Having Her Dinner and Eating It Too: Edna’s Last Dinner Party

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Abstract

The presence and function of Edna’s dinner party in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* is the subject of our investigation. We view the idea of the “dinner party” as an unnatural effort to move the public sphere into the intimate domestic space, examine the economic dimensions of the dinner party and Edna’s dependence on her husband’s wealth, question the absence of food served at the party and the effects of alcohol on Edna and her guests, and analyze the repercussions of the dinner party on Edna’s emotional state. I argue that the dinner party is a performance of Edna’s wealth and status. Unfortunately for Edna, the dinner party fails to validate her as an independent woman, focusing on the ways in which men at the dinner party stifle Edna’s efforts. Ultimately, Edna’s unsuccessful dinner party leaves her with an overwhelming sense of ennui because it has not provided her with a sense of autonomy or agency. Using the framework of a dinner party, I reveal the pitfalls of the relationship between women and domesticity and the obstacles facing the New Woman. This analysis draws from research concerning class complexities in the role and expectations of the late-nineteenth century housewife, economic analysis of the effects of industrialism on the domestic sphere, historical context revealed through primary sources, and a close reading of the dinner scene.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Having Her Dinner and Eating It Too:
Edna’s Last Dinner Party

by

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HAVING HER DINNER & EATING IT TOO:

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**................................................................................................................................. 7

Domestic Expectation .......................................................................................................................... 7
Class Complexities in *The Awakening* ............................................................................................. 11

**Invitations into the Private** .......................................................................................................... 16

The Promise of a Dinner Party .......................................................................................................... 16
The Coup d’Etat .................................................................................................................................. 19

**Setting the Table** ......................................................................................................................... 21

The Housewife as Consumer ............................................................................................................. 21
The Table as Metaphor ....................................................................................................................... 23

**Dinner is Served** ............................................................................................................................ 24

Women as Decor & Men as Monopolizers ......................................................................................... 24
Alcohol and Desire ............................................................................................................................. 25

**Cleaning Up** .................................................................................................................................. 28

The After Party .................................................................................................................................... 28

**Works Cited** ..................................................................................................................................... 33
Yet I too have that secret life, that center that at times seems undercooked, moments of feeling like a cake that cannot rise. And the frosting is a kind of toxic loyalty where I struggle with the ingredients in a recipe handed down to me for how to be a woman.

-Dianne Shipley De Cillis, *Missing Ingredients*
Introduction

Domestic Expectation

I know nothing about my great-great-great grandmother except that she was born in 1811. I have photocopies of her recipes, handwritten in fading ink, stained with cooking oil and smeared sauces. They are not clear instructions. They do not include measurements or cooking times, but I follow them by instinct: I know the amount of salt or nutmeg to sprinkle because I know how the house should smell when I sauté an onion. I know how polenta should fall from the spoon—in long, thick ribbons—when it is done. I know how dough begins to feel under your palm when you have kneaded it enough and are erring on the side of overworked gluten. I know these things because I have been taught them, intimately, since I was old enough to sit on a kitchen stool, by my mother and grandmother. These are the recipes, handed down to me, generations worth of them, that embody a tradition of female domestic labor. Women inherit a relationship with domestic labor tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, and so on. In many cases, the relationship is fraught and manufactured. These are unnatural responsibilities that have been passed on to women and passed over their male counterparts. Women’s inclusion in public, social and political society has been stunted for much of American history. Yet, in the private sphere, domestic labor offered an identity to assume and connected the value of womanhood with the health of their respective domestic commonwealths.

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1 I use this term after reading Thomas Strychacz’s Kitchen Economics: Women’s Regionalist Fiction and Political Economy. Strychacz refers to a “kitchen commonwealth” (7) which situates broad questions of political and economic thought in representations of American kitchens. I use the term domestic commonwealth to include all female-centered, private, domestic spaces in the house, including gardens,
In *Women and Economics* (1898), Charlotte Perkins Gilman shrewdly identifies the economic and gendered dimensions of American home life as systemic, and ultimately destructive to social progress: “We love [the home] with a love older than the human race. We reverence it with the blind obeisance of those crouching centuries when its cult began” (204). In the late nineteenth century, the New Woman was not happy in the home. She wanted a seat at the table, and she had to figure out how to get there. The figure of the New Woman challenged American women to achieve feminist objectives, to work vigorously, independently of husband and children, at a passion outside of the domestic sphere. In order to reclaim the domestic sphere, American women first had to give it up-- a challenging task because the idealization of the domestic sphere and domestic arts had been so embedded in American society. As society launched into the age of modernity, the United States advanced in technology and manufacturing, and so came the rise of urban living. Leaving behind the rural landscape meant shifting how income could be earned. With this shift, the tangible economic value of women’s

drawing rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms—anywhere where women work within the household. The concept of a “domestic commonwealth” is best illustrated by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Home: Its Work and Influence*. Gilman writes a description of the prototypical American woman, presiding over the hearth “to maintain that altar fire” (37). While fire delivers warmth and provides a method to cook food and to sanitize, beyond the physical comforts, maintaining the hearth fire is also an apt metaphor for every task which contributes to the health of the home in general. The hearth fire is the center of life for the American family. Therefore, we can see women tending to that altar fire as a moral necessity for the continuation of the American family in the 19th century.
domestic labor\(^2\) declined. More men began providing for households by working outside the homestead in the public sphere. When they returned home in the evening, order in the domestic sphere stood to directly counterbalance the barbarity of poverty and the immorality of industrialism. The home and the housewife were emblems of a heaven on earth, but that symbol belied reality for women who had limited prospects and no escape from the domestic sphere.

The late nineteenth century also saw the rise in a new field of study, “home economics.” Ellen Swallow Richards emerged as a leading voice in home economics in the 1890s. Her efforts were fueled by the growing concern that American homes, and the moral order which they upheld, was threatened by the values associated with industrialism and capitalism. In her essay “The Social Significance of the Home Economics Movement,” Richards describes the losses American society experienced:

Gone out of it are the industries, gone out of it are ten of the children, gone out of it in large measure is that sense of moral and religious responsibility which was the keystone of the whole. (124)

The conservative vision of female domesticity in response to industrialization meant that women would come to transfer principles of industrial capitalism into the home. At its core, home economics would ensure that domestic labor was efficient and enhanced, drawing on scientific methods for routine domestic processes, economic approaches for budgeting, and specialized nutrition as guiding principles. Furthermore, home economics would ensure sacred

\(^2\) For more critical insight into the fraught relationship between women’s domestic labor and the American labor system, see Barker, Drucilla. Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Economics. United Kingdom, Routledge, 2003.
morality. In *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America*, Carolyn Goldstein argues that the home economists "strove to preserve nineteenth-century ideas about morality that were cast in their own image" (2) and sought "to help what they perceived as an erosion of the moral authority of women as producers" (30). Home economics was a direct response to the uncertainty that modernity posed to American home life and reinforced the necessity of the home’s moral influence. This ideology permeated nineteenth-century society and perpetuated the moral linkage between women and the domestic sphere that was being challenged. Most apparent is the striking reaction in female writers in the late nineteenth century who articulated the struggle against the expectation of women’s proper placement in the home, which had been so rooted in American society. However helpful Home Economics was and continues to be, the origins of the field were located within a time frame when women, more than ever, began entering higher education, and so the concentration invigorated women’s preoccupation with the domestic arts. In addition to Home Economics, concerns about the decoration of homes as both a symbol of order and social status emerged. The housewife turned into Interior Designer and became a guarantor of good taste. Thus, lacking the necessary and genuine outlets for expression outside the home, the American woman distracted herself with illusions of purpose in the domestic arts.

When I began to write this thesis, I wanted to investigate the primary site of women’s oppression: the home. My research was founded upon two premises. First, no one can find happiness where they do not perceive freedom or selfhood. Second, women’s domestic servitude in America is systemic, the result of an oppressive history of religious and economic structures. I found that when the value of American women was irrevocably attached to their performance in the domestic sphere, they had no choice but to participate. Without education and therefore
opportunities to enter lucrative spheres in the workforce, the landscape of a changing American society was bleak for women who were trapped in the domestic. Literature of the late-nineteenth century and into the twentieth century is rife with representations of women’s discontent and offers fertile ground for analysis. We can see in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* how the art of doing nothing quickly disintegrates the human spirit. Charlotte Perkins Gilman clearly articulated the oppressive domestic expectations in her fiction and nonfiction, offering solutions to women’s discontent across class boundaries. She offers astute commentary on the psychological effects these middle and upper-class white women experienced. She writes, “human labor is an exercise of faculty, without which we should cease to be human; that to do and to make not only gives deep pleasure but is indispensable to healthy growth” (157). While domestic traditions can be seen as celebratory rituals, the result of a lack of meaningful human labor translates domestic ideology into a disconcerting practice. Housewives defined by discontent, lack of self-realization, and depression amongst middle and upper class are unable to maintain selfhood.

**Class Complexities in *The Awakening***

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* was published in 1899. At the time it was not well received, but by 1985 the novel had been included in three of the four major college anthologies (Corse 140). The tale of the housewife who drowns, both literally and metaphorically, represents the fate that awaited women who were unprepared to face life outside domestic expectations. In the private domestic spheres of all households, there are complex power structures and modes of participation that differ among the working, middle and upper class. The commodification of working-class women’s domestic skills shows how domestic labor shifted with the rise of the white middle-class after the Industrial Revolution. Typical employment for working class
women and women of color could be found in middle and upper-class homes. This reveals not only the narrow scope of opportunity, but also the conceptualization of race and class boundaries in America. Working class women were not “housewives” because they were not financially capable of remaining in their respective domestic spheres all day: work called them out of the home.

A key indication of wealth and privilege was the removal of middle and upper-class women from both the public workforce and all domestic tasks. For example, a cartoon illustration in the New York Times review of The Joy of Cooking in 1944, in which a white woman gracefully lolls on a sofa, reading the seminal cookbook, while her maid scowls from a steamy kitchen (Mendelson). The ideology symbolized in the image resonates with a discourse associated with white middle- and upper-class housewives. Perusing a cookbook out of interest rather than necessity is an inherent privilege which industrialism afforded a select group of American women. That the New York Times published this cartoon well into the twentieth century underscores the white, middle, and upper-class hegemonic housewife identity and its reverberations throughout American society. Women of this class did not actually perform or complete routine domestic tasks themselves. Instead, they employed other women to do so. Middle and upper-class women managed the household, housekeepers, and governesses, but had little exposure to domestic labor itself. Kay Boardman puts it plainly:

The cult of domesticity demonstrated that the domestic middle-class women's role had meaning because of what it represented rather than because of what she actually did. (154)

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3 There is much more we need to learn about the experiences of poor women and women of color; therefore, I acknowledge that the people who serve at the dinner party remain largely unseen, and this too requires attention, but is beyond the scope of my research.
By emphasizing the symbolic role of the housewife, Boardman argues that the fundamental concept of the home relies on the people who occupy and create it, and so, within the traditional reverence for the American home, there was a reverence for a class of American women which could only be attained through performances of domesticity, rather than actual domestic labor.

Placing middle-class white women at the center of this thesis pushes out women of color and other classes. My purpose is not to excuse or explain women like Edna Pontellier. Nor is it my intention to overlook the ways in which The Awakening dramatizes racist realities. Mostly, I think that we must consider the irony of a class of housewives who were believed to be experts of domestic labor but actually and largely did nothing. Here I want to mark a pathway of analyzing the privilege of being white and being a woman and think about the ways in which we might see this identity in other ways. I do not want to focus solely on Edna’s identity, but also on the performance of that identity and the systemic and institutionalized ideologies which it upholds. In The Awakening, there is an intersection of class and gender ideologies, and the way those ideologies mingle with domestic expectation. Edna is reluctant to fulfill her domestic duty, however minimal and performative it may be. Within Edna, there is a severe “juxtaposition of ‘compulsory’ and ‘voluntary’ motherhood” (Heilmann 97). She is neither a natural mother nor is she compelled to care for her children other than buying them sweets. She refuses “to sacrifice herself” for them (115). Furthermore, Edna allows “the housekeeping to go to the dickens” (67) - - not that she actually does any housekeeping. Emily Toth writes that Chopin’s work is a meditation on “moral questions” (252) concerning the late-nineteenth century woman. Edna Pontellier acts as a foil to the moral housewife. She is a failure. She does not take care of the house; she has servants for that. She does not take care of her children; she has a governess for that. She does not support her husband; she shamelessly spends his money. To compound her
rejection of and failure within the domestic realm, Edna also fails to affirm the independence of the New Woman. She is a perfect tragedy. She cannot maintain independence. She is a compulsive spender (of her husband’s money). Her artistic endeavors are superficial. She lacks creative focus and distracts herself with illusory love affairs. Charlotte Perkins Gilman argues that “women are not underdeveloped men, but the feminine half of humanity is undeveloped human” (*Forerunner*). Edna lacks a developed sense of selfhood that one derives from meaningful work. Bored housewives like Edna Pontellier reveal the plight of the late nineteenth-century white, upper-class woman. She, who has been given every privilege besides autonomy, becomes indolent. Edna, trapped by domestic expectation, wishes to be free. But she is apprehensive, ill-prepared, and too lazy to explore total freedom. As a symptom of her class, Edna experiences an overwhelming sense of ennui as she faces the meaninglessness of her existence.

Enter the dinner party, the ultimate performance of domestic labor. The housewife we will examine prepares for the dinner party by planning a menu which she will not cook herself; she selects china, cutlery and table decor but does not set the table; she decides to serve a festive cocktail which she does not make for herself. Her husband, not present at the dinner party, pays for everything. The dinner party exists as a microcosm of the domestic: an event that beholds and advertises all the charm of the domestic sphere and celebrates the art of the domestic. The presence and function of the dinner party in *The Awakening* is the subject of our investigation. Edna Pontellier plans and hosts an event for a group of her acquaintances after deciding to move out of her husband’s home. The dinner party is Edna’s last hurrah as woman of the house. Although Edna believes her efforts in the affair will be celebrated and yield a sense of joy which has been missing from her life, closer inspection of the dinner party scene shows an
understanding of the moving parts involved in generating Edna’s overwhelming ennui. Under the guise of domestic labor, Edna’s planning and hosting turns brings her nothing but discontent.

For the sake of clarity and concision, I have divided my discussion of this scene into several sections: “Invitations into the Private: The Promise of a Dinner Party” scrutinizes the idea of the “dinner party” as an unnatural effort to move the public sphere into the intimate domestic space; “Setting the Table” looks at the economic dimensions of the dinner party and the function of Edna’s dependence on her husband’s wealth; “Dinner is Served” analyzes the absence of food served at the party and the effects of alcohol on Edna and her guests; and “Cleaning Up” focuses on the repercussions of the party on Edna’s emotional state and the “after party” at her pigeon house. So, with that, let us go to dinner.
Invitations into the Private

The Promise of a Dinner Party

Lynn Bloom writes in “The Dinner Hours” that the promise of a dinner party is the possibility that “our lives might...against all odds and expectations, burst open and give us everything we’ve ever imagined” (4). Bloom investigates dinner parties in a wide range of literature and seeks to find the romantic chance, the familial bonds, the deepening of friendship and intimate ritualistic meaning of the meal. Ultimately, the promise of a dinner party is the hope of connection. As housewives struggle to connect with the public sphere, the dinner party “seeks to ‘bring people together’ because they are unnaturally kept apart” (Home 195). Nevertheless, the constructed experience of the dinner party rests on the shoulders of the hostess, who must orchestrate the series of pleasures-- aural, visual, gastronomical, conversational, and otherwise-- to make her guests feel not only welcome in private but also entertained. Especially in dinner parties in middle and upper-class homes, there is an overwhelming sense of extravagance and of establishing your class through your performance. At the “grand dinner,” Edna advertises “everything that you like to eat and to drink. We shall sing and laugh and be merry for once” (209). In this promise to Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna believes that the cocktails, dinner menu, and fancy chairs she brings out will contribute to the general tenor of the party. However, this is a loaded promise, and more figuratively, what Enda is promising is to reassert her position of wealth and status through her performance at the dinner party.

As we examine the effects of Edna's celebratory dinner in The Awakening, there is little to claim as positive or productive. The conversation is superficial, and Victor’s singing drives Edna nearly to tears. There are only two certain consequences of the party. The first is the
reassertion of Edna’s class status. The second is a paralyzing sense of ennui— a realization that what Edna believed the dinner party could accomplish was unachievable.

Edna’s dinner party is an attempt at welcoming the public into her private, domestic sphere. Before the dinner party, Edna Pontellier has moved further and further away from her responsibilities as a housewife. Throughout the novel, her detachment from her husband, children, and domestic expectations increases. She seeks “refuge” (252) and companionship with Mademoiselle Reisz. Reisz is a social pariah, an unmarried musician who encourages both Edna’s affair with Robert and her artistic endeavors. Reisz understands Edna’s desire for freedom but also warns Edna that such freedom— artistic and otherwise— requires vast bravery. Reisz, unlike Edna, lacks the need for social validation; she does not seek the company of others, and the extent of Reisz’s social connections are the parties at which she plays the piano. On the other hand, as hostess Edna seeks to entertain and to charm.

When Edna finally musters the courage to move out of her husband’s home, a home which has become a place in which a “thousand muffled voices bade her begone” (220), she decides to throw a dinner party. The promise of Edna’s dinner party is the hope for connection and within that connection there is her desire to be welcomed by the public. It provides an opportunity for Edna to make connections without her husband, to write her narrative and receive validation in the process. She does not just leave her husband’s home and focus on living the life of an artist and becoming the successful painter she hopes to be. Instead, she plans a dinner to gain validation from the public as she endeavors to become a free woman. Although it may seem like her departure from Léonce’s home is the ultimate symbolic act of turning her back on domesticity, Edna celebrates the feat, quite ironically, by performing one of the penultimate acts of housewifery: the dinner party. This dinner celebrates the beginning of Edna’s
new life as an independent woman, almost like her debutante ball. Her expectations are, of course, not met, a fact which we will return to later in “The After Party.”

Simultaneous changes in American economic and home life occurred after the Industrial Revolution, wherein, in order to invent value in domestic labor, religious and moral rhetoric produced feminine ideals which could only be attained in the domestic sphere⁴. These ideals were upheld by white middle and upper-class Protestants, who encouraged female piety, purity, and submissiveness. Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains the abnormality of domestic entertainment in *The Home: Its Work and Influence* as “an effort to meet a natural craving in an unnatural way” (195). Social connection cannot be accomplished in isolation, so housewives, alienated from a world of social interaction in the public sphere, had to create opportunities for social contact. What is interesting about Edna’s dinner party is that it has the potential to do two things. First, it provides Edna with the sense of social connection and attention she has lost since Robert has gone to Mexico. Secondly, the dinner party provides Edna with validation as she embarks on her journey toward independence. However, we come to see that the dinner party will do neither.

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⁴ Kay Boardman covers a range of ideological representations from the Victorian era in her work “The Ideology of Domesticity: The Regulation of the Household Economy in Victorian Women's Magazines,” including the gendered division of work, the woman at the center of homelife, and the construction woman’s role in the new consumer economy. She also analyzes religious and evangelical rhetoric in literature of the time.
The Coup d’Etat

When Mademoiselle Reisz asks Edna her true reason for leaving her husband’s home to live in the “pigeon house” down the street, Reisz asserts that Edna is not being honest with herself. Edna "did not protest or endeavor to justify herself" but simply states, "The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine. Isn't that enough reason?" (207). Edna struggles to articulate the impetus for deciding to leave her husband’s home. She can only circle around the issue. Reisz gives Edna space to think about her decision. The answer “unfolded itself” and Edna feels that it was “instinct” which had enabled her to “put away her husband's bounty in casting off her allegiance” to him (208). In that moment of brief clarity, Edna “resolved never again to belong to another than herself” (208) and she removed herself from all responsibility toward her home, husband, and children. Ironically, as she turns her back on the domestic, she also takes the opportunity, since her husband is away, to plan a dinner party in her honor. Ironically, Edna is still a kept woman, and the dinner party is not the fruit of her own labor. Unfortunately, visible in this dinner party is the bitter revelation that Edna wants to draw the public in, transgressing against her husband.

The dinner party is referred to as a “coup d’état” (223) by both Alcée Arobin and Edna, and the “crime” is as follows: housewives of the late-nineteenth century rarely owned the homes in which they lived, and although it is not explicit, we can assume Edna did not own her home with Léonce. The home was instead dominated by the male figure whose ownership of the home was a right to privacy. When men left their private property and entered the public sphere, housewives were tasked with upholding that ideological privacy. Edna, in allowing the public into Léonce’s house in his absence, overthrows his right to that privacy. Although Edna writes to her husband to tell him about her desire to move out and hold the dinner party, expressing her
perhaps sardonic regret “that he was not there to share it, to help out with the menu and assist her in entertaining the guests” (214), she does not wait for Léonce’s permission before proceeding with either event. Furthermore, this move represents “a feminist adjustment of the law that dispossessed women of their most basic rights” (Heilman 94) -- namely, the right to decide what they can and cannot do.

After Léonce receives the letter, he writes to Edna about the social repercussions of her decision and begs Edna “to consider, first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say” (243). Weighing most heavily on Léonce’s mind is the “incalculable mischief” Edna’s behavior could wreak on “his business proposals” (243). Léonce’s proposed fix is to begin remodeling their home, which gives logical reasons for Edna’s move, and upon his return, retreats to a vacation abroad. Edna agrees to his instruction, believing that Léonce “handled it with his well-known business tact and cleverness” (244). As we will see in “Setting the Table,” Edna and Léonce are intimately connected not by any emotional bonds but purely financial ones. His control over Edna is secured when he forces her to consider his financial integrity. Edna’s relationship to the material world is the only relationship she actually cherishes, and we will see in “Setting Up” the role consumerism plays in binding Edna to her husband.
Setting the Table

The Housewife as Consumer

Rebranding the domestic restored reverence for the tasks which, in the modern age, contributed little to the progress of an industrial society. The amount of time working the daily grind and toil outside the home generated the feeling that returning to at the end of a long day, one might find solace. Tending to that little piece of heaven was the American woman. In Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century Laura Shapiro illustrates this ideal:

[T]he domestic hearth became the most grandiose, the most important, the most influential place on earth during this era, because only an image of that immensity could effectively counterbalance the real power of industrialism. (Perfection Salad 14)

Rebranding the domestic sphere meant delivering a torrent of new rhetoric which is evident in the amount of literature produced and circulated during the late 19th century: household manuals, cookbooks, magazine advertisements, newspaper articles, essays, and novels-- all of which served to construct a heavenly home culture that could be bought. If only you had the right napkins, your husband would surely be so kind at the dinner table, if only you had better plates, the children would behave, and so on. Popular magazines of the day such as Godey's Lady's Book exemplified this phenomenon. The extravagance is visible in the detailed suggestions for invitations (two-weeks’ notice at the very least), guest count, napkin color, and seating arrangements (round tables were preferable to square). The standard for etiquette was set
by Sarah Josepha Hale. In her forty-year run as editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, Hale wrote countless editorials and instructions on female domestic identity. She, and *Godey’s*, held close a perpetual faith in women’s role in creating a heaven at home. In her manifesto, *Manners; or, Happy Homes and Good Society* (1868), Hale insists rather romantically that “Love and home seem inseparable ideas”\(^6\) (13).

Ruth E. Finley, a Sarah Josepha Hale biographer, explains that the “real object” of *Manners*, in Hale’s own words, was to convince the American people “‘that a certain formality of manner, or etiquette as it is usually called, is…a mark of respect’” (272). Indeed, Hale, known for composing the popular nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” was certainly versed in the art of rhetoric. However, Ruth E. Finley laments the stodgy contents of *Godey’s*:

Turning through files of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, one wonders how any mind that could

\(^5\) That periodicals of the time like *Godey’s Lady Book* embedded moral ideals into its pages and promoted them through specific products and brands. In a similar way, contemporary periodicals promote unrealistic beauty standards to sell products.

\(^6\) Love in the home was becoming increasingly problematic in the late-nineteenth century. Ruth E. Finley explains of the era that “there was scarcely a household in which the struggle was not on for supremacy—between husband and wife…a struggle of bitterness, selfishness, unkindliness” (136). As nineteenth-century society struggled with moral change, so did the structure of home life. Samuel Dike, an American congressman and clergyman, writes in the *Journal of Social Science* that “in some of the States one divorce to every ten marriages [were] recorded” from 1880-1881 (3). Hale begrudged these statistics, describing the break from her idyllic home as “the desolated home” (*Manners* 307). The American family’s negligence towards morality was unjustifiable to her; She believed it was no one’s fault but the husband and wife’s “when the leaves of love and trust are swept from the domestic roof-tree by the autumn blasts of dislike, discord, and divorce” (*Manners* 307).
read the words could bring itself to peruse the meaningless trash scribbled by the majority. Rhetoric can be relied on to cover a multitude of lacks; in this art the Victorians excelled. (128)

Advertising in Godey’s Lady’s Book shows women carrying trays of cakes and using new kitchen utensils. The overarching idea in Godey’s is to solicit women to buy into the idea of domesticity. They needed the best sugar, the best flour, the best china so that they might wield these items with wild abandon in the domestic sphere. Thus, we see the rise of woman-as-consumer eager to fill her home with all the tools necessary for a happy home.

The Table as Metaphor

Edna fails to separate herself financially from her husband. In the moments proceeding her decision to separate herself physically from Léonce’s home, Edna begins removing “Whatever was her own in the house, everything which she had acquired aside from her husband’s bounty” and transporting it to her new house. The removal of Edna’s personal belongings leaves us to wonder how the party, which Edna has promised “all my best of everything-- crystal, silver and gold, Sèvres, flowers, music, and champagne to swim in” (223) can come to fruition. If Edna’s things have already been removed from the house, the dinner party will not feature Edna’s best of everything, but her husband’s best of everything. In fact, Edna says to her lover, Alcée, “I’ll let Léonce pay the bills. I wonder what he’ll say when he sees the bills” (223). Having your husband pay the tab on your goodbye party is not exactly New Woman material. If there is a void left by the dinner party, which we will explore in “The After Party,” it is the willful expectation that material objects will fulfill her. Consumerism is a toxic nostalgia that seduces Edna into ignoring a pathway to true freedom-- financial and emotional. However, the prison of consumerism only seems to satisfy her momentarily.
**Dinner is Served**

Women as Decor & Men as Monopolizers

At her dinner party Edna seeks to claim symbolic stature as an independent woman, distinguishing herself from her husband as she takes on the role of solitary host. The housewife exists in the domestic. So, when embarking to invite the public into the domestic, the housewife is tasked with socializing, an act in which she has little practice. Charlotte Perkins Gilman argues in *The Home: Its Work and Influence* that the irony of women throwing dinner parties lies in their inability to socialize, being so far removed from any true human connection:

> No true and invigorating social intercourse can take place among people who are cut off from real social activities, whose medium of contact is the utterly irrelevant and arbitrary performance of what they so exquisitely miscall "social functions." (212)

Edna’s advertising of the party as a “grand affair” pales when the night finally arrives. “It was in truth a very small affair” (225) with only ten total guests who were selected with “discrimination” (225). Though the proportion of men to women was even, the conversation at the table is monopolized by the male contingent. Indeed, we see the ways in which the women respond to the men talk about all the “inquisitive people and institutions abounding” (229). In response, Mrs. Highcamp stares with “languid but unaffected interest upon the warm and impetuous volubility” (231); Mademoiselle Reisz is concerned only with nourishing and drinking as her “interest seemed to be centered upon the delicacies placed before her” (230); and Mrs. Mayblunt’s sole contribution is to compliment the artfulness in which her cocktail has been “composed” (228). While the men talk about the public sphere, the women have limited ability to contribute to the broader cultural conversation. The women’s removal from the dinner conversation is only heightened by their dependence on the space and decor as conversation
pieces. Furthermore, the women themselves become the decor. The dining room, full of red and yellow roses, candles, and all of the silver and gold, serves as a stage for the women, who are compared to crystal that “glittered like the gems which the women wore” (227). Furthermore, the dining table itself mirrors Edna’s outfit. The table is dressed extravagantly with “pale yellow satin” peeking out from a lace tablecloth. Edna is dressed in a “satin gown” which shimmers golden, and is encircled by a “soft fall of lace” around her shoulders (231). She wears a “magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled, that almost sputtered, in [her] hair” (227), which Léonce has sent from New York for her birthday. Outfitted by the men around her, Edna thus becomes part of the visual feast. Exuding an air of regality, Edna is seen as the queen of this dinner party, but one must remember that all of which she dresses in, drinks from, sits on, and shares with her guests is not her own to give. Instead, Edna is participating in the performance of Léonce’s wealth and status. Understanding this, Edna does not announce her move at the dinner party. Instead, following Léonce’s strategic instruction, Edna reveals that it is her twenty-ninth birthday and asks her guests to toast to her. However, this becomes another opportunity for the men to take over. Edna’s effort to return the subject of the dinner to herself is slighted by Alcée Arobin. He says, in response to Edna’s request to drink to her health, “it might not be amiss to start out by drinking the Colonel’s health...on the birthday of the most charming of women—the daughter whom he invented” (228). Placing significance on the Colonel’s accomplishments again reveals how Edna is consistently defined in relation to the men around her, whether it be her husband or her father.

Alcohol and Desire

As Edna and her guests drink, the mood of the party changes. The romantic “splash of a fountain” and aromatic “heavy odor of jessamine” from the garden (231) fade into the
background. Edna sits back and merely exists as an onlooker to her own party. Edna “felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her” (232). The dinner party fails to inspire Edna. For her, the dinner party has taken on a life of its own outside her control. The men, taking charge of conversation, predict the failure Edna will experience in finding her own independence. It also suggests that the presence of her guests in her husband’s house produces no validation for her decision to abandon the domestic, emphasizing the fraught psychological state Edna finds herself in:

It was something which announced itself; a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords waited. 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 the unattainable. (232)

As this description implies, Edna is disconnected from the party and holding onto the memory of Robert Lebrun, her “beloved one.” The dinner party does not distract her from this “longing” but only worsens it. Directing our attention to the dinner party’s tonal shift, it is aligned with the increasing amount of alcohol being consumed. Sublette and Martin argue that eating and drinking habits are inherently ideological. At Edna’s dinner party, there is little mention of what food is served. Our attention is drawn to the drinks. There is much energy spent on the discussion of the cocktails, champagne, and “rich wines” she serves. We come to understand that Edna and her guests are over-imbibing, and as the effects of the alcohol escalate, so does the stress of the party on Edna. The demise of the already fabricated relationships being upheld at the party can be placed on the effects of alcohol.

Gouvernail, one of Edna’s guests “of which nothing special could be said, except that he was observant and seemed quiet and inoffensive,” (226) recites the first lines of Algernon
Charles Swinburne’s “A Cameo”: “The graven image of Desire / Painted with red blood on a ground of gold.” This reference not only reflects Edna’s red and yellow color scheme but signals the turning point of the party and a realization that what Edna desires—Robert Lebrun—will never be hers. The ominous lines that Gouvernail murmurs “under his breath” (234) are aimed at Victor LeBrun, Edna’s lover Robert’s younger brother. While Victor has been present at the dinner, he slips into “a reverie” as “the effect of the wine upon [him] was to change his accustomed volubility into silence (235). The women beg him to sing, and Victor’s choice of song harkens back to Edna’s memory of Robert, who once sang the same lines to her: “Ah! si tu savais!” (235). When Edna cries for Victor to stop, he does not listen. Consistent with Edna’s treatment throughout the evening, instead Victor “laughed and went on: “Ah! si tu savais / Ce que tes yeux me disent” (236). Edna stands up from her chair, places her hand over Victor’s mouth in one final stand. In response, Victor kisses her palm as it is pressed against his lips. This represents the rupture between courteous behavior. Edna then “lifted the garland of roses from his head and flung it across the room” (236). Edna makes this final attempt to gain control. The song Victor itself underscores Edna’s inability to understand what she wants. Loosely translated, the song lyrics are “If only you knew / What your eyes tell me.” Edna’s lack of understanding why she wants to move out of her husband’s home, her unreasonable attempt to host a dinner party, and lack of control over the dinner party force Edna to drink and pretend she is merry. In the end, as she throws the rose garland to the floor, we see that Edna has stayed too long at her own party. Her self-indulgent pursuit has failed to bring any real meaning or add any social connection to her life.
Cleaning Up

The After Party

Victor’s performance brings the evening to a close. As Edna’s guests make their way home, their voices “jarred like a discordant note upon the quiet harmony of the night” (237) in the streets, and our focus is on Edna, alone with Alcée, who had taken upon himself the role of host in Léonce’s absence. Impaired by alcohol and disillusioned by the dinner party upon which she had placed so much expectation, Edna is exhausted, “disheartened, and had nothing to say” (239). When Alcée suggests to Edna that she has “tried to do too much in the past few days” and she “might have dispensed with it” altogether (241), it is impossible to not sense the irony. Furthermore, his presence at the dinner is significant because readers sense he is standing in as Edna’s husband. Even under the guise of an independence ball, the dinner party is just like any other. Edna responds to Alcée solemnly, admitting “it was stupid” (241) to have the dinner party at all. She feels “chilled, and miserable...wound up to a certain pitch-- too tight-- and something inside of [her] had snapped” (241). After her interaction with Victor leaves her unnerved, Edna is left with an overwhelming sense of loss. Her dinner party did not fulfill its purpose. Questioning the outburst allows us to see the crux of the matter: Edna’s longing for Robert, and herein lies the problem. Edna derives a sense of agency from the men around her. A review in The Dial, a transcendentalist journal once edited by Margaret Fuller, sheds some clarity on why:

A woman is married without knowing it is to love. Her husband is kind but commonplace. He cares overmuch for the conventions of life; she, finding them a bar to the free development of her wayward personality, casts them off when “the awakening” comes to her, and discovers, too late that she has cast off the anchor which alone could have saved her from shipwreck. It is needless to say that the agency by which she
becomes awakened is provided by another man...To her distraught thinking, self-destruction is the only way out. (73)

In The Awakening, there’s no true liberation because Edna remains controlled, financially and emotionally, by and dependent on the men around her. After dismissing her servants, she decides to close up Léonce’s home and spend the night at the pigeon house, believing her retreat will make her feel better. She allows Alcée Arobin to escort her home. Unbeknownst to Edna, Alcée has decorated her pigeon house with flowers. Though surprised, Edna does not comment or extend her thanks. Instead, “seated herself with every appearance of discomfort” (240). Although the dinner party surely reveals Edna’s unmet desires, it also suggests her insecurity. Exhausted and unsatisfied by the dinner, Edna seeks to recuperate what has been lost, and she gives herself to Alcée. Although the housewife of Edna’s time was “totally defined by her sex (reproduction)”—her children – but also “sexless (devoid of sexual passion)” (Cott 19), Edna seems to find passion and meaning in her affairs, however fleeting it may be. It is much easier to distract herself with affairs rather than boldly set out on a new life as an artist. Edna’s failure to pursue her artistic passions, instead focusing on relationships with men, lead her down a destructive path. Ultimately, Edna led a “dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (78), but when Edna made the leap to move out of her husband’s, she did not accurately assess that the real conflict—which Chopin suggests stands between the New Woman and her freedom—was within herself. Edna’s sincere longing for elsewhere is never realized because unfortunately that “elsewhere” does not exist for Edna. Her explicit affairs do not lead her to a meaningful existence, but only strain Edna’s psychological state. To make matters worse, Edna receives a visit from Madame Ratignolle. Ratignolle tells her of the gossip circulating around town about Edna and Alcée’s affair. Edna’s investment in her position
in society is finally threatened when she learns that her reputation has been marred. Through the planning, performance, and after-effects of the dinner party, Edna’s dissociation from not only her husband and children, but also from herself begins to take shape.

Approaching Edna’s dinner party as a performance provides a canvas for examining the housewife’s relationship to both the domestic and public spheres. Edna is fundamentally motivated by her need for independence, connection, and validation. Her economic and emotional dependence on the men in her life underpins the complications that arise during and after the dinner party. The dinner party captures the complex relationship between Edna and the domestic sphere. She knows nothing else. Charlotte Perkins Gilman explains this attachment plainly:

Those who most conspicuously and entirely give themselves up to it are most wearied by it. They may develop a morbid taste for the game, which cannot be satisfied without it; but neither are they satisfied within it. (*The Home* 195).

Edna reaches, through her dinner party, for her independence. Edna does not rebel against the domestic but embraces it. She lacks fulfillment because she defines herself only in relation to the domestic or the men around her. From an Emersonian perspective, John Carlos Rowe sees Edna as an utter failure whose story “reveals only the futility of one’s knowledge” (13). She cannot see beyond a patriarchal society’s expectations of her. She oscillates between being a housewife, mother, and independent woman but remains unable to find success in any of these roles. Edna suggests the overwhelming sense of disillusionment and longing in the domestic sphere is a normal reaction to domestic oppression. The dinner party she throws is her last attempt at selfhood, but she fails. Her performance at her dinner party suggests Edna’s lack of control. Trapped between domestic ideals, societal constraints, and a lack of self-
understanding, Edna spirals into madness: she knows no other possible outcome. While traditional Victorian women like Sarah Josepha Hale criticized “girls be taught so ‘tomboy’ an art as swimming” (Hale 132), Edna, at the age of 28 and without the strength to bear the sea, swims out and we know that she does not make it back to shore. Chopin’s depiction of Edna’s ambiguous death at the end of the novel signifies Edna’s inability to live in a liminal state in society. Chopin writes that she “never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did” (Toth 277). If she returns to shore, her crumbling marriage awaits. Bearing the weight of responsibility and her tarnished reputation, Edna may see no other option. The New Woman, who wanted a seat at the table, had to reject the domestic sphere to succeed. The New Woman and the feminist objective have been historically obstructed by domesticity. Trapped in this inequitable cycle, women were made to find selfhood in their domestic roles, find the muse in the kitchen and meaning at the dining room. This is what women have been taught: recipes to follow, standards to achieve, unrealistic expectations to meet, but nothing of passion. Thinking of Edna Pontellier, we see the absence of passion. Indeed, she threw herself into affairs and fell in love, but we are not talking of that kind of passion. We are talking about the passion to pursue real endeavors. For Edna, her passion for painting fell flat against the weight of expectation. Perhaps this is because there was no one who had gone before her. Mademoiselle Reisz, although a successful artist, was a social pariah—a reality which Enda could not bear.

Womankind has inherited so much from its past that we call into question today. Standards of beauty and behavior are only the surface. Most significantly and intrinsically, we have inherited expectations, recipes for how to be a woman. An immeasurable number of young American women in the twenty-first century are made to feel they should possess, domestic
skills, even if they are traditions of the past. With what reverence have both women and men approach these tasks? This discussion inevitably leads to questions of oppression. Has domestic work been an impediment to women’s progress? Has it distracted womankind from gaining the maximum achievement possible—in society, politics, the workforce and, perhaps, most importantly, selfhood? The becomes a complicated conversation about who American women are, what experiences they share, and how they have endeavored to come to terms with life in a patriarchal society.

7 Coming from a long line of silk farmers, the women in my family have always taken up needlework, become expert seamstresses or embroiderers, or, at the very least, could patch a hole in a pair of trousers. I learned to sew in the third grade, and until recently, I had neither questioned why these skills—cooking and sewing—were not passed on to my three brothers nor realized that they thus lacked these methods of self-reliance and connections with their past.
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