(19). Lily answers: “I supposed so. What else is there?” (19). Her answer suggests that female possibilities or alternatives have restrictions, and a woman has no option of a privileged life except through marriage. Thus, the idea of marriage differs between the sexes. Lily makes a distinction: “Ah there’s the difference – a girl must, a man may if he chooses” (22). Man does not have to marry if he chooses to which implies that his power extends beyond even his choice for a partner in marriage. This means that in the high society Lily inhabits, imbalances between sexes are a reality. She, too, desires financial freedom like men. An example is when she learns that Selden owns a unit in the Benedict and exclaims: “How delicious to have a place like this all to oneself! What a miserable thing is it to be a woman” (16). “She leaned back in a luxury of discontent” (16). For her, even a woman in high society hopes for the right to property she can call her own, and she perceives the inequalities between genders in relation to material circumstances. Hearing Lily’s statement, Selden makes a judgment: “She was so evidently a victim of her civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (17). Selden’s judgment confirms Lily’s perception of a woman’s place in society where she does not have as much freedom of movement and space as men. Naturalism, therefore, exposes the lack in society because of its focus on the physical and less regard of the equally important spiritual human dimension. And although Lily equates success and stability with financial freedom and the symbolic status it can provide, she only desires it without hurting or infringing on others. She needs a stable economic situation for her survival in high society because “it is the only climate she can breathe in” (38), but she makes it clear that the luxury of other people is not what she
craves for (38), suggesting a trace of spirituality in action within her such as when she eventually returns the money to Trenor and refuses any financial assistance from Rosedale. When she declares she wants to "have a great deal of money" (19), it is to avoid relying on others for financial support. Her declaration also puts forward her desire for equal opportunities with men. She believes she is not meant for "shabby surroundings" and "squalid compromises of poverty" (37) to suggest that a woman (like man) deserves a decent place to live in for her survival in society.

Societal eyes watch the movement and physical appearance of high class women especially if they are unmarried. Lily’s activities with her friends in high society, for instance, are expected to be printed in the papers for the consumption of those who do not have her or her friends’ advantage. When Lily meets Nettie one time, the latter informs her: "I used to watch for your name in the papers, and we’d talk over what you were doing, and read the descriptions of the dresses you wore" (363). Nettie’s impressions of her suggest that women in high society are interesting among the less privileged for their physical representation in fashion and high society lifestyle. Lily is aware that as a woman, “she had been brought up to be ornamental” (344) and she seems to suggest that she is not accountable “for failing to serve any practical purpose” (346). This implies that she is not totally convinced of her purpose as an "ornamental” as shown in the continual delaying of her marriage. As mentioned earlier, she has implicit requirements, and one of them is not just material security as in the case of the royalty and other older men. Wharton notes: “She was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty” (367). Lily is conscious that her physical beauty is a trap for marriage, but she does not compromise herself to marry for merely economic survival in high society. So despite several prospects for a marriage of convenience, Lily is not
exactly engrossed in realising it, which could be perceived as her subtle way of resisting society’s expectations, a resistance which represents female intelligence and self-determination.

**Rumour as one external “force” of female disempowerment**

One of the potent mechanisms in Lily’s society is rumour, considered one of the forces of female disempowerment. The novel depicts rumour that is spread with malicious intent among those with the most material influence. Her society is therefore conservative because expectations are enforced by those in position of advantage. Lily becomes the target of rumour through her interweaving of the roles expected of an unmarried woman. If she exhibits negligence of her roles and activities, dominant society is ready with its speculations. For example, when Lily agrees to meet the wealthy but married Trenor as an innocent gesture of trying to pacify him into being her business partner, Trenor seems to give meaning to their “partnership” because he complains about her lack of time for him. He expects her to spend more time with him in return for the monetary profits he allots her. Dimock comments:

Lily “owes” Trenor the payment that he now demands only according to his rate of exchange – not hers – and his ability to set the rate and impose it on Lily says nothing about fairness, only something about power. (66)

Trenor is attracted to a young woman like Maggie because his marriage is a travesty in high society. He is a lonely husband, and he needs attention from others because his socially preoccupied wife fails to give it to him. The result is that he drinks and gets drunk in gatherings in order to criticize and complain about the routine of the high class elite. He is old enough to be Lily’s father, but his attempt at Lily’s attention makes him think that she is for sale because of her need for funds. Lily expresses this need for money to Gerty: “... Yes money! That’s my shame, Gerty – and it’s known, it’s said of me –
it’s what men think of me ...” (198). Her need for money suggests it is purely for economic considerations and acceptance within her elite society. She becomes Trenor’s easy target for sexual subjugation due to her lack of resources. When she chooses to approach Trenor for financial investment, her proposition is perceived as unusual for women in her society; so, her courage at financial independence in seeking investments with a male partner is misinterpreted. Trenor takes advantage of the situation by demanding that she spend more time with him. Although Lily is uncomfortable being seen with a married man, she agrees to his requirement because she is concerned her “investment” will be affected. The funds are earmarked for her gowns and debts which suggest her desire to survive in high society because of the limited alternatives of women. The rumour about Lily and Trenor makes his wife, Judy, cut off her friendship with Lily. Judy learns that Lily benefits from Trenor financially, and from her society’s perspective, a woman who receives funds from a married man must be a “kept woman”. Judy is also surprised why Lily no longer visits her in Bellomont thus compounding Judy’s doubts about her husband and Lily. Because of the rumour, Judy stops inviting Lily to her estate for dinners. Lily is the favoured subject of society gossip because of her beauty and unmarried status. However, she remains physically intact and unscathed by the corruption despite all the intrigues and noise about her. Her situation suggests that her dignity as a woman is preserved and her personal disposition still echoes her naïveté, innocence, and humanity. Rosedale is the only friend of Lily who extends himself in her hours of need by offering her monetary assistance. Lily however turns down his offer for help, to suggest perhaps that there is more to life than material emancipation. Dimock notes:

> There is something really heroic in her refusal to accept money when she knows she has no money to give in return, and yet such principles are surely suicidal, when the point of exchange is to get and not to give... Like her decision to return Trenor’s money, Lily’s rejection of Rosedale’s loan leaves the exchange
system intact and hurts only herself. Where the marketplace is everywhere, in refusing to do business Lily is perhaps also refusing to live ... (75)

When one of Lily’s relatives spread malicious rumour about her, Lily’s image is tarnished in society. It is Grace Stepney who receives information from one of her friends that Lily is cultivating an illicit relationship with Trenor because of his wealth. As Lily’s extended family, Grace is expected to help support the orphan Lily continue her survival in high society. However, Grace maligns Lily by informing her rich aunt, Mrs Peniston, about the funds Trenor secures for Lily. This prompts her aunt to get upset because she believes she is giving Lily sufficient allowance for personal use. Mrs Peniston claims that she provides for Lily handsomely (151). She also pays for her expensive dresses. At first, Mrs Peniston is unconvinced of Grace’s malicious talk. However, Mrs Peniston muses: “It is horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be blamed for their having been made” (153). The naturalistic novel presents one of the injustices apparent in any society – the spread of baseless rumour and its destructive effect on a person’s reputation. The speculations are strengthened because it is Lily’s own family that start them. Grace’s unsubstantiated smear against Lily manifests rugged individualism because in the patriarchal family system, she is expected to show concern for Lily’s welfare, being an extended member of the household. Therefore, what motivates Grace to put Lily in a bad light despite their blood relations is a sign of human frailty. She wants Lily deprived of inheritance by her aunt. Thus, the patriarchal western upper class society partly controls and dictates female ideas through the power of speculation and its implications – even if it is baseless. Also, Lily’s seeking of money from Trenor to secure more funds for her needs in high society is misconstrued as Lily’s lack of appreciation of the family’s financial support.
Actually, Grace secretly admires Lily because she is “brilliant and predominant”, but Grace dislikes Lily because she thinks Lily dislikes her (147), an example of misplaced assumptions. Her antagonism towards Lily starts when she inadvertently excludes Grace from the list of one of the big dinners that Mrs Peniston hosts (147-148). Insulted, Grace is consumed with animosity, and she retaliates by generating malice in her dialogue with her aunt and thus denigrates Lily. The oppressive act of Grace suggests that in society, hostility and avarice are realities within family structures. And from a Marxist perspective, Grace, with her privileged status, “has reduced the family relation to mere money relation” (Marx and Engels 10) because she wants Lily deprived of the family inheritance. Thus, human frailty subsists not just in underclass societies, but also in privileged societies that encourage greed. Grace’s inhumanity implies spiritual absence when she highlights the material and therefore, inessential or dispensable. Wharton’s novel presents the tension between two contradictory human spheres: the jealousy and acquisitive mania of Grace versus Lily’s display of innocence and humanity that she is able to demonstrate through her charity work with the underclass Nettie.

Lily exerts herself to balance out her situation in regard to Trenor’s desire to spend more time with her and what society will say about her status as a single woman. She worries that Trenor will make a drastic move to stop the funds she receives regularly. Her act of appeasement is in consideration of the funds she receives from him as her business “partner”. Lily naively believes it is her own money Trenor puts into the stock market when in fact, according to Trenor, it is only his money that is involved. He informs Lily that he is just giving her his profits from his transactions in Wall Street (138). Trenor takes advantage of Lily’s lack of funds, signifying his awareness of the power play between sexes where unmarried, beautiful women are an easy target for male abuse. He offers Lily
money because he knows she can give him something in return—sexual favours. Since Lily challenges yet again society’s expectations of how a single woman should behave, her meeting with a married man and her acceptance of money from him leads to assumptions that she is his paramour. This perception is strengthened when Selden sees for himself the silhouettes of Lily and Trenor in the latter’s house one late night leading Selden to assume that the two are having an affair. Dimock writes: “The sight of her emerging late at night from the Trenor house shatters his slim confidence, and Selden is quick to pull out” (71). His discovery suggests to him that society’s assumptions of Lily’s illicit affair with a married man is true. Selden is misled into believing the speculation because he misinterprets the presence of Lily’s shadow in Trenor’s house. Thus, societal confines and Lily’s lack of caution in choosing to disregard them indicate moments of the heroine’s willpower. Despite her innocence from the vile assumptions society hurls at her face, there exists female agency. However, Lily’s incorruptibility transcends all suspicions and rumours because her innocence dictates for her that there is nothing to be scared of as regards how society perceives her every movement. Her innocence and purity of motives represent an aspect of her spirituality that remains natural for her while her lapses serve as expressions of female imagination that indicates willpower despite societal resolve for confinement. Wharton’s novel acknowledges the existence of man’s free will and need for appropriate manners in society: “Lily imbibed the idea that if people lived like pigs it was from choices, and through lack of any proper standard of conduct” (43).

**Lily and her relations with other female characters**

The other female characters represented in Wharton’s novel, the underclass women, as exemplified by Nettie and her family, are not portrayed as mere spectators of high society life, but also serve
as a comparison, with some similar aspirations but a different set of obstacles. Their lack of funds, for instance, does not deter them from indulging in dreams of hope and optimism for the future. Nettie’s representation illustrates that the struggle for survival is not limited to those with inadequate resources as demonstrated by her rise in life after a depressing past. Through Nettie’s case, naturalism presents a woman who is not defeated by the forces of disempowerment such as poverty. Nettie is able to weather these forces to her advantage when she secures for herself what her heart desires. Nettie confides to Lily about her renewed self, suggesting her sense of purpose and direction:

Work-girls aren’t looked after the way you are, and they don’t always know how to look after themselves. I didn’t... and it pretty near killed me when he went away and left off writing... It was then I came down sick – I thought it was the end of everything. I guess it would have been if you didn’t send me off. But when I found I was getting well I began to take heart in spite of myself. And then, when I got home, George came round and asked me to marry him... I never could have told another man, and I’d never have married without telling; but if George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn’t see why I shouldn’t begin all over again – and I did. (364)

Nettie shares with Lily her changed situation and outlook because Lily helped her when Nettie was in need of medical assistance at the time of Lily’s charity work. Nettie’s transformation is an example of her recovery from a past misery, and she confides this transformation to Lily as an expression of her gratitude for what Lily has done for her life. Nettie’s transformation echoes yet again the assertion of Beauvoir in regard to securing the change herself if she considers herself “essential” (8) in society which links to a person’s sense of purpose and responsibility. This assertion suggests that whatever is the woman’s situation or status, whether it is physical, emotional or mental, whether she belongs to high society or the underclass, there is a role for free spirit or will to effect the needed change. Beauvoir’s assertion parallels Pizer’s (2010) suggestion on
challenging disempowering conditions with reason or knowledge, experience, self-confidence, and learning from the mistakes of others and trying not to repeat them for man’s (male or female) survival and continuity (223).

The case of Lily’s friend, Nettie, as a lost soul before Lily’s act of kindness saves her, suggests that “no life possesses spiritual vitality unless it is motivated by belief in its own significance” (Gargano 140). Lily’s role as the catalyst for change in Nettie’s life suggests that change takes place because of Nettie’s willingness, too, to effect such change, “a willingness to live with and accept the fragile nature of existence” (Shinbrot 36). Nettie’s transformation happens after she sees the basic importance of a spiritual realm i.e. love for family and hope amidst life’s uncertainties. Pizer implies that Lily can turn to Nettie’s inspiration based on her changed life:

If Nettie can triumph in the face of physical and social handicaps which are hers from birth, this victory is also possible for Lily within her own seeming manacles of environmental conditioning. (244)

Through the character of Gerty Farish, the novel reveals the influence of humanitarian activities on Lily. It is Gerty who introduces Lily to charitable work, and her eyes open up to the world of the poor. In the *tableaux vivants* organized by socialites, it is only the humanitarian Gerty who sees the “real Lily” as “kind and generous to the working-class girls in her Girls’ Club (Sapora 371). And it is through the *tableaux vivants* that Lily is able to express herself as an artist. Backer remarks:

While the gendered, moneyed realities of her existence conspire against her development as an independent artist, in one specific instance Lily is able to break through to create and display an artistic production. (34)
Lily is able to display herself as artwork in the tableau vivants which underscores her commodification as female because she becomes subject to the gaze of spectators. Lily portrays Reynolds’ portrait of Mrs. Lloyd as a living human painting on stage complete with the costume of her choice displaying the beauty of her looks and body. Totten writes: “Thus, Lily ‘values’ her looks for obvious reasons, and her physical appearance, an important marker of socio-economic status, also becomes an important component of her subjectivity” (72).

The philanthropic activity of Gerty paves the way for Lily’s meeting with the underclass Nettie. The novel reveals that Lily’s encounter with society’s underprivileged is a challenging one for her because day to day practical realities make her uneasy as expected with her orientation from a privileged world of luxury and splendour. However, her meeting with Nettie is a worthwhile experience because it makes her look inward. Nettie’s life experience in the “tenement” suggests for Lily a light from a tunnel because she learns that contentment and love is possible as shown in Nettie’s humble existence with her family (365). Also, the introduction of Gerty’s character to Lily’s life suggests she is open to humanitarian activities despite her acquired lifestyle of the elite in society. Her exposure to people in the lower class serves as a catalyst that facilitates her reflection about life’s deeper meaning and happiness. Shinbrot writes:

Contemplating Nelly Struther’s life helps Lily to arrive finally at her own definition of happiness. Instead of a gilded cage that shuts out contingency, error, and danger she longs for shelter amidst the fluid and unstable chaos of the universe. (56)

The other character who is also sincere in helping her is Carry Fisher. She helps Lily get a job after her expulsion from society. Carry’s kind gesture is a symbol of encouragement for Lily to be independent so that she can support herself financially, but Lily does not stay long in her job. There is similarity in Carry and Gerty’s
entrance into Lily’s life. They both offer her a sisterhood outside of the patriarchal system. However, Lily does not benefit from Carry and Gerty’s support because of her lack of practical education which makes her feel she is of no use to society. Wharton portrays Lily in her lowest emotional state a disappointment in terms of serving “any practical purpose” (344):

I have tried hard – but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else. (357)

Lily’s assertion indicates her awareness of how she has been constructed as a woman who is useless, and the imbalance of power between a man and woman in high society. She questions her inability to fit in with high class society: “What can one do when one finds that one only fits into one hole? One must get back or be thrown out into the rubbish heap – and you don’t know what it’s like in the rubbish heap!” (357). McEntyre compares her to a delicate flower such as “a rose, an orchid, and other cultivated flowers grown in hothouses for domestic consumption,” a woman who “was born and bred in an unnatural environment” (93). This implies that high society is not a conducive environment for the beauty and inner goodness possessed by Lily. McEntyre explains that Lily “is an uncomfortable heir of the romantic tradition that glorifies and sentimentalizes the pastoral and the rural, aligning rusticity with innocence and the natural world with spiritual purity” (84).

**Lily’s perceived “transgressions” in society**

Lily happens to challenge society’s conventions unconsciously in her search for material emancipation and security. Her position in society becomes even more uncertain because she remains unmarried for a long time. Social expectations suggest that marriage is
important for a woman so that she can contribute to its preservation and continuation. Because of these social expectations, her friends such as Carry and Judy rush her entry into the marketplace of marriage. They are alarmed by her single status at age twenty-nine. According to the culture of the time, a woman ought to marry to secure herself a stable place in a man’s house as wife and bearer of his children. However, Lily continues to delay her marriage suggesting she unconsciously challenges its values in her “intrusion” into the “spaces previously considered the spheres of men” as Goldman aptly puts it (71). Her uninterrupted suspension of marriage indicates the presence of choice or free will because it suggests she has intelligence and society cannot just impose its expectations on her. Her disregard of social expectations through “intrusions” into the male realm signifies female freedom and agency.

What are the “intrusions” that Lily unconsciously violates in society? Firstly, she smokes cigarettes and gambles at dinners. In her society, smoking and gambling are spheres only for men. When Bertha asks for cigarettes, she gets tight-lipped about having them because she is conscious of Gryce’s presence in the train. Although the other characters know that Lily smokes, she suddenly becomes careful by lying so that Gryce will not know she smokes or her chances for marriage with him will fail. Also, Lily’s passion for gambling is a taboo for an unmarried woman without means (even though she plays bridge for socialization and to show her respect for her party host). Eventually, she loses Gryce to Evie because of the rumour of Lily’s supposed gambling addiction that Bertha spreads. Wharton’s novel suggests that Gryce regards Lily’s “addiction” as detrimental to his vast wealth so that he chooses the rich Evie over the beautiful “gambler”.

Lily’s inability or refusal to get married, with her subjection to materialism, may also mean that she can marry only if her husband
has the same faith that Nettie’s husband offers to her. This is illustrated when she sees Nettie’s changed situation from a sickly woman to someone fulfilled domestically because she acquires a husband, who has faith in her despite her past pre-marital experience, and a child despite her life of struggle in the tenement. She reflects upon Nettie’s transformation: “Her husband’s faith in her had made her renewal possible” (370). Lily believes that the truth of one’s existence is in life’s continuity through a loving husband and a child. She thinks of Nettie’s stability and permanence despite the absence of material comforts in her family:

The poor little working-girl who had found strength to gather up the fragments of her life, and build herself a shelter with them, seemed to Lily to have reached the central truth of existence. It was a meagre enough life, on the grim edge of poverty, with scant margin for possibilities of sickness or mischance, but it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird’s nest built on the edge of a cliff – a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss. (369-370)

Lily thinks she has found a friend in Selden with whom she can be her real self (Sapora 378), “a friend who won’t be afraid to say disagreeable [things]” (Wharton 7). Sapora writes that Lily “looks to Selden to verify her existence, to prove the reality of her inner self” and whenever she meets him, her “inner self” surfaces (378) where she feels “an inner isolation deeper than the loneliness about her” (Wharton 78). Lily, however, is too inhibited to show her feelings of love for the man she cares for. When Selden speaks of love, she ignores the topic and informs him that she will marry for money because it is the only choice for a woman like her. However, despite her urgent need of marriage, she refuses marriage with Rosedale and Dorset. This implies that perhaps she refuses society’s inducements for women to marry well to suggest that aside from material considerations, a woman wants something more that has links to the non-physical human dimension i.e. love. This suggests that despite
her external show of consumption or “living the high life” such as marrying for material comfort, in her heart, she has considerations of love in a marriage. Eventually, she lives in a boarding-house, a sign of her descent from high society, where she reflects about a deeper misery, that of living in what she calls “solitude”:

It was indeed miserable to be poor – to look forward to a shabby, anxious middle-age, leading by the dreary degrees of economy and self-denial to gradual absorption in the dingy communal existence of the boarding-house. But there was something more miserable still – it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept away like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years – the feeling of something rootless and ephemeral … (368-369)

Conclusion

Lily’s “deeper misery” does not refer to material lack. Instead, it suggests a call for spirituality to fill the vacuum in her heart. Her defiance of society’s expectations suggests an expression of her choices just like the case of Maggie. Wharton, too, suggests that there is tension between the material, symbolized by Lily’s enthusiasm for material prosperity and the non-physical, symbolized by her purity of intentions. High society, a symbol of corruption and excess, is juxtaposed by the symbol of purity represented by Lily whose name denotes a white flower, lily, symbolising purity as well. As a woman therefore, she cannot fit in her society because it is not the right place for her idealism and spirituality. Her interest in materialism is for personal survival in high society while her “transgressions” denote choice and free will. And her pursuit of stability through material security apparently represents the physical. However, she has “a sense of deeper impoverishment - of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance” (Wharton 368). The only feeling left for her after her social descent is the “feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral” she thinks that “there had never been a time when she
had any relation to life” (369). This suggests her implied clamour for the non-physical nexus in relation to her need for a sense of purpose. Her descent from high society therefore is “largely a subconscious search for meanings fixed beyond the flux of wealth and social status” (Gordano 140) where society’s imperatives and rules are transcended by a spiritual or non-physical standpoint.
CHAPTER 5

THE MARRIED WOMAN

Introduction

This chapter and chapter 6 analyse the construct of the married woman in Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary and Kate Chopin’s The Awakening in relation to her position in society, relationship with her husband, family and children, the nature of her sexual freedom, and her relationships with other men and women. It explores the feminine condition and her choice amidst disempowerment issues in relation to patriarchal operations. While chapters 3 and 4 foreground the unmarried woman, chapters 5 and 6 focus on the married woman, categorized into the deprived represented by Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, and the privileged, represented by Chopin’s Edna Pontellier.

The purpose of this chapter and the next chapter is similar to chapters 3 and 4, and that is, the reconceptualization of the context of woman and “victimhood” in a group of naturalistic novels towards a re-imaging of the “female” with choice and agency despite the presence of societal “forces”. By exploring the heroine’s interplay with these “forces” and its relation to her choice and fate, I demonstrate that the concept of determinism is less applicable in my chosen novels. Both unmarried and married women focus on the physical for survival in society, but they differ in their search for self-fulfilment. As presented in chapters 3 and 4, the unmarried woman links her self-fulfilment to economic sanctuary and social acceptance. In this chapter (chapter 5) and the next (chapter 6), I will show that the married woman links her self-fulfilment to her romantic ideals and passions.
THE MARRIED WOMAN IN GUSTAVE FLAUBERT’S

MADAME BOVARY

There is clear juxtaposition between the physical and spiritual human dimensions in Flaubert’s representation of Emma as a woman. The spiritual is shown through her purity of intentions despite the sexual commodification she experiences and her desire to make real her idealism derived from her exposure to romantic literature. The physical dimensions, on the other hand, are linked to her desire for economic comforts. The tension between the two human dimensions illustrates the complex female construct in Emma’s society. The concept of “victimhood” is also complicated in Emma’s case because although she can be dominant as a woman, she is also a “victim” of male deception in her romantic and business relationships within “the masculine code, the society developed by males and in their interests, that has defined the feminine condition in a form that is now for both sexes a source of distress” (Beauvoir 535). And although this novel is categorized with the naturalistic genre, the concept of free will is portrayed as inherent not just among the male characters, but in Emma as well, being the “radical” protagonist in the narrative.

The novel’s representation of the female construct as complex or multifaceted is demonstrated in the creation of the three characters referred to as Madame Bovary. It delineates the character of Emma as a woman different from society’s expectations of the female construct. The portrayal of the three Madame Bovary characters shows that each of them has distinct experiences in society. The construct of “female” in society shows how a young married woman (as portrayed by Emma, the youngest Madame Bovary) revolutionizes or transforms the outmoded female paradigm. All three women experience domestic containment with varying degrees of agency in relation to expected female roles in marriage. It
is important therefore to include a discussion of the three kinds of Madame Bovary characters to show how the nineteenth century married women depicted in Flaubert’s fiction differ from the “modern” married woman bound by conventions represented by the heroine.

Three Madame Bovary characters: the female construct in society and her role in marriage and family

Flaubert must have a good reason for his presentation of three Madame Bovary characters. His novel shows that within a patriarchal society, there exists an “unusual” woman like Emma, the youngest Madame Bovary, who knows her desires, owns them, and intends to act on them. It portrays her as a radical woman with unequivocal feminine desires that make her exceptionally different from the other Madame Bovary characters of the nineteenth century “masculine” era in France. Her blatant difference is the impetus behind literary critics’ attack on her “unique” characterization from the time Flaubert’s fiction became available to the public in France and beyond. Percy Lubbock, for instance, describes Emma a “foolish woman” who “is not much of a force” because her “impulses are wild, her emotions are thin and poor” and “she has no power of passion with which to fight the world” (15). Mario Vargas Llosa describes her “a basically ambiguous character, in whom contrary sentiments and appetites coexist” and he cites Flaubert who writes that in Emma “one could no longer distinguish selfishness from charity, or corruption from virtue” (44). Leo Bersani suggests Emma’s sometimes trivial behaviour has led critics to underestimate her intelligence and her significance as a fictional character:

The profundity of Emma Bovary as a figure in literature has been obscured by her intellectual and psychological triviality as a “character”. I would associate that profundity first of all with what may seem like a sign of her imaginative indifference to, and curious irritability over occasions which seem to realize her dreams. (43)
Vladimir Nabokov, on the other hand, describes Emma as “false” and “deceitful by nature” because she “deceives Charles from the very start before actually committing adultery”. Nabokov moreover implies that Emma as a woman is vulgar because she “lives among the philistines, and she is a philistine herself” (50). These are just some of the criticisms generated from Flaubert’s novel as regards the “unique” characterization of Emma Bovary. Most of these literary critics are men with fixed orientations in relation to expected gender roles and relations. Emma’s character as a woman is beyond the formula of the male code in society because she suggests a betrayal of the “masculine ideal” concept of a woman. However, she is just one of the “many women [who] do not let themselves ‘be themselves’ except in their husbands’ absence” (Beauvoir 525). The criticisms generated that foreground Emma’s character as a married woman forthright with her romantic desires make Gustave Flaubert’s novel exceptional because it is able to penetrate the deepest longings of a married woman immersed in her search for fulfilment within the confines of her environment. Michael Tilby comments that Emile Zola acknowledged *Madame Bovary* as “the quintessential Naturalist novel” because it exhibits “three defining characteristics: the exact reproduction of life; the abolition of the conventional hero; and the concealment of the author” which suggests according to Tilby, “Flaubert’s commitment to documentation” although when compared to Flaubert’s passages, “Zola’s descriptions are much more straightforwardly pictorial” (30).

**The eldest Madame Bovary**

The novel shows that among the three Madame Bovary characters, the eldest Madame Bovary, Charles’ mother, exemplifies the patriarchal woman serious with a motherhood role and the call of martyrdom as a wife to an unloving and hostile husband. She is
portrayed as a wife-mother committed to female subservience and resignation to expected gender roles. Her unhappiness as a wife shifts her focus onto motherhood. It is common knowledge that through motherhood, a “woman fully achieves her physiological destiny” (Beauvoir 337). However, when her son is of a certain age already, she still positions herself as fixated on his welfare by being unusually nurturing of him while at the same time dominating him. Her overprotectiveness of Charles drives her to impose her will on him unconsciously. For instance, she forces Charles “to acquire a bookish education” at the “Lycee” and at “medical school” because she is perceived “an embittered woman who projects all her frustrated ambitions onto her son” (Peterson 123). She also chooses a wife for Charles before he practises his profession as a country doctor, and even when Charles is already married, she is still the dominant figure in his household that upsets his wife. From the traditional male lens, the eldest Madame Bovary acquires the virtues associated with domesticity and societal feminine construct as self-sacrificing, nurturing, and overly anxious wife-mother to compensate for the inner vacuum and grief she feels in her own marriage. Her condition as a woman echoes Beauvoir’s thoughts on how some wife-mothers play the dominant role in relation to their children:

Some mothers make themselves slaves of their offspring to compensate for the emptiness in their hearts and to punishing themselves for the hostility they do not want to admit; they endlessly cultivate a morbid anxiety, they cannot bear to let their child do anything on his own; they give up all pleasure, all personal life, enabling them to assume the role of a victim; and from these sacrifices they derive the right to deny the child all independence; this renunciation is easily reconciled with a tyrannical will to domination. (573)

Her husband, an “assistant army surgeon” (Flaubert 3), is initially an image of authority until he is forced to leave the service due to a “conscription scandal”. The hierarchical structure therefore in patriarchal relationships determines the dominant status in genders.
For instance, between the mother and son, the eldest Madame Bovary is an image of a powerful female figure. However, in her relationship with her husband, the latter is the dominant partner because of his alcoholism and infidelities. He marries her and spends the dowry he receives from her family irresponsibly. “He cares nothing for his wife and is annoyed by her servile adoration” (Paris 8). The eldest Madame Bovary is portrayed as a long suffering wife resigned in silence to her domestic role exacerbated by her dysfunctional marriage:

She had suffered so much, without complaint at first, when she saw him chasing after every slut in the village and when a score of bawdy houses had sent him back to her late at night, worn out and smelling of drink... Then her pride had revolted. She felt silent, swallowing down her rage in a mute stoicism that she kept up until her death. (4)

There is a reversal of marital roles in the Bovary household to suggest that in real life, there are men who challenge life’s problems (i.e. his dismissal from service due to corruption charges) through vices (i.e. alcoholism and marital infidelity). The novel presents the husband’s flaws to suggest that although he possesses a strong personality and physical appearance with “macho” features (i.e. handsome, tall, and “a big talker” who sports a moustache and wears colourful garments), these assets are not a guarantee that he live up to society’s expectations as a powerful figure. There is inversion of the dominant image of men in the Bovary household. The gender role reversal puts Madame Bovary in a male position where she takes care of the family business for their survival. The result of her husband’s ineptness and rejection of the expected “masculine” role in society transforms her into a “difficult whining neurotic” (4). Her confinement to domestic role has not “guaranteed” her feminine “dignity” (Beauvoir 452). She is perceived burdened in her assumption of the role of family breadwinner her husband is supposed to take responsibility in a patriarchal social structure. Despite her pain and
stoical submission to her household situation, she emerges a woman with agency and resolve for continuity.

**The second Madame Bovary**

The second Madame Bovary is Charles’ first wife, forty-five-year-old Heloise Dubuc. The eldest Madame Bovary chooses Heloise as Charles’ wife because she calculates that Heloise is immensely rich and can offer her family sufficient dowry. However, Heloise is not what Madame Bovary thinks she is in relation to her “wealth”. Heloise has pretended to be wealthy, ensuring her entrance into marriage even if the process involves deception. The discovery of Heloise’s real economic status disappoints the eldest Madame Bovary and her husband, prompting them to confront her. Despite her shortcomings, Heloise represents the patriarchal female ideal not only because she is portrayed dependent on a man’s protection, devotion, and love, but also because as a wife, she serves her husband to a point where she dominates Charles. Flaubert comments: “But his wife is master; he had to say this and not to say that in company, to fast every Friday, dress as she liked, harass at her bidding those patients who did not pay” (8). She is perceived an insecure wife who nags about being neglected by Charles, a suggestion that she requires his attention. The novel implies that perhaps her insecurity is due to her unappealing beauty i.e. lots of pimples and “dry as a bone” (8). She would imagine Charles’ infidelity when he is out in his patient’s house and assumes he is in love with “someone else” (8). Heloise’s need of male assurance points to her emotional dependence on Charles, but perhaps she wants him to live for her, too, as she does for him. Her need for a husband who can understand or consider her desires in her relationship with him echoes Sophia Tolstoy’s deepest yearnings in her own marriage: “I live through him and for him, I demand the same thing for me” (qtd. in Beauvoir 532). Heloise’s character as the second Madame Bovary is important when juxtaposed with Emma,
the third Madame Bovary, because of the clear character delineation in her image as a woman who receives, as Heloise reckons, “a good education” in the convent (12) as well as her eventual transgression of boundaries in a male-centered society. The sudden death of Heloise facilitates Charles’ marriage to Emma, the third Madame Bovary.

The third Madame Bovary

The most controversial female character in the novel is Emma Rouault, the youngest among the three Madame Bovary characters. Although earlier critics consider Emma’s character “foolish” (Lubbock 15), “ambiguous” (Llosa 44), or trivial (Bersani 43), Jonathan Culler claims that “modern feminist criticism” declines to treat Emma as “small and futile” because “the historical condition of women of her day” has shown that her problems “come less from some innate foolishness than from her situation as an imaginative woman in the province, with no occupation, deprived of the city that would give her more scope” (688). Her intrusion into the male sphere, however, suggests female agency and individuality.

While the first two Madame Bovary characters adhere to society’s expectations of feminine roles, Emma, on the other hand, is identified for her defiance of social conventions as I will discuss in detail below. The slant towards the physical highlights her propensity for materialism after an experience of “domestic drudgery”, “fallen hopes” and “sterile virtue” that define her marriage and situation in the countryside. She longs to live in a city, like romantic Paris, and she “suffers” from her physical displacement. Bernard J. Paris comments that “there must be something in Emma’s character that makes her so responsive to romantic elements in her culture” (6). The sense of displacement paves the way for her to indulge in a shopping splurge which suggests that her materialism is an upshot of
her romantic orientation i.e. her love of beautiful material goods. She reasons that the act is acceptable because she suffers from the “irregularities of the nervous system” (169).

Any woman who had imposed such sacrifices on herself could be permitted a few fancies. She bought a Gothic prie-dieu, and in one month she spent fourteen francs on lemons for cleaning her nails; she wrote off to Rouen, to order a blue cashmere dress; she chose the very best scarf from Lheureux; she tied it around her waist over her dressing gown; then, with the shutters closed, and a book in her hand, she would recline on a sofa in her accoutrements. (99-100)

If Emma loves fancy accoutrements and indulges in extravagance beyond her financial means, it is because of her romantic ideals as suggested in the novel. This implies that the influence of romanticism on a woman is to make her less practical about living life because it blocks her impressions of the actual situation she is in. One of the “rhetorical devices” Flaubert uses in the novel suggests that he intends “to mock Emma’s dreams by showing the contrast between the truth and her illusions” (Paris 8). Paris comments that Flaubert “often lets us know in advance that Emma is out of touch with reality and is bound to be disappointed” (8).

Flaubert shows that a woman is capable of challenging the traditional idea of marriage where a wife’s “renunciation and devotion have been extolled” (Beauvoir 532). However, in Emma’s pursuit of the ideal, she chases the adventure of romance as alternative to her unhappy marriage with Charles, who ironically “idolizes her with boundless and heartwrenching tenderness” (Birken 615). She finds her husband dull, unkempt, and unattractive, suggesting that she does not find in him an image of male power, which indicates further that she is not proud of the disposition and physical attributes of her husband, her supposed lifetime partner. She increasingly gets “irritated with him” because he lacks table manners i.e. “after eating he cleaned his teeth with his tongue” and “in taking soup he made
gurgling noise with every spoonful” (37). He is also “getting fatter, the puffed out cheeks seemed to push the eyes, always small, up to the temples” (37). Paris comments that “he is a pathetic figure who could never satisfy Emma’s craving for a gallant lover, or at least a distinguished husband” (8). Perhaps Emma is too sophisticated for Charles in that she wants a husband who is her equal, or a husband she doesn’t have to develop to be her equal in intelligence and personality. The novel therefore presents a “mismatched” couple bound to clash in their perceptions on the role of husband and wife, and about marriage, as a whole. Their differences and incompatibility have already been hinted even before they get married by Emma’s father as suggested in Flaubert’s narrative. Monsieur Rouault observes that Charles is “not quite the son-in-law he would have liked” (15).

The criticisms of Emma’s character by the critics quoted above can be construed as a response to a female threat to middle class male society values. Emma’s character promotes individuality and is perceived as a threat to the stability of the patriarchal family structure within the society, in which in de Beauvoir’s words a man “imposes his presence on woman as her supreme, one justification; by marrying her he obliges her to give herself to him completely; he does not accept the reciprocal obligation, which is to accept this gift” (532). Her behaviour with the men in her life is still, in the twenty-first century, an alien conception in society and perhaps the reason for the criticisms of her “unique” characterization. However, what the novel attempts to show literary critics is that Emma’s spirituality refers to her being animated by romantic ideals for her to experience life’s meaning felt through elevated moments of inner aliveness.

In comparison to the other two Madame Bovary characters, Flaubert shows that Emma is different from the patriarchal image of feminine in regard to her roles in the domestic arena and romantic
relationships. For instance, as she gets gradually disappointed with Charles’ lack of culture due to her passion with romantic ideals, she is also “growing difficult, capricious” (39) so that when Charles’ mother visits the couple in their house and makes a comment about keeping an eye “on the religion of their servants”, Emma responds “with so angry a look and so cold a smile” (39) that her mother-in-law stops interfering in Emma’s household again. This attitude, which gets more pronounced due to her increasing frustrations about how life must be lived, is a reversal of the female image society expects from a woman:

Moreover she no longer concealed her contempt for anything or anybody, and at times she set herself to express singular opinions, finding fault with that which others approved, and approving things perverse and immoral, all of which made her husband open his eyes widely. (38-39)

Because of Emma’s discontent with domestic life in the farm, she grows pale and suffers from the “palpitations of the heart”. Charles decides they leave Tostes for a “change of air” (40) in consideration of her health. With Emma’s gradual transformation and agency, the novel shows that the female character contributes actively to plot structure in her interplay with the forces in society. However, from the prevailing nineteenth century construct of a woman defined within patriarchal paradigms, the concept of female as a passive entity and a “stumbling block” for male agency in the narrative extends to the early twentieth century mainstream fiction where women are reduced to “little mannikin figures who never contributed actively to the plot” (Asimov 75). Emma’s character as an assertive wife is the antidote to the prevailing passive female prototype in the male-centered society.

One factor that contributes to the differences in attitude and disposition between Emma and the other Madame Bovary characters is her youth which influences the way she perceives her role in society. Flaubert’s choice of a heroine in her youth signifies that she
has not been burdened with experience. Young Emma is a big contrast to the nurturing eldest Madame Bovary who represents the extreme form of motherhood that extinguishes elevated emotions and the life of passion. This is perhaps the reason Emma is portrayed by Flaubert as not very fond of her daughter. She is a woman-mother unusual in her approach to parenting. Self-sacrifice is anathema to a passionate life, and Flaubert suggests that the self-sacrificing eldest Madame Bovary is a reversal to Emma’s characterization. In portraying the two kinds of women-mothers, the novel shows contradictory images of womanhood: the eldest Madame Bovary with her lacklustre personality, and therefore, an example of a woman who lives for others (i.e. for Charles). The other image is the youngest Madame Bovary, the woman Flaubert seems to favour because she is the embodiment of life with her focus on passion and romance.

Motherhood entails living for the family. It is a form of female servitude that demands self-sacrifice. And as the novel suggests, Emma is a reverse of a nurturing mother shown by her unique treatment of Berthé, her daughter. She is unconventional in her approach to parenting because she is detached to some extent from her daughter. For instance, when Berthé tries to reach her apron strings, Emma yells that she be left alone (71). She declares though that she adores children, the source of “her consolation, her joy, her passion” (65). Her attitude towards Berthé is perhaps a reflection of romantic disillusionment (71) triggered by Léon’s (her lover) departure to Paris or perhaps, her having a female child has not extinguished in her heart yet. She expected a boy because to her, the “idea of having a male child was like an anticipated revenge for the powerlessness of her past” (70), which means that as a woman, she feels the parameters of patriarchal structures. Her anticipation of a baby boy makes her reflect on her retribution in society:

A man at least is free; he can explore each passion and every kingdom, conquer obstacles, feast upon the most other exotic
pleasures. But a woman is continually thwarted. Both inert and yielding, against her are ranged the weakness of the flesh and the inequity of the law. Her will, like the veil strung to her bonnet, flutters in every breeze, always there is the desire urging, always the convention restraining. (70)

The quote suggests that Emma recognises the importance of a person’s gender in society. To have a baby boy implies she envies the male social position because she desires what men can do in society. For her, they represent power. Society’s gender stereotyping requires a woman to be “modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing”, virtues “associated with patriarchal femininity and domesticity” (Tyson 90). Emma resists these disempowering qualities because they entail the passive confinement to domestic servitude and constraints on female agency. The choice is her exposure to romances where she determines to realise their content. Her spirituality is in her being animated with romantic idealism for a sense of meaning in her life. Flaubert comments that Emma “rejected as useless all that did not contribute to the immediate desires of her heart, being of temperament more sentimental than artistic, looking for emotions, not landscapes” (22).

The novel shows that motherhood is not the only recourse for married women even in nineteenth century patriarchal societies. However, there are times Emma would ask the nurse to bring her daughter to her and embrace her while she declares: “I do love you, my poor little thing! I do love you!” (139) Flaubert shows that Emma acknowledges she has a daughter who needs a mother’s love, but like Chopin’s Edna, discussed below, Emma refuses the role of a woman-mother who lives solely for her children and family, which means that although she loves her daughter, her parenting role cannot dissuade her from her other desires for self-actualization such as the experience of romantic passions to suggest her spiritual expression. In her society, motherhood is understood as a full-time concern. In her case, full-time motherhood is unnecessary that is why, she
employs a nurse who can help her take care of her daughter. The novel, however, suggests one reason for Emma’s seeming lack of idea about full-time motherhood. She does not have a model of a full-time mother within patriarchal patterns because her own mother died when Emma was still in the convent.

**Emma’s childhood and readings**

Flaubert traces the formation of Emma as a young woman in the convent to her life in the farm with her father. She is released from the convent owing to her boredom with the routine of religious life so that her father takes her back to their farm at Les Bertaux. In the beginning, she enjoys managing their servants, but after a while, boredom with farm life sets in again. Flaubert suggests that the monotony of farm living works as a corrosion to her imagination. The expression of her spirituality extends to her love of the humanities and arts: “dancing, geography, drawing, embroidery and playing the piano” (13). Flaubert suggests that creative activities ignite the spark of her fertile imagination that makes her feel alive. Her interest in geography connects with her love for travel because within her is an adventurous woman who loves to explore kingdoms. Farm living implies entrapment in a fixed space and restrictions on female advancement. Also, she has no female friends she can exchange confidences with or broaden her social interaction with to escape the monotony of pastoral experience.

Emma’s early education with the Catholic nuns shows that her experience with “prayers, retreats, novenas, sermons” (30) in the convent is supposed to make her religious through the knowledge of the doctrines of the church. Instead, she fulfils her hunger for romances which appeal to her more than the doctrines. Thus, the portrayal of a woman in a convent learning about romances is Flaubert’s criticism of the effects of romantic literature on the imagination. In the convent, Emma is more drawn to reading
romance novels or listening to an old maid who reads romantic stories and sings love songs to her and the other girls (i.e. stories about love, lovers, sweethearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions... sombre forests, heartaches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little skiffs by moonlight, nightingales in shady grooves, ‘gentlemen’ brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous... weeping like fountains” (22). The novel seems to portray a parody of female sentimentalism and nostalgia. For instance, when Emma’s mother dies, she obtains a “funeral picture” that is “made with the hair of the deceased” and writes her father in Bertaux a “letter full of sad reflections on life” (after her mother’s death) asking that she “be buried later on in the same grave” (23). When the “goodman” thinks she is ill, Emma is glad to have displayed an appearance of being “pale” (23) just like the women in the romance novels. Flaubert explains:

Emma was secretly pleased that she had reached at a first attempt the rare ideal of pale lives, never attained by mediocre heart. She let herself glide along Lamartine meanderings, listened to harps on lakes, to all the songs of dying swans. The pure virgins ascending to heaven, and the voice of the Eternal discoursing down the valleys. (23)

Her sentimentality does not stop in the convent. It extends in her marriage to Charles, discussed below, when she wants, for instance, to have “a midnight wedding with torches” (16). The novel shows that the romantic life is her ideal life. Paskow implies that Emma’s choice of readings is on romance, religion, and fashion:

Her reading, which supplies most of the reference points for her relationship to the world, comprises manuals on religious piety, classical Romantic literature, popular romantic fiction, keepsakes with engraved illustrations, and later, after marriage, the fashion magazines already mentioned (328).

Romances highlight happy endings, but Flaubert’s Madame Bovary portrays the contradictions in Emma’s characterization because she is also drawn to “ill-fated women” (Flaubert 29) with sad endings, shown in her library book subscription at age 15. The novel shows
there is beauty in tragic endings that is why, Emma sees female
death as romantic. The novel therefore projects an image of a woman
who reads to indulge in sentimental education in order to quench her
heart’s thirst for stereotypically romantic ideals that awake her
passion for living. Leedy shares one compelling reason young women,
like Emma, read romances voraciously:

[R]omance novels are read for their entertainment qualities, in
and of themselves. It is fascinating to read about far away
places and high adventure. One enjoys the mystery and
suspense of the novel, and the dangerous villains trying to
destroy and deflower the innocent heroine. By reading the
novels, one can experience exotic lands without ever leaving
home. One can have different lovers, have money, sail across
the ocean, and be raped by a slave, all in one adventurous
sitting. It gives one the chance to do things one would never be
able to do otherwise. (69)

Men (like Monsieur Homais) dabble in intellectual activities (i.e.
reading scientific journals) as suggested in Emma’s male-centered
society. However, Emma’s interest in reading implies she is different
from the other women of her time who are content merely with
domestic education (i.e. housekeeping, child-rearing). The novel
shows that reading is a complex activity critical to the formation of
one’s intelligence and perceptions of the world; therefore, a woman
should choose carefully what she reads because its influence may
have damaging effects on her actual world, her reality. This makes
Flaubert’s novel a reaction against romanticism and at the same time,
a celebration of the human thirst for idealism amidst harsh social
realities. Vinken suggests that Madame Bovary is a comment on the
“false reading” of novels that results to “a false relation to the world”
(763). However, the reading of romantic novels seems for Emma a
spiritual expression that enlivens her passion for the ideal experience.

Emma’s early education is therefore shown as less effective for
practical realities. Drawn to romantic books more than the Christian
doctrines, Flaubert suggests she sees her importance as a woman in the world of these books. These novels have become a vehicle for her interest in objects of luxuries. For instance, despite her limited funds, she buys an expensive gift, “a rug of velvet and wool with leaves on a pale ground” (60) for Leon. Her propensity for beautiful things is her spiritual expression for romantic ideals. So although her spirituality means being animated by romantic ideals, she acknowledges the importance of religion when she seeks the advice of a priest about her problem, a manifestation of her Christian spirituality having received her education from the Catholic nunnery. Therefore, although she is drawn to romances rather than the literature of the church, she exhibits a longing for something more to fill the void within her. Vinken writes that “Emma regularly turns to religion for what she cannot find in earthly love” (766) suggesting the tension between the material and spiritual dimensions within her. Her attraction to romances indicates that despite her religious education she is still driven by romantic ideals.

**Emma’s marriage and relationship with Charles**

When Charles visits Emma’s house to treat her father’s leg fractures, he is still married to Madame Heloise Dubuc (the second Madame Bovary). However, when the latter has died suddenly, Charles asks Emma’s hand in marriage. Emma’s marriage to Charles seems the answer for her release from a mundane reality in the farm. Marriage is perceived, in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth, as the “destiny that society traditionally offers women” (Beauvoir 451). In nineteenth century France, a woman considers marriage “her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence” (452) perhaps because “an unmarried woman is a pariah” (455) in her society. Since marriage is a woman’s destiny in society, Flaubert shows that Emma has to marry. Her father, too, desires her marriage to a good man. The novel suggests that in regard to Emma’s marriage
to Charles, her father will not feel “sorry to be rid of his daughter” because she is “of no use to him in the house”, justifying she is “too clever for farming” (15). However, she marries Charles primarily to escape farm life, and not because he is her ideal man, but perhaps more on her idea of finally realising in marriage her romantic desires. Her father though is unsure of Charles as a son-in-law to some extent:

He did find him rather weedy and this was not exactly the son-in-law he might have wished for; but he was said to be steady. Careful with money, a clever chap, and most likely he wouldn’t make too much fuss over the dowry. (18)

Charles has a modest income as a country doctor, but the novel’s description of him as a person is one who is no match for Emma’s intelligence, creativity, and energy. So between Charles and Emma, the latter has a more dominant personality. She dominates him in the area of house management. She writes letters to his patients for payments of their unpaid bills and later on secures the power of attorney to manage Charles’ financial affairs. The novel shows that in a male-centered society, female agency is prominent in the household to confirm the idea of a woman’s proper place in the home. However, despite a man’s inferior mind as portrayed by Charles’ mediocre intelligence, he is still perceived as a superior entity in society because he has a career outside the home, and he provides for the needs of his wife and daughter suggesting to suggest economic power. Charles earns his medical license only after retaking his written examinations, but his career as a country doctor is assured in his society, and it is a respectable male social position. His edge in society is also seen in his decision where to settle with his wife because he has the material means. For instance, after an elaborate wedding in Tostes, Charles observes Emma’s ennui that makes her physically sick so that, in consideration of her health, Charles decides they leave for Yonville.
Charles’ intellectual inadequacies, however, have become clearer to Emma when they start living together as a married couple. She finds him stupid, unromantic, and “increasingly irritating”. She is disappointed with her honeymoon because she expects that they would visit “places with marvellous names”, hold hands “on the terrace of a villa”, or “gaze at the stars” and “talk of the future” (31). Her romantic expectations in marriage are not met. However, for Letwin, Emma’s happiness “depends on her being able to sustain her illusions” because she “knows only her desire to ‘feel love’, and regards her husband” as a mechanism for “inducing this pleasure” (142). Letwin adds that Emma, as a “recipient of sensations” (142), suggests she is the kind of woman who depends on sense impressions for her to be able to feel a “kind of ecstasy that she craves” (142). For instance, she realises she cannot confide her innermost desires to Charles because her impression of his conversation is “as flat as any pavement” and he lacks the sensitivity and intellectual refinement she yearns in a man:

A man surely ought to know everything, ought to excel in a host of activities, ought to initiate you into the energies of passion, the refinements of life, all its mysteries. But this man knew nothing, taught nothing, desired nothing. He thought her happy; and she resented his so-solid calm, his ponderous serenity, the very happiness that she brought him. (Flaubert 32)

Emma’s impressions of Charles as a husband suggest she compares him to a fictional romance hero: dark, strong, rich, refined in manners, intelligent, passionate, and adventurous. To her dismay, these qualities are absent in Charles. Her present reality as a married woman conflicts with her romantic longings. As a result, she feels an “inward detachment” in her relationship with him so that she spends most of her time drawing, playing the piano, sewing, and writing letters to Charles’ patients. Her romantic illusions blind her to the devotion of Charles as a husband who loves her “immensely”
Flaubert 33) and works hard for his family where “he showers her with all the material goods and benefits his hard-earned income can provide” (Birken 615). However, it is clear that his love is not the kind of love Emma desires. She wants passion and the exact meaning of “the words bliss, passion, ecstasy, that had seemed to her so beautiful in the books” (Flaubert 24). For her, a man must excite her romantic passions. Flaubert, however, presents the parody of female romanticism when he portrays Emma struggling to recite “all the passionate verses” she knows and sing “with a sigh many a melancholy adagio” (33) just to excite the romantic passions in Charles. She observes, however, that Charles is still neither “amorous” nor “excited”, and she has not experienced the “spark” she longs to feel in her heart. So she convinces herself that “there was nothing startling about Charles’s passion” (34). This realisation makes her blurt out to herself: “Oh, why, dear God, did I marry him?” (34).

Now, she understands they are incompatible as a couple. Charles, however, takes a patriarchal view and expects his wife to be happy in fulfilling her role in the house, along the lines of his image of what their daughter will do when she grows up:

He pictured her to himself, working in the evening by their side, in the lamplight; she would be embroidering slippers for him; she would look after the house; she would fill every room with her charm and her gaiety. (158)

Emma’s question about why she married him implies that although Charles seems the answer for her boredom in Tostes, her marriage to him becomes an extension of the monotony she felt back then in the farm. Her question suggests that her marriage with Charles is a wrong decision because it lacks the recipe she yearns in romance novels where heroines reel with “bliss” in the “kingdom of pleasure and passion” (46). The physical yearning for a passionate life is a manifestation of her youth, energy, and spirituality. Her frustrations grow into a “hatred” for Charles, and she “directed at him all the manifold hatred that sprung from ennui…” (86). This inner
turmoil indicates her unmet marital expectations. Flaubert suggests that romanticism as represented by Emma cannot mix with the objective reality of Charles. A country doctor and an “artist” can’t simply blend in together. Objective Charles represents Science (medicine) while subjective Emma represents romance, passion, and creative arts. A clash exists between practical realism and impractical romanticism. The two is an antithesis that cannot blend or marry in harmony. For Letwin, however, Charles’s love for his wife is a “kind of illusion” for the following reasons:

It is not founded on even a shred of understanding of Emma. His love lasts as long as she lives not because he has so great an insight into the uniqueness of her personality, but because his very limited imagination is easily satisfied with the stimulus provided by Emma. (143)

So in Emma’s attempts to realise her romantic ideals, she gets only so disappointed that she turns pale, thin, and ill. A life without passion for Emma is actually a life that resembles death where all emotions are extinguished. The novel’s representation of the heroine as someone who gets physically sick with her marital frustrations and situation in the countryside reveals the heroine’s continued lack of fulfilment from her romantic desires.

**Emma’s involvement with other men**

To compensate for her marital frustrations, she turns to the first man she sees in the person of Léon Dupuis whom she refers as “the only light of her life, her only hope for happiness!” (Flaubert 99). As discussed earlier, Emma’s spirituality means being animated by her romantic ideals. “When she thinks she is in love with Léon, she imagines him to be something quite different from what he is” (Letwin 143). Her passion for romance and the beautiful are awakened by Leon. However, her romantic expectations have been quelled yet again because Léon leaves Tostes for better opportunities:
But she was filled with lust, with rage, with hatred. That elegantly pleated dress concealed a heart in turmoil, and those lips so chaste told nothing of her torment. She was in love with Léon, and she sought her solitude, the better to take her pleasure, undistracted, in images of him. (85)

The novel is a commentary of one traditional institution, marriage, through the portrayal of the heroine’s responsiveness to a man other than her husband. Marriage is a church tradition that expects wives to remain committed to their husbands despite unfavourable odds. However, Flaubert seems to suggest that marriage is sometimes impractical because it blocks the free expression of human passions. He also shows that the religious education Emma receives in the convent is not a guarantee of a life of commitment in marriage. He suggests that resistance to permanence i.e. tradition occurs if the natural desires of man’s inner self conflict with external realities. His heroine knows about marital commitment as reflected by her readings, but her fascination with romantic ideals makes her reckless in her actions. For her, life is not life at all with the absence of passion, which is perhaps the message of the novel for humanity. Emma’s search for a passionate life is also reflected in Flaubert’s passionate life. Unwin claims that Flaubert as a “writer of legendary finesse could also be a man of staggering vulgarity” with his extensive “hedonistic travels” that “give a picture of an early practitioner of sexual tourism” (11). Unwin insists we need “to modify the view of Flaubert as the uniformly reclusive artist who spent his life in solitary aesthetic contemplation” (12) because “his view of life is also shot through with a sense of the grotesque, the carnal, and the physical” (11).

The novel suggests that material considerations and human passions go together. This is shown through the portrayal of the heroine who sees the importance of money to realize the passionate kind of life she longs for, and the reason she feels tormented in her
struggle to make real this vision of her ideal life: “The cravings of the flesh, the yearning for money and the melancholia for passion, all were confounded in a simple sorrow” (86). The novel implies that her inability to see her ideals in reality results in hysteria (discussed below) when she starts feeling the “nerves”. And although the creation of a heroine with characteristics that symbolise the previous literary mode borders on ridicule, the novel suggests that her condition is serious because her maid sees her sobbing to suggest her emotional woes. Emma dismisses the maid’s comment by saying that it is just “nerves” where “there’s no cure” (87). However, she thinks “she had to carry on smiling, had to hear herself always saying she was happy, had to try to look happy, let them think her happy!” (87). The word “them” refers to her husband, her father, her mother-in-law, and the people in Tostes. The novel suggests that since society has expectations for a married woman, she has to conform somehow to how she should look on the outside despite her inner reality so as not to upset them. She is portrayed as an unhappy wife who keeps up appearances, just like Chopin’s Edna, so that her family and her society will not be distraught. Flaubert hints that society’s influence can be profound sometimes because a woman, for instance, has to conform to its dictates that affect her inner self i.e. pretending to have a happy appearance. However, these social dictates seem to backfire because they lead the heroine instead to focus more on her desires. She keeps quiet while still feeling the “nerves”, but she seems more resolved to indulge in fantasies and desires in the name of passion: “Domestic mediocrity drove her to sumptuous fantasies, marital caresses to adulterous desires” (86).

Emma is a middle class woman who yearns for something more than her present marital reality. Her “life-pursuit” is “love” (Paskow 328). However, “as the intimacy of their life became deeper, the greater became the gulf that separated her from him” (Flaubert 24) to suggest her disillusionment in marriage. She keeps her thoughts to
herself because she finds that her husband’s “conversation” does not excite “emotion, laughter, or thought” (24). Paskow comments that “authentic love requires dialogue” (329), but Emma and Charles seldom indulge in a dialogue. Flaubert shows there is communication barrier between the couple. Emma’s conversations with him do not reflect what she truly feels, that is why, she regrets her marriage to him (26). Her silence about her desires for a passionate marriage echoes the silence of the eldest Madame Bovary who is unwilling to disturb the family structure in society, suggesting that language from the feminist lens “is a decidedly male realm” (Murfin 159) in patriarchal societies. Chopin, for instance, writes that Edna also suffers from communication barriers in marriage because she “had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves” (67).

The hierarchical binary oppositions at work in 19th century France presents the heroine as emotional or irrational. Her being emotional borders on the “hysterical” (168) as Flaubert describes Emma when she suffers from “cerebral fever” (169) that results from a rejection letter. According to Schmid, the word, “hysteric” (the noun form for “hysterical”) is associated with female “madness” (1). Female “hysteria” is “an Irigarayan hyper-mimesis of a male economy of desire in which woman serves as the sign of difference and lack” (2). Hysteria is therefore related to a female frame of mind, the binary opposite of masculine mental state. To be hysterical signifies female display of emotional weakness. It is a patriarchal assumption resulting from gender stereotyping that echoes Cixous’ dichotomies of language i.e. mind/heart or rational/irrational. As discussed in chapter 3, a society where dichotomies or binary oppositions exist suggest the presence of dominance. The novel’s depiction of the female protagonist shows that a woman is more predisposed to irrationality because of her passions. From feminism’s binary dialectics, she is the antithesis of male rationality. An example is when Rodolphe launches
his initial seduction of Emma, his calculated language puts emphasis on feelings and passions that appeal to Edna’s sentimentality:

To feel what is great, to cherish what is beautiful, that is what duty is. Not to accept every one of society’s conventions, with all the ignominy they inflict upon us.

So why castigate the passions? Are they not the only beautiful things there is on earth, the source of heroism, enthusiasm, poetry, music, art, of everything? (115)

Aside from Rodolphe’s way with words, Emma gets drawn to him because he represents the man with all the romantic frills in her readings. For instance, he owns an estate and wears garments similar to the gentlemen in her romance books. Paskow details the romantic trappings that are associated with Rodolphe: “The trappings include a chateau and certain possessions that for Emma are the signs of privileged male power: horses, carriages, whips, hunting-guns inlaid with silver, and cigars” (330). With him, Emma’s romantic “illusions” take another form because for her, he is “a gallant cavalier who will carry her off to distant glories – to cities resplendent with domes and bridges, lemon trees and white marble cathedrals...” (Letwin 143). When Rodolphe succeeds in his attempt to seduce her, Emma is portrayed as ecstatic because she keeps saying to herself that she has acquired a lover:

‘I have a lover! A lover!’, savouring this idea just as if a second puberty had come upon her. At last she was to know the pleasures of love, that fever of happiness which she had despaired of. She was entering something marvellous where everything would be passion, ecstasy, delirium... (131)

Flaubert suggests that her efforts at realising her passion and going through “delirium” and “ecstasy” signify female hysteria. Emma is subject to her romantic imagination while her lover perceives her as an object of sexual gratification. The more Emma obsesses about securing her man’s love, the more her lover is turned off by her
“irrationality”. This female irrationality is made clear during the course of their tryst when Flaubert describes Emma as extremely sentimental towards Rodolphe because she demands that they exchange miniatures, cut off their hair for keepsakes, and give each other rings, “an actual wedding ring as a symbol of their eternal alliance” (137). Emma’s sentimentality leads her lover to get rid of her (after he uses her) when he writes her a rejection letter telling her that he is “going away” (133). Her romantic escapade suggests for her a loving expression, a fascination with men of power and her dissatisfaction with Charles. Her transgression is her refusal of society’s confinement of married women to mundane reality with their expected roles, and her “choice of lovers” hints of her “appropriation of the rights of the masculine sphere” (Birken 618) to claim power in a male-centered society.

Flaubert suggests that Emma has difficulty separating her real self, the present self, from the imaginary self she is implied to have internalised from her readings. This implies that the romance novels she reads avidly have shown their influence on her behaviour when she acts out their contents as demonstrated by her romantic liaisons with other men. One critic points to Emma’s “inability to incorporate time into experience” or her “failure to live in time” (Marder 49) which suggests that her imagination is focused elsewhere instead of in reality. And when Emma feels that he starts to display signs of indifference, she is portrayed by Flaubert as becoming particularly sentimental, intensifying her expressions of tenderness towards him, making her feel his subjugation of her:

The humiliation of feeling her own weakness was turning into a rancour dulled by the pleasures of the flesh. It was not affection, it was like a perpetual seduction. He was subjugating her. She was almost afraid of him. (137)
Reversal of roles in Emma’s relationships with men

The image of Emma with her sentimentality that borders on the hysterical is combined with suggestions that she possesses the traits of a man in being assertive. This depiction is somehow contradictory because when a woman is sentimental, we get the picture of her as passive, meaning, she waits for her man’s initiative as suggested in the genre of novels Emma reads. In romance novels, Leedy confirms the superior status of men:

The man is the aggressor in all matters, including sexuality. He makes the first contact with the woman, although she may be attracted to him in the first place. He can start and end a relationship and may determine the "rules of the game". (43)

In these novels, the wealthy but passive heroine lives happily in châteaux with her adventurous and strong-willed man, and they profess to each other their “undying love and life-long commitment” (Leedy 62). Flaubert’s novel, however, presents an image of a woman with agency and choice. This is illustrated in the heroine’s offbeat rendezvous with Rodolphe, when she stealthily meets him in his chateau by trailing through the copious bushes in the garden often during the night after her husband is already asleep in bed. It is Emma who looks for ways to be with her lover, the same approach she applies to Léon whom she meets on a regular basis by travelling to Rouen. There is role reversal of a pursuer and being pursued. The actions of Emma “do get increasingly masculine throughout the novel as she strays further and further from reality” (Plemmons 16). Instead of being pursued by men, the heroine pursues them in the name of passion. Instead of receiving romantic declarations from her lover, it is Emma who declare that she “can’t live without him”, telling him that she is a “better lover” and she is his “slave” and his “concubine” as she exclaims: “You’re my king, my idol! You are good! Beautiful! Intelligent! Strong!” (Flaubert 114) Emma’s passion for
romance is perhaps the reason Percy Lubbock describes her “a foolish woman, romantically inclined, in small and prosaic conditions” (qtd. in Bloom 14). Her sentimentalism, however, mimics the heroine in romance novels described as “nonrational, flighty, and emotional” who sheds tears at the "drop of a hat." (Leedy 63). As Vinken explains, Flaubert’s novel highlights “the dangers of false reading, about a false relation to the world, which it illustrates by the examples of novels, among others” (763). Flaubert suggests that a woman is capable of ignoring society’s patriarchal ideology in her active pursuit of partners, but she is captive to another false ideology, one that comes from her reading. There is tension between literary illusion, as shown by Emma’s imagination, and reality, as shown by her condition in a male-centered society.

Emma’s assertiveness, therefore, poses as a challenge to the ideal female construct in a patriarchal society. However, she can only be assertive because she is married and not cut out for marital love and commitment. Her assertiveness is portrayed yet again when she proposes elopement to Rodolphe. Thus, the dynamism she extends for sentimental pursuits makes her the dominant figure in her relationships with men. This echoes yet again the reversal of gender roles. Although male exploitation is involved, Emma’s demands for actions that are “romantic” makes her stand out in comparison to the fictional life of passive women in the romance fiction she reads. A good example is her affair with Leon who thinks that he has become “her mistress rather than she becoming his” (226) when she goes to his hotel weekly, buys him gifts, gives him half the expense of his hotel rent, and demands that he write her poems. While Emma’s demands are geared towards fulfilling her quest for romantic ideals, Paskow describes Emma’s attitude towards her lovers as dictatorial: “Both Rodolphe and Léon come to feel the despotic element of her "love" and seek to distance themselves from her” (337). So although she is perceived as a weak female entity in society, in her romantic
relationships, she is a dominant figure because she takes the role of
man in her pursuit of passion. Flaubert’s novel suggests that a woman
like Emma can only be demanding in the field of romance and
consumption which are somehow expressions of her individuality.
Therefore, while Emma’s society restricts female movement, her
efforts at romance suggest the presence of female agency and
autonomy.

Emma’s quest for happiness also blinds her to her actual
position with men who see her as merely a sex object as I will show
below. Her interest in the physical and mental attributes of men is
compared with the narcissism of beautiful women who “have the
greatest fascination for men” because they show indifference to them
(Freud qtd. in Birken 615). In her desperate need for self-fulfilment,
she becomes blind to the real motives of the men she is involved
with. Therefore, the tension in Emma’s characterization represents
her refusal of society’s female stereotyping while at the same time
acknowledging male power in society so that she wants to be like
men, indicating a woman’s low status in nineteenth century France.
Her desire for a male child also suggests she wants the superior
position of men. In her society, it is always the men who are
privileged economically and socially. If a woman is married, she
depends on the income her husband receives. Emma is classified
within the middle class range. However, her indulgence in
conspicuous consumption and crass materialism incurs her huge
debts because she splurges on luxuries for herself and her lover. Her
extravagance, in particular, signifies her assumption into the male
sphere because the men in her society are always perceived to have
the financial capacity for material acquisition. Her huge debts,
however, result from the exploitation of her limited financial
understanding by the unscrupulous male merchant. She lacks
knowledge in managing her husband’s finances wisely because in the
first place, she does not know how to control her expenses that are
linked with her romantic longings. A good example is when she prepares for her supposed elopement with Rodolphe, and she orders a number of overpriced luxury items from Lheureux at inflated interest rates until her debts pile up and become too difficult for her to hide from Charles, leading their properties being sequestered by the court. The novel suggests that Emma thinks she deserves a life similar to that of the royal characters in chateaux found in her books. Leedy claims that a young woman longs for “relationships similar to those described in the [romance] novels” (66). Emma “takes these fictional experiences and applies them to the real world, which makes life nothing but a search for constant desire, sensation, and romance” (Plemmons 16).

The other powerful male figures in Emma’s society

Men possess economic power in Emma’s society, and there are men who somehow contribute to Emma’s fate. These are Lheureux, Guillaumin, Homais, and Bournisien. Lheureux represents the shrewd capitalist who knows how to manipulate his female patrons. He is the reason Emma gets deeper into debt because he introduces her to luxurious items and lures her into buying them on credit. Men like Lheureux know how to handle female weaknesses for romance and material acquisition. Paskow comments that he is “a master at exploiting the consumer potential provoked by romantic publications of his time, instructs Emma on the Parisian and upper-class connotations of his wares, while supplying her with easy credit for their purchase” (326). He succeeds in having Emma obtain the power of attorney over Charles’s financial affairs. Lheureux uses his knowledge of Emma’s affair with Léon to blackmail her. And when Emma sees him to ask for help with regard to her debts and impending court property sequestration, he refuses to listen to her pleas and slams his door in her face. This suggests that although Lheureux helps her with her material needs, he does so only for
personal interest. He represents the oppressive capitalism and corruption in Emma’s society.

The other man that Emma approaches is Guillaumin, the Yonville lawyer. Emma is desperate to pay off her huge debts to Lleureux because she does not want her house and other possessions sequestered by the court. Since Charles is unaware of Emma’s debts, she approaches Guillaumin in an attempt to borrow money from him. However, Guillaumin takes advantage of the situation by trying to seduce Emma sexually: “He put his hand, took hers, covered it in greedy kisses, held it on his knees; and he played with his fingers very delicately, coaxing her on with many an elegant phrase” (247). Her need for funds is sexually exploited by Guillaumin through his consideration of her exchange value as a woman. Therefore, he perceives Emma as a commodity who can offer him sexual pleasure in return for the funds she needs. But Emma uses her free will not to give in to his sexual advances. Emma’s act suggests that despite her need for funds, she will not succumb to external pressures such as the sexual abuse (attempted rape) of men like Guillaumin. This also suggests that her sexuality is not for sale. As a result of this experience with men, Emma feels she wants “to do battle with them, spit in their faces, crush them all” (248). Despite her desperate need for money, the novel shows that Emma will not trade financial freedom for sexual manipulation which indicates further that she will not stoop too low for materialism at the expense of feminine dignity. This gesture shows that her spirituality is also in her courage to uphold her dignity and self-respect as a human being.

The third powerful man in Emma’s society is Homais, the apothecary. He is a successful figure in Yonville because people rely on the medicines that he produces exclusively at his laboratory. He attracts more patients than a doctor in his area, and he considers himself an intellectual who intervenes in the activities of other people.
For instance, he persuades Charles to perform an operation on Hippolyte’s clubfoot for publicity. When the operation fails, he refuses to take responsibility. Flaubert portrays Homais as a successful middle-class charlatan who pursues material wealth while pretending to be interested in scientific knowledge. On the other hand, Flaubert paints a comic picture of Bournisien as a priest who advises Hippolyte to be happy in his suffering because what happens to him is God’s will: “He began by pitying him for his sufferings, while exhorting him to rejoice in them, since it was the will of the Lord, and to grasp this opportunity to reconcile himself with heaven” (141). The novel makes a mockery of the church’s representative through his advice—that Hippolyte reflect and beg for God’s mercy and recite various prayers (146). This also shows Flaubert’s criticism on the doctrine and tradition of the church. Bournisien implies that Hippolyte deserves his suffering because he has been neglecting his duties in the church. The priest’s misreading of the church doctrine suggests the corruption of the values of the church in society, and he is portrayed satirically in the novel to show that man’s suffering has nothing to do with religion but is the outcome of his choice. Flaubert presents not just the corrupt practices of capitalism in society, but also the corruption of the church through her trusted representatives.

This novel’s representation of the priest suggests they are entrusted with the spiritual health of their parishioners, but they are prone to human flaws as reflected in Bournisien’s inattention to Emma who approaches him in hopes of being enlightened about her problems. So although she needs guidance for her worldly passions as a result of her dissatisfaction with her marriage, her act of seeking spiritual advice from a priest as God’s representative suggests a female clamour for spiritual guidance to placate an inner turmoil. The novel hints that a woman’s fulfilment (in reference to Emma as heroine in the novel) in life is achieved if there is less attachment to life’s material dimensions and a consideration of the spiritual element
to nourish and pacify the female soul. Charles’s mother represents the church’s voice when she advises Charles that Emma earn a living because she leads an idle life by stuffing her head with “wicked books” written against religion (100-101). Through Charles’s mother, Flaubert suggests that the church is against the reading of romance fiction because of the perception that it may have a role in the corruption of the soul. Charles’ mother is juxtaposed with his father, who represents a detractor of the church when he hurls “insults at religious processions” (4).

Flaubert shows the disadvantages of a woman’s position in her interactions with the powerful men in her society. There is irony in the presentation of these men because of the image they project to society. They are successful, recognized, and respected in society, and yet, they are greedy, selfish and corrupt. Society is blind to their falsehood. There is more emphasis on the physical, material world where men resort to deception for vested interests (particularly in the case of Lheureux, Guillaumin, and Homais). Flaubert also shows that worldly success is not always achieved through hard work and sincere efforts as has been demonstrated by male oppression in the persons of Lheureux, Guillaumin, and Homais.

Conclusion

Flaubert’s Emma is a radical woman with unusual intelligence. The women in her society are destined for domestic education only, while Emma explores literature and the arts through her readings and artistic or domestic endeavours like playing the piano and managing her husband’s finances. Somehow her spirituality is found in her pure intentions and expectations as a woman distracted in a materialistic western culture. Her spirituality also means being animated by her romantic ideals for a passionate life. Her quest for spiritual satisfaction, however, suggests that it is not found in the physical-
material realities alone, but also in a non-physical creative fulfilment which simply does not seem to be available in her society, and certainly not available to a woman of Emma’s social position.

Emma’s role as a woman-mother is similar to Edna’s in Chopin’s *The Awakening* (as I will discuss in detail in the next chapter). They challenge the institution of marriage because of their impatience with domestic confinements and frustrations with marital realities. Both feel being restrained in their confined space in marriage. They cannot communicate their innermost feelings with their husbands who consider them their properties. Their husbands though live up to society’s expectations of the male role as providers. Both women are middle class wives who enjoy life’s luxuries although Emma’s financial irresponsibility has caused her downfall. They employ a non-traditional approach in the rearing of their children by hiring a nurse or sitter. This approach to child-rearing implies they require time for artistic pursuits or creative expressions. Both, however, profess that they love their children although they will not sacrifice their individuality for them in their quests for self-fulfilment. Their creative energies differ, though. Emma, for instance, plays the piano while Edna dabbles in painting. Both of them, however, read romances. Their husbands, engrossed in their professions, expect their wives to be happy in their submission to domesticity. Flaubert’s novel (as well as Chopin’s fiction) conveys the reality of a disturbed human soul with its incessant quest for something more, for the spiritual. In her need for spiritual regeneration, the privileged married woman resists societal conformity in her desire for love, self-actualisation, and equal opportunity with men.
CHAPTER 6

THE MARRIED WOMAN IN KATE CHOPIN’S

THE AWAKENING

Introduction

Critics of naturalism suggest that it is impossible for a woman to be freed from being determined within the frontiers of male tradition. This assertion is suggested in the discussion of Chopin’s heroine as a married woman by Abassi who claims that the female character exemplified in The Awakening does not have a choice within patriarchal boundaries:

By portraying Edna’s death, Chopin has shown that woman as a social construct is not free to change her situation and stand before the male law. (39)

As a social outcast unable to make peace with the patriarchal society, she is neither able to remove herself from her former life nor powerful to win over the society. This signifies that any attempt in making a female logic is doomed to failure. (40)

There seems to be a consensus in literary criticism that patriarchal constructs are the basis for analysis of the feminine fate. This indicates that literary critics operate within these constructs from which a feminine consciousness emerges in relation to a woman’s identity and failure. Female fate interpreted from the ideals of patriarchy considers it the common source for a woman’s doom. It is possible that by employing Foucault’s notion of power relations in social constructs, critics may think beyond the status quo paradigms in favour of human will and untether themselves from relentlessly placing the blame or responsibility for female failure to the dominant consciousness when he declares: “I don’t construct my analyses in order to say, ‘This is the way things are, you are trapped.’ I say these things only insofar as I believe it enables us to transform them” (294–
5). Downing notes that Foucault attributes “agency and free will to individual consciousness, arguing that authentic freedom was a genuine possibility and that its assumption was a matter of responsibility for each citizen” (3). Foucault therefore links pivotal moments of individual agency and transformations to the repercussion of man’s choice. However, literary analyses in regard to the heroine’s dilemma depicted in nineteenth century fiction have been constructed on the idea of her being constrained within male boundaries and hence, trapped by overwhelming forces that seem outside her control. This chapter will show that the presence of these forces merely challenge the heroine in her resistance to permanence within patriarchal paradigms. It explores her freedom as a possibility being the catalyst of her fate. Foucault’s hypothesis suggests we think and analyse beyond the mentality: “This is the way things are” therefore “you are trapped”. This female sense of entrapment paves the way for transformations expressed in the transgression of boundaries as suggested in the naturalistic novel under study, which confirms Butler’s assertions that critics operate within certain confines:

any effort at empirical description takes place within a theoretically delimited sphere, and that empirical analysis in general cannot offer a persuasive explanation of its own constitution as a field of enquiry [and] that theory operates on the very level at which the object of inquiry is defined and delimited, and that there is no givenness of the object which is not given within the interpretative field – given to theory, as it were, as the condition of its own appearance and legibility. (274)

While it is assumed that literary analyses are somehow restricted due to a “theoretically delimited sphere” according to Butler, there is a need to think beyond the usual critics’ object of blame for the female fate. Other critics Abassi mentions like Bradley, Gray, Ramos, and Hochman link the female fate as suicide in this novel to the prevailing ideology and respond to it positively because for them it indicates
freedom from servitude within the patriarchal tradition. However, although a woman faces the challenges of the predominant culture that is still shaped by the past, the critics’ generalization that she is represented in the novel without free will is overstated, as I have argued in the earlier chapters. Chopin’s novel (along with the other novels under study) demonstrates that female fate does not depend solely on patriarchal conditions because it would suggest a woman is a marionette bereft of a mind of her own, promoting the denigration of her intelligence and femininity, in general. Instead, her fate is due to her choices or will for adaptability or destruction within but is admittedly a highly restrictive system. Her resistance to conformity and permanence signifies free will. Certain types of women who resist patriarchy are portrayed by Chopin in The Awakening, and Edna is just one type of woman that exists in her society. The novel presents strong women with agency and choices while responding to their various concerns in society. However, it does not present men as women’s only adversaries or competitors.

Parrish notes the public’s reactions to Chopin’s novel as “a story unfit for proper telling” because of its “vague distaste for the rebellious” and “unclean dispositions” (2). She adds that “public discomfort” with the heroine “reflected more than just displeasure with the unconventional and immoral aspects” of her personality (2-3) suggesting that literary critics and scholars like Parrish and Pollard continue to view Chopin’s heroine within patriarchal demands – that a woman exercise submission to her husband, total devotion to the household, and compliance to societal norms. The novel, however, presents different types of women that exist in society. It exposes one of the social realities of Chopin’s time that affect women in relation to marital servitude, psychological oppression, and male double standards. The readers of the novel are presented with an alternative type of woman who caters more to her natural self through individual expression. This woman is determined to effect
change in society’s expectations of gender roles and relations, a modern woman who resists confinement within patriarchal traditions.

**Female culture and transformations**

Showalter cites Carol Smith-Rosenberg’s understanding of women’s culture of the 1850s and 1860s where there is “veneration of motherhood”, “intense mother-daughter bonds”, and “intimate female friendships” (171). The strict adherence to the traditional “code of values” for women is expected and strengthened through “sermons, child-rearing manuals and sentimental fiction” (172). It is during these years that female writers of sentimental fiction are still uncomfortable in identifying themselves with the “figure” of the “artist”, the “genius,” or the “poet” disseminated by the predominant ideology (173). They feel excluded from male memberships like the “male club or circle of brothers”. Instead, the sentimentalist writers align with female organizations such as the “literary sorority” described as

a society of sisters whose motives were rather moral rather than aesthetic, whose ambitions were to teach and to influence rather than to create. Although their books sold by the millions, they were not taken seriously by male critics. (173)

The end of the civil war inspired women to aim for “higher education, the professions, and the political world” (Showalter 173). They were enticed to the “male worlds of art” and asserted themselves as “daughters of literary fathers as well as literary mothers” (173). They presented themselves as artists, and write about the “art of fiction” represented in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s 1897 essay, ‘Art for Truth’s Sake’ (Showalter 174). Domesticity was relegated to the background with priority given to their “literary ambitions” (174). Women who catered to their literary ambitions were challenged by what their predecessors called “selfishness”. Motherhood is now seldom the focus of their writing. Literary
ambitions require focus, mental exertion, and time, implying that domesticity is anathema to a woman’s literary aspirations. The female writers of this period hint that a woman can only focus on one thing at a time because “artistic fulfilment required the sacrifice of maternal drives, and maternal fulfilment meant giving up artistic ambitions” (174).

While thesentimentalist writers seek refuge in the company of other women writers, Chopin and other female writers of the 1890s have more independence because they move forward from the “female bonds and sanctuaries of the past” (Showalter 175). The 1890s female writers are “hostile to women’s culture, which they often saw as boring and restrictive” (175). They have acquired radical “attitudes towards female sexuality” (175). Showalter, however, clarifies that “not all New Women advocated female sexual emancipation” (175). Darwin’s revolutionary ideas may have influenced Chopin’s literary work because it has empowered her to create and portray a new woman who questions the status quo. It was in the 1890s (Chopin’s time) that the theories championed by Darwin (175) and applied by Zola et al were at their peak. Chopin wrote novels beyond the literary prescription of her period that showcased female protagonists marrying older men of means and remaining blissfully content in domesticity. Edna’s story equates to “Chopin’s literary awakening” (Showalter 170) when she deviates from the narrative formula of the period:

Both the author and the heroine seem to be oscillating between two worlds, caught between contradictory definitions of femininity and creativity, and seeking either to synthesize them or to go beyond them to an emancipated womanhood and an emancipated fiction. (170-171)

Showalter confirms that Chopin has a “need for independence and individuality in writing” which is shown in The Awakening when Reisz, the heroine’s friend, advises Edna that “the artist must possess
the courageous soul”. This is the “brave soul ... that dares and defies” (Chopin 71). The female protagonist’s resistance to confinement within patriarchal paradigms in The Awakening corresponds to Chopin’s literary desire to write stories “that go beyond female plots and feminine endings” (Showalter 171). The rejection of motherhood and domesticity reflected in her novel suggests that her heroine is identified beyond the image of the patriarchal female, as a representation of the modern woman who caters to her sexuality, passions, and imagination. Chopin’s literary work toys with the possibility of women escaping or resisting their subordinate position to be considered men’s equal in society.

**The heroine’s society and family**

Chopin’s heroine in The Awakening belongs to middle class society. Her name is Edna Pontellier. Married to a wealthy Creole, she enjoys the trappings of a privileged woman. The novel suggests that her society is traditionally a man’s world where a husband, for instance, engages in activities without his wife’s presence i.e. Mr Pontellier spending his evening in the men’s club in hotels or going out to dinner with his friends, even during a family vacation in the Grand Isle. The novel shows that Edna does not question the arrangement, an attitude that indicates her independence as a wife. She does not interfere in her husband’s activities because they suggest instances where she relishes her own space and time. For instance, when her husband goes on a long business trip, she would breathe a “genuine sigh of relief. A feeling that was unfamiliar but was delicious” for her (80). Showalter comments on the separate social activities of the couple:

Léonce is fully absorbed by the business, social, and sexual activities of the male sphere, the city, Carondelet Street, Klein’s Hotel at Grand Isle, where he gambles, and especially the New Orleans world of the clubs and red-light district. (185)
In Edna’s society, therefore, men are free to stay out late at night, and her spouse, Léonce, represents the typical nineteenth century husband in Chopin’s time:

For one thing, her husband expects her to assume all authority and management of the home and family. He doesn’t want to be bothered about it. When he makes the money he feels he has done his whole duty, and he leaves the rest to her. When he comes home, tired out, after a day’s work, he wants to rest, to read his paper, to think out some scheme in which he is interested. (Dix 129)

Edna’s society expects a husband to provide for the household, while he expects his wife to submit to him without question. Dix writes that “it is the theory of the perfectly unselfish woman that she must bear everything without complaint” (128), which means society expects the wife to regulate herself and live for her husband and family. He is the head of the family, and he expects his wife to fulfil her traditional roles in society i.e. devoting full time and attention to childrearing and domesticity. The novel suggests that Edna’s husband is a conventional Creole who treats her as his property. In his society, women are expected to show subservience to men. They are “objects” with a low social position in a predominant male culture:

The hegemonic institutions of nineteenth-century society required women to be objects in marriage and in motherhood, existing as vessels of maternity and sexuality, with little opportunity for individuality. (Gray 53)

Edna’s father is one of the traditional but powerful male figures in Chopin’s novel. He is a Presbyterian minister, and he thinks that Leonce is lenient in his treatment of Edna who has become assertive, inflexible, and unyielding to male authority. The novel shows that Edna’s father is a perfect example of the traditional male subject who obliges his wife to fulfil female gender roles, and yet, he cannot convince Edna to fulfil her familial duty to be present at her sister’s
wedding. Edna’s resistance to her father’s authority prompts him to tell Léonce to assert his influence over Edna as her husband:

You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Leonce, asserted the colonel. Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it. (79)

Chopin does not give explicit reasons for Edna’s refusal, but from Edna’s words, she finds attending a wedding “pretentious”. Léonce also admits that Edna says that “a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (73). One implication for this is that Edna is upset with social activities that require her to show expected manners as has happened when she decides to stop giving dinners at home for her friends. Her refusal to attend the wedding also signifies her non-acceptance of social activities with expected requirements. Her defiance of social conformity and tradition suggests she favours individual integrity. It may suggest her disappointment in marriage as an institution because of her experience with Léonce’s disposition (i.e. he treats her as if she is his property). The heroine’s defiance may also suggest Chopin’s criticism of the Church’s tradition (in the conservative Creole society) in relation to the institution of marriage that requires the fulfilment of vows despite the presence of inner discord and incompatibility, and the growing conflict between “Edna’s interests and desires and Léonce’s obsessions with the stock market, property, and his brokerage business” (Showalter 179). Edna’s attitude seems an expression of her sorrow because a wealthy man with business acumen and intelligence marries her, and he has no inkling how he can make her happy.

Edna therefore rejects the rigidity of family structure and the demands of society on women, in general. For Chopin, the perpetuation of outdated patriarchal hegemony that considers women subjects of their husbands is non-negotiable. Edna’s attitude tells women they are not properties of their husbands. Instead, they are
equal partners in marriage who have needs that require fulfilment. Edna wants to be productive as a person, and Chopin shows that her being a woman is not a hindrance in the author’s vision for the needed transformations in society. Her actions specify a woman’s need for self-fulfilment beyond what the social norms require of her. The novel depicts her as a female outsider in the Creole society questioning the role of a housewife dependent on the kindness of her husband. She wants to prove that she, too, can have the material freedom of men in society which is perhaps the reason she “resolves never again to belong to another than to herself” (Chopin 89) suggesting “self-ownership” that connotes “a woman’s right to have possession of her own fully realized human identity” (Gray 53).

The language of silence in marriage

Edna’s marriage to Léonce is compared to the image of noisy caged birds that cannot understand each other because they speak in a different language. Because Léonce’s perception of her is affected by social conventions, Edna uses silence as a form of communication in response to the “indescribable oppression” (Chopin 8) she feels in her marriage. Some feminist theorists consider all language as masculine, which suggests that Edna “has no language to express an authentic feminine expression”. Her silence suggests her non-conformism to traditions (Streater 410). According to Foucault, silence is “an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know” (3). Edna’s silence suggests the futility of intended expressions between husband and wife who cannot see eye to eye because they belong to two disparate worlds with distinct ideologies. Perhaps, she understands that any attempts at “heart to heart” dialogue will just be misunderstood, so she chooses to keep quiet which may be her unique expression of female power in
morship. Downing notes that Foucault too acknowledges silence to
denote power:

One of Foucault’s most striking and far-reaching points
regarding power and knowledge is the insight that power
operates according to and by means of secrecy and silence ... instead of by voicing its presences in loud and oppressive
interjections and orders. (vii)

The silence of Edna indicates power at work because she uses it as a
strategy for her eventual move towards autonomy from domesticity
and marriage. Her silence is a form of resistance to issues of
disempowerment within marriage.

Léonce’s authority is formed from his acquired views of
femininity in reference to a wife’s role in the household, and the novel
makes it clear through the couple’s verbal and non-verbal gestures
that this demand on Edna results in a relationship soiled with
seclusion and tension in communication:

This is an image of isolation, confinement, and lack of
communication. Edna experiences this in her marriage to a rich
Creole husband, and so do other women who spend their
summers with Madame Lebrun, the strong Creole woman who
runs the cottages in Grand Isle and is the mother of Edna’s
beloved Robert and Victor. (Clark 337)

Edna’s individuality is juxtaposed with the traditional
consciousness of Léonce, “a rather courteous husband so long as he
met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife” (Chopin 63). Edna
receives his anger only for her “absolute disregard of her duties” (63)
suggesting he is exacting about her domestic and social roles. Léonce
insists they have “to observe les covenances” (57) which means they
consider social conventions and proprieties. He keeps an eye on
scheduled social functions. Since Edna feels the discomfort of
“indescribable oppression” (8) in her marriage, she aligns with the
natural world because it is outside societal confines. Enden notes that “traditional dichotomies connect women with nature while men with culture” (30). There is some truth to Enden’s statement because Edna’s awareness of being in harmony with nature suggests for her a sanctuary and inner happiness:

There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with sunlight, the color, the odors the luxuriant warmth of some perfect southern day ...

Modern woman versus traditional woman

Chopin’s novel acknowledges disparate images of women. For instance, it shows one woman’s awareness that is still tied to the past, while the other woman is more at ease with change. The heroine’s society portrays images of traditional married women who are comfortable with their own men, the Creoles. These are women who are not side-tracked by romantic thoughts with other Creole men who entertain them when their husbands are elsewhere. For instance, Edna’s friend, Adele, knows how to handle Robert’s expressions of intimacies because in their Creole society, he is one of those who entertain guests-wives, as a son of the owner of the vacation site in Grand Isle. Thus, when Léonce goes to work while the family is vacationing in Grand Isle, Edna is entertained by Robert although she thinks: “I wonder if Léonce will be uneasy!” She welcomes Léonce’s business trips for days or when he is not home in the evenings. She confides: “What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn’t have anything to say to each other” (Chopin 76). These thoughts project the clash between modernity and tradition which reflects her marriage - she represents modernity as suggested by Clark (336) while her husband symbolizes tradition. Her comment on the difference between the summer in Grand Isle from other summers also suggests the tension between her two selves: “She could only realize that she
herself – her present self – was in some way different from the other self” (45), suggesting a “present self” that is more alive and natural than the “other self”. This means too that there is a clash between Edna’s self that entertains individuality and the self tied to social conventions.

The novel comments on Edna’s awakened state: “That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect” (45). Adele cautions Robert: “She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously” (23). The Creole society therefore is concerned with Edna’s behaviour because she has all the indications of a liberated woman as an American descendant of the Anglo Saxon race. Adele’s warning to Robert also implies that Edna may be tempted to submit to her erotic impulses due to her openness for new experiences and progressive nature. From her society’s perspective, Edna is unfamiliar with the Creole code of conduct, the reason Adele gets worried because Edna might misread Robert’s engaging approach with the guest-wives in Grand Isle.

To juxtapose the modern Edna from the traditional woman, Chopin introduces the heroine’s friend, Adele, a woman devoted to her husband and children. However, her situation suggests she does not exactly lament her traditional role of wife and mother in society because she blends well with the system for her own comfort and advantage. For instance, she listens to her husband, but then she also makes her point after he speaks. Clark explains that Adele earns the respect of her society because of her dedication to her family (338). She is committed to social roles. Her experience is a case of domestic acceptance and comforts within her marriage and family. She is therefore the patriarchal image of a “mother-woman”. Margraf comments that she “lives the life of maternal self-sacrifice” inspired
by the Bible (99). However, despite the society’s perception of her as a woman-wife who fulfils the roles expected of her, she represents a different form of female resistance within the bounds of patriarchal constructs (Streater 408). Streater argues that although Adele is considered by literary critics as a traditional wife who embraces the feminine gender role in a dominant male society, she can also be seen as the embodiment of “home-based feminism”. Adele uses the status quo consciousness to her advantage while Edna calls for its rejection (408) when she employs a quadroon to take care of her children so that she can indulge in creative pursuits. Thus, within the confines of domesticity, Adele is perceived as “a great performer, overdoing her mother role while at the same time allowing glimpses of her true self to emerge from that role, and that self is confident, powerful, and sexual” (Streater 408).

Adele and Edna’s verbal interactions with their husbands differ in style. While Edna uses silence to show female power, Adele listens to her husband constantly and completes his sentences suggesting “domestic compatibility and familiarity” (Streater 410) and the “ability to usurp and claim patriarchal language as her own” (411). The “exchange also signifies that in the home sphere, Adele is an equal, perhaps even dominant, partner in marriage” (Streater 410). Streater regards Adele’s “strong feminist voice at home realistic, reassuring, and reaffirming” (411). One example Streater presents regarding Adele’s “strong feminist voice” is when Edna lives separately from her husband and at the same time allows Alcee Arobin to her house. Adele’s husband instructs her to warn Edna about the possibility of tarnishing her name due to society’s speculations. The solution is to invite a woman to live with her to counter possible assumptions. An obedient wife, Adele cautions Edna, but she takes back her advice: “and don’t mind what I said about Arobin, or having someone stay with you” (Chopin 106). Streater hints that the act of Adele disregarding her husband’s explicit instructions implies she ignores
when necessary the male rule, generally the same as society’s norms, in support for and understanding of a friend’s preferences (411). While literary critics labelled Adele as a patriarchal woman subservient to her husband, Streater rightly favours Adele’s solution in addressing female tension within the status quo because she aligns with a domesticity where feminine expression is life-affirming:

With Adele, Chopin gives us a vision of feminism that not only addresses patriarchal reality, but addresses women’s existence in that reality, allowing for an accessible and life-affirming form of feminism. (415-416)

Edna, on the other hand, is considered strong-willed because she has a mind of her own, an image of female individuality. Chopin’s novel differentiates her role as a woman from the Creole women like Adele by stating that Edna is “not a mother-woman” (10) because she lacks “maternal feeling” (Glendenning 43). Chopin describes the mother-woman in her Creole society: "They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (10).

The extreme image of female

The introduction of Reisz, Edna’s friend, shows that in the Creole society, it is possible for a radical type of woman to exist and still be acknowledged for her individualism. Reisz is the other image of female power although she represents an extreme version of Edna. Three types of women therefore exist in the upper echelons of nineteenth century society: the non-traditional married woman represented by Edna, the traditional married woman represented by Adele, and the radical unmarried woman represented by Reisz. Chopin describes Reisz as “a little disagreeable woman” who is “no longer young” (28). She “quarrels with almost everyone” because she
has “a disposition that tramples upon the rights of others” (28). Her being “self-assertive” however, is appealing to Edna because it suggests she sees herself in her, and she understands how Reisz perceives herself and others. Clark comments that Reisz “is recognized as an artist, which allows her to indulge in small eccentricities. The latter is accepted in social gatherings only to play music” (339). Reisz plays the piano, and she is portrayed as the type of woman who resists acquiescence in the predominant male ideals. For instance, she reverses the idea of a woman who is expected to marry when she reaches a certain age. Reisz remains single, but she is dedicated to her career as an artist. The emergent non-traditional wife, Edna, admires Reisz’s freedom as unmarried woman. Both women use their free will to address their specific concerns. Reisz conceives the role of a woman-artist as something different from the patriarchal woman, but nevertheless one that is accepted in this society. The novel suggests that to succeed in this society, a woman need not abide by the conventional image of femininity. She does not have to marry and have a family because social acceptance is not determined by the expected paradigms of womanhood. Her example suggests that resistance against conformity with tradition does not always lead to female failure.

Reisz’s perception of Edna is that she is not a “devoted homemaker, but rather an independent artist” (Clark 338). Reisz’s view of Edna as an artist indicates she cannot function devotedly as a mother, which implies that a woman has to choose between being a devoted mother or a consummate artist. She cannot be good at both. Her time, attention, and efforts will be divided between the two. Edna’s interest in Reisz suggests she is fascinated by her sense of independence although Edna does not want to be a spinster. Reisz’s choice to remain single indicates perhaps her rejection of marriage as an institution. Her role is that of Edna’s confidante and refuge in connection with questions of the heart. Reisz advises her that in order
to succeed as an artist, she “must possess the courageous soul” which means that she must have a “the soul that dares and defies” (71). Edna’s pursuit of the arts includes a focus on her paintings to suggest that a woman can also contribute to creative activities in society. Despite a woman’s expected role as wife and mother, Edna shows that a woman is capable of engaging in fulfilling projects just like the men in her society. From Edna’s standpoint, both men and women are on equal footing with regard to obtaining financial freedom or pursuing individual interests despite gender role expectations. The female characters’ various forms of resistance therefore show that although they live within the dictates of patriarchy, they can display signs of female empowerment and succeed. How they treat these “dictates” depends on how determined they are in exercising free will and using their ingenuity.

Radicalism and the woman-mother

Edna’s radicalism is highlighted in the novel when she declares boldly: “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 53). Her refusal to sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone (126) implies that her individuality and personal integrity will not be sacrificed in favour of society’s outlook on gender roles. Her assertion though recognizes motherhood as an important aspect of a woman’s life. Her assertion also suggests she is a modern woman set to cultivate other interests for self-fulfilment because she observes that within the Creole society, women have no other interests apart from their families.

Edna’s modern outlook includes her radical ideas about childrearing. Her children are important to her, but her assertions suggest she does not have to adore them because they are in good hands with a quadroon. This approach towards childrearing is unusual
in her society. She does not believe in the idea of full-time mothering. The family quadroon attends to the children most of the time. Her privileged status in society allows her to employ a sitter. She is not negligent in her role as a mother because she demonstrates her love towards her children. An example would be when she attends to his son one night while he goes to sleep: “Edna took him in her arms, and seating herself in the rocker, began to coddle and caress him, calling him all manner of tender names, soothing him to sleep” (Chopin 44). She would also tell the children bedtime stories after sending the quadroon away for supper and “told her she need not return” (48).

Then she sat and told the children a story. Instead of soothing it excited them, and added to their wakefulness. She left them in heated argument, speculating about the conclusion of the tale which their mother promised to finish the following night. (48)

The novel suggests that because of Edna’s interest in painting, she cannot just offer all her time to her children. She cannot be a full-time mother as indicated by the service of a quadroon in her household. Edna’s modern approach to childrearing relates to the observations of Dorothy Dix about child-rearing which is one of the leading oppressors of women (132) in the nineteenth century. She explains that mothers sacrifice exceptionally for the well-being of their children who get “unreasonable” at times because they require ample time from them. Dix hints that children can be a source of household tension because even if sitters are available, they still need their mothers’ physical presence so that they fall asleep or feel comforted. Mothers are sometimes obliged to leave their house-guests in the living area just so they can attend to their children who crave attention (132). Dix elaborates on the role of mothers who are willing victims of their children’s self-centeredness:
In her desire to be a good mother, and to do everything possible for her child’s welfare, the average mother permits herself to be made martyr before she realizes it. It doesn’t take a baby but three days to develop all the amiable traits and the despotic power of Nero and a Caligula, and there are plenty of women who never saw a single breath of freedom after their first child is born. They may have the best nurses, but angel Freddy howls like a Commanche unless his mother sits by his side and holds his hand until he goes to sleep, or darling Mary won’t let the nurse undress her, and so no matter how interesting the conversation downstairs, or how important the guests, the poor mother has to leave it all, and spend her evening in solitary confinement in a dark room to gratify the whims of a selfish and unreasonable creature.

Edna challenges the dominant idea of “woman” as defined by the role of “mother”. She finds it unnecessary to cater to her children’s every whim that is why she employs a quadroon. Edna declares “that she would never sacrifice herself for her children” (126). It does not mean she refuses parenting tasks. It suggests she has time for other things that call for female creativity. In other words, Edna is a wife and mother, but she does not highlight these expected feminine roles because she also considers the creative aspect of her personality for individual expression and self-fulfilment.

Edna’s unusual childrearing is contrasted to Adele’s traditional childrearing. When she delivers a baby, Adele advises Edna to consider her children: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (122). As a full-time mother, Adele’s reminder implies that Edna is not known for fulfilling her maternal duties religiously. Clark compares Adele to a caged bird that “does not see beyond her limits and is always in the same environment” (337). Adele’s situation is juxtaposed to Edna’s position who explores the possibilities outside of her cage:

Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, starts to take walks and distance herself from her surroundings. This freedom of body movement allows her to meet different people and to alert her
senses to new experiences, such as swimming and being in solitary contact with nature to think about her life. (Clark 337)

Adele’s statement endorses the expected role of wife-mothers, which is to focus on their children and stay devoted to their husbands. Society’s perception of Adele is that she is an ideal mother because of her dedication to her family. She is an example of a traditional wife content with her role as house companion. On the other hand, Edna is an example of non-traditional wife who lives not just for her children, but also values her freedom and personal integrity. She represents a woman who does not want her husband or children to possess her. She disapproves of her husband treating her as if she were his possession, and in the process, she rejects social conformity in favour of individuality. Chopin’s novel therefore portrays Adele to represent accustomed standards, and Edna to represent new standards.

Edna’s modern outlook includes her discussion of “the eternal rights of women” (Chopin 73) according to Leonce who confides to Dr Mandelet his wife’s unexpected change: “She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown overall her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street card, getting in after dark” (73). Dr Mandelet explains that women are “highly organized” organisms, resonating with Darwin’s theory of natural selection. The doctor adds that as organisms, women are “peculiar and delicate” as well as “sensitive and highly organized” (74). This statement suggests that nineteenth century’s society’s perception of women is geared towards the heart to recall Cixous’s binary language of oppositions in the hierarchical social structure. Edna’s modern outlook creates a concern to her husband and Dr Mandelet because it suggests they exert more effort to require a woman to conform to their expected image of “female”. Edna’s symbol as a modern woman reflects Chopin’s criticisms of established institutions such as the Catholic Church as Margraf (24) observes:
When the author refers to Christianity, she either portrays it as one of the institutions of civilization from whose moral code Edna seeks to liberate herself (Ch. 7, 13) or simply ridicules the outdated customs of Catholicism (Ch. 15).

Despite the “moral code” that Edna strives to release herself from, the novel portrays her as having experienced religion at one point in her life: “...during one point of my life religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was twelve and until - - why, I suppose until now, though I never thought much about it – just driven along by habit” (19). This statement suggests that her knowledge of religion is something inherited through tradition because her father is a Presbyterian minister, and she acknowledges that she does not think of religion often. For her, religion is just an experience and not something that is rooted in her consciousness, which implies that for Edna, spirituality must be spontaneous (i.e. felt within) and not simply enforced by the environment or society’s predominant ideology. Her reservations about her observations on religion confirm her preference for the inner life: “Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself” (16). As a child, therefore, Edna has already shown traces of individuality because she seems to favour her inner-spiritual life of detachment over the outside reality.

**Radicalism and the unattached woman**

The radical view pertaining to gender roles and relations is also evident in Reisz who lives alone and remains unmarried bereft of children in old age. Her kind of female resistance suggests she knows her position in society. For instance, her antagonism to society’s constraints has not deterred her from her assumption of the role as a successful artist. She enjoys society’s acceptance of her despite her individualism and difference. This means she is able to “modify” the identity she assumes in society, and she takes an active role in the continuance of her creative pursuits and transcendence of gender role
expectations. She has risen above these expectations by assuming an identity she desires for herself. Her “self-ownership” enables her to realize her identity as artist. “Self-ownership connoted a woman’s right to have possession of her own fully realized human identity” (Gray 53). As a result, Reisz becomes herself – free from the demands of society on women. She projects will power for independence or self-determination:

By taking control of the very means of representing or determining their social selves in a society that would otherwise determine or represent them, strong, dedicated women – like those in other marginalized groups – have overcome many of the social restrictions they faced (and in many cases, continue to face). (Ramos 148)

Ramos, by contrast, suggests that Edna refuses to assume any of the social roles in society. However, the novel suggests that she refuses to accept these roles because she questions the idea of female subjugation to men. Like Reisz, she is an artist, and she dislikes being relegated only to the household. According to the traditional view, a woman’s education must be focused on the family. Edna silently disagrees with this rule. She does not want to be compared to a caged bird where her body is restricted from movement to imply an absence of “opportunity for individuality” (Gray 53).

**Female sexuality and nature**

In depicting female empowerment through sexual questing, Chopin uses personification to highlight the impact of nature on Edna’s emotional state for Robert: “The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (16). In an early response to the novel, Pollard critiques Chopin’s representation of a married woman with her implausible awakening:
It was Robert who awoke her. But when he went away, it was another who continued the arousal. Do you think Edna cared whether it was Robert or Arobin? Not a bit. Arobin’s kiss upon her hand acted like a narcotic, causing her to sleep “a languorous sleep, interwoven with vanishing dreams.” You see, she was something of a quick-change, sleep-artist: first she slept; a look at Robert awakened her; Arobin’s kiss sent her off into dreamland again; a versatile somnambulist, this. Yet she must have been embarrassing; you could never have known just when you had her in a trance or out of it. (161)

Pollard points to Edna’s sexual awakening. His criticism suggests annoyance and displeasure because Edna is a married woman, whereas, as Foucault writes about the Victorian female sexuality, “proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitised one’s speech” (3) because a wife is expected by tradition to assume her feminine role. Victorian sexuality suggests that a woman deny her passions because she is subject to her husband who expects her devotion to the household. The resistance of Edna therefore is Chopin’s reaction to the Victorian bourgeoisie’s perception of sexuality which according to Foucault “was carefully confined” and “moved in the home” where the “conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction” (3). The “awakening” of Edna, however, is not limited to sexual freedom as a result of her unhappy relationship with Léonce. Her awakening is also in reference to her need for domestic and economic independence. As a woman with intelligence and privileged background, the novel suggests that Edna is not cut out for home life alone. The creative aspect in her seeks release from the ennui of domesticity.

Edna’s sexual quest is not explicitly condemned by her Creole society, and in this instance, the novel shows that perhaps femininity may be constructed beyond the patriarchal image of a woman. This means that because a woman has desires, she, too, can act on them
just like the men in her society. Writing in 2011, Recep, however, criticizes Edna’s sexual exploration:

Is it ‘awakening’ or being schizophrenic when a married woman with two children cannot control her “id” by her “ego”, and lusts for a young man’s love; and while longing for that love, upon being rejected, she cannot avoid having a liaison with another man for whom she doesn’t even feel anything sentimental? (416)

To explain the behaviour of a woman who submits to her desires, Recep discusses Freud’s model of the psyche which consists of the id, ego, and superego. She explains that the id is the “impulsive aspect of the person” which “occurs from birth to age two” and Freud calls it the pleasure drive (Recep 416). The ego appears at age two to five. It “deals with reality by balancing out the impulses coming from the id”. The superego, on the other hand occurs at age five along with moral principles. This deals with “knowing between right and wrong” (416). Freud’s theory suggests that “If the ego is not strong enough to balance out the demands of the id and superego, abnormality occurs” (Recep 416). Despite claims that Chopin’s heroine cannot be considered a “proto-feminist character” (Recep 417), Edna is portrayed to have exercised her aspirations for female autonomy from tradition. The nineteenth century social culture regards her sexual assertions as radical because tradition considers women without sexual desires. The novel hints though that both men and women have sexual needs that require fulfilment.

The feminist archetype

Although she does not belong to a feminist group, Edna’s sentiments and actions point to the right of women for equal opportunity with men. She is unwavering in her desire for financial freedom. She wants to live self-reliantly through her “sketches”, substantial winnings from the horse race, and “mother’s estate” (88).
Her decision to leave the family “mansion” (109) in Esplanade Street in order to live alone in a four bedroom “pigeon house” (95) demonstrates her courage and desire for “independence” as she resolves to belong to herself alone and not to her family or society (89). Edna’s actions imply these questions: Why should childrearing be the territory only for woman? Why does society expect women alone to be responsible for child rearing? What about a woman’s right to pursue personal interests? What about a woman’s right for self-fulfilment or self-reliance? Edna may not be a member of a feminist group that advocates equal opportunity, right to property, education, etc., but she represents the female voice for equal opportunity in all dimensions – personal, family, social, economic and political as she concerns herself with the “eternal rights of women” (73). She challenges the psychological oppression and other forms of disadvantages married women experience in her own families. Edna is therefore the archetype of a feminist image with her quest for equality between genders for a sense of achievement in society.

Clark elaborates on Edna’s sentiments: “She does not accept patriarchal stereotype that try to fix her into a determined essence, so she fights the physical and psychological oppression she has internalized to discipline herself” (346). A woman is free only if she retains control and secures her right over her body and mind, suggests Clark, who advises “that the first step of a dependent housewife towards liberation is to be in possession of her body and mind” (335). She applies “Fry’s theory of oppression in order to discuss the systematic nature of oppression, its internalization according to Sandra Lee Bartky, and the modernization of power, as expounded by Foucault” (336). She notes the “drastic resolution taken by the strong wife who belongs only to herself, as the New Woman who is born out of this text” (336). Chopin’s novel presents female power through the heroine who wrestles with various tensions: her passions, her inner conflicts, and her response towards
society. Her youth and passions are a reflection of the reality about young, independent-minded women.

The novel suggests that a woman’s innermost sentiments, individuality, and spirituality are to be valued more than her physical relation with her family and society as shown by Edna. Edna’s spirituality is in relation to her quest for love and justice in relationships and in a society free from prejudices where she is accepted as she is. Her physical-material self is actually fulfilled by her “husband’s bounty” (88), but she abandons her “allegiance” (88) to him because of her desire for individuality and spirituality. She feels her spirituality has deepened when she lives alone in the “pigeon house” (104): “There was with her a feeling of having descended in a social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual” (104). Even when she dines lavishly with her guests the night before she leaves her mansion, this longing for something more, for a sense of the spiritual in her, is portrayed in the novel when Edna senses the inner vacuum in the midst of her guests: “There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of unattainable” (98). Margraf also suggests that the heroine’s spirituality is awakened in the Grand Isle (99) when she is “beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin 16).

The novel’s initial publication was generally condemned by critics because it dwells on the question of female sexuality and celebrates non-conformism and individuality. However, Chopin’s novel was rediscovered in the 1960’s by “feminist scholars and theorists” who consider the heroine “a prototype of feminism” (Recep 413). Recep, however, argues that Edna’s actions as a protagonist are far from advocating “women’s freedom”: 
The women’s rights movement of the second half of the 19th century is known to be the first wave of feminism that mainly struggled for equality in property rights and for women’s suffrage, i.e., women’s right to vote. Considering the characteristics of this first wave of feminist struggles for women’s rights and Chopin’s protagonist Edna’s behaviours, it is difficult to say that Edna longs for women’s freedom and that she should be regarded as a prototype for feminists. (414)

Critics point to Edna’s challenging marriage as an institution, sexual desires, absolute freedom and rebellion from the social expectations of women indicate feminist perspectives (Recep 414). However, the concept of feminism is “a liberation’s struggle against patriarchy. But this struggle is exerted to construct equality of both men and women in social, economic, and political spheres” (415). Feminism, however, “is not regarded as a luxury of fulfilling one’s all intrinsic desires, be it emotional or sexual” (415). Feminism promotes equality between men and women as regards social, economic, and political spaces. It is not a rejection of social institutions such as marriage, family, and society in favour of one’s emotions and sexual desires with men other than a woman’s husband, explains Recep. However, the novel suggests that Edna’s modern outlook indicates self-reliance and emancipation from patriarchal stereotypes. For instance, Edna’s leaving her husband’s house and securing a smaller house for herself indicate she exercises her right to property she can call her own. Her radicalism emerges with her self-reliance to show that women are capable of existence outside the domain of their husbands.

Hooks regards feminism as “a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression” (cited in Recep 23). Recep suggests that feminism is therefore “not as a movement to dismantle and dismiss the social institutions such as motherhood and marriage”. It is liberation against the patriarchal system that promotes “sexism and sexist oppression”. She argues that feminism is not about dismantling motherhood and
the institutions of marriage and social structures such as the family, stating:

Chopin’s protagonist Edna Pontellier does not employ any exertions in pursuit of women’s rights. She rather makes efforts to fulfil her amoral desires. She is enthusiastic to push away all her matrimonial, familial and societal bonds, (be it the father, the husband, the children or social mores), for the sake of her impulsive feelings. (415)

In Léonce’s words, however, Edna promotes the “eternal rights of women” (73) in her attempts for equal status with men and recognition of her rights as female. The novel exposes middle class society where dysfunctional families are a reality. It portrays female natural desires, and the tension between social pressure and self-fulfilment. The novel offers a type of woman who resists stagnation and patriarchal stereotypes in order to live a life of freedom as the heroine’s solution to an unhappy marriage. Recep claims that Edna “does not employ exertions in pursuit of women’s rights”. However, one of the basic rights of a woman is to pursue individual interests for self-development. Edna pursues her art and rebels against expectations that thrust women to focus their time totally on the family, motherhood and childrearing tasks. Her radical actions suggest she has an inner resolve to effect the needed change in her society by resisting the psychological oppression experienced by married women Emma refers to as “indescribable oppression” (8).

In discussing The Awakening, Clark cites Bartky’s three types of psychological oppression of women: “stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification” (339). Women are constrained for subordinate roles because they have internalized their oppression psychologically as has happened to people who have been colonized (339). Similarly, the Creole women represented, for instance, by Adele have accepted the male culture making them ”colonized” by the prevailing consciousness. This is the reason Adele partially submits to
her husband and to her role as a woman-mother. She has internalised the psychological oppression of patriarchal “stereotyping and cultural domination” so that she becomes contented in her semi-subservience perhaps because she is an obedient wife who reads the Bible. Her partial subservience suggests, however, that she is not totally convinced of her role as wife and mother. Clark explains that when patriarchy stereotypes women, “their bodies are restrained and made to fit the stereotype of the real woman or woman-monster” (339). One example would be when Edna is obliged to smile before her guests at dinner even if she feels upset. Clark posits that freedom from all kinds of oppression is realized through the woman’s complete “possession of her body and mind” (335), and the novel suggests that Edna resolves to take control of herself through her radicalism. She is therefore the epitome of everything not Creole because she is a symbol of a new woman with a mind of her own. She resists male authority when she moves out of the family house to declare her independence and free will. The portrayal of Edna as a liberated heroine, however, deviates from the narrative standard formula of Chopin’s era where novelists depict women who are passionless or devoid of sexual desires as reflected particularly in the literature that precedes naturalism and continues in the nineteenth century. Showalter comments on female sexual indifference: “A few radical feminists had always maintained that women’s sexual apathy was not an innately feminine attribute but rather the result of prudery and repression” (175) in a male-centred society.

Edna’s acquisition of a new house she calls “pigeon house” (102) is symbolic because it implies she is like a bird that is free and away from others’ restrictions. Edna’s independence is considered a blow to the male ego, and her husband writes her a letter to reconsider her decision in order to save appearances. His Creole society considers men responsible for the family image. Husbands encourage their wives to submit to them for the preservation of the
patriarchal family structure. Léonce suggests they go overseas (104) for a vacation perhaps as a reconciliatory offering while their mansion undergoes renovation. He does not want his name tarnished as a result of the collapse of his marriage. However, Edna seems determined to persist with her decision to realize the freedom she longs. Her reply to him suggests “friendly evasiveness – not with any fixed design to mislead him, only because all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference” (115).

The emphasis on domestic education for women is implied as the norm in nineteenth century society because it has been encouraged by the prevailing mode of consciousness. The family remains the female focus of achievement as it has become synonymous with “a woman’s place” where her success as a person is continually aligned. Clark confirms:

It seems that the family unit became the measure of success, as well as the center of production and reproduction of the new values for women. Thus, women’s education was focused on domesticity. (343)

However, the novel is a reversal of this mode of consciousness with the connotations on female resistance to domesticity in favour of her search for individuality and rights within marriage. The idea of the passionless woman tailored for home life has been transformed in The Awakening with its attempt to debunk this outmoded image of woman. And the answer is Chopin’s novel when it projects the idea that a woman can explore worlds other than domesticity. Household servitude resonates with a caged bird, and citing Wollstonecraft, Clark says: “This metaphor of the caged bird partly alludes to women’s entrapment in marriage or remarriage, a social constraint which Edna Pontellier is forced to confront after her awakening” (336). A caged bird functions as an ornament analogous to a woman confined to domesticity. A caged bird is passive, limited, and decorative just like
a woman restrained to a man’s house. And domesticity is not the only option for women. Edna’s independence from Léonce’s house represents agency and free will. It shows she is not a property subject to his authority because she is his significant Other with human rights. Both man and woman therefore have to learn more about how to penetrate into the male and female sensibilities for them to accept and understand each other much better for family solidarity and wellbeing of society, in general.

Conclusion

*The Awakening* presents a woman in pursuit of equal opportunities with men. In a society where women are relegated to the household, she stands out in her search for self-fulfilment. These aspirations are not sufficiently recognized by critics like Recep. Her story suggests equality for both sexes which is demonstrated when she pursues her art and lives in a smaller house alone. Doing so allows her to experience relief from her husband’s psychological oppression, freedom of expression, and the right to property. Although she has the material comforts her husband provides for her, there are other things of equal importance for her such as her need to be true to herself and her individualism because her marriage has become a sham as it is fraught with hypocrisy and unhappiness. She transforms from a woman silenced by patriarchal consciousness with space and movement confinements to someone who embraces personal integrity and clamours for a sense of balance between life’s external and inner or spiritual spheres. She is no longer a woman who bows down easily to society’s constructs of female. She is a modern woman who rethinks society’s stereotyping of woman and her roles, and resists the excessive adulation of women-mothers towards their husbands and children. Overall, she resists society’s dominant expectations of the female that are anathema to creative expressions, individual freedom, and gender equality. And she eludes their
confinements because they inherit still the male tradition that upholds a woman’s low position. Her defiance against social stereotypes represents the triumph of female will, individual expression, and spirituality defined by Waaijman as a human dimension marked by courage, energy, and detachment (59).
CHAPTER 7

SUICIDE AND THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST

Introduction

As discussed in the earlier chapters, women in naturalistic prose are often construed as victims in literary criticism because of the way they are trapped in their societies, but they can also be perceived as responsible for their own fates through their imagination and independence and the exercise of their will. Society confines them, but they do not just give in. They resist in their desire to transcend the situation they want changed. However, there is something haunting in the naturalistic woman’s fate. Her resistance usually concludes in the participation of her own destruction through suicide. This resistance to societal confinement is supposed to alter the circumstances she wants transformed, but she acts contrary to her well-being making her fate tragic. This tragic act is therefore in conflict with her continuity. “It shows how individuals can act against their own interests and the consequences of their actions may deviate disastrously from what they hoped for” (Felski 333). Their defiance reflects a woman’s desire for change in the status quo that is misdirected in a form of transgression. This status quo relates to the dilemma in the female experience generated by the tension between self-fulfilment and confinement to subjugation as a woman, wife, and mother. This tension often results in transgression, indicating their resistance to the repressive female condition within the status quo, and a sign of female agency and human will. Felski notes:

Unable to aspire to public achievement and action, women find in erotic transgression a potent vehicle of refusal and defiance. Sexuality is burdened with redemptive meaning and impossible expectation. It offers a promise of sensual and spiritual transcendence; it becomes both conduit and compensation for frustrated emotion and fury at social restraint. (330)
The suicide of the woman in the naturalistic novel haunts the imagination because of its contradictory connotations in literary criticism. These contradictory connotations relate to suicide as either a liberation from confinement to the status quo and therefore a triumph of the will, or a reflection of resignation to the idea of the hopelessness of their circumstances in that no matter what they do, they will remain subject to the conventions established in a patriarchal society. In this chapter, I will discuss the representation of female suicide as either accidental or deliberate acts and examine the concept of free will in response to the naturalistic notions of determinism. I should like to read the fate of the female characters in the light of the suggestions in the novels of a spiritual dimension transcending the material circumstances in which the heroines find themselves, suggestions that a woman’s focus on the purely physical human aspect is futile unless it is tempered with the non-physical human dimension via the nourishment of the soul. This idea suggests that a woman is more than her physical self, an idea that is also applicable to the other characters the female protagonist has links with.

All four female protagonists suffer untimely deaths suggesting a rejection of their physical selves because they are in a society that does not accommodate the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional needs of women. However, there are marked differences in the execution of their “suicide” because they are analysed as either accidental or deliberate which makes the suicide ambiguous and controversial. Maggie drowns in the river, Lily overdoses on drugs, Edna sinks in the sea, and Emma swallows arsenic. Their ending intrigues the mind because of its inexplicitness. This is perhaps the reason Higonnet claims that female suicide, which has become a “cultural obsession” in the “nineteenth century”, is “more difficult to read than men’s because women’s autonomy is always in question and their intentions are opaque” (103). The novels show that while the first three suicide
acts are without doubt ambiguous, the death of Emma disturbs our thinking as well because her motivations for the suicide are vague. Only her death can be stated as explicit suicide although contingent forces that lead her to the act play an important role in its realisation. This means that although it is clear suicide for Emma, it is not exactly a deliberate act because it is done hastily and therefore, unplanned.

**Maggie’s Suicide**

Among the four protagonists, the conclusion of Crane’s *Maggie* is the most controversial because her death can be construed as either murder or suicide. Literary critics like Dowling and Pizer disagree on this question. For Dowling, Maggie is murdered because the “huge fat man” who follows Maggie “stands with her at the water’s edge”, and he quotes Crane’s words: “varied sounds of life...died away in silence” (53). Dowling argues that the fat man is responsible for Maggie’s death. He strengthens his argument by citing Bowers who explains that “the possibility of murder is as present as that of suicide, given the degeneracy of the man in Crane’s description” (52). Dowling notes the change of the pronoun “her” (1893 edition) to “them” in “The structures seemed to have eyes that looked over them, beyond them, at other things” (Crane 131). This statement makes Dowling conclude that maybe “Stephen Crane insinuated the fat man back into his story after all” (48) implying that Maggie’s death is a homicide case. If Maggie is murdered, her fate is construed as her being a victim of the environment which points to female agency and responsibility as non-existent in *Maggie*. However, Pizer argues that Maggie’s case is an act of suicide. To prove his point, he presents historical accounts published in 1872, 1878, 1890, and 1894 about real life prostitutes who usually commit suicide “in the East River” (39). He explains that the theme of suicide in the novel has historical reference to young women who drown themselves (40). Pizer suggests therefore that the interplay of forces in Maggie’s
environment propels her to commit suicide. This environment points to her family and society that serve as catalysts for her physical misery and eventual death. Pizer explains that the meaning of the appearance of the fat man near the river with Maggie “represents a stage in her decline...the stage of her absolute degradation” and concludes that the fat man is “a harbinger, not the agent, of Maggie’s death” (Dowling and Pizer 42). If Maggie’s death is suicide, it can be regarded as an act of freedom. It implies that there is responsibility involved because she is an active participant in her tragic fate.

Pizer’s account is convincing on his claim of the suicide, but my own interpretation of Maggie’s suicide has something to do with her empty existence on the Bowery slums, indicating a beleaguered female soul and dampened resolve for continuity. While she gives importance to her physical self in her interactions with society, the suicide is a symbol of her eventual rejection of the physical human dimension due to her harsh experience in the Bowery. Her sense of self with a soul is adversely affected to suggest a decline of spirituality. Maria de Souza expresses the importance of individuals attending to their intellectual, spiritual, and emotional needs so that a sense of connectedness exists between the self and “one’s immediate community” (276). She argues that this connectedness contributes to lifelong learning and when an individual feels disconnected, his or her accumulated lifelong learning experiences are hindered. Maggie’s courage and energy have vanished after her social ostracism, and her continued solitary existence seems adversely affected in the Bowery.

As an unmarried woman, Maggie’s hopes are actually simple. She longs to be saved from an impoverished family. However, her inner goodness is associated with a complete lack of self-assertion. Gandal claims that “she does not have the toughness, the anger, or the habits of self-defense to triumph, psychologically, over her ostracism” (781). So, she becomes a pariah devoid of meaningful
relations after her tenement degradation. She exists for herself. Her support system for guaranteed slum existence is cut off as a result of her sexual transgression. No one cares for her, and she is portrayed as having no sense of direction in life due to society’s condemnation. She longs for social acceptance from her mother, brother, and the tenement society as a whole, but they reject her, and she does not know how to defend herself from the descent of her soul into deeper and deeper emptiness because it is not shielded from society’s attacks. She does not know how to fight back for her own welfare or even assert herself from her family’s accusations because as discussed in chapter 3, she merely keeps quiet, a manifestation of her choice. It is possible to see a connection between her attitude and the spirituality of Christ who remains quiet from the accusations and attacks hurled at Him by the Pharisees and Sadducees, ironically the religious voice of His time. Similarly, Maggie is attacked by her family and Bowery society, a symbol of tenement morality.

Crane depicts the Bowery slums as a haven for angry, hostile, and physically violent inhabitants like Maggie’s brother and parents. However, Maggie’s behaviour is surprisingly unaffected by her surroundings. And although Maggie’s harsh environment has a role in her early death, her will suggests the presence of individual responsibility, illustrated by her last night on the streets. In the chapter where Maggie appears last, she strides nonstop from one block to another (after a number of insults and rejections from men) until she reaches the river and drowns. The suicide act seems calculated on her part because she knows exactly where to go, and that is the dark river. The suicide enables her to have a voice for the first time, that is, ironically, a choice to silence herself permanently. She dies “with an illusion of human joy and togetherness” and “in the emptiness of silence” (Gandal 768). And although Crane portrays her as totally isolated in the Bowery, Maggie is successful in her trade as shown by her high-priced attire on her last night in the Bowery
streets. So, the economic challenge is not entirely a concern for her because the physical aspect of her life is somehow fulfilled through her entrance in the flesh trade. However, despite her relative success, she apparently longs for something more, and that is, the importance of living with dignity in society, and a sense of meaning, direction, and purpose, suggesting a call for spiritual regeneration. This means a need to raise the “consciousness of one’s inner life, a recognition that there is a need to regain touch with the human spirit – the soul” (de Souza 271). Her rejection of the physical self signifies the triumph of her will and a reflection of spiritual vacuum. Maggie’s suicide suggests that the focus on the physical human dimension leads to a neglect of the non-physical spiritual aspect in her nature, and the usual consequence is a rejection of the physical self through an act of violence towards the self. It is haunting to think of Maggie’s case because she is presented as the embodiment of perfect goodness despite her violent environment. However, her sexual transgression has links with economic considerations, and Crane may have patterned her circumstances to the many young girls in nineteenth century New York who drowned themselves.

The novel portrays underclass dwellers like Maggie as enduring an existence with a bleak future. Crane hints that there is little hope for them – meaning, their lot will not improve much because of dire poverty in lower New York, where unfair capitalistic practices and a culture of violence define the Bowery social structure. Maggie’s prolonged silence suggests that she is incapable of speaking out for herself (Hapke 34) because her society is not a place for the physically weak, like Maggie, who violate the moral code or conventions. Her silence indicates she has nothing significant or meaningful to say because she is an inferior slum woman. Hapke writes about Maggie’s “muteness” and her “diminished” personality in the Bowery:
Thus, her muteness can be read as the crushing result of social ostracism. Symbolically, her silence means she is powerless to speak out for herself. Literally she has nothing to say to which the society would listen. (34)

Tyson validates Irigaray’s contention concerning silence as one of the women’s limited choices in patriarchal rule:

(1) to keep quiet (for anything a woman says that does not fit within the logic of patriarchy will be seen as incomprehensible, meaningless) or (2) to imitate patriarchy’s representation of herself as it wants to see her (that is, to play the inferior role given her by patriarchy’s definition of sexual difference, which foreground’s men’s superiority). (101-02)

From the feminist standpoint, therefore, Maggie’s suicide can be seen as a form of resistance to the repression of her society, and as a moment of empowerment in defiance of the decadent Bowery that sanctions sexism. Men use her and scorn her on the streets, and even the priest she attempts to approach for help rejects her as if she carries some contagious disease. Her suicide suggests condemnation of patriarchal mistreatment. Her tragedy is the result of resistance against established norms. As indicated by her free choice, her suicide suggests she has complete control over her body and future. She could have chosen to have slowly degenerated physically just like her mother. Her suicide represents empowerment over the further degeneration which is the future for humanity, Crane’s naturalistic novel suggests. Actually, Maggie’s quiet tragedy is a statement of pragmatism and common sense because death of whatever form is still the conclusion for all men and women. Irving claims that Maggie, as an Irish immigrant woman, is perceived a threat to the dominant Anglo–Saxon race, the superior prototypes, and her tragedy “is that she can only ever redeem herself and the country to which she has come by ceasing to be” (12).

Sweeney supports the idea that Maggie’s abrupt death is liberation by suggesting that she would certainly have contracted a
sexual disease: “... syphilis would most likely have been her fate” (85). He cites the fact that syphilis was rampant in New York tenements in 1893, where forty thousand prostitutes were infected (83) and posits that the slum characters in the Bowery tenement in Crane’s Maggie have acquired dermatological problems due to syphilis. Sweeney argues that Maggie’s mother, Mary Johnson, has stage three syphilis which she inherits from her alcoholic husband who dies early in the novel without obvious reasons. The syphilis Sweeney claims is also the basis for Mary’s violent and erratic behaviour that borders on insanity. Likewise, Maggie’s baby brother dies abruptly and Sweeney assumes that it must be due to “congenital syphilis”. He adds that when Maggie is walking on a wet night on the street before she ends finally near the dark river, the man who says to her, “I have a date” has skin blotches, a sign of the disease (84). Sweeney claims, too, that Pete has syphilis because of the blotches on his neck. He concludes that Maggie is the only person who does not have the disease, and he argues that Maggie is “better off dead” because she might get the disease also. Sweeney writes: “Maggie, short-lived, dies apparently without contracting syphilis” (84). Sweeney hints that the other Bowery characters may have suffered from syphilis. However, I want to point out that since it is implied that Maggie has had sex with Pete, she may well have been infected with the disease already although there are no clear indicators yet because it is still in its initial stage. In this case, the novel shows that Maggie’s purity is less than absolute. The syphilis is a symbol of the decline of spirituality among the slum inhabitants because the physical such as the flesh is what defines the Bowery. The physical is represented by the violence, sexual transgression, prostitution, and poverty in the tenements. The focus on the physical therefore contributes to “disconnectedness” in the heroine’s life which suggests that her spiritual development needs nurturing (De Souza 273).
Lily’s Suicide

There is ambiguity in Maggie’s death, and the abruptness of Lily’s death remains unclear, too, because there are twofold interpretations as to her decision to increase her intake of chloral for sleep inducement. Literary critics question if her death is a form of suicide or an accidental one. Lily has previously contemplated self-destruction by drowning although she fails to carry it out. On her last night before she sleeps and dies, Lily is bothered by a sense of vacuum, feelings of desolation, and a bleak perception of the future: “But the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolise her future – she felt as though the house, the street, the world were all empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe” (371). She has apprehensions about going to bed at night because of her inability to sleep, and at that time, she has suffered from sleepless nights already: “Sleep was what she wanted – she remembered that she had not closed her eyes for two nights” (371). Lily’s feelings imply that she is drained emotionally as she reaches the lowest level of social existence in the dreary boarding-house. Her descent from high class society is so drastic she seems unable to handle her new relocation. Before her social descent and degradation, she is a woman of “leisure” according to Kaplan: “For the lady of leisure, domesticity was subordinated to publicity as the home became a stage for gala social events orchestrated and acted out by women” (91). She functions as ornament accustomed only to a life of luxury and materialistic consumption intended for others’ gaze or scrutiny. Showalter notes: “And, whereas the heroine of women’s fiction triumphs in every crisis, confounds her enemies, and wins over curmudgeons and reforms rakes, Lily is continually defeated” (46). She remains in her sad situation even if her friends are ready to help which suggests that her passivity is a reflection of her will. She is quiet about the economic pressures that beset her. From living in luxurious manors and hobnobbing with her select group, Lily now
lives friendless in a boarding-house, a symbol of her degradation and
dearth where dinginess and solitude reigns. In her chance meeting
with Rosedale in Sixth Avenue, she feels that he “was taking
contemptuous note of the neighbourhood” while he stares at the place
“with an air of incredulous disgust” (340) when they almost reach the
door of her house, a physical sign of Lily’s ultimate economic collapse.

Lily’s relocation from high society represents a relentless leap
into further degradation. She demands to be left alone in her
despondency. Her decision to relinquish all kinds of help from
congrued friends is unexpected and intriguing as well. Perhaps it is a
result of her depression and insomnia aggravated by her drug
dependence, a chemical substance, chloral. Her rejection of her
friends’ offer for help may indicate she does not want to be a burden
to them. Her insomnia and severe depression may have resulted from
her financial worries and desire for social acceptance in high society:

It was indeed miserable to be poor – to look forward to a
shabby, anxious middle-age, leading by dreary degrees of
economy and self-denial to gradual absorption in the dingy
communal existence of the boarding-house. But there was
something more miserable still – it was the clutch of solitude at
her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted
growth down the heedless current of the years. (368-69)

Wharton portrays Lily with extreme mood swings such as when
she “felt stronger and happier” (366) after she witnesses Nettie’s
domestic life of contentment. After a while, however, when Lily enters
the door to her boarding-house, “she felt the reaction of a deeper
loneliness” (366) signalling of a sense of disconnectedness. She is
aware of the warning of the chemist about increased chloral
ingestion: “If sleep came at all, it might be sleep without waking”
(372). Lily nevertheless increases her drug intake: “She had long
since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must
increase it” (372). She is no longer concerned with the possible effect
of increased chloral intake because she swallows the “contents of the glass” (373). She takes all the drugs in the bottle despite the chemist’s warning. Wharton writes:

She did not, in truth, consider the question very closely – the physical craving for sleep was her only sustained sensation. Her mind shrank from the glare of thought as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light – darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost. (372-73)

Lily’s simple reason for increased chloral intake is to have a good sleep. However, her awareness of the side effect of increased drug dosage indicates she must have willed her death. Her suicide is a release from her hostile society as well as freedom from all feelings of vacuum where perspectives are wiped out ad infinitum. It also means a negation of all life’s possibilities because of her obsession for total darkness. Lily’s suicide is similar to Maggie’s. Female agency and will are involved. Lily’s spirituality is a reversal of the spirituality marked by “courage, energy and detachment” for a sense of meaning and purpose. The suicide indicates a rejection of the physical self due to her clamour for spiritual nourishment as suggested by her longing for stability and permanence.

**Edna’s Suicide**

Edna’s suicide is also linked in literary criticism to autonomy from patriarchal frame. Chopin herself hints of Edna’s circumstances when Chopin writes on Chapter 7 the exterior and interior life of Edna: “Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (16). This statement suggests that the public image of Edna contradicts her inner desires which leads Ramos to write that Edna’s case is a quest for freedom from social identity: “Edna’s search for such an unrestricted, undefined, and, ultimately, impossible state
– a freedom from identity – ironically deprives her life of meaning (and finally of life itself)” (147). She feels constrained by society’s expectations. Her other female friends also feel society’s limitations. However, they are able to rise above the challenge with success. For instance, Edna’s friend, Reisz, rejects social expectations, but she is able to assume the role of a successful artist. Despite her antagonism for societal restrictions, Reisz is accepted in society for of her individualism and difference. Reisz is able to “modify” the identity she assumes in society, and she takes an active role in the perpetuation of her creativity. This suggests that she is able to transcend society’s feminine gender role expectations. She has risen above society’s expectations by assuming an identity she desires for herself. Her “self-ownership” enables her to realize her identity as artist in society. “Self-ownership connoted a woman’s right to have possession of her own fully realized human identity” (Gray 53). As a result, Reisz becomes herself – free from the demands of the confining patriarchal system. Society may have determined her, but she has will power to determine herself:

By taking control of the very means of representing or determining their social selves in a society that would otherwise determine or represent them, strong, dedicated women – like those in other marginalized groups – have overcome many of the social restrictions they faced (and in many faces, continue to face). (Ramos 148)

The mention of Reisz as a friend of Edna’s is to juxtapose the limiting condition of women in a patriarchal society and present the outcome of their choices. For Reisz, she is able to transcend society’s feminine gender role expectations. Despite her rejection of patriarchal expectations for women, she is still accepted in society while the female protagonist chooses a different path.

Ramos writes that the “strong, dedicated women” who belong to the “marginalized groups” have succeeded in challenging the society’s demands (148). Because Edna refuses to “dedicate herself
to an identity” or perhaps “creatively transform one for herself”, she ends in apparent suicide (148). Ramos suggests that women who refuse to assume the roles expected of them in society will have the same fate that Edna faces. However, I believe that Edna does not refuse female roles in society. Instead, she questions the inflexible nature of society’s expectations about gender roles because female creativity is restricted by domestic demands. She enjoys the arts and she wants passion. This suggests that a life without passion is not life at all. But female passion and desires are denied by Edna’s conservative society, and her lack of resolve for continuity and permanence may have affected her spirit to live. For me, this suggests Edna’s call for spiritual nourishment since her physical, material life is already satisfied with her husband’s financial capabilities. Edna says: “But I don’t want anything but my own way” (123) suggesting she values individualism and self-autonomy. However, De Souza cautions about being alive and engrossed with the self that allows distance from a communal experience and fellow-feeling:

The experience of aliveness must never degenerate into a narcissistic celebration of the self – for if it does, it dies. Aliveness is relational and communal, responsive to the reality and needs of others as well as our own... (278)

Edna’s desires freedom and romantic love because her idea of “aliveness” is to be with someone she loves: “She could picture at that moment no greater bliss than the possession of the beloved one” (124). She longs to be with a man who can make her feel free to be her creative self without the hassles of domesticity and a detached husband who requires her submission without question.

The last chapter of Chopin’s novel narrates Edna’s increasing feelings of hopelessness at Robert’s departure where she is unable to sleep the whole night: “She did not sleep. She did not go to bed. The lamp sputtered and went out. She was still awake in the morning,
when Celestine unlocked the kitchen door and came in to light the fire” (124). She goes back unexpectedly to the Grand isle in Robert’s house and finds only his brother, with a Spanish girl, Mariequita, who is surprised by Edna’s sudden appearance. They observe that Edna is “looking tired and a little travel-stained” (125). Before she plunges into the sea for a swim, Edna informs them that she will have dinner with them. She asks what time they will have dinner because she is very hungry. Then she adds: “but don’t get anything extra” (126). She is lucid when she tells them that she wants to take a swim in the sea first before she eats dinner. However, Edna’s emotional state is already drastically affected by the decision of Robert to be freed of her, and the realisation that the object of her love and passions is passing and therefore short-lived:

Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. (127)

It is surprising that Edna swims totally naked in the sea at night. Chopin narrates that she finds the sea “delicious” (127) and its voice alluring: “The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abyss of solitude” (127). Her total nakedness in the dark sea signifies for her a liberating feeling: “She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (127). When the sea touches her body, she feels its sensation, and she is so pleased with it: “The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfold ing the body in its soft, close embrace” (127). She remembers her husband and children and thinks: “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (127-128). This statement suggests as a woman, wife, and mother, she is not a property, and they cannot make her totally subservient to them. She
desires her integrity as a woman. Her assertion expresses her need for freedom while she is almost covered by the sea due to exhaustion. Then she recalls Reisz’s statement: “The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies” (128). Edna continues swimming distantly towards the depths of the sea. She may not have deliberated on her suicide. Maybe, she wants to go back to the shoreline after she hears some familiar voices. However, the sensation that she feels in the sea awakens her as she goes farther from the shore. She resolves that her husband and children must not possess her. She can only be possessed by the object of her love which resembles the physiognomy of the “delicious” sea that pleases and awakens her passions. Edna’s dip into the deepest seas indicates total rejection of the physical self to record her clamour for something more.

Edna’s suicide stems from a voluntary act of willpower. She could have learned from her practical feminist-leaning friends and formed a kind of sisterhood for her continued existence, but her individualism and feelings of extreme hopelessness or despair have already prevailed. Chopin may have veered away from the narrative formula of her time by portraying a non-conformist heroine. However, she has not exactly deviated from the writing trend of her time because she allows her heroine to die in order perhaps to compensate for her indiscretions, a kind of narrative ending common in nineteenth century literature (e.g. The Mill on the Floss by George Eliot and Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy).

Emma’s Suicide

Among the heroines whose tragic endings have been analysed in this study, it is Emma Bovary’s suicide that is most clearly a wilful act. The deaths of the other heroines are ambiguous because they are construed as either accidental or deliberate. However, although
Emma’s self-destruction is indisputable, the suicide process is done hastily, hinting of the role of impulse as one of the forces in Emma’s tragedy, making her suicide neither deliberate nor accidental. Flaubert may have hinted that there are traces of romanticism in the modern woman of his time despite the call for rational thinking as exemplified in the age of enlightenment. Female tendencies for romance suggest she leans more on her natural impulses and passions rather than clear thinking which is slow and deliberate.

Before Emma’s suicide, she approaches several people to borrow money because of the threat of the court about property sequestration if immediate debt payment is not received. She approaches a lawyer but she rejects his offer of funds in exchange for a sexual favour. She also approaches her previous lovers. However, they spurn her and turn down her request for loans. The last person she pleads for assistance is Rodolphe whom she informs about her problem:

You know, she went on quickly, that my husband placed his entire fortune in the hands of the notary; well, he absconded. We’ve borrowed money; patients haven’t been paying us. Anyway, the sale of the estate isn’t finished; that’ll come eventually. But today, for want of three thousand francs, they’re going to seize our goods; and that means now, this very moment; so counting on your friendship, I came here. (254)

However, Rodolphe responds that he has not got it. Before Emma left, she accuses him of making her believe him when he swears his “eternal love” to her on the carpet (255) in his chateau. She walks out and she feels that everything about her seems to detonate: “Everything in her head, all her reminiscences, all her ideas, poured out at once, in a single spasm, like a thousand fireworks exploding” (255). Then she feels that she is “suffering purely for love, and in remembering him, she felt her soul slip from her, just as injured men, in their agony, feel life slipping away, through their bleeding wounds”
Comparing her situation to an “abyss”, she heads fast to the apothecary’s store feeling out of breath:

She was panting, her chest almost bursting. And in a rapture of heroism which was almost joyful, she ran down the hill, cross the plank-bridge, along the footpath, down the alley, over the market-square, and arrived in front of the pharmacist’s shop. (256)

In the laboratory, she is able to grab some white stuff through Justin’s assistance and swallows it suddenly. She tells Justin she wants the arsenic because there are rats in her house and they prevent her from sleeping. However, after she gulps down the arsenic powder, she tells him to keep quiet or the apothecary, his master, may be involved. There is no suggestion that she has reflected on the act. She has acted on impulse implying she is just being her natural, sentimental, and impulsive self. As discussed in chapter 5, her spirituality is animated by romance, and she seems to remain true with her nature as a woman who may have considered female death perfectly romantic. The evidence is that aside from the romance novels she reads, she is also drawn to “ill-fated women” with their sad conclusions. Thus, coming down fast from the chateau of Rodolphe who turns down her plea for financial assistance, Flaubert portrays her emotional temperament at its highest, ready to explode anytime like a bomb. As Steiner says: “There are around us daemonic energies which prey upon the soul and turn it to madness or which poison our will so that we inflict irreparable outrage upon ourselves and those we love” (7).

What is ironic about Emma’s suicide is that she seeks Christ’s deliverance as she awaits her death. This is shown when she presses her lips to the crucifix of Christ and “laid upon him with all her ebbing strength the greatest loving kiss she had ever given” (265). Her implied knowledge of salvation through her gesture of submission to Christ’ mercy suggests that her Catholic convent education is still
active in her imagination. However, Flaubert’s portrayal of his heroine smacks of mockery for the Christian spirituality because her convent education is supposed to call for the preservation of life, and yet, she destroys herself for romantic and mundane reasons, and that is due to her implied association of female death as romantic, aside from the pressure of saving herself and her family from the debts she incurs as a result of her “generosity” to her lovers. Flaubert suggests that the material reality connects with her romantic ideals because it is only through the physical-material reality that she can express her spirituality, her romantic tendencies, the reason for instance of her wearing fancy gowns, acquiring costly stuffs, attending the royalty ball, and offering gifts as expressions of her love and passion. Her suicide may also be the result of her “disintegration and social victimization rather than heroic self-sacrifice” (Higonnet 106).

Flaubert makes Emma return to her faith when she invokes Christ’s compassion for the salvation of her soul at her deathbed, yet the nature of her death contradicts Catholic faith and tradition. Suicide is prohibited because it is a murder of self which is against the law of love. It is therefore beyond redemption. So, Flaubert poses a conflict between Emma’s act of suicide and her invocation of Christ for her soul’s redemption. Gaudium et Spes presents the continuing Christian view about the preservation of the human person: “For the human person deserves to be preserved” (4). Emma in her deathbed has faith in the redemption of her soul, but according to Gaudium et Spes religious faith “directs the mind to solutions which are fully human” (12), and Emma’s suicide as a solution is an inversion of such faith. There are traces of economic determinism in Flaubert’s narrative, but the protagonist’s suicide is a choice, a rejection of the physical self signifying a spiritual void. Flaubert’s representation of the nineteenth century woman is one whose quest for self-fulfilment relates to her need for worldly love that is just misdirected in her
desire for the good of the human soul as shown in her return to faith for spiritual redemption at her deathbed.

In conclusion, Maggie’s death shows freedom, and the limitations of determinism, given that she has some agency through suicide. Lily’s death is a reaction to an inner vacuum and frustrated spiritual longings. Edna’s death is an assertion of self-ownership despite patriarchal pressures, and Emma’s death is impulsive and ironic given that she calls on Christ at the last yet is breaking the injunction not to take one’s own life. Their resistance to societal confinement including the suicide act demonstrates the possibility of female agency. However, the “breakdown of conventional frameworks such as the family and community structures” (de Souza 270) in their individual situation contributes to their sense of disconnection.

The suicides of the female protagonists are ambiguous because they are read as either deliberate or accidental and impulsive. How they carry out their deaths does not involve careful planning because they are done in haste and are therefore not exactly deliberate despite the presence of agency. However, there is a common factor the female protagonists resort to ending their lives, and that is their clamour for spiritual nourishment. Lifelong learning is not available to these women, so the result is tragedy. The novels show that although the female protagonists show they can find fulfilment through their physical-material realities, all of them still experience an inner vacuum that indicates a need for something more. Therefore, their deaths suggest the importance of the spiritual human aspect for fulfilment of the dual dimensions of human nature as suggested in Gaudium et Spes. The naturalistic novel acknowledges that a person’s physical-material reality alone is not enough for him to be totally content in this life because of the dual human nature – the physical and spiritual dimensions. The novels suggest that the spiritual aspect of a human being also needs attention. This means human fulfilment
is assured in this world only by making his other self, the spiritual self, also contented. The novels do not show explicitly how this other self can find fulfilment, but they suggest it is not through a spirituality anchored on a fragile foundation.
CHAPTER 8

RECONCILING NATURALISM AND SPIRITUALITY AS DEFINED IN GAUDIUM ET SPES

Introduction

This chapter explores spirituality, drawing on the definition in the Roman Catholic constitution, Gaudium et Spes, and relates the topic of spirituality to my examination of literary naturalism in regard to man as a social being, man and the spiritual, human dignity, suicide and self-preservation, human will and freedom, atheism and anti-clericalism, and marriage and family. Gaudium et Spes is a useful source for a commentary on spirituality because it is an official summary of the doctrine of one significant church on these matters. Gaudium et Spes underscores the above-mentioned issues in guiding humanity for spiritual living in the modern world among believers in the faith, along with non-believers. The constitution’s full title is The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes. This constitution is a result of the efforts of the Second Vatican Council, assembled in 1962-1965 by the Church leadership. More than three thousand religious dignitaries, authorities, “observers” and “auditors” were involved in the writing of Gaudium et Spes according to Carroll:

Vatican II met in the great nave of Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome in four sessions in the autumns of the years 1962-1965, with committees doing extensive work between sessions. Made up of about 2,400 bishops, with about 500 periti or experts, and something between 50 – 200 “observers” and “auditors” in attendance... (25)

Gaudium et Spes is distinctive as a Church document and in terms of its orientation because it represents Christian spiritual values resulting from the collaborative efforts of an Ecumenical Council that
meets once in a century or even once in several centuries when necessary and convened by the Pope. Previous councils were Vatican I (1869-1870) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563) (Carroll 25). It is also the outcome of the Church response to the times that ensued from the Pope’s observations:

Pope John intuited that there was something profoundly out of sync in the inner life of the Church: intellectually sterile, liturgically lifeless, moral instruction depending more on imperatives than on invitations, fear emphasized over hope, a clergy cut off from the laity, the razor wire of the Reformation still dividing Christendom, the living Word of Scripture all but forgotten, Jesus himself on the margin of piety. (Carroll 27)

The purpose of the council’s assembly is also to monitor the papacy, especially in relation to his “infallibility” (declared by the First Vatican Council) as well as strengthen his authority (Carroll 25). The council moreover serves to evaluate the Church in regard to the implementation and relevance of its spiritual tradition and teachings in the contemporary world. The document is one of the results of the council’s aim for reformation within the Church, and an answer to the threat of nuclear destruction and human extinction felt by the “council fathers in the context of Hiroshima and Auschwitz” (27).

Spirituality within the framework of Gaudium et Spes suggests a quest for the “true, good and beautiful” (85). Pope Paul VI promulgated Gaudium et Spes in 1965. Some theologians raised questions about the document, for instance on its use of modern language, and on what they saw as its excessive optimism, which tied the idea of Christian hope to the “modern idea of progress” (Ratzinger qtd. in Dulles 1). However, the constitution is significant for the faithful as it represents the continuation of the Catholic tradition that focuses on Jesus Christ’s spirituality, and on the broader social mission of the church, rather than more narrowly theological matters. Thus, Gaudium et Spes is useful here because it links spirituality
directly to the questions about family, marriage, society, and male and female roles which are raised in the naturalistic novels under study.

Literary naturalism through the four novels suggests a tension with Christianity as framed within *Gaudium et Spes*. The two traditions seem to clash because one focuses on the physical, on external realities, while the other one focuses on the spiritual human dimension. However, as I have argued in Chapter 1, naturalism, as demonstrated in the novels, has an implied message about the possible betterment of the human experience and of the fate of humanity as a whole. The novels show that the attainment of perfection through instincts and individual will is futile without a consideration of the human soul. This suggests that the individual person must recognize the non-physical or spiritual human aspect to secure permanence or stability for the experience of life. To recognize the spiritual within man or woman is to search for his or her good, for his or her continuity, and not for his or her destruction. So although naturalistic literature limits access to spirituality through its tendency to undervalue self-preservation and the portrayal of life as a useless passion with its focus on death (of whatever form) as humanity’s fate, naturalism, as suggested in the novels, nevertheless recognizes a person’s spiritual need for enlightenment from life’s harsh realities and acceptance of the dual nature of a human being encompassing the physical and spiritual human dimensions. Also, because naturalism promotes social awareness for the betterment of the human condition through its examination of social realities, its end goal echoes the spiritual creed of love and furtherance of humanity proclaimed in *Gaudium et Spes* and demonstrated in the novels through the heroines’ inherent need for love, social acceptance, and individual integrity.
Man\textsuperscript{3} as a social being

One of the key concepts in \textit{Gaudium et Spes} is that it considers an individual person a “social being” (13). This suggests that man—male or female—belongs to a social structure that requires free interchange of ideas and feelings with others. The doctrine cautions that “unless he relates himself to others, he can neither live nor develop his potential (13). This statement suggests that a woman who ceases to function as a “social being” and becomes a recluse or an outcast will have difficulty living on her own. She will not be able to develop her full potential in the world. Similarly, the portrayal of the heroines, Maggie and Lily, in Crane and Wharton’s novels, puts them in situations where they cease to function as “social beings” due to societal ostracism. As a result, their potential for change and advancement as women with aspirations are crushed because they are socially alienated and are eventually unable to live in society. The doctrine’s important message for humanity is that we need others for our survival or continuity, and the role of societal support for a woman’s development ensures her continued existence in society.

The Church through \textit{Gaudium et Spes} echoes its concern regarding isolation because it is not part of God’s design for humanity: He “did not create man for a life of isolation, but for the formation of social unity” (30). Hence, the Church maintains that “from the beginning of salvation history He has chosen men not just as individuals but as members of a certain community” (30). It is through social interaction that “man” is able to cultivate his talents and realise his purpose:

Man’s social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another. For the beginning, the subject and the goal of all

\textsuperscript{3} As mentioned in Chapter 1, “man” is used in the Vatican document (and in this study) as a general term that refers to both male and female.
social institutions is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life. (3) Since this social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny. (24)

Man’s “social ties” which include his “family and political community, relate with greater immediacy to his innermost nature; others originate rather from his free decision” (24). Naturalism as demonstrated in the novels shows married women who enjoy the shared activities available in society i.e. Emma attending the royal ball, and Edna vacationing with family and friends in the Grand Isle. However, these women are portrayed as more determined on their quest for happiness and individual freedom by challenging expected roles as wives and mothers, highlighting naturalism’s message, shared with Gaudium et Spes, that “the deepest longings of the heart... is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer” (39). And while Gaudium et Spes notes the importance of socialization to the human person, it also cautions about its possible threats: “socialization, while certainly not without its dangers, brings with it many advantages with respect to consolidating and increasing the qualities of the human person, and safeguarding his rights” (25). It acknowledges that the “disturbances which so frequently occur in the social order result in part from the natural tensions of economic, political, and social forms” (25). However, it singles out the influence of man’s self-centeredness that causes the disturbances: “But at a deeper level they flow from man’s pride and selfishness, which contaminate even the social sphere” (25). The statement echoes the portrayal of individualism and self-regard of the female protagonists in the novels, particularly the married heroines. Thus, the Church recommends a relentless watch for the “social order” in relation to human freedom, love, and justice:
This social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice and animated by love; in freedom it should grow every day toward a more human balance. An improvement in attitudes and abundant changes in society will have to take place if these objectives are to be gained. (26)

There is tension in the idea of free will and individuality in the naturalistic novel and Gaudium et Spes. For instance, Gaudium et Spes discourages “individualistic morality” because it expects the individual person to contribute to improving life’s conditions and maintain that “the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to his own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life” (29). The focus on “individualistic morality” and independence as exemplified by the female protagonists in the novels highlights human freedom and individual will to show their resistance to human conventions within patriarchal structures. Gaudium et Spes focuses on the importance of social interaction as human beings for a sense of community and esprit de corps. Naturalism, as suggested in the novels, shows twofold polarizations within social structures through the representation of characters like Edna and Adele, for example, who represent the individualistic and social, physical and spiritual, traditional and non-traditional. Other examples are the unmarried female protagonists who seek societal and familial acceptance while the married female protagonists resist oppressive behaviours in favour of individual freedom, detachment, and fairness in gender relations in their struggle for equal opportunities with men in a male-centred society.

**Man and the spiritual**

Gaudium et Spes suggests the need for humanity to extend awareness to the non-physical, spiritual human dimension to
minimise the lagging “spiritual advancement” amidst the increasingly “intellectual formation” (6). It reminds humanity of the importance of the life of a human being among all creations in the world where his existence can only achieve perfection through increased spirituality, the recognition of his Creator’s love for his continuity. This love preserves man as “he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to his Creator” (17). The document explains more about the concern of the Church for humanity:

Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world’s citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before has man had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance... True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems. Finally, man painstakingly searches for a better world, without a corresponding spiritual advancement. (5)

The Vatican document suggests a need to refocus on the importance of spiritual advancement in this world. The novels, on the other hand, depict the female protagonists with a passion and love for the ideal despite the harsh realities around them. However, while they are represented as dedicated to the physical-visible world, naturalism, as demonstrated in the novels, recognizes the value of spirituality to a person’s life. The pursuit for material fulfilment is connected to their quest for the ideal because of man’s dual nature. In other words, the longing for something more among the female protagonists indicates that despite material fulfilment, a person’s spirituality is important as well and must not be neglected. For instance, Maggie is successful in a material sense as a prostitute. Lily comes from the elite class. Emma lives with her middle-class doctor-husband, and Edna’s businessman-spouse provides for her comfort
adequately. These women (with the exception of Maggie) read literature suggesting “intellectual formation”, and they are more educated than the other women who are content simply with domestic education. Through these protagonists, naturalism shows that they are a different breed of women with imagination that challenges social traditions. The novels show however that the female protagonists lack inner peace, an offshoot of their relentless quest for impartial social structure that is more accepting, for instance, of female interests and sentiments, as shown in their preferred readings and alternative activities in society. *Gaudium et Spes* therefore reminds society about a balanced life because the tendency of the individual person is to search painstakingly “for a better world, without a corresponding spiritual advancement” (6). The Vatican document suggests that this kind of spirituality is animated by a consideration of the “true, good, and beautiful” for both men and women.

**Human dignity**

Another key concept underscored in *Gaudium et Spes* is human dignity which is related to a person’s self-respect or self-esteem. Man is “not wrong” when he considers himself “superior to bodily concerns, and as more than a speck of nature or a nameless constituent of the city of man” (14). Because of his twofold nature: “body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” (4), he is expected to acknowledge within him “a spiritual or immortal soul” (4):

Thus, when he recognizes in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being mocked by a fantasy born only of physical or social influences, but is rather laying hold of the proper truth of the matter. (14)

In relation to the novels, the orientation of the female protagonists is on material security, but towards the end, before their tragic move, they discard this kind of security with their acknowledgment of an
inner reality they seem unable to satisfy amidst the material advantage. They experience a sense of inner vacuum to suggest a search for more despite the physical-material orientation of naturalism. Thus, the novels portray women with an inner centre and spirituality anchored on a frail base as mentioned earlier, and their experience resonates with Copernican moments that show they are not the centre of the universe, most notably in their tragic fates.

The novels’ projection of physical-material realities signify unfriendly “forces” that seem beyond the protagonists although dependent on their will. In Lehan’s terminology, “the naturalistic force was hostile... or at least more indifferent to human needs” (230). This idea of unfriendly “forces” in naturalism is juxtaposed with the spiritual reality as representing a positive “force” higher than the female protagonists although within their reach, awareness, and readiness to acknowledge it. So “without a corresponding spiritual advancement” Gaudium et Spes points out (6), a physical-material triumph alone is meaningless as suggested by the experiences of the female protagonists. This “spiritual advancement” (6), along with the physical-material progress, paves the way for humanity to recognize a higher, powerful force that is “in no way hostile to man’s dignity, since this dignity is rooted and perfected in God” (20) with man as an “intelligent and a free member” of God’s society called to “share in His happiness” (20).

**Suicide and self-preservation**

The novels show the harsh reality of suicide in society where female agency, human bodies, and the physical circumstances of women in prejudicial positions pose as potent forces encouraging self-destruction. The novels present suicide as the likely outcome for a person that focuses on material reality and harmful emotions. Gaudium et Spes, however, opposes “wilful self-destruction” because
it suggests a desecration of the “integrity of the human person” as I explain more below. Thus, the Vatican document’s message for humanity is a reminder concerning what man is, what comprises an individual as a person, and what he must acknowledge about one’s self as a person with dignity. A human being must acknowledge “in himself a spiritual and immortal soul” (14). On the other hand, naturalism, as demonstrated in the novels, conveys the message that there is more to the physical-material human dimension, a perception similar to that in *Gaudium et Spes*. A human being is on a higher level than the human body and physical circumstance because he or she has a soul. A refocus therefore on the spirituality of man or woman uplifts his or her consciousness from the challenges of material knowledge.

*Gaudium et Spes* is clear in its position on the subject of suicide because it opposes the importance of life that the Church upholds, and is toxic to general welfare and society:

...whatever is opposed to life itself such as any type of murder ... or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as ... torments inflicted on the body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, ... prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful conditions, where men are treated as tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonour to the Creator. (27)

Self-destruction is ruled out by the writers of *Gaudium et Spes* because of its message of hopelessness and futility of life for future generations: “We can justly consider that the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping” (30). Thus, the Church calls for the preservation of the human person (4). Naturalism, through the novels, suggests that the self-destruction of
the female protagonists provides instant solution to a human problem without mental fortitude or staying power and regard for the continuity of future generations. *Gaudium et Spes* acknowledges the concept of self-preservation for the future of humanity through acceptance of life’s challenges. Human beings are encouraged to shoulder their cross, face responsibility through pro-life affirmation and uphold the “values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom” (37). However, “man extends his power in every direction” (5). The naturalistic novels’ portrayal of the female protagonists’ response to societal values suggest a resistance to experiences that disadvantage women and a sign of aversion to face further the challenge of human pain. This is perhaps due to a culture that focuses on instant gratification. This means for *Gaudium et Spes* that power is misdirected because man “does not always succeed in subjecting it to his own welfare” (5). Humanity is urged to acknowledge human suffering as one of the social realities that beset mankind. Despite its negative connotation for non-believers, human suffering as suggested in the document entails quiet acceptance of challenges by facing them, and the focus on human agency through a life-affirming stance for a vision of hope among humankind. The good news for humankind however is that a deepening of one’s spirituality may answer the innermost longings of the heart:

Since it has been entrusted to the Church to reveal the mystery of God, Who is the ultimate goal of man, she opens up to man at the same time the meaning of his own existence, that is, the innermost truth about himself. The Church truly knows that only God, Whom she serves, meets the deepest longings of the human heart, which is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer. (39)

In relation to the novels, the portrayal of women experiencing frustration in fulfilling the longings of the heart suggests naturalism’s acknowledgment of the spiritual aspect that needs attention. However, *Gaudium et Spes* implies that the longings of the human heart can only be satisfied through a recognition of a higher force that
is positive, referring to a divine authority that is not hostile. *Gaudium et Spes* reveals that this divine authority represents the ideal as the “true, good, and beautiful” which is perhaps what the heroines in the novels actually desire.

**Human will and freedom**

The idea of freedom as represented in naturalism suggests the absence of physical constraints with female protagonists who perceive agency and free will as what *Gaudium et Spes* calls “a license for doing whatever pleases them” (16), with an emphasis on physical realities. The document opposes this to the true nature of freedom, which is focused toward goodness: “Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness” (16) with the dignity of the human person requiring freedom from confinement to passion and depravity.

Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end. (16)

The novels present a woman as a plausible character whose courage, spirituality, and values are challenged because they seem to clash with the nineteenth century values of the family and society. She is represented to have a “split personality” because she has an “inner life that questions” and an outer life that is expected to conform. As a result, her personal and social relationships have been undermined because she feels structured by her circumstances. The woman’s situation in naturalistic literature echoes the image of man in *Gaudium et Spes* who feels confined by his experiences and yet, he feels limitless in his aspirations: “Thus, on the one hand, as a creature he experiences his limitations in a multitude of ways; on the
other he feels himself to be boundless in his desires and summoned to a higher life” (10). This suggests therefore that man “expresses and continues to express, many divergent and even contradictory opinions” (12) because he is “split within himself” (14). He “often exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair” which often ends in “doubt and anxiety” (12-13). This manifestation of tension within man indicates vulnerabilities that may cause him to succumb to infractions:

Indeed, as a weak and sinful being, he often does what he would not, and fails to do what he would. Hence he suffers from internal divisions, and from these flow so many and such great discords in society. No doubt many whose lives are infected with a practical materialism are blinded against any sharp insights into this kind of dramatic situation; or else, weighed down by unhappiness they are prevented from giving the matter any thought. (10-11)

Naturalism, as shown in the novels, suggests that female transgressions are committed without regard of the outcome. The protagonists do what they are not supposed to do and don’t do what they should. As a result, happiness is compromised as it becomes elusive or gets blocked by a conflict between their individualism (shown through their resistance) and a repressive society (as discussed in the chapters on women, above). Reliance on human efforts alone is not enough. Gaudium et Spes suggests that man consider his faith and spirituality in order to throw a “new light on everything” and direct his mind to solutions to problems that are “fully human”. The Vatican document expounds: “The intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be, for wisdom gently attracts the mind of man to a quest and a love for what is true and good” (15). Society undergoes inevitable transformations where by “this very circumstance, the traditional local communities such as families, class, tribes, villages, various groups and associations stemming from social contacts, experiences more thorough changes every day” (3). With all sorts of transformations
that humanity faces in society, the relevance of tradition and its values is challenged:

A change in attitudes and in human structures frequently calls accepted values into question, especially among young people, who have grown impatient on more than one occasion, and indeed become rebels in their distress. (8)

Naturalism, as portrayed in the novels, links freedom and human dignity through the material circumstances and social status of the female protagonist. And Gaudium et Spes cautions humanity about what can happen to freedom and human dignity in extreme poverty or affluence and warns about isolation through individualism:

Now a man can scarcely arrive at the needed sense of responsibility, unless his living conditions allow him to become conscious of his dignity, and to rise to his destiny by spending himself for God and for others. But human freedom is often crippled when a man encounters extreme poverty just as it withers when he indulges in too many of life’s comforts and imprisons himself in a kind of splendid isolation. (30)

**Atheism and anti-clericalism**

Naturalism’s representation of the female protagonists points to young women with free will who refuse to conform to the demands of their societies in their unhappiness. The novels reveal that their spirituality hungers for attention and nourishment. Their Christian education and faith are portrayed as deficient in their experience with dysfunctional families although the female protagonists such as Flaubert’s Emma, for instance, seeks Christ in her final moments for spiritual redemption or Chopin’s Adèle, as Edna’s foil, suggests the importance and practice of Christian spirituality through family values like marital fidelity, domestic devotion, and personal care for the young to strengthen the tradition in her Creole society that is predominantly Catholic. Flaubert shows a woman’s discontentment and presents the corruption of Church values through her
representatives who are unable to help Emma in her distress. Her convent education has not exactly strengthened her faith in the good because Flaubert depicts the religious instruction in the Catholic convent that needs to be strengthened. The heroine’s spirituality needs a refocus too because it is motivated by romantic ideals.

On the other hand, Crane’s novel projects the importance of physical supremacy among men and makes a travesty of Christianity because it symbolizes weakness in its preference for individual submission and self-sacrifice for the “common good”. The novel also showcases the hypocrisy of believers at the wake of the lifeless protagonist. Crane attacks the flaws of Christianity with the corruption of Church representatives and less effective spiritual formation. *Gaudium et Spes* shows that man can only “live fully according to the truth” if he “freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to his Creator” (17). The novels portray manifestations of the protagonists’ orientation of the Christian spirituality (i.e. seeking enlightenment of their problems by approaching a priest and kissing the crucifix for redemption as in the case of Emma). Desiring love and acceptance from society, the protagonists extend importance to social activities (i.e. melodramas, royal balls, long vacations or holidays, and dinners in mansions), the material or physical circumstances from the naturalist perspective, because of the focus on love and romance they consider the female ideals in society as suggested in the novels. However, the negative experiences of the female protagonists have become pathways for the recognition of an innermost need that cannot be fulfilled alone by the physical-material realities that this world offers.

Naturalism, as demonstrated in the novels under study, offers a radical concept of freedom with its representation of individualistic women who use it with less restraint and thought of its effect on the self and others. By contrast, *Gaudium et Spes* explains that
“authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man” (16) and must be directed towards the wellbeing of the individual and others. For instance, the tension within the protagonists’ marriage and family illustrates female agency and freedom without deep reflection on the consequences. *Gaudium et Spes* clashes with such idea of freedom since it connotes unrestrained “desires for human independence to such a point that it poses difficulties against any kind of dependence” on Divine Love (19) the Creator wants to share with humanity in the modern times. *Gaudium et Spes* suggests that this kind of “human independence” or individualism extends to “modern atheism” because it illustrates man’s freedom “to be an end unto himself, the sole artisan and creator of his own history” (19) and reinforces the idea that “this freedom cannot be reconciled with the affirmation” of the existence of a divine creator as the “author and purpose of all things, or at least that this freedom makes such an affirmation altogether superfluous” (19). The female protagonists’ search for love and freedom has links to the fulfilment of the spiritual aspect of their humanity. *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes man’s dual nature: material and spiritual, and unless he recognizes that other part of him and participates in some form of spirituality, such as his “own training in the faith” (18) motivated by the ideal, “true, good, and beautiful” (85), he remains split within him. *Gaudium et Spes* suggests that a person’s “call to communion with God” (17) strengthens human spirituality. A compromised happiness results from the neglect of a person’s spiritual dimension so that “when divine instruction and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man’s dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attests; riddles of life and death, of guilt and of grief go unsolved with the frequent result that men succumb to despair” (20) that is experienced, too, by the female protagonists. The novels show that the female protagonists are shown to be denied fulfilment through loving relationships as a result of a spirituality anchored on a fragile
foundation and lack of knowledge of the dual nature of human beings as suggested by *Gaudium et Spes*.

Although the church rejects atheism, *Gaudium et Spes* calls for both “believers and non-believers” in the faith for active involvement in the “betterment of this world” (21). It notes further: “The church calls for the active liberty of believers to build up in this world God’s temple too. She courteously invites atheists to examine the Gospel of Christ with an open mind” (21). *Gaudium et Spes* warns that one clue for atheism is “a critical reaction against religious belief” or “against the Christian religion” (18). Anti-Christianity in Crane’s novel is reflected in the representation of Maggie’s brother (“he despised obvious Christians” (11) as opposed to the culture of violence and physical strength in the slums. The spirituality motivated by Christian principles promotes selflessness and non-violent actions in consideration of the wellbeing of others that *Gaudium et Spes* suggests. Crane’s naturalistic fiction suggests that spirituality and the focus on inner life weigh less among the slum dwellers because of their efforts on concerns for economic survival. It is through the character of Maggie that spirituality is demonstrated even though physical power is more of a reality in the underclass. This aversion to Christian ideology is also found in Flaubert’s novel when he presents the insensibility of the clergy in society and the imperfections of Emma’s convent education. This aversion is also found in Chopin’s novel when she portrays the irony of the high society elite who attend the mass religiously, but are corrupt and materialistic, and who subject Lily to oppression for her social transgressions such as missing the mandatory church mass and for still being single at age 29. The novels, however, acknowledge the importance of spirituality because the protagonists are portrayed with their inherent goodness as human beings and desire to transform a repressive social structure through their acts of resistance, perhaps to signify the need to change
the status quo to accommodate female wellbeing and equality with men.

**Marriage and family**

As to the institution of marriage and family, naturalism presents it as alive with imperfections to portray social realities: These are personal, economic, cultural, and social concerns: communication barriers between husband and wife, intellectual and emotional incompatibilities, money problems, cultural differences, marital infidelities, and contradictory views about gender roles in society. The Church through *Gaudium et Spes* encourages humanity to understand more about marital love and the problems it faces:

In addition, married love is too often profaned by excessive self-love, the worship of pleasure and illicit practices against human generation. Moreover, serious disturbances are caused in families by modern economic conditions, by influences at once social and psychological, and by the demands of civil society. Finally, in certain parts of the world problems resulting from population growth are generating concern. (48-49)

*Gaudium et Spes* suggests that it can “offer guidance and support” to those who work to preserve marital sanctity “to foster the natural dignity of the married state and its superlative value” (49):

For the good of the spouses and their off-springs as well as of society, the existence of the sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes. (1) All of these have a very decisive bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of a family, and on dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole. (49)

From the novels, the two married women choose to act independently in their unhappiness with their spouses resulting in their experimentation with human love. Their marital discontent and
resistance to their roles as wives suggest their need of emotional fulfilment. Although they go beyond the marital borders of commitment, their independence may be interpreted as among other things a message for their husbands not to treat them as possessions or commodities. *Gaudium et Spes*, even though written in the 1960s, presents a staunchly traditional view of marriage, so that there exists tension with naturalism in its thrusts for innovation and radical solutions. For instance, as portrayed in the novels, the female married protagonists are represented as imbued with independent minds who want their husbands to be sensitive to their individual needs, to communicate with them honestly and not take their feelings for granted. Communication barriers within marriage and conjugal love seem taken for granted as a result of unresolved deep-seated concerns. The Church message through *Gaudium et Spes* reminds man and woman about conjugal love as “firmly established by the Lord” (52) suggesting that the couple work to come up with a marriage that “radiates from the equal personal dignity of wife and husband, a dignity acknowledged by mutual and total love” (52). Although this view is a reversal of the marital experience of the female protagonists, Chopin’s and Flaubert’s novels show marriages and families of other characters in the novels that embody the Christian ideals on marriage and family. For instance, the marriage and family of Edna are juxtaposed to the marriage and family of Adèle while the marriage and family of Emma are juxtaposed to the marriage and family of Homais’ wife that project images of stability and contentment.

The writers of *Gaudium et Spes* say that to preserve the sanctity of marriage and family in society, both husband and wife are required to “promote mutual self-giving” so that they can “enrich each other with a joyful and a ready will” (52). Emma and Edna long for love, but it is a different form of love because it is based more on emotions instead of a decision that promotes the self-giving of mature
married love. The kind of love they have is more physical than unconditional perhaps because they have not exactly experienced the stage of romantic love where young girls are carefree and responsibility-free. In other words, they marry at a young age where they are not yet mature enough to face the responsibilities of married life. They have not received the kind of romantic love in marriage perhaps because their husbands’ love is focused more on a decision to have a family and embrace the traditional role of breadwinners, making them seem to neglect their wives’ emotional needs. As a result, the married women succumb to romantic love with other men, an act that may be interpreted as a desperate move for the completion of their romantic desires and live in the moment or perhaps feel the excitement of being natural in their self-expressions. The novels’ representation of marriage suggests that both husband and wife, such as Edna and Léonce in *The Awakening* or Emma and Charles in *Madame Bovary*, for instance, consider the physical and emotional needs of each other so that they can establish genuine sharing of feelings and thoughts for the total commitment of their persons to each other.

*Gaudium et Spes* reminds couples about marital commitment: “As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them” (50). Both husband and wife must remember that the “author of matrimony” is God and contemplate the divine will in marriage by extending “mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions” (49-50). Both can then “cultivate and pray for steadiness of love, large heartedness and the spirit of sacrifice” (52). In *The Awakening*, for example, Edna’s husband reconsiders his night outs with his male friends and be with his wife and children. When they are on family vacation, he is presumed to give first priority to them so that they can exercise “true practice of conjugal love, and
the whole meaning of the family life which results from it” (53). This is shown in the marriage of Adèle to her husband whose example of a cohesive family is demonstrated by their adherence to spiritual values such as love and respect for each other and commitment to the family and children, as discussed in Chapter 6, above.

The married women’s need for gender equality and expression of creativity is laudable, however, *Gaudium et Spes* puts the alternative view that both husband and wife should consider the “dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of the human society as a whole” (49). The novelists do not imply that the protagonists are at fault in seeking equality and creative outlets, but for the success of the marital and familial structures, *Gaudium et Spes* suggests a consideration of values for the preservation of the family and strength of the human society. It also suggests a balance of personal or individual interests and the “common good” such as the interests of married couples and the family, as a whole. Both husband and wife are encouraged to “nourish and develop their wedlock by pure conjugal love and undivided affection” (51).

The novels present married women with misdirected longings and love. Their spirituality may need to be refocused on the ideal i.e. “true, good, and beautiful”. *Gaudium et Spes* however calls for the preservation of marital love, that it must “never be profaned by adultery or divorce” (52) through “fulfilment of duties” as a “Christian vocation”. To safeguard marriage and family, the Vatican document encourages “steadiness of love, large heartedness and the spirit of sacrifice” (52). The married couple’s behaviour is expected to protect the meaning of marital love so that they experience a “truly human fulfilment” with their children who can contribute to the wellbeing of their parents (53). Parents are also reminded of their important role in the education of their children who bring about the “needed cultural, psychological and social renewal on behalf of marriage and
the family” (52). Flaubert’s and Chopin’s novels, for instance, show the importance of parental role in the education of their children. Emma is sent by her father to the convent for her education while Edna reads stories to her sons before bedtime to suggest her interest in the intellectual formation of her children.

**Human and social culture**

The writers of *Gaudium et Spes* highlight the importance of a person’s right “to a human and social culture in conformity with the dignity of the human person without any discrimination of race, sex, nation, religion or social condition”. It acknowledges the importance of the development of culture for humanity and defines culture as follows:

The word “culture” in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family. (57-58)

For the development of culture in society, *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes the value of literature and arts because of its “great importance to the life of the church” (67).

The naturalistic novels show that although the prevailing culture in society is inherited through the male dominant tradition where female protagonists make adjustments, innovations are possible, for instance, in the inclusion of a more creative or productive life for women in society. For example, Chopin introduces Reisz as an independent artist accepted in society to juxtapose her role with the traditional woman like Adèle. The heroines value
creative works i.e. painting, playing the piano, reading, watching creative productions, because they believe that through them they can make a positive contribution to society and culture. This suggests that the development of culture is made possible through the roles of men and women who value their own contributions to society. Here and elsewhere the naturalistic writers acknowledge that tradition is enriched through a more tolerant society where women enjoy productive roles with men.

The view of *Gaudium et Spes* is that freeing humanity from ignorance occurs through the provision of cultural benefits so that people will not “be prevented from cooperating in the promotion of the common good in a truly human manner because of illiteracy and a lack of responsibility” (64). Men and women therefore have a special duty to develop themselves culturally so that they can help themselves as well as others in society (65). The female protagonists in the novels are shown to have internalized the value of participating in creative activities for self-development while contributing positively as well to the culture in their society.

The novels do not portray women as content with their domestic roles because they are focused on their creative efforts for an independent existence. Writing in the mid twentieth century, the authors of *Gaudium et Spes* argue that since women are now working in “all spheres”, they are encouraged “to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature” because their participation in “cultural life” is important in society (65). The Church through *Gaudium et Spes* therefore acknowledges the role of women in the modern world particularly their participation in the workplace. They are expected to develop themselves in society for their wellbeing and that of others. In this sense, *Gaudium et Spes* is in sympathy with the implied endorsement in the novels of the need for the emancipation of women. However, such developments relate to the tradition of the
Church that highlights the values of Christian spirituality. These values necessitate alignment to constructive actions or affirmative solutions that promote the common good. The Church acknowledges however that “it is sometimes difficult to harmonize culture with Christian teaching” (66); the integration of the values of Christian spirituality to society is not without challenges as shown in the images of marriage and family. This suggests further that the structures of marriage and family as traditional institutions in society undergo transformations in the face of social change as reflected in the novels. And to keep the balance of a person’s dual nature and inner contentment, all forms of physical-material developments in the world must keep pace with the non-physical spiritual advancements for humanity’s positive vision for continuity and a meaningful existence. The novels recognize a person’s spiritual need for enlightenment from life’s harsh realities, and they suggest that the attainment of aspirations for humanity’s permanence and stability through instincts and individual power alone is less certain unless there is a consideration as well of the spiritual dimension.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets

Hostile forces in society, like commodification, inhuman workplace conditions, unfair labour practices, and rugged individualism from her family, with verbal and physical abuse, challenge Maggie in Crane’s eponymous novel. Nevertheless, she is represented as possessing gentleness, inner goodness and spirituality. Her transgression signifies willpower and freedom, though the path she chooses paves the way to her tragedy. Her situation is juxtaposed to the path taken by Nellie, an underclass woman like Maggie who survives because she resists societal forces, with her sisterhood involvement and assertive stance over men like Pete. Maggie’s spirituality is in her inherent goodness as a person, allied with her appetite for romance and the experience of the female in melodramas that she connects to her own condition in the Bowery.

The House of Mirth

Wharton’s heroine Lily has a privileged status in a dominant male culture, a reflection of consumerism and excess. However, like Maggie, Lily experiences commodification by the men in her society and rugged individualism from her own family. Her descent from high society is due to societal pressures Maggie also experiences. Lily intrudes into the male sphere (by smoking, gambling, and receiving a married man’s money). She is an image of purity physically and symbolically. She refrains from all dirty tricks for material convenience, and even uses her inheritance to pay off an unnecessary debt. Her condition, however, suggests “a sense of deeper
impoverishment - of an inner destitution compared to which outward conditions dwindled into insignificance” (Wharton 291). The novel acknowledges a need for a deepened spirituality to replenish an inner vacuum and satisfy a thirst for meaning. Lily’s defiance of societal forces is an expression of willpower that compromises self-preservation and continuity. Her resistance to society’s oppressive forces is an assertion of the human will. Her spirituality is evident in that, despite her need for material things and social acceptance, she will consider marriage only where love is present.

**Madame Bovary**

Flaubert’s Emma is a member of the bourgeois class but is financially challenged. She borrows funds from other people and loses track of her debts because she values money only for what it symbolises in relation to her quest for something more. Emma feels the oppression of capitalistic practices and commodification. She regrets her marriage to Charles because they are intellectually incompatible. Charles supports Emma and their daughter with his hard-earned income, but consumerism and excess paves the way for Emma’s insolvency that results in the appropriation of her family’s properties. She has relations with men who perceive her as a sexual object. These relations are a reflection of her desire for spiritual fulfilment that is merely diverted to the worldly enticements, passion, and romance in attempts to create similar opportunities with men in society.

Emma’s radicalism as a woman is exemplified in her boldness in challenging social expectations in her search for inner contentment. Despite her dominant role in marriage and romantic relationships, Flaubert’s depiction of spirituality in the narrative is in the purity of Emma’s motives in these relationships. She does not show ill will or grudges to the men who discard her like an object. She reveals a
generous heart with her fondness for gift offerings as symbols of her love. Her spirituality is in her courage to uphold her dignity and self-respect as a person as shown when her sexuality is challenged in her desperate need of financial freedom. So although the concept of victimhood suggests an implacable domination by societal forces, she exhibits moments of freedom and willpower as evidenced in her transgressions and relationships with men. Her exercise of free will is in her defiance against societal expectations in relation to her role as woman-wife and mother in her quest for individual fulfilment and inner contentment.

The Awakening

Chopin’s Edna has close affinities with Emma in her relationship with her husband, her strikingly modern perspective on childrearing and resistance to social expectations as a mother-wife, her artistic bent, and her societal transgressions. Both protagonists clamour for freedom from marital domesticity because they feel there are paths for a woman’s imagination other than within the household. Both women experience limited social possibilities and they envy the roles reserved for men in society.

Edna’s spirituality links to her struggle for honesty from an empty marriage by trying to live an independent life where she experiences a “sense of having risen in the spiritual” (Chopin 104). Her spiritual expression relates to her quest for love and honesty in relationships and in her desire for acceptance of her uniqueness and individuality as a woman in a society free from preconceptions. Her implicit feminism is brought about by the psychological oppression she feels from her husband who considers her his property. Her longing for spiritual regeneration is shown at her last dinner in her conjugal house when she senses an inner vacuum in the midst of her guests. Her spirituality is awakened in Grand Isle when she
communes with nature and begins “to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and [to] recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin 16).

Edna’s inner goodness and spirituality is therefore shown in her desire for honesty, independence, and self-actualization over a comfortable but hypocritical marital reality. Both Edna and Emma have relations with men who perceive them as sexual objects. These relations are a reflection of the female soul’s need for spiritual fulfilment that is merely diverted to worldly enticements, passion, and romance in their struggle for the same privileges society accords men.

**Suicide**

The lives of all four heroines end in untimely deaths, each of which might be called suicide, but none of them is presented without ambiguity. These deaths are a narrative crucible for the questions of agency versus determinism, spirituality, and the position of women in the novels.

The death of Flaubert’s Emma is the clearest case of suicide of the four. However, she swallows the arsenic out of impulse, an act that is not exactly deliberate, making Flaubert’s portrayal of her suicide pregnant with ambiguity as well. One reason for her action is that she considers death a romantic female gesture as reflected in the sentimental fiction she reads. The suicide of the other three female protagonists suggests ambiguity because it is difficult to classify them as accidental or deliberate. The most controversial among the female suicides is that of Crane’s Maggie because it can be construed as either suicide or homicide. The clearest indication that her death is suicide is that she is described as heading straight to the dark river, well-dressed.
For Wharton’s Lily, the suicide is ambiguous because it can be interpreted as either deliberate or accidental. Her motive to increase the chloral dosage is to have a good sleep. At the same time, she knows the danger of increased dosage. There is free will in her tragic fate because of her obsession for total darkness after her social descent. Her suicide is similar to Maggie’s because it indicates that a rejection of the physical self suggests a spiritual dearth that needs overhaul for a meaningful life as suggested by her deepest longings for stability and permanence.

There is also ambiguity in Edna’s suicide because the female protagonist goes further away from the seashore towards the deep seas or she is near the seashore because she hears familiar voices implying that she must have come back. However, there is involvement of free will in her death because while in the deep seas, she resolves never again to be possessed by her family except the object of her love, Robert, whom she cannot have because he is no longer a reality in her life with his decision to be rid of her for good.

The female protagonists therefore are responsible for their own fate through their choices even if these choices are contrary to their well-being. Their suicide is ambiguous and controversial because it is construed as either accidental or deliberate in the novels. The authors’ intent in regard to the portrayal of the ambiguity of deaths in the novels allows the literary reader or critic some flexibility in regard to the examination or interpretation of the protagonists’ conclusion. The sense of disconnection they experience is the result of the “breakdown of conventional frameworks such as the family and community structures” (de Souza 270) in their individual situation.
Agency

Despite the socio-cultural disadvantages experienced by the female protagonist, her tragic fate is the result of her choice, and her misdirected passions and quest for individuality and self-fulfilment suggest a need for something more, which links to the spiritual dimension of her nature. And although naturalism highlights the representation of social realities to promote social awareness, the claim that determinism and materialism dominate the representation of the human condition in these novels is an overstatement. There is no persuasive suggestion in the chosen novels that the protagonists’ fates are already determined, because the choices they make in their interplay with societal forces suggest moments of willpower. These “forces” therefore do not have total control of the protagonists’ situation. Their choices are juxtaposed to the choices of other important characters who exemplify their aspirations for survival and continuity. The depiction of the choices of the protagonists’ friends is a contrast to the protagonists’ choices which suggest instances of human will that direct the path towards their tragic fate. Thus, contrary to naturalism’s core thought of “pessimistic determinism”, the novels challenge determinism through the protagonists’ defiance against perceived roles in society which are highly patriarchal in nature. The novels defy determinism and reveal “goodness” rather than the corruption within the human being. The protagonists’ transgression indicates their resistance to the repressive female condition within the male-centred status quo, and this resistance signifies female agency and human will.

The heroines therefore do challenge orthodoxy and social constraint, and in this sense have agency, but they do so for reasons they do not fully understand – certainly not as a political programme – and in a way that leads only to death, and presents itself finally as a not-even-deliberate choice to end their own lives. This might best be
called tragic agency. Some other models presented in the novels of minor female characters live apparently fulfilled lives within social constraints. It is in the heroines, however, that a second main claim is made: that an irreducible spiritual dimension asserts itself in some individuals in defiance of a modern urban industrialised society directed towards material prosperity. This spirituality bears traces of origins in the Christian tradition, most notably in the purity of motive shown in the heroines, derive from the idea of a human soul made in the image of a Divine Creator that Gaudium et Spes upholds (13).

The inclusion of literature, creative arts, music and painting in the novels contributes to the heroines’ reservoir of spirituality. Gaudium et Spes highlights the role of literature and creative arts for humanity because of their “great importance to the life of the church” and the development of culture in society as a whole (67).

**Spirituality**

Spirituality as portrayed in the novels has allusions to the spirituality as defined in the Catholic Gaudium et Spes which links to the quest for the “true, good and beautiful” in humanity (85). The novels under study have an implied message about the common good of humanity that is why they present a commentary on the flaws of Christian spirituality with the portrayal of characters such as the church representatives fraught with imperfections. This suggests that the spiritual ideals of the Vatican document are executed imperfectly not just by ordinary citizens but also by the custodians of the church in the novels. As discussed in the chapters on women, for instance, the Catholic priest fails to give advice to Emma when she approaches him for spiritual enlightenment on her problems. Emma’s orientation of Catholic spirituality as a young woman is on the reading of serious Catholic materials (i.e. Catechism) she does not find very exciting as it requires learning by rote. This idea is perhaps a commentary on the approach of Catholic instruction for the young women in the nunnery.
At her deathbed, however, Emma implores the compassion of Jesus Christ – demonstrating her orientation of the Christian spirituality. In *Maggie*, Christian spirituality is attacked because the female protagonist’s brother considers the Catholic spiritual ideal of submission or obedience contrary to the physical power he advocates. Maggie approaches a priest for guidance or help, but she is dismissed by the priest as if she has a contagious disease. Like Emma, the act of approaching a priest for direction shows that her spiritual orientation is Christian. Her inherent goodness as a person remains intact despite her struggle for love from her family and freedom from poverty. Her patriarchal society is an example of a world that tolerates female oppression and dehumanization. On the other hand, Lily’s high society presents people who hear the Catholic Mass on a Sunday as a holiday of obligation. However, when Lily misses the Mass once, she is being criticized and gossiped at by the same people in her society. Lily’s implicit attendance at Mass is a manifestation of her Catholic Christian spirituality. Her integrity as a person remains intact despite the malicious gossip about her. Edna is also surrounded by Catholic people, the Creole, who uphold the values of the Church in regard to family and gender relations. However, Edna seems to value her freedom more than the mores of her patriarchal society she finds limiting to her creativity. She values independence for herself and for her children. *Gaudium et Spes* believes in the contribution of women to society, and this is shown in the novels. *Gaudium et Spes* serves as a guide on Christian spirituality with a focus on man’s search for the “true, good and beautiful” (85). It links spirituality directly to the questions about family, marriage, society in relation to male and female roles and social positions raised in the novels. The novels are a portrayal of social realities where the strong and dominant represented by the men in society make women question the roles that limit them as well as challenge them to assert their rights as persons with dignity, freedom and integrity. The novels suggest that in reality, people, despite their church orientation, do
commit suicide, an idea that connotes that their Christian spirituality is anchored on a weak foundation or is in question. This implies that despite a Christian spiritual orientation, some people do not choose continuity and self-preservation. This idea of reality is shown in the novels.

The naturalist writer may be less fully aware than the church-based writers of the Catholic document such as *Gaudium et Spes* of connections to the spiritual element because of the focus on the visible-physical dimensions perhaps for narrative-objective effect. However, the novels suggest that tension exists between the physical and spiritual human dimensions if freedom is tilted more towards the physical. To achieve balance to a person’s dual nature suggests a recognition of the role of spirituality (as defined in *Gaudium et Spes*) to meet “the deepest longings of the human heart, which is never fully satisfied by what this world has to offer” (39), the same message the naturalistic novels under study want humankind to reflect on in order to nurture and deepen their spirituality to still their troubled hearts. *Gaudium et Spes* highlights the good of the human person with the acknowledgment of divine will, the same aspiration literary naturalism conveys for humanity, with its focus, however, on individual will. The criticism on literary naturalism’s reductionist treatment of the non-physical spiritual dimension and intense focus on the physical social realities therefore point to the same aspiration that *Gaudium et Spes* projects – the betterment of the human condition and humanity as a whole.
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