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The Emergence of the New Woman in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Story of Avis*

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THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW WOMAN IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*
AND ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS' *THE STORY OF AVIS*

by

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Abstract

The following thesis focuses on two different nineteenth-century American texts: *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *The Story of Avis* by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. The main focus of this thesis is to explore the emerging New Woman figure in both novels. There is also notable consideration given to the traditional role of True Womanhood and its portrayal in both Chopin and Phelps' novels. The research found in this paper is from close readings of *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis* and the use of secondary sources such as books and literary criticisms pertaining to the topic. This thesis focuses on analyzing the female characters of both novels and assigning them the roles of either a "New Woman," a "True Woman" or a combination of both. Out of all the female characters present in *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis*, the most successful example of a New Woman is Chopin's character, Mademoiselle Reisz.

This document is divided into four chapters: "The Portrayal of Motherhood and True Womanhood," "The Importance of Sisterhood," "The Power of the Female Artist," and "The Influence of Sex and Marriage on the New Woman." Each chapter explores different feminine aspects of Chopin and Phelps' characters that encompass characteristics of either the New Woman or the more traditional philosophies of True Womanhood. This thesis suggests that in order to become a New Woman, a female must embody the strength to pursue her own individualism and create an identity outside of the domestic sphere.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW WOMAN IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*
AND ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS' *THE STORY OF AVIS*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of English

by

ALISON F. REIDY

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Montclair, NJ

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Introduction

In the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of changing the status quo emerged within the structure of feminism. A transition from the traditional role of women as wives and mothers became popular, and the idea of True Womanhood was questioned. Women began to seek a life outside of domesticity, and fight for more rights and freedom. Several literary works written during this time period reflected the shift in values; many authors wrote their female characters to be independent and challenge the patriarchal system. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "The Madwoman in the Attic" explores several female archetypes that are present in literature and the strides female writers have made in order to break their silence. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the end of the eighteenth century is crucial in reviewing the female author. Gilbert and Gubar note that "women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised" (Gilbert and Gubar 824).

Additionally, in "Reconsidering *The Awakening*: The Literary Sisterhood of Kate Chopin and George Egerton," Charlotte Rich affirms that "as scholars of the literary culture of the 1890s on both sides of the Atlantic concur, this decade was a time during which the identity of women, both in and outside of marriage, was richly contested. Debates about the institution of patriarchal bourgeois marriage filled the pages of mainstream periodicals of the day, and along with real examples of women leading newly independent lives, they gave rise to the movement classified as 'New Woman Fiction'" (Rich 126). Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' novel *The Story of Avis* both portray the conflict and struggle between the True Woman and the

New Woman. The important progression from the traditional framework of True Womanhood to the feminist ideology represented by the New Woman is reflected in the values and actions of the characters in both novels.

The concepts and thought process behind the New Woman emerged as a response to negate the rules of True Womanhood. The True Woman is defined as a woman who embraces the traditional roles of wife and mother, a concept explored by Ivy Schweitzer in her article, "Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*":

Female passionlessness was a staple feature of the Victorian cult of 'true womanhood,' and is re-enforced in this text by the modification of 'woman' by 'mother.' Women... are defined by their reproductive capacity and social caretaking role. They are meant to discover their identity through intimate relationships of interconnection, rather than through independence, autonomy and the self-definition of work. That is, their desire should not be directed towards themselves but always towards others, children, husbands, the romantic double. (Schweitzer 168 – 169)

Schweitzer's commentary on True Womanhood portrays how society viewed women for centuries. Traditionally and historically, women were bound to the domestic sphere as mothers and wives. They were considered second-class citizens, and were unable to live autonomously primarily due to financial reasons. In *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875 – 1930*, Jean V. Matthews explores the economic issues women faced: "As for women, their economic dependence had corrupted as well as enslaved them. Domestic confinement to the home had cut women off from all the

progressive activities that continued to improve the male... Women, on the other hand, confined to the home, worked in isolation at numerous unspecialized tasks, usually performed in much the same fashion as their grandmothers” (Matthews 82). While men were able to cultivate and explore their own talents, women were confined to their houses, unable to develop their individualism. The ideas of selflessness and sacrifice for others coincide with the traditional structure of True Womanhood. By accepting the fact that they were only identifiable as mothers and wives, women who embraced True Womanhood could never develop their own separate identities. However, the ideals of True Womanhood did not resonate with every woman, and thus the New Woman was born as a way to challenge these ideals that had remained in society for so long.

The New Woman is one who embodies independence and strives to create a life completely separate from the domestic sphere. She wants to rid herself of the burdens of being a mother and wife and embrace her independence and the freedom to pursue a more self-fulfilling and independent lifestyle. Rich defines the New Woman as “a figure who challenged Victorian notions of the angelic, domestic True Woman” (Rich 121). Rich’s statement can be clearly applied to both *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis*. Edna and Avis both question the idea of being an angel in the house, and strive to create their own independence.

Matthews declares that the term “New Woman” became mainstream in the late 1800s: “By the turn of the century, magazines and newspapers were filled with discussions of a new type of female personality: the ‘New Woman.’ The actual term seems to have been coined around 1894, but the type was instantly recognizable and the name immediately caught on. As a type, the New Woman was young, well educated,

probably a college graduate, independent of spirit, highly competent, and physically strong and fearless” (Matthews 13). There are several traits in Matthews’ definition of the New Woman that can be found in Phelps and Chopin’s female characters. Avis and her friend Coy both graduate from college and are considered well educated, and Mlle. Reisz is completely independent and unfazed by society’s view of women. She does not become a mother or wife, two identities her society would expect her to embody.

Kate Chopin and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps both utilize the image of the self-sufficient and independent New Woman in their famous works, *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis*. In both novels, the influence of true womanhood still permeates society and is represented through different characters. While neither novel clearly portrays a perfectly defined New Woman figure, there are several female characters that embody important elements of the New Woman. These female characters show a variety of traits that demonstrate a need for change during the time period, and serve as a foundation for the New Woman to be accepted. Through the negative portrayal of motherhood, the act of sisterhood, the love of art and a movement away from the domestic sphere, both Chopin and Phelps create powerful and memorable feminine characters that display key components of the New Woman.

In both Chopin and Phelps’ novels, the downfalls of becoming a New Woman lie within motherhood and marriage, two integral parts of True Womanhood. Motherhood and the other commitments to True Womanhood become obstacles for the female characters attempting to embrace the lifestyle of the New Woman. There are several characters in both novels that embody many characteristics of True Womanhood, including Adèle in *The Awakening* and Coy and Chloe in *The Story of Avis*. Adèle

identifies herself completely as mother and wife and tries to convince Edna to do the same. Both novels demonstrate the problem with True Womanhood and its negative influence on female creativity and independence. In *The Awakening*, the scene with Adèle in childbirth horrifically portrays the agonizing reality of motherhood, and both Edna and Avis' mothers suffer in their marriages and die early deaths.

Female artistry is another important concept present in both novels. The female characters in *The Story of Avis* and *The Awakening* find a sense of agency through their artwork. Gilbert and Gubar note the importance of "killing the angel in the house" and embracing female creativity: "Women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house... [who] also kills female creativity" (Gilbert and Gubar 812). In *The Awakening*, Edna figuratively kills the angel in her house when she refuses to submit to Léonce's demands and chooses to pursue her creativity through painting. Avis tries to prevent herself from becoming an angel in the house when she travels through Europe and studies art at the collegial level. And of course, Mlle. Reisz is able to support herself through the art of playing the piano, and never allows herself to become a domesticated woman.

In *The Story of Avis*, Phelps writes the title character as a strong-willed, artistic young woman. In the novel, Avis struggles to define herself as an artist and becomes overwhelmed by her husband and children. While growing up, Avis had the opportunity to study art and travel through Europe, giving her a sense of freedom. She also had the influence of her aunt Chloe who consistently lectured Avis on how to become a True Woman. The dynamic between Chloe and Avis illustrates the struggle between not only

generations of women, but also the friction between True Womanhood and the New Woman.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin explores the disconnection between the patriarchal society of Grand Isle and the emerging trend of the New Woman. Through the female characters in the novel, Chopin illustrates the many facets of both the True Woman and the New Woman. Mlle. Reisz clearly represents the New Woman; she is the only female character who absolutely embodies creative and financial freedom. Through her music, she is able to support herself and never felt the entrapment of the domestic sphere. Adèle, on the other hand, serves as the True Woman; she is the ultimate mother and wife. Edna is arguably in the middle of these two women; like Adèle she is married with children, but she craves the independence Mlle. Reisz possesses. In her novel on the history of the New Woman, Matthews suggests that Edna negates the traditional role of women as mothers: "The 'cost of reproduction' in terms of the woman's energy reserves, plus the burden of child-rearing, required that, beyond a certain point, women had to sacrifice individuation and physical and mental development to the cause of perpetuating the race.... When Kate Chopin in her controversial 1899 novel *The Awakening* has her heroine say that she would give up her life for her children, but 'I wouldn't give myself,' she was challenging the whole Darwinian schema that required her to do just that" (Matthews 75).

Finally, both *The Story of Avis* and *The Awakening* challenge the presence and validity of patriarchal society. By negating the notions of True Womanhood, the New Woman becomes a threat to male-dominated societies. Matthews explores the changing trend of social hierarchies, and argues for the need of a more socialist approach in

understanding the evolvement of the New Woman: “By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the new and rapidly expanding field of anthropology was supplying evidence of the diversity of human social arrangements.... [Friedrich] Engels acknowledged that patriarchy had been a necessary stage in the development of higher civilization, but he predicted that it would in turn be superseded by a still higher stage: socialism” (Matthews 86). Matthews’s statement here is interesting in that changes in the hierarchy of society would be necessary to foster the New Woman, and both Chopin and Phelps’ novels suggest that the patriarchy would soon lose its power to the emerging New Woman ideology.

Chapter I: The Portrayal of Motherhood and True Womanhood

In *The Story of Avis*, Avis is constantly at odds with her aunt Chloe who acts as a mother figure to her. Chloe tries to influence Avis to both accept her role as a female in the patriarchy and value the domestic sphere. Avis does not adhere to the mold of the true woman, a concept Chloe cannot even fathom. Chloe completely embodies the essence of the traditional woman who remains satisfied in her domestic lifestyle. While Avis continues to reject the ideas of motherhood and wifedom, Chloe demonstrates much disdain and disapproval and urges Avis to act in a more ladylike manner. Avis appears unwilling and arguably naïve about surrendering her ambitions in favor of Philip's, and again does not recognize herself in Chloe's portrayal of a wife. Prior to marrying Philip Ostrander, Avis's behavior negates the traditions of true womanhood, but unfortunately finds herself confined to her house, carrying out the domestic duties of a wife and mother.

Before marrying Philip, Avis and Chloe engage in a conversation about marriage. Chloe explains unequivocally that once Avis is married, she must forget her own interests and cater to her husband's: "When a—woman becomes—a wife,... her husband's interests in life are enough for her. When you are once married, you will no longer feel any of this youthful irritation against the things that other women do. Women...are *not* men. God made us'" (Phelps 114). Chloe's comment perfectly characterizes the duties of the True Woman; she is supposed to remain in control of the domestic sphere and adhere to the beliefs of her husband. Through her statement, Chloe is trying to prepare Avis for her future, and unfortunately, she is correct. As the novel unfolds, Chloe's prediction becomes Avis' reality, since she does not have the opportunity to dedicate sufficient time

to her painting. Chloe's comment about God creating women for the purpose of men is also reminiscent of religious views held at the time period. Jean V. Matthews cites religion as one of the strongest justifications in women's subordination: "On the question of the subordination of women to men, many people would still merely cite the Bible... 'The Christian Church is based upon the fact of woman servitude; upon the theory that woman brought sin and death into this world, and that therefore she was punished by being placed in a condition of inferiority to men'" (Matthews 68 – 69). Chloe's comment to Avis suggests another commonly held belief about True Womanhood, that it is both an inherent and religious duty to serve men and raise children. In *The Awakening*, Adèle's reaction to Edna's remarks regarding her unwillingness to give up herself for her children is similar to Chloe's: "I don't know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by the unessential," said Madame Ratignolle, cheerfully; 'but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so. I'm sure I couldn't do more than that'" (Chopin 53). Adèle's remark adheres to the belief that women were created to be mothers, and also shows that Adèle subscribes to the idea that her goal in life is to be a wife and mother, a characteristic of True Womanhood.

The motif of motherhood can be seen in both novels and can be viewed in different ways. Edna and Avis are also very much persuaded by their mothers, or in Edna's case, the lack of a mother. In both novels, the idea of motherhood can be viewed as a warning to the younger generations. While daughters often follow their mothers' ways of maintaining the household, there is a different kind of message that is passed down from mother to daughter in both novels. Avis and Edna's mothers suffered in their marriages to overbearing husbands, and the scene where Adèle gives birth also

contributes to the rejection of traditional domestic roles. There could be a correlation between Avis and Edna's mothers and their own marriages. Perhaps by following their mothers' advice and situations, neither Avis nor Edna appears interested in being a mother and both reject their husbands by the end of the novels. In *The Awakening*, Edna witnesses Adèle give birth, leaving her completely traumatized and also solidifies her rejection of motherhood.

The first crucial factor that shapes both Edna and Avis is the fact that neither of their mothers survives to see her daughter reach adulthood, and both women were subject to creative suffocation by their husbands. Of the two novels, it appears that the only female character that is able to become a New Woman is Mlle. Reisz, and this is because she is never a mother herself. The women in the story who are mothers become unable to devote enough energy to their craft, and Mlle. Reisz appears to be fulfilled despite not having a family of her own. This suggests that perhaps motherhood is not needed to define oneself as a woman. In *The Story of Avis*, at a young age, Avis witnesses her mother's death and also her unhappiness; Avis's mother did not find gratification living with her husband and being confined to her house. Avis's mother actually serves as an admonition to her daughter. On her deathbed, Avis's mother warns her daughter about her father: "It was then that there rang throughout the room a tense and awestruck cry. It was not in any sense a cry of pain; rather surcharged with a burden of wondering joy. Then there followed words resonant and vibrant:--'Under the shadow of His wing shalt thou abide'" (Phelps 26). Avis takes her mother's advice and exhibits defiance when ordered to do household chores and act like a lady.

In "A Literary Legacy: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Mother and Daughter," author Carol Farley Kessler examines both the relationship between Avis and her mother and Phelps' relationship with her own mother. Kessler argues that Phelps' mother shaped Phelps' ideas about the domestic realm, and influenced her writing tremendously. According to Kessler, Phelps' mother "seemed to the daughter a 'being of power and importance in the world'" (Kessler 28). Phelps' own mother died when she was eight years old, and Kessler expounds that "in a sense, a daughter carried on her mother's aborted career, and the profession of authorship became a daughter's quarrel with the world on her mother's behalf" (Kessler 29). Not surprisingly, Kessler views *The Story of Avis* as an expansion of Phelps' own beliefs regarding the power of women and her connection to her mother. Kessler argues that "in one sense, then, *Avis* is the story of the chance that her mother might have had, the story of a symbolically expressed wish of the daughter for her mother" (Kessler 31). When considering Kessler's research, one can conclude how important the relationship between a mother and daughter truly is; there is no doubt that women often follow their mother's wishes and advice. A bond between mother and daughter is the first form of sisterhood a female encounters. In Avis' case and perhaps in Phelps' case, both women feel a connection to their mothers in terms of art. Although Avis' father had prohibited his own wife from pursuing her creativity as an artist, he allows his daughter to receive education in the art field, a sign of hope for the younger generations of women.

Even though Avis' father does not allow his wife to cultivate her own talent, he realizes that he cannot treat Avis this way; in the case of Edna Pontellier, her father is the opposite. In *The Awakening*, when Edna's father visits, he advises Léonce, Edna's

husband, on how to manage his daughter: ““You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce,” asserted the Colonel. ‘Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife...The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave” (Chopin 79). Here, the narrator of *The Awakening* suggests that Edna’s father essentially killed his wife through his domination, similar to Avis’ mother. However, unlike Avis, Edna is not given the opportunity to pursue her creativity by her father, which affects her tremendously. While Avis expresses a desire to remain single as a young female, Edna appears to have been a hopeless romantic as a young girl. She also willingly marries Léonce, mostly as a form of rebellion and possibly to escape her father: “Her marriage...was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate... add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband” (Chopin 21). It is not until Edna has already married and given birth to her sons that she realizes her need for a separate life.

Coppelia Kahn’s “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle” focuses primarily on women’s role in familial and societal structures, and also acknowledges Marxist and Freudian ideas. In the beginning of her article, Kahn challenges the idea of motherhood and the loss of the woman within this dominantly masculine structure. In *The Awakening*, Edna questions her maternal obligations to her children and her expected marital obedience to her husband, Léonce Pontellier, and attempts to create a life of meaning for herself. One of the most riveting lines in the novel is Edna’s declaration to Adèle that she would never give up herself, not even for her children: “Edna had once

told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one.... '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. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me'" (Chopin 53).

Edna's attitude towards motherhood reflects the problematic notion that Kahn herself questions. Kahn's concern with motherhood actually rests in the label and dependency of society on the idea of the mother as a selfless entity: "Why is it women who assume responsibility for children after they are born and weaned. . . [and make] them fit for adult society. . . What authorizes this universal division of labor which makes women . . . the persons on whom we all depend not only for survival but ultimately for the bedrock of existence, a sense of self?" (Kahn 826). Edna's character truly ponders the same dilemma; she yearns for her own place in society and in the process, appears to have failed as a mother, especially in the eyes of her husband.

Edna does not have a mother figure to emulate, which affects her self-awareness. Schweitzer describes Edna's struggle as a mother and wife, and her desire to retain her individuality. Schweitzer argues that "*The Awakening*, written by a woman who was herself a mother of six and a widow at thirty, raises the perennial American question of individualism in terms of maternity precisely in order to explore and explode its opposite, the ideology of self-possession as the pre-eminent mode of a masculine American subjectivity" (Schweitzer 162). After becoming a wife and mother, Edna then rejects her role in the patriarchal society that exists on Grand Isle. As a child, Edna's maternal role model was her sister, Margaret, who is described by Schweitzer as "Edna's cold and matronly sister and substitute mother, a woman who could not satisfy Edna's longing for

the lost maternal body” (Schweitzer 185). Edna does not have any positive female role models growing up, and appears to be unfocused during her young adulthood. She also does not receive any significant affection from her sister, and lacks a strong sense of self: “Margaret was not effusive; she was practical... [Edna] never realized that the reserve of her own character had much, perhaps everything to do with this. Her most intimate friend at school had been one of rather exceptional intellectual gifts, who wrote fine-sounding essays, which Edna admired and strove to imitate” (Chopin 20). Edna is unable to develop her independence partially because of her immaturity; she romanticizes many situations in her own life and becomes distracted. Further, Edna appears to have always sought a female role model, and naturally gravitates towards certain women on Grand Isle, including Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna also appears to admire art from a young age; she is interested in her childhood friend’s writing and the music Mlle. Reisz and Adèle play for everyone. However, Edna must rely on inspiration from others; the absence of understanding her own wants and needs does not allow Edna to acquire self-awareness, a necessary trait for becoming an empowered female, like Mlle. Reisz and even Avis as a young girl. Unlike Avis, Edna begins to reject true womanhood after her marriage, a concept explored by A. Elizabeth Elz in “*The Awakening and A Lost Lady: Flying with Broken Wings and Raked Feathers*”: “For Edna the home represents having to act as the True Woman. Having no desire to be the True Woman, she completely disregards her duties as a wife” (Elz 22). Elz also suggests that “Edna represent[s] the New Woman who was evolving in society... Edna [is at] an early stage when society had not yet adapted to tolerate a New Woman” (Elz 25).

Another interesting parallel between Edna and Avis is that they both appear uninterested in raising their sons. Edna believes that her children stifle her creativity and being, and Avis appears repulsed by her son's antics. To counteract their lack of interest in maternal duties, there are characters that remain doting mothers. In *The Awakening*, for example, Adèle's character represents the ultimate mother figure; she is consistently praised by the patriarchy for being the ideal mother and wife. Edna, on the other hand, refuses to accept her position as a mother, as explored by Jarlath Killeen in her article, "Mother and Child: Realism, Maternity, and Catholicism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*": "She rejects the role of mother-woman, because she sees in it the creation of a (necessary) illusion by Nature herself. The love of a mother for her children is seen by the text as a dangerous creation by Nature as a 'decoy to secure mothers for the race'" (Killeen 417). Edna realizes that by focusing entirely on her children, she will lose herself. Adèle interminably warns Edna about abandoning her children, something she herself would never do. Even though Adèle does not seek a life away from motherhood, she does maintain a sense of agency by demonstrating certain strengths, and part of this can be attributed to her husband's lack of success. Unlike Edna, Avis must provide for her family because her husband is incapable of doing so. Edna can consistently fall back on Léonce for financial support, but Avis does not have that luxury.

Kathleen M. Streater analyzes Adèle's character in her article "Adèle Ratignolle: Kate Chopin's Feminist at Home in *The Awakening*." According to Streater, many women would not recognize Adèle's role as a mother as particularly feminist, which complicates the view of Adèle as a strong female: "Introduced as a 'mother-woman,' Adèle's position as a feminist is difficult for some readers to discern, and this difficulty

betrays the double-bind women often find themselves in: to become a wife and mother is, on some level, to capitulate one's self to patriarchal systems, but this should not render a woman's feminism suspect" (406). Streater believes that Adèle is able to work within the patriarchal system; however, the last scene of Adèle in the novel is of her in excruciating pain while giving birth, which portrays the act of childbirth in a quite disturbing manner. Although Streater reads this scene as one of empowerment, it is clear that Edna is completely horrified by her friend's situation: "Edna began to feel uneasy. She was seized with a vague dread. Her own experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remember. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go" (Chopin 122). Edna is unable to empathize with Adèle's situation even though she has survived it herself. Streater believes that Edna represents "an exhilarating, nihilist escape from the patriarchal reality of our world," and Adèle is "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). Although Edna abandons her life and embraces death as her escape, Adèle chooses to remain within the framework of the patriarchy. This shows that Adèle is still part of True Womanhood; she accepts her role in the patriarchy and continues to be a mother and wife. Edna, instead, chooses to reject being a part of this system, and the birthing scene appears to solidify her decision to commit suicide and defy the patriarchy.

Schweitzer views the birthing scene quite differently from Streater; Schweitzer believes this scene is one of torture and the dominance of the patriarchy is seen through

Dr. Mandalet's character: "That world dismisses as hysterical, petulant, inconsequential, and even psychotic women's expressions of pain, anger, fear, frustration, desire and even power. This is especially clear in the crucial scene of Edna's attendance upon Adèle during her delivery... She finds the 'romantic heroine' in a state of high agitation, upbraiding her husband and doctor in imperious tones, which under normal circumstances would be unacceptable" (Schweitzer 179 – 180). Adèle is reliant upon the men to survive childbirth; Edna is left completely traumatized by this scene, and chooses to end her life shortly after. Edna does not view her children in a loving manner; she believes they consume her energy and individualism: "Her children are a responsibly she cannot evade. This shocking realization, coupled with the shattering of her romantic illusions, sends her back to the beach at Grand Isle where she will 'elude' the tyranny of her children, that is, an overwhelming maternal responsibility which amounts... to a soul-killing self-sacrifice" (Schweitzer 182 – 183). Edna knows she cannot remain like Adèle, trapped in the domestic sphere caring for children.

Killeen describes the birthing scene as a dangerous situation for all women: "The marauding power of Nature and its discriminatory effects on women are evident in the scene of Adèle Ratignolle's parturition where the pain of childbirth is vividly depicted as a frightening and horrifying experience... Nature and motherhood are dangerous and painfully imposed rites of passage for women, against which they should fight. In her warning to Edna, 'think of the children,' Adèle crystallizes the dilemma for the independent woman. To think of the children and to submit oneself fully... is ultimately to give oneself over to a natural process which you have little control over and which ultimately controls you" (Killeen 418). The last section of Killeen's argument is

especially important because Edna now realizes that she cannot escape motherhood; since she has already given birth to her sons, she remains tied to them, and in a sense, trapped. It is only when Edna chooses to drown herself that she is completely released from domesticity.

Unlike Edna, Avis has a daughter, and also unlike Edna, Avis is freed from her marriage and motherhood to her son when her husband and son die. Avis is then left with her daughter, which could imply hope for future generations of women. The only way to change the system is to promote different ideas and teachings, and since Avis already has the concept of New Womanhood in her mind, she can then teach her daughter independence and agency. Because Avis had the drive and determination to be independent from childhood because of her mother's advice, she herself has the ability to pass along the importance of being independent to her daughter and may be able to mold her into a New Woman. This would suggest that both the power of the mother and the rejection of motherhood are highly necessary in the creation of the New Woman. With each generation to come, women can continue to move away from the domestic sphere and find their true passion.

Chapter II: The Power of Sisterhood

In *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis*, the concept of sisterhood is present and crucial to paving the way of the New Woman. In creating enough momentum for aspects of the New Woman to emerge, the presence of a sisterhood among the female characters is evident. Edna's relationships with Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz greatly influence her character. Avis is also influenced by her best friend, Coy, but their relationship is affected by her relationship with her husband. In the beginning of *The Story of Avis*, both Avis and Coy are interested in learning and keeping up with the male students at the University. Coy is described as "not ignorant. Harmouth girls never were. Her mind was stocked with facts sufficient to bring these correspondences before it" (Phelps 3 -4). At Harmouth, Coy is proud of Avis' accomplishments and appears interested in intellectual conversation: "Coy remarked it, and felt proud of her, for Avis had got into the newspapers. It was seldom that a Harmouth woman got into the papers. It was only men—at Harmouth: indeed, the University existed, [Coy] supposed, for the glorification of men" (Phelps 8). Coy is extremely supportive of Avis; she wants her to succeed. In fact, both of the girls appear to be quite interested in competing with the men at the University, but both women eventually succumb to marriage. Coy's husband, John, appears to be a suitable partner for Coy, unlike Avis' marriage where Philip Ostrander truly suffocates Avis' spirit and creativity. In Edna's situation, Adèle serves as a maternal figure to her; she is described as an "angel-woman" and a perfect mother and wife. Mlle. Reisz, on the other hand, serves more as an inspiration to Edna. Mlle. Reisz rejects being the domesticated woman and instead embraces her passion for art. Mlle. Reisz is the closest example to the New Woman in both novels; she is self-sufficient,

independent and creative. Interestingly enough, she appears completely unattractive, which could be Chopin's way of balancing her character as well as providing a stark contrast to the beauty of Adèle and Edna.

In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier appears alienated from the people living on Grand Isle. She does not belong to the same cultural background as the other residents, but Adèle takes Edna under her wing and looks out for her, and Mlle. Reisz also takes an interest in her. Edna also does not have a positive mother figure, and on Grand Isle, turns to Adèle and Mlle. Reisz for female guidance. Both women provide Edna with guidance and support, creating a sisterhood on Grand Isle. A. Elizabeth Elz describes Edna's relationship with both Adèle and Mlle. Reisz in detail: "Even though Edna grapples with society over what her position should be, she is never physically isolated from a community of women. The two most important women in her life are Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, who live very different lives and assist Edna as she explores which life, the True Woman or New Woman, she wants" (Elz 18). Elz also recognizes that Adèle and Mlle. Reisz represent polar opposites within their society: Adèle as the selfless mother figure and Mlle. Reisz as the independent, childless artist. Elz writes that

Edna has all the trappings of a True Woman—the husband, the children, the house and the responsibilities. Adèle senses that Edna needs a mentor, so she takes her under her wing and attempts to show Edna the joys of being a wife and mother. In opposition to Adèle is Mademoiselle Reisz, who recognizes that Edna is not like the other vacationers and singles her out as someone who innately understands beauty... eventually, Edna decides that she is not interested and has never been interested in sprouting angel wings; instead, she desires the strong and

sure wings Mademoiselle Reisz feels for... Both Adèle and Mademoiselle Reisz are interested in Edna's growing wings, but the type and purpose of the wings are radically different: on the one hand hovering around others, acting as the True Woman; on the other hand soaring free, living as the New Woman. And yet, both women support Edna as she makes her journey. (Elz 18)

This concept of support from the female members of Edna's community is vital; it demonstrates the importance of having female guidance and in Edna's case, a role model. Edna is able to emulate aspects of Mlle. Reisz's strong personality and this influences her decision to separate herself from the domestic sphere.

While Mlle. Reisz is a crucial force in Edna's journey to becoming a New Woman, Adèle also influences Edna's view of sensuality. Jarlath Killeen argues that it is Adèle who truly influences Edna's sexuality, not her lovers: "It is not Robert who first awakens Edna's sensuality after all... but the most obvious was the influence of Adèle Ratignolle... Adèle is ripe and full, abundant in power and attraction" (Killeen 431). In *The Awakening*, Adèle represents the self-sacrificing mother figure, and the other extreme is represented by Mademoiselle Reisz, the anti-mother, autonomous artist. Adèle's friendship is important to Edna because she does rely on her for support. Adèle and Edna are in discord about the roles they play in society. In "Charting the Nebula: Gender, Language and Power in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," Gerri Brightwell explores the use of language in the novel. Brightwell argues that "Adèle does not question the role society gives her. Although it means overlooking her own needs and wants, she puts the desires of men and children first, and advises Edna to do the same" (Brightwell 39). Although Adèle accepts the traditional roles of mother and wife, she

does have intuition and common sense, two traits Edna lacks. Adèle feels the need to guide Edna, and continues to attempt to change her mind about her children. Brightwell argues that “Adèle’s world idealizes women and in doing so ‘[urges] them to satisfy the presumed demand [for the idealized ‘Mother’—or, in this case, the idealized ‘Woman’] and to maintain the ensuing order’” (Brightwell 39). Brightwell continues to argue that Adèle uses male language to justify her position as a female: “Adèle can express her feelings because they are defined by her belief in conforming to the ‘tacit submissiveness’ expected in a wife... She uses the Bible to support her argument, borrowing both a male text and a male language to give herself authority... the feelings she voices have been defined for her by men” (Brightwell 39). Adèle can fulfill her maternal instinct and Edna can receive guidance and sisterly love. Adèle’s character is important because she shows Edna how to be loving and sexual.

Unlike Adèle, Mlle. Reisz rejects motherhood and wifedom completely, and encourages Edna to embrace her autonomy. Even though Mlle. Reisz wants Edna to be self-sufficient, she recognizes that Edna will not be able to achieve complete independence due to outside distractions such as her marriage and affairs with Robert and Alcee, and also a lack of commitment to a solitary life. Although Edna finds inspiration in Mlle. Reisz’s character and vice versa, she ultimately does not want to be Mlle. Reisz. In “The Female Artist in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*: Birth and Creativity,” author Carole Stone argues that Reisz cannot be the woman Edna wants to become due to her bizarre, unconventional nature: “The woman who represents a structured form of art is... Reisz, the true artist Edna wishes to become...After listening to her play, Edna’s passions are aroused...Reisz is unmarried, childless, eccentric in manner and in dress, and

alienated from society. She cannot serve as a role model for Edna” (Stone 28).

Schweitzer reads Mlle. Reisz’s character as “the alternative to the ‘soul’s slavery’ of the ‘mother-woman’...anti-social, asexual and non-maternal, Mademoiselle Reisz is an accomplished musician who, at the expense of intimacy and attachment, pursues a career and achieves the individuation autonomy... [defined] as masculine” (Schweitzer 170).

Edna is conflicted; she does not want to live her life like Adèle, giving herself up for her children, but she also cannot live an isolated, asexual existence. Schweitzer also sees that “Edna is both drawn to Mademoiselle Reisz and repulsed by her, another sign of the contradiction which distinguishes her position. It is her music that awakens Edna to both her own repressed sensuality and her desire” (Schweitzer 170). However, towards the end of the novel, Mlle. Reisz does not take Edna seriously. She realizes that Edna does not have the gumption or strength to survive on her own, as explained by Stone: “[Edna] receives a much harsher judgment of her artistic capacity from Mlle. Reisz. . . Reisz warns, ‘To be an artist includes much... to succeed the artist must possess the courageous soul’” (Stone 29). Reisz accurately predicts that Edna most likely will not survive on her own as an artist.

Chapter III: The Power of the Artist

Art is a powerful motif throughout both novels. Several of the female characters present themselves as artists in one form or another, giving them a different identity from becoming or being labeled as simply mothers or wives. Of the female characters who exist in both *The Story of Avis* and *The Awakening*, the most successful female artist is Mlle. Reisz. She is the only one to lead an independent life devoid of marriage and children, which may account for her success. In "Imaging the Future in *The Awakening*," critic William Bartley declares that "generally speaking, the feminine *Kunstlerroman* explores how a woman protagonist, a would-be artist, negotiates the conflicting claims for domesticity and artistic vocation. As Susan Gubar points out, the conflict, as it is dramatized in the nineteenth century is generally settle in absolute terms: artist figures either gave up their art for motherhood... or renounced motherhood for their careers" (Bartley 726). Bartley's statement can be applied not only to *The Awakening*, but also to *The Story of Avis*. Avis, unfortunately, is forced to abandon her artistry when she becomes a wife and mother, while Edna attempts to abandon her children for the sake of her art, but finds herself unsuccessful. Reisz on the other hand, is able to have a career in music because she never succumbs to motherhood.

Reisz is the best example of the New Woman present in *The Awakening*. Reisz is not a particularly attractive woman, and appears both misanthropic and uninterested in her appearance: "She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others... [She] was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in

dress” (Chopin 28 – 9). The other women, Edna and Adèle, are described as attractive in their own way, both exuding some type of sensuality, but neither have the same artistic accomplishment Reisz possesses. While both Edna and Adèle display signs of creativity and promise, neither of them fully embraces her talents. Reisz even composes her own music, a somewhat masculine trait. In “The Enigma at the Keyboard: Chopin’s Mademoiselle Reisz,” Doris Davis analyzes Reisz’s background as a musician. She writes “it is important to realize that serious music—whether in performance or composition—was viewed by most in the nineteenth century as the domain of the male” (Davis 90). Although the piano is considered a feminine instrument, as Davis explains, it is the writing of Reisz’s own music that gives her power. Davis also notes the musical composers Reisz is attracted to, Beethoven and Wagner, and describes their significance:

Reisz also plays in this same scene a transcription... from Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*. On other occasions, no doubt, she performs Beethoven, as she keeps a bust of him on her mantelpiece. These details are important, for contemporary critics categorized Beethoven and Wagner as producing ‘virile’ or ‘man-tones,’ in ‘powerful’ forms. Their music was beyond the realm of what women should perform or emulate in composition. (Davis 96-7)

Chopin provides Reisz with agency through her music and the fact that she has survived without a husband. Reisz also serves as the artistic model for Edna. Reisz’s success can be attributed to the fact that she does not marry or have children; she is able to solely focus on her music, giving her power in this patriarchal society. Brightwell argues that Mlle. Reisz has rejected the patriarchy and is, therefore, viewed in a repulsive manner by her society: “Not only is Mlle. Reisz ridiculed and labeled ‘demented’ ... her aggression

and assertion, taboo in women, diminish her femininity... without her femininity, she is denied the prestige of having a husband... but gains the freedom to act as she wishes, albeit with the criticism of those around her” (Brightwell 40). Brightwell also argues that “in order to uphold the status quo, Mlle. Reisz must be criticized for she has stolen those traits which define men as powerful: Society cannot let her get away with such a theft without punishment because [she] threatens the essence of patriarchal order” (Brightwell 40). Killeen argues that “while Mademoiselle Reisz might escape the conflicts within her own sex by absconding to an arena of sexlessness, not only is Edna unprepared to do this—because she simply enjoys sex too much—but she has already given birth, she is already a mother and a slave to Nature” (Killeen 423). Edna is unwilling to completely give up everything to become self-sufficient.

Similar to Mlle. Reisz, Avis has the mindset and talent to be successful. After all, it is she who must provide for her family when Philip becomes ill. Kessler reads Avis as everywoman: “As a painter the main character Avis Dobell symbolized every woman who aspired to goals that her society had set apart for men and who then found her striving steps hedged in” (Kessler 31). Kessler’s point is a valid one; she recognizes Avis’ true being and what she ultimately symbolizes. Unlike Mlle. Reisz, Avis does not live primarily for her art. She marries Philip out of sympathy, hindering her artistic creativity. The fact that Avis marries him because she feels sympathy for him demonstrates a very traditional, almost maternal, quality within her. This weakness for Avis solidifies her fate as a True Woman. From an early age, Avis is aware that she desires to be on her own, not trapped in a house with a husband and children. As a young child, Avis expresses her disdain for housework: ““Aunt Chloe says it’s unladylike to

hate,' said Avis. 'If it is, then I'd rather not be a lady. There are other people in the world than ladies. And I hate to make my bed...to sew chemises...to go cooking around the kitchen" (Phelps 27). This scene demonstrates Avis's resistance to the domestic sphere. She witnesses her own mother's death, which could have influenced her rejection of becoming domesticated like her aunt Chloe. After she receives her training in the art field, she still has no interest in marriage:

And Avis did not mean to marry: that was a matter of course. It was not necessary to talk about it: young women were apt to say something of the sort, she believed. She had never meant to marry and she knew that she had never meant to. She acted upon this consciousness as reticently as she did upon the combination of her palette, and as naturally as she did upon the reflex motion of her muscles. (Phelps 55)

Avis's conviction regarding marriage appears to be an inherent quality; she believes in her heart that she is not destined for matrimony, and her reasoning seems to be completely intrinsic.

In "The Riddle of the Sphinx: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis*," author Deborah Barker explores Avis's role as an artist and the significance of her painting of the Sphinx. Barker views Philip's interference in Avis's life as precarious; he negatively affects her artistry: "Phelps demonstrates that the potential danger to society lies not in the contribution of women's original production; rather, it is the male gaze that threatens to undermine women's potential contribution by transforming women from subjects into objects" (Barker 41). Here, Barker suggests that Philip's role in the novel serves to disrupt Avis' artistry as well as to objectify her. Once Philip enters her life, she

is no longer empowered. Avis, unfortunately, believes Philip when he promises she can fulfill her dream of being a painter after their marriage. Barker continues her argument by noting that "... according to Avis, marriage would be disastrous for her career as an artist; yet, it is precisely when she is on the brink of success that she loses her artistic objectivity and allows Philip's reciprocal gaze to transform her from an artist to a woman" (Barker 41). Barker recognizes Avis' downfall as Philip, and Phelps demonstrates the danger of losing one's independence to marriage.

As an artist, Avis has her masterpiece, the Sphinx. The sphinx itself is an interesting concept to paint, a figure that has appeared in literature and mythology for centuries. Barker suggests that the Sphinx is a projection of Avis's feelings towards women:

In choosing such an over-determined figure, Avis exposes her own position as a Western, middle-class, white woman and the impact that has on her own art and her ability to speak for all women. Given the complexity of the image of the sphinx, its conflicting depictions and symbolic functions, it is an appropriately inappropriate embodiment of Avis's troubled attempt to discover, and to speak for, the mystery of womanhood. (Barker 43)

Barker argues that Avis constantly separates herself from other women, which is portrayed in her painting of the Sphinx: "As an artist Avis defines herself in opposition to 'ordinary' women; they become the 'Other,' the riddle to be solved. Avis's depiction of the sphinx anticipates the profusion of sphinxes used in art and literature in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century to symbolize the power, mystery, and destructive energy of women as associated with Eastern mysticism and pagan mythology" (Barker

43). Phelps' choice of the Sphinx cannot be left untouched, and Barker's reading of the sphinx itself is important. Avis' choice to paint a sphinx could be viewed as a sign of womanhood, and also a powerful muse that cannot be ignored. Barker believes that "Avis's greatest shortcoming is that she too conceives of women (and of the sphinx as representative of women) as primitive and mysterious... [Ironically] it is her art that 'blinds' her to other women and that ultimately makes her incapable of fulfilling her goal of speaking for womanhood through her painting" (Barker 49). Throughout the novel, Avis does not identify with other domesticated women; she is constantly in discord with her aunt Chloe and even her friend, Coy, who appears happily married. From the beginning, Avis recognizes her independence and disinterest in anything feminine.

Both Edna and Avis separate themselves from other women through their art. While Avis refuses to identify with True Womanhood, Edna rejects certain aspects of the feminine and begins emanating more masculine traits. Schweitzer suggests that Edna exhibits these masculine qualities when painting Adèle, whereas Barker argues that Avis seems women different from herself as the Other. Schweitzer argues that Edna's desire to paint Adèle's picture symbolizes empowerment: "Edna's desire to capture the romanticized maternal image places her in a masculine position by linking her to the masculine world of representation and power. By imagining Adèle as 'some sensuous Madonna,' she stereotypes, fetishizes, and silences her" (Schweitzer 173). Aside from her painting, Edna displays masculinity when she pursues sexual relationships with Alcee Arobin and Robert, and by moving out of Léonce's house. Edna lives on her own in the pigeon house, and is able to support herself. In "The Female Artist in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*: Birth and Creativity," author Carole Stone sees the symbol of Edna's house

as twofold, representing both financial and artistic independence: “She moves out of her husband’s house, using money from an inheritance and from the sale of her paintings, into a smaller house of her own. Edna’s little house, like Woolf’s ‘room of one’s own,’ is a symbol for growing psychic and financial independence... and Edna has defined herself as an artist” (Stone 29). Both Avis and Edna attempt to remove themselves from the domestic sphere and women who embody traits of the selfless, traditional homemaker.

By appropriating Adèle and Mlle. Reisz as her role models, Edna is left conflicted between the life of an artist and true womanhood. Adèle finds her purpose within the domestic sphere, the same situation that Edna resents. In fact, Léonce even compares Edna to Adèle, arguing that she can paint but also find time for her family: “‘Then in God’s name paint! but don’t let the family go to the devil. There’s Madame Ratignolle; because she keeps up her music, she doesn’t let everything else go to chaos. And she’s more of a musician than you are a painter’” (Chopin 64). According to Léonce, Adèle is able to satisfy herself and her family, but Edna has a point, Adèle’s music is not her passion. Adèle represents the traditional female artist, one who uses her creativity as a source of entertainment for others, a selfless act rather than a selfish one. Unlike Mlle. Reisz, who considers playing the piano her livelihood, Adèle plays for her family, a concept explored by Davis: “...Adèle...performs solely for her family’s entertainment and considers the piano ‘a means of brightening the home and make it attractive...’ Music, for Adèle, is a kind of ‘domestic decoration’” (Davis 91). Adèle is not the serious artist Mlle. Reisz is, but neither is Edna.

In “Unbearable Realism: Freedom, Ethics and Identity in *The Awakening*,” author Peter Ramos describes Adèle and Mlle. Reisz as two women who are able to work within

the system of patriarchy, a concept Edna does not recognize. Ramos also realizes that Edna awakens after her marriage: “Throughout the first half of the novella, Edna takes advantage of the epiphany: she becomes an artist, begins to question and then defy Léonce’s authority as her husband, moves out of the house, and develops romantic relationships with other men” (Ramos 150). Ramos concludes that Adèle and Reisz are both successful in their endeavors, and that Edna is the character who fails within this system: “Both Mademoiselle Reisz and Adèle Ratignolle explicitly inhabit social identities available to them only to actively and creatively transform them. In doing so they implicitly demonstrate the options available to woman of this time period, options Edna fails to exercise and sustain” (Ramos 148). Adèle and Reisz are able to find a place for their artistry in the patriarchy; Adèle as a means of entertaining within the domestic sphere and Reisz as a way to support herself. As an artist, Edna is unable to find her place, leaving her unfulfilled.

Chapter IV: The Influence of Sex and Marriage on the New Woman

A very common analysis of marriage in feminist studies is that it can be a suffocating institution for women. Often, the patriarchy's treatment and viewpoint of wives and daughters is particularly malicious in order to preserve the status quo. Jackson argues that "by the turn of the century, many 'new women' profoundly distrusted marriage; indeed, it was often their reaction to the lives of married women of their mothers' generation that had first propelled many into the women's rights activism. For too many women, marriage seemed to mean a life of drudgery, invalidism, a dwindling of personality, a submergence in others – a black hole of the self" (Jackson 97). In both *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis*, marriage is portrayed as an obstacle; both Edna and Avis find themselves unhappy and devoid of creating an independent self. In both novels, traditional marriages are seen as a manifestation of True Womanhood, and a concept that women must avoid in order to evolve into New Women. In Phelps' and Chopin's novels, the pattern of unfulfilling marriages originates with the mothers. Both Avis and Edna's mothers have unsuccessful and unhappy marriages that foreshadow their daughters' negative relationships with their own husbands.

In Avis and Edna's marriages, their husbands are inappropriate partners for them and do not support their independence. This dynamic present in both novels demonstrates the influence of both a male-dominated society on women. In relation to the ideology of the New Woman, the independence Edna and Avis crave is a direct threat to the regulations of the patriarchy; the societies portrayed in *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis* rely on men and women acting in certain roles. In other words, men must adhere to the dominating roles of breadwinner and head of the household while women

must act as doting mothers and wives. Women are not equal to men and must remain within the domestic sphere and if they reject this lifestyle, they are often punished by society because they represent a threat to the structure of the patriarchy. Since Edna and Avis both reject domesticity, they are seen as a threat to their societies and to their husbands.

A primary difference between Edna and Avis is that Avis craved independence and self-sufficiency from childhood. Unfortunately, when Avis meets Philip Ostrander, she succumbs to domesticity under the false pretense that Philip will support her dream of becoming a successful artist. The reality of Avis' situation is very much the opposite; she finds the duties of being a domesticated woman interfere with her talents: "Strong with the immediate needs of their position, in the heart of July she had put the new-born baby off her knee, and gone up into the hot attic studio to finish a portrait. Then came the old and commonplace story: any woman knows it. Why the children must needs select that precise time to have the whooping-cough? Why the cook must get married the week before Commencement?" (Phelps 180). Here, Phelps is suggesting the problem every woman faces: selflessness. Avis does not have a chance to dedicate the proper time to her work.

Another issue in Avis and Philip's marriage is the lack of balance and companionship. Philip, in actuality, is a much weaker person than Avis. He is unable to provide for his family and lacks the drive Avis has for work. Overall, Philip is an especially weak character; Avis is actually stronger mentally and physically. For example, Philip's lungs are weak and he cannot recover from illness, whereas Avis is resilient and able to survive when she is faced with disease and death: "Magnificently she

set herself moment by moment to conquer death. She counted the dropping of the medicine which she could not swallow, the passing of her pulse, the beating of her heart, the ticking of the watch. She cast the whole force of her nature upon that die. Her will rang iron to the crisis. She repeated at intervals, -- 'It is my duty to live'" (Phelps 181). Here, Phelps shows Avis' strength; she has the willpower to live and overcome disease. Philip, on the other hand, does not find success as a professor, and Avis' father tells her: "The trouble is... that your husband does not attend to his business... the department is running behind. It ought to be one of the most brilliant in the college. Under Professor Cobin's day it acquired a prestige, which, of course, makes it difficult for a younger man, *any* younger man. I thought Mr. Ostrander was equal to these difficulties. He is not'" (Phelps 172). Avis and Philip's relationship appears doomed due to a lack of balance and power struggle. This imbalance does not create a harmonious partnership since Philip is jealous of his wife's success and strength, failing to accept his wife as the dominant partner in their marriage. Avis possesses traits of the New Woman here since she can be self-sufficient due to her talent as a painter. Avis also could have lived independently, while Philip could not.

Their problematic relationship can be analyzed in a number of ways, but Barker explores the Oedipal marriage and its connection to Phelps' characters: "In the Oedipal myth, marriage...brings disaster to both Oedipus and Jocasta. Avis and Philip prove to be equally destructive to one another. Philip responds to Avis as a sphinx because of her difference from other women he has known; she is an enigma to him and his inability to answer the riddle brings about his death" (Barker 52). Barker's analysis is interesting; the fact that Philip cannot understand Avis could be seen in a more universal way;

perhaps Philip represents the traditional husband and Avis the New Woman, thus indicating that Avis' thinking is ahead of her time. The patriarchal nature of society cannot comprehend why she needs to have her own career. Unfortunately for Avis, she is unable to entirely devote herself to her art. Due to her relationship with Philip and her refusal to conform to the conventions of the True Woman, Avis does not completely fulfill her dream of being both independent and an artist like Mlle. Reisz in *The Awakening*. However, once Philip and her son, Van, have passed away, there appears to be a chance for Avis to blossom and even instill the tradition of self-sufficiency into her daughter. Edna, however, suffers a different fate.

Throughout *The Awakening*, Edna is consistently trapped by her marriage to Léonce. Like Philip, Léonce Pontellier does not support his wife's independence. Edna realizes after she is already married with children that she is uninterested in domestic duties. Author A. Elizabeth Elz writes that "for Edna the home represents having to act as the True Woman. Having no desire to be the True Woman, she 'completely disregards her duties as a wife, suddenly discontinuing, for example, the reception day which she for six years has held each week to further her husband's business interests'" (Elz 21 – 22). Because Léonce is completely fixated on his business, Edna's outright rejection of aiding her husband's career is hazardous to Léonce and the traditional mindset of Creole society. Léonce displays concern regarding his lack of discipline over his wife, which can be seen as dangerous to his comfortable position as husband. When he confides in Doctor Mandalet in hopes of seeking psychological care for Edna, both men scorn the idea of women's rights: "'She's making it devilishly uncomfortable for me,' [Léonce] went on nervously. 'She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of

women' 'Has she, asked the Doctor with a smile... 'been associating with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings?'" (Chopin 73). On the surface, Mandalet believes Edna's interest in her liberation is frivolous. However, women who attempt to rise above the patriarchy are hazardous, especially because men are supposed to control the destiny of women, whether they are daughters or wives. Edna's father naturally represents the traditional patriarchal way of thinking, urging Léonce to place restrictions on Edna.

Critic Gerri Brightwell dissects the use of language and dominance in terms of the domestic sphere, and argues that "in *The Awakening*, male and female languages are distinguished not only by register, but by the relationship of each register to status in societal hierarchy; ... male language tends to be task- and money-oriented because men dominate business and finance" (Brightwell 37). Brightwell continues her argument by stating "women are thus confined not only by their subordinate societal roles, but by their language which renders them powerless beside men" (Brightwell 37). By equating language with power, it becomes clear that the society in *The Awakening* is a traditionally male-dominated one, leaving little room for women like Edna to flourish. Brightwell also concentrates on Léonce, declaring that he "will not veer from the language of power, expressing himself through the register of the business world even at home: tells Edna to 'send [Robert] about his business' if she should grow tired of him" (Brightwell 37). This notion regarding Léonce is important because it demonstrates his dominance and his power over not just Edna, but other characters, too. Léonce's need for control and dominance creates friction in his marriage to Edna, and drives her away from the domestic sphere.

Throughout *The Awakening*, there are several allusions to Edna being confined to a cage, just like a domesticated bird. Because Léonce and the children metaphorically trap her in the house, her character could be equated to a trapped bird in a cage; both long for freedom. Elz quotes a famous line from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman* in reference to caged birds: "Confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch" (Elz 14). Wollstonecraft's metaphor of the caged bird applies to Edna's position. Throughout the novel, there are several instances of bird imagery. In fact, the novel begins with a parrot and mockingbird squawking and singing in an unattractive manner. Elz describes this opening scene in detail, including a reading of Léonce's character: "The cacophony of sound is explicit; the noise of these two nonsensical birds drives Mr. Pontellier away. The caged birds are not mere items to admire when one wants and to dismiss when one is either bored with them or wants silence; instead, they are continuing presence, and Mr. Pontellier must act and remove himself from the situation if he wishes solitude. Moreover, this scene demonstrates Mr. Pontellier's reaction to every situation he finds uncomfortable: he separates himself from the perceived problem" (Elz 15). It becomes unequivocal that Léonce is uneasy around the bird, and later around his own wife. This is important because like Avis and Philip's marriage, this tension creates a lack of balance within their relationship.

Similar to Brightwell's argument, Elz also reads into the language present in the novel. Elz argues that "just as the parrot speaks and understood language--- Spanish--- Léonce Pontellier speaks French and English, and Edna is fluent in both French and English. Thus, she can comprehend what Léonce says; however, Léonce has a third

language—social customs. Therefore, while Edna comprehends and is conversant in French and English, because she did not grow up in the Creole society she is weak in both understanding and practicing the language of Creole social customs” (Elz 15). Edna’s lack of language creates yet another barrier between her and her husband. Edna has trouble discerning the society on Grand Isle; she is not accustomed to the nurturing and warm nature of the Creoles. Léonce and Edna are from different worlds, and neither of them truly understands the other, and this discord creates a problematic and tragic marriage for both of them. Edna fails to be the doting, loving wife Léonce seeks, and Léonce fails to provide Edna with sexual satisfaction or freedom.

By the end of the novel, Edna has moved out of Léonce’s home and into her own space, dubbed “the pigeon house.” The pigeon house represents another complicated and failed attempt for Edna to leave Léonce. By moving to the pigeon house, Edna establishes what appears to be a strong and even empowering statement: she brashly rejects the house she and Léonce have together and dismisses her duties as wife and mother. However, the pigeon house is not enough for Edna to survive independently. Elz describes Edna’s dilemma in detail: “When Léonce leaves town on a business trip, Edna further distances herself by leaving the home and establishing her own place of residence: the ‘pigeon house.’ However, when Edna explains to Arobin, her lover, that her new house is called a ‘pigeon house’ by Ellen, who is a servant,’ because it’s so small and looks like a pigeon house,’ the bird imagery is maintained” (Elz 22). This suggests that Edna is still trapped; she has not been able to completely free herself from True Womanhood. One of the common trappings of women is that they go from their father’s house into their husband’s house; simply stated, women cannot live without a man, and

Edna is no exception. Elz describes this dilemma in detail: “Edna recognizes that in living she will, as her moving from her home to the pigeon house demonstrates, merely be moving from one type of confinement to another... Edna does not want her existence to be defined by her relationships with others, particularly with men... Awakened, Edna refuses to remain the parrot attempting to communicate but doing so ineffectively. Like the mockingbird, she insists on her way and is not dissuaded from it by any obligation recalling her to her role as woman taking care of men—acting as the True Woman” (Elz 20).

In *The Awakening*, it is evident that Adèle is quite comfortable in her role as the True Woman, and Léonce wishes Edna would follow Adèle’s way of life. Edna, on the hand, rejects that lifestyle but is still on display and confined, no matter how much she rebels. Elz argues that “Edna has actually traded in a gilded cage for a simpler one. Additionally, this cage is for a domesticated show bird. Edna has always revolted against being both domesticated and displayed; yet, in selecting this house, she achieves both. Even when fleeing, Edna cannot escape” (Elz 22). Elz’s reading suggests that Edna’s character is doomed; no matter what she does, she is unable to break free from what already defines her. Edna cannot annihilate the roles she has already established for herself, such as being a mother and wife, so she instead chooses to escape by ending her own life. The bird with the broken wing foreshadows Edna’s suicide, and Elz believes Edna becomes that bird: “Aware that she cannot have the life she wants, Edna becomes the bird with the broken wing spiraling down to the water. Shattering her dream are her children whom she chooses to protect” (Elz 24). Edna realizes that she will not be able to

achieve independence living in the pigeon house or by being a mother, so suicide becomes her only escape.

One could argue that the power of sex is a distinguishing factor among the female characters. Unlike Avis and Mlle. Reisz, Edna's sexual awakening influences her character and motivation immensely. Edna's relationships with Robert and Alcee awaken her sexual desires and force her further away from Léonce. Through her affairs, Edna begins to realize that all men in the patriarchy view women as subordinate. As the emotions between Edna and Robert finally surface and become verbalized towards the conclusion of the novel, Robert admits that he did not pursue Edna because she was not "free": "Because you were not free; you were Léonce Pontellier's wife... I was demented... recalling men who had set their wives free" (Chopin 119). Robert's view of Edna establishes her as objectified by her husband; Léonce possesses the power to release Edna and give her to Robert, a sign of the male-dominated culture. When Robert reveals his desire for Edna to become his wife, Edna is furious at the idea of being set free from Léonce: "You have been... wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (Chopin 119). At this point, Edna begins to understand just how detrimental marriage can be. Even though Edna loves Robert, he is not much different than Léonce because of his patriarchal view of her.

In the cases of Avis and Mlle. Reisz, neither is particularly interested in sex, and both put all of their passion into their artwork. This passion allows them to create meaningful and successful art, and gives them the drive to support themselves. Edna, on

the other hand, is more interested in sex and finds herself in extramarital affairs that distract her from producing great art. Like Edna, Adèle is also a sexually stimulated character, but appears to use sex as a means of procreation. Adèle is always fertile and able to produce children, so her interest in sex does not take away from her character's purpose; after all, Adèle is the ultimate "mother-angel." For Edna however, her interest in sex could be viewed as problematic in terms of her productivity. She is unable to channel her passions into her artwork, thus hindering her from becoming the independent artist Mlle. Reisz is. Elz describes the difference between Edna and Reisz in detail: "Edna does not have the 'strong wings' Reisz says are required to sustain flight... in *The Awakening*, Edna dreams of a bird spiraling down to the water, and in the last scene she witness a 'bird with a broken wing... beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water'... This bird is out of control and has nowhere to land; its flight results in death" (Elz 19). Only Mlle. Reisz is truly able to succeed, and this may be because she lacks both a husband and sexual drive.

While Edna does attempt to break away from her home with Léonce in order to become an artist, she is unable to completely immerse herself in creativity for several reasons. The problem with Edna becoming an isolated artist is that she does have her husband and children, but more importantly, she has her sexual desires and longing to be with Robert. Edna's fixation on romance and sex prevents her from fully embracing her independent artistic self, and she ultimately feels trapped. Edna cannot survive on her own as an artist because she is not willing to give up her sexuality. Mlle. Reisz leads an isolated, abstinent life and devotes her energy to her music. Davis writes that "Mlle. Reisz has no material possessions of worth except her 'magnificent piano.' It testifies to

the sacrifices she has made, both materially and emotionally, to pursue the solitary life of an artist” (Davis 98). Edna appears to be more fixated on items of luxury and a specific level of comfort; she is spoiled in a way that Mlle. Reisz is not, and she does not appear willing to lose that aspect of her life. Even after she gains independence from Léonce and her sons, she still feels unhappy, a concept explored by Ramos: “Nonetheless, after Edna has freed herself from Léonce, from her roles as wife and woman of the house, including many of her child-care responsibilities, she still feels empty, feels her own life to be without meaning” (Ramos 156). This reading suggests that Edna cannot fill the void in her life with her art the way Mlle. Reisz can.

Although Edna finds inspiration in Mlle. Reisz’s character and vice versa, she ultimately does not want to be Mlle. Reisz. Stone argues that Reisz cannot be the woman Edna wants to become due to her bizarre, unconventional nature: “The woman who represents a structured form of art is... Reisz, the true artist Edna wishes to become...After listening to her play, Edna’s passions are aroused...Reisz is unmarried, childless, eccentric in manner and in dress, and alienated from society. She cannot serve as a role model for Edna” (Stone 28). Since Edna already has children, she can never completely remove herself from motherhood. Schweitzer reads Mlle. Reisz’s character as “the alternative to the ‘soul’s slavery’ of the ‘mother-woman’...anti-social, asexual and non-maternal, Mademoiselle Reisz is an accomplished musician who, at the expense of intimacy and attachment, pursues a career and achieves the individuation autonomy... [defined] as masculine” (Schweitzer 170). Edna is conflicted; she does not want to live her life like Adèle, giving up herself for her children, but she also cannot live an isolated, asexual existence. Schweitzer also sees that “Edna is both drawn to Mademoiselle Reisz

and repulsed by her, another sign of the contradiction which distinguishes her position. It is her music that awakens Edna to both her own repressed sensuality and her desire” (Schweitzer 170). However, towards the end of the novel, Mlle. Reisz does not take Edna seriously. She realizes that Edna does not have the gumption or strength to survive on her own, as explained by Stone: “[Edna] receives a much harsher judgment of her artistic capacity from Mlle. Reisz.... Reisz warns, ‘To be an artist includes much... to succeed the artist must possess the courageous soul’” (Stone 29). Reisz accurately predicts that Edna most likely will not survive on her own as an artist, but Edna can also not survive in her marriage.

By depicting destructive marriages in their novels, Phelps and Chopin illustrate the damaging effects marriage can have on a woman’s creativity. Avis, Edna, and Adèle cannot achieve artistic freedom due to their marriages; only Mlle. Reisz truly embodies the autonomous female artist. The ending of both novels is also especially important. In *The Story of Avis*, Avis is freed from her husband and son due to their deaths. She is left with her daughter, Wait, who appears to be a double of Avis as a child. Phelps may be suggesting the importance of the female bond by choosing to kill off Philip and Van. As her mother warned Avis on her deathbed, Avis can serve as a living example; she can instruct her daughter and nurture her ambition. Without restrictions, Wait can now become what Avis had wanted for her own life; there is hope for the next generation. In *The Awakening*, Edna’s ending is very different; she chooses to end her life instead of submitting to her family for the remainder of her life. Although Edna attempted living on her own, she remained dissatisfied, seeing suicide as her only option. Rather than allow

Edna to submit to patriarchal society, Chopin gives Edna agency. Edna finally has a choice: she can escape this world through death.

Conclusion

The endings of *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis* portray the leading female characters in different ways, but both novels suggest the theme of female empowerment. Chopin chooses to have Edna commit suicide as a symbol of her unwillingness to submit to a life of domesticity. Edna would rather end her own life than commit solely to her sons and husband. Edna's suicide can be read as empowerment; here is a woman who feels she will only be free through death. Phelps, however, concludes her novel with Avis as a single mother and widow. Phelps' writing of Avis can also be seen as empowering in terms of sisterhood; Avis is now a self-sufficient single mother to her daughter, Wait. There appears to be a sign of hope for women at the end of *The Story of Avis*. Although Avis faces adversity in the novel, she is finally free from her husband and son who consumed her independence. Now, Avis will have the time and energy to devote to her artistry, and she can also teach her own daughter the importance of independence. Both *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis* suggest the need for destroying True Womanhood in order to embrace the New Woman.

Evidently, Kate Chopin and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps were both highly influenced by the movement of the New Woman. Through the use of compelling and diverse female characters, Chopin and Phelps successfully convey how multi-faceted women truly are. In *The Awakening* and *The Story of Avis*, women are depicted in a variety of ways including the mother, the daughter, the artist, the student, and the lover. By utilizing these different roles, Chopin and Phelps showcase the downfall and empowerment of women.

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