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Empowered Women as Secondary Characters in
The Awakening by Kate Chopin and *The Age of
Innocence* by Edith Wharton: A Comparative
Analysis

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Abstract

The main aim of this dissertation is to examine and compare the influence of a secondary feminine empowered character on the protagonist of the novels *The Awakening* written by Kate Chopin and *The Age of Innocence* written by Edith Wharton: Mademoiselle Reisz and Ellen Olenska. Both women present challenging qualities which made them unconventional and whose particular characteristics are related to the figure of the “Artist Woman” and “New Woman” respectively. Therefore, I will explore how they adapted to the American patriarchal society and their influence on their protagonists: Edna Pontellier and Newland Archer.

1. FIRST WAVE FEMINISM IN THE US

Several literary critics have analyzed the social context of the period in which *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) by Edith Wharton, were written, that is, First Wave Feminism. Therefore, in order to better understand the background in these novels, I offer an overview of First Wave Feminism, for which I mostly rely on Rory Dicker's *A History of U.S. Feminisms*. Throughout history, women have been subjected to various forms of oppression. During the nineteenth century they were prevented from obtaining most secondary education, and as result were unable to find gainful employment, instead having their identities confined to their role as housekeepers and mothers. Women desired to be treated equally, demanding justice and personal fulfilment, as well as self-development. As a result, these restrictions marked the need for a change, to guarantee equal rights and opportunities. However, it is also important to understand that it was a gradual process. Thus, with the passing of time, more and more equality was achieved and women from high social classes were enjoying a greater sense of freedom. However, those changes have not applied to women from lower social classes, or whose skin color was not white. American women realized they needed to distance themselves from the trapping situation they were suffering at home and open for new possibilities, aspirations and ambitions.

With the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in the year 1792, women realized the tyranny they were suffering, and the oppressed system they were living in. Mary Wollstonecraft's main aim was to provide equality to men in mind and spirit (Janes: 295). These demands occurred in the public sphere, for instance in education, and in the private sphere, where many of them were forced to marry men they have not even chosen in order to devote themselves to motherhood and

housekeeping. At first, it was thought that women were not capable of having rational thought and they would not “survive” without a man by their side. Therefore, there was a need to transcend from that belief that was widely accepted and eventually develop a different approach to the situation women were suffering. As a consequence of more and more women sharing their frustrations with one another, the turning point of a new movement started in the mid-19th century, the Seneca Falls Convention, in New York. The convention was led by two suffragettes, Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. The Declaration of Sentiments was a manifesto that presented the demands of women, who deserved equality and rights as being U.S Citizens. One of the most important declarations of the manifesto was: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal,” (Declaration of Sentiments, 1848), which was inspired by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In these days, the Declaration of Sentiments is considered to be a crucial document of the feminist movement.

First Wave Feminism had not been properly acknowledged until Marta Lear referred to “second wave feminism” in her article for the *New York Times*. (Mohajan: 8). Therefore, women eventually recognized the importance of that movement years ago which marked the beginning of what we nowadays identify with feminism, as the term itself. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, feminism is the “belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests”. In order to obtain this definition, indisputable changes related to the role of women had to be completely transformed. However, Rory Dicker states that “feminism, however, is not just concerned with ‘equality’ [...] Women will become equal when they have what men have” (12). The main problem is the domination of men over women, they consider them inferior and

therefore never acknowledge women's value, as Dicker argues "domination is the root of the problem, and domination occurs when one person or group has power over another" (23). Moreover, it is remarkable to notice Dicker's interest on the actual term "feminism" and the fact that it was not widely used until the 1910s. The concept that many women created in order to refer to their progress in society was called the "woman movement" (Dicker: 25). However, it was not until 1920 when the right to vote eventually recognized women's "self-sufficiently, self-expression, and sexual freedom" (Dicker: 25). These characteristics are present in both secondary female characters from *The Awakening* (1899), Mademoiselle Reisz, and from *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Countess Olenska, whose main aim is to make a difference in the main protagonist's thoughts and influence them in order to create an identity of its own.

1.1 THE NEW WOMAN

Before entering into the analysis of the two novels and their respective secondary female characters, Mademoiselle Reisz from *The Awakening* (1899) and Countess Olenska from *The Age of Innocence* (1920), it is important to contextualize one of the most relevant terms that have been brought with the First Women's Movement, that is, the concept of the "New Woman". The term was coined by Sarah Grand in 1894, and this concept was a significant departure from the traditional Victorian woman. The New Woman was intelligent, educated and self-sufficient (Diniejko: 2). This term had a great influence on the independence and freedom that women were claiming. The achievement of freedom was crucial in order to liberate women from the trapping situations they were living, due to the fact that traditionally marriage was seen as the only possibility for women to achieve social status; as West claims, "Since marriage is no longer the only career open to women, they have the advantage and can demand whatever terms they wish" (57). The

New Woman challenged social norms, and was usually confined to the margins of society due to her “extravagant” lifestyle, that is to say, her behavior and the way of dressing. The term had emerged as a rebellion to the conventional idea of submissive wives:

In the nineteenth century, proponents of what was called ‘voluntary motherhood’ argued that women had the right to choose when they wanted to be mothers; practically, this meant that they had the right to refuse their husband’s sexual advances - a remarkable feat given the fact that ‘true women’ were expected to submit to their husbands’ desires in every way. (Dicker: 61)

Therefore, their idea was to distance themselves from the widely-known concept of a “mother-woman”, a concept which some of these women reject.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. KATE CHOPIN’S *THE AWAKENING* (1899)

Kate Chopin was an outstanding American female writer, her story was an inspiration for women due to the manner in which she approached controversial themes such as sexual liberation. She wrote *The Awakening* in 1899. Nowadays this text is considered a classic feminist text, due to the fact that it deals with topics such as the decadence of a Victorian marriage and the posterior self-discovery of Edna Pontellier, the protagonist. For context, it is relevant to mention some important biographical facts of the author. Kate Chopin was born in St. Louis in 1850. Her father was Irish and her mother was a French Creole. However, she was raised in St. Louis Academy of the Sacred Heart, where she received her education from nuns, “nuns were famous for their brisk efficiency and keen intellect, and theirs was by far the best education available for girls” (Toth: 3). Regarding the way in which she was educated, by primarily independent women, Chopin was influenced by their thinking and therefore adopted new knowledge that will be revealed in her book *The*

Awakening, as Groves states: “For Kate Chopin, her writing tells the story of women claiming their own independence in the only ways they can in a patriarchal society” (1). Kate Chopin got married at the age of twenty and moved to New Orleans. She gave birth to six children and ten years later she became a widow. After her husband’s death she was highly in debt, therefore she had to start writing in order to provide economic stability to her family. Fortunately, even though her novel *The Awakening* caused a scandal due to how she treated sexuality, female liberation and self-definition, it became a widely-known novel and many women identified themselves with Edna.

In *The Awakening* the reader can observe the awakening of the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, a twenty-years-old American and in a smaller portion French woman, mother and wife, who is married to Léonce Pontellier, a forty-year-old wealthy businessman. Their marriage provided them with two children while depriving Edna of any independence, due to the fact that she was summoned to housework and children care, while her husband traveled for work. The novel is set on the coast of Grand Isle, and in the city of New Orleans. These two places are presented in contrast: In Grand Isle near the ocean Edna feels liberation while in New Orleans she feels trapped at home, with her husband and her children. The need of Edna to liberate herself from social conventions is portrayed through a relevant figure for Edna: the pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, while at the same time being contrasted with another female figure, Adele Ratignole, who represents what Edna should be: a good mother who would sacrifice her own life for her children: “The mother-women [...] were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin: 10).

At the time the novel was published, 1899, most critics agree with a definition that society would never accept Edna's decision to liberate herself:

According to the majority of 1899 reviews, *The Awakening's* Edna Pontelier is a selfish wife and mother who not only does not appreciate her good husband, but also she rebels in the worst possible way by taking a lover or two. She is not sympathetic; she is wicked foolish, or both. (Toth: 20)

In fact, while Edna may give the impression of a cruel woman, who abandons her children and husband for a search of self-development, that feeling is softened by the appearance of a female character who opens a new world for her, mostly through art: Mademoiselle Reisz. Even though Mademoiselle Reisz is presented as a secondary character in the novel, she has a huge influence on her actions and mental development, who encourages her indirectly to take control of her life, while always being slightly critical, since it is a part of her personality.

In order to understand the importance that Mademoiselle Reisz has on Edna, the reader must be aware of the characters that were depriving her from self-development, and therefore the reason why Edna rebelled. Edna never experienced understanding from men, more precisely, from her husband: "Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident" (Chopin: 22). The influence that Edna's husband has on her is exactly in the way he desires it, he felt as if Edna was his possession while never acknowledging her value. For example, he looks "at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin: 3). Even though the conventional image of a woman is that of a wife and mother, Edna challenges that imposed definition and rebels against the patriarchal society:

There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone. (Chopin: 114)

As has been mentioned in the previous section, women were subjected to motherhood and housekeeping, while never being able to achieve their dreams. Therefore, in a search for understanding, Edna relies on women, on her friends, Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz.

2.1.1 MADEMOISELLE REISZ: THE “ARTIST WOMAN”

As a girl, Kate Chopin loved playing the piano and she developed an interest in music through which she could voice and claim herself. Chopin was naturally gifted with the art of music, she took daily piano lessons and therefore was able to “repeat ‘by ear’ any piece of music she heard” (Toth: 13). In addition, “she continued to perform on the piano as an adult for family and friends in the privacy of her ‘salon’” (Davis: 89). Kate Chopin’s fictional character Mademoiselle Reisz represents the artistic side of the author and the opposite of what was expected of women from the nineteenth century: an “artist-woman” (Gray: 63). Reisz is an unconventional woman who appreciates music and art as a crucial element in her life and one of the reasons for her development. She is very passionate about her artwork which serves as an inspiration for Edna and her awakening.

The novel begins with a sentence presenting the situation: “A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door...” (Chopin: 1). This moment is crucial due to the fact that it deals with the theme of imprisonment, a bird in a cage, as Edna feels. This theme would evolve in the book with the help of Mademoiselle Reisz. The reader would observe the evolution of the bird, of Edna, as a woman capable of spreading her wings in

order to leave the cage of entrapment. In the chapter 27, Edna was having a conversation with Alcee Robin, the man with whom Edna committed adultery, in which she explained her earlier visit to Mademoiselle Reisz's house:

When I left her to-day, she put her arms around and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. 'The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth. (Chopin: 107)

Mademoiselle Reisz illustrates Edna with her ideas of freedom, using the example of a bird, an animal that must free itself, what Edna must do in order to achieve self-fulfillment. However, almost at the final page of the book, where Edna found herself buried with social expectations, went to the beach and discovered a wounded bird, incapable of flying anymore and thereafter falling into water: "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin: 148). Edna interprets that wounded bird falling down as a sign for her. Edna's tragic, or self-release end was tied to the fact that she was the one who actually took the decision to submerge herself into water, into the sea, a place in which she felt liberated: "The shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone. She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again" (Chopin: 149). That idea of the seductive, tempting sea that was calling Edna to submerge in it was already portrayed in the sixth chapter and therefore anticipating the final decision of Edna: "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (Chopin: 16).

At first, it may seem that everyone wants to control Edna's life, and no one is actually worried about her as a woman with aspirations, since she is only twenty-eight years old and already a mother with two children. Edna is on a journey of discovering herself, and for that, she must need a female figure as a reference: Mademoiselle Reisz. As has been mentioned above, Mademoiselle Reisz does not fit in the definition of a puritan Victorian woman. She is a "gifted-pianist" (Gray: 62) and her role contrasts with Adele Ratignolle's "mother-woman". Mademoiselle Reisz does not follow the conventional standards of beauty:

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, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair. (Chopin: 31-32)

With that description that Chopin provides, the author is already aware that she is an independent, not-interested in her appearance, old woman. She is not presented as a woman with sexual interest and because of her musical rather than motherhood abilities "she is labeled as 'other'" (Gray: 62). This figure of the "artist-woman" is the one who inspires Edna to take advantage of all the passion that Edna has hidden in herself and transform it into music, since Edna admitted that she "Was what she herself called very fond of music" (Chopin: 32). The fact that Mademoiselle Reisz's music provoked such intense emotions in Edna: "she trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (Chopin: 33) was a shock of reality for her. She never felt those emotions while being with her family. Mademoiselle Reisz also noticed Edna's feelings and even though she did not care about the rest of the audience "She arose, and bowing her stiff, lofty bow,

she went away, stopping for neither thanks nor applause [...] ‘You are the only one worth playing for’ (Chopin: 33) she recognized Edna’s enthusiasm and invited her to her apartment in order to play Edna her songs.

The artist-woman was so unnoticeable that Edna had trouble finding her apartment, most of the neighbors had not even noticed if she was still living there or not, since she was “the most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street” (Chopin: 75) and she was living an unconventional life, a life that society did not accept. However, that feeling of being unperceived had an effect on Edna and she explored the whole city in order to visit the little woman. They both enjoyed the presence of each other and Edna felt comfortable to talk about her own life, going beyond the concept of mother and of wife. She wanted to become an artist, since Mademoiselle Reisz’s music was the impulse she needed, however, her critical attitude was very defiant for Edna, since she comprehended that to become an artist needs a lot of courage:

‘But you have told me nothing of yourself. What are you doing?’

‘Painting! Laughed Edna. ‘I am becoming an artist. Think of it’

‘Ah! An artist! You have pretensions, Madame.’

‘Why pretensions? Do you think I could not become an artist?’

‘[...] to be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts - absolute gifts - which have not been acquired by one’s effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. [...] the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies’. (Chopin: 81)

Her repeated visits to the little woman’s apartment became a routine: “It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free” (Chopin: 101). Edna needs to hear

someone with authority, whose advice would awaken in her a sense of reality: “she is presented as a witchlike figure with the ability to transport Edna to new levels of reality” (Seidel: 213) in order to understand that she must sacrifice “love, sexuality, and connection” (Gray: 66). Since she was not able to transform herself into the desired role of “artist-woman”, scholars agree that she fits in the role of “‘free-woman’: Both roles reject the interpellation of females as objects, rather than subjects” (Gray: 67). In order to achieve that independence she moved into her “pigeon-house” (Chopin: 109). Therefore, the metaphor of the bird is present again: “Pigeons are not free, soaring birds; they fly away, but always return. Edna breaks with her familiar connections and responsibilities [...] but she does not fully escape them” (Gray: 66).

At the end of the novel, which coincides with the end of Edna’s life, one of her last thoughts is about how Mademoiselle Reisz would ridicule her “pretensions” that have been mentioned before: “How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered” (Chopin: 149), while at the same time acknowledging that she was right in her advice, she could not allow that her beloved ones would “possess her, body and soul” (Chopin: 149) and her suicide was her own final decision.

To conclude, Mademoiselle Reisz challenged social expectations and she represents the opposite of a female mother-woman. Living in a nineteenth century Victorian society required strength, and according to Gray, Reisz transformed that into music (63). She became the “Artist Woman”. In opposition to Edna, “Mademoiselle’s authority is that of the artistic outsider, who is not bound by sentimental conventions” (Seidel :213). In addition, as Davis concludes: “the novel acknowledges the difficulties of a woman’s rising to the height of her artistry in the male-dominated artistic world of the nineteenth

century” (103). It was not only a difficult task to stand out as an artist-woman, but also to be accepted in society as such. Mademoiselle Reisz’s most important focus was on her art and her independence, something she acknowledged and claimed throughout the novel.

2.2 EDITH WHARTON’S *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*

Edith Wharton was born in New York City in 1862, during the American Civil war. Even though she was born into a very sophisticated and wealthy American family, she experienced a very hard childhood because of her mother's harsh treatment, she never allowed her to read novels until marriage to Edward Wharton, which ended in divorce. She could not publish a novel until she was forty years old, right after the death of her mother. From that moment, she became a very prolific writer and published a novel almost every year (Batuman: 8). “In other ways, also, the image of an invulnerably lady like Wharton came to be modified.” (Bell: 12). With strength and determination she found place in the editorial world, publishing houses and determined her market value as a fruitful writer: “at whatever cost, she made herself in more senses than one into a ‘new woman’ who seized her own identity” (Bell: 13). Most women also identified themselves with the author, who was beginning to be considered as Bell states “one of feminism’s foremothers” (13). She moved to Paris in the year 1907:

Europe represented a better refuge from the world that had almost extinguished her. [...] In France, she established herself in a circle of cultivated men and women who found intelligence and artistic creativity acceptable feminine attributes. (Bell: 11)

The liberation from New York was not easy, however, as a citizen of New York, novelist and woman, she analyzed the customs of the city with irony and the position of women

in society. Thus, we are provided with the most accurate description and analysis of New York society in her winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction book *The Age of Innocence*, a “tender story of love and sacrifice” (Bell: 7). She lived in a period of changes, due to the First World War and her exile from New York to Paris and eventually she died in the year 1937. “She saw herself as an intellectual, interested in her culture in a broad sense - in questions of nationality and sociology and history as these affected all mankind, male and female”. (Bell:15)

One of her most awarded and recognized novels is *The Age of Innocence*, and therefore it is important to provide the reader with some relevant facts of the story. The novel is set in the 1870s in Old New York City and told from the perspective of a third-person narrator but focalized through the eyes of Newland Archer, a lawyer and the male protagonist of the book: “In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of Old New York gentility” (Wharton: 7). The story revolves around his marriage with May Welland and his desire for her cousin, Ellen Olenska, who married an abusive Polish Count and obtained the title of Countess. Ellen suddenly appears in New York where her unconventional beauty and behavior awakes the interest of the rest of the society. There is a dichotomy between the two women from the novel: May Welland and Ellen Olenska. May represents innocence while Ellen stands for experience and awareness. However, even though in the novel we can find several dialogues between the characters, neither of them can properly express themselves because almost all of the information is filtered through Newland Archer’s perspective: “He separates them into their respective roles, once he misinterprets as the ‘real thing’ beneath their outward appearance” (Jessee: 38). Archer’s attitude will be constantly challenged by the surprising appearance of his fiancée’s cousin: Ellen Olenska. At the

beginning of the book Mrs. Lovell Mingott, Mrs. Welland and May Welland are gathered at the Opera House in New York. However, the appearance of Ellen Olenska is observed through the eyes of all the spectators of the opera:

The entry of a new figure into old Mrs. Mingott's box. It was that of a slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds.[...] Left no doubt in Archer's mind that the young woman was May Welland's cousin, the cousin always referred to in the family as 'poor Ellen Olenska'. (Wharton: 8-10)

Archer is a gentleman, who wears a high-fashioned suit and has a respectable position in society, since he is a lawyer. Moreover, he wants to secure a future for his firm and a family, that is the reason why the book revolves around his engagement with May Welland and her pregnancy: "Archer's identity is always positional: he is a son, brother, part of an affianced couple, unable to break free even when he realizes his own condition, trapped, finally, by May's victorious news of his forthcoming paternity" (Knights: 23). May Welland is the embodiment of innocence, trust and traditional family values, because she is carrying their future child. Therefore, Archer's projections are fulfilled: he is married, has children and his wealth has a successor, however, the problem lays in the fact that he does not love the woman he married, since he is deeply in love with Ellen Olenska: she was responsible of turning his life upside down, unintentionally. As Knights describes: "Some readers would agree with Archer that to be locked in the family is to be buried alive" (36). Therefore, the frustration that Archer experiments exists only because a woman, a new type of empowered woman, opened his eyes.

2.2.1 ELLEN OLENSKA: THE “NEW WOMAN”

In this part of the dissertation will focus on the depiction of Ellen Olenska, the character that challenged the whole world of Newland Archer, her influence on the New York old-fashioned society and how they adapted to the figure of the “New Woman”. Throughout the text we can find various stereotypical dichotomies between the two women: “the ‘dark’, ‘experienced’, ‘whore’ Ellen Olenska with the ‘fair’, ‘innocent’, ‘virgin’ May Welland” (Jessee: 37). However, the ending of both of them would emphasize the meaning of previous definition: May was awarded with marriage and children while Ellen was sent to Paris, since she never actually adapted to New York City’s demands: “To ensure a future, the figures who threaten structural collapse, to self and to society, must be expelled from New York and from the narrative” (Knights: 39). Ellen adopted the title of “Countess” when she married a Polish nobleman, who resulted to be an abusive partner who was depriving her of any liberty and was presenting her as a material value:

Ellen’s marriage to an immensely rich Polish nobleman of legendary fame. [...]

Ellen’s own marriage had ended in disaster, and that she was returning home to seek rest and oblivion among her kinsfolk. [...] Polish count must have robbed her of her fortune as well as of her illusions. (Wharton: 51, 57).

Her desire to be liberated and acknowledged again as an American woman: “I want to forget everything else, to become a complete American again” (Wharton: 55) was constantly interrupted by her family opinion on her divorce, she would never be seen as more than a woman without a man by her side and she would never change the opinion of her family because of the European characteristics she adopted while living there: “No wonder she is completely Europeanized” (Wharton: 121). Time was passing and Archer’s feelings for Ellen Olenska were growing, he was so fascinated with the air of

sophistication and the good taste in art the Madame has, that, in chapter nine he completely forgot to send his fiancée the daily bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley he sent her everyday until their wedding day. Instead, after the good impression Ellen Olenska made on him, he went to the florist and ordered her a bouquet of “sun-golden cluster of yellow roses” (Wharton: 67) because they reminded him of the strong personality of Ellen Olenska, someone who is not afraid to start her new life in another city: “there was something too rich, too strong, in their fiery beauty” (Wharton: 67). Yellow roses symbolize “jealousy” and “decrease of love” (Petitti: 2), as a way of representing their unsuccessful love affair. Moreover, she offers Newland “the possibilities of individual freedom and experience, instinct and variety, cultural and sexual richness” (Fryer: 161) which he recognized as threatening but which enriches his life.

The world in which Newland Archer, May Welland and Ellen Olenska are living is full of controversial situations, and gossiping is an everyday event. Newland Archer is a lawyer, he must obey his duty as a legal representative of the corporation he works for, as well as please the demands of the Mingott clan, mostly related to Ellen’s private affairs, such as the divorce, which has become a public concern. The Mingott clan demanded him that he must convince her to not divorce her abusive husband because the scandal that would be brought up with it, would destroy Ellen’s possibility to live a normal life, but she sought desperately a solution, a way out: “But European society is not given to divorce: Countess Olenska thought she would be conforming to American ideas in asking for her freedom. [...] But we do most thoroughly appreciate you (Archer) persuading Ellen to give up the idea” (Wharton: 121). As Fryer argues:

The power of this world is such that the men can be called home from work to give their attention to domestic problems, and even the nature of their work - when it touches on family matters - can be dictated, as when the family makes clear to

Newland what sort of legal decision he is expected to make about Ellen Olenska's divorce. (162)

The conversation between them is presented as silencing the New Woman demands as a way of emphasizing the collective interest: "It appeared here that the Old New York has silenced the New Woman" (Elaman-Garner: 12). At this moment of the novel we can already observe how Ellen Olenska influenced Archer's ideals: he is so deeply in love with her that he went against his morals that he must obey as a lawyer and as a new member of the Mingott family. Thus, he would rather run the divorce procedures than follow the demands of the Mingott clan, because he wants Ellen to be free, to be with him, even though he is engaged with May, demonstrating a selfish attitude. On the positive side, it is also due to the fact that with her divorce she would be free from her husband, which allows her to not be tied to a man and his fortune, and Archer can appreciate more her being free rather than not having her, because she is not a possession a man can have: "I hear she means to get a divorce," said Janey boldly. "I hope she will!" Archer exclaimed" (Wharton: 35). Later, he emphasizes that dialogue adding an important comment on the topic: "Women ought to be free - as free as we are" (Wharton: 35). May would never influence him until that point, but Ellen did, and in a shorter period of time. However, the power of the family is more influential than his own feelings: he had to adapt to their demands and convince her to not sue for divorce.

As the novel progresses, Archer is becoming aware of the world he is living in, as a form of critique to it. He was so submerged in the New York society life, that for him his everyday life was the only correct one. However, with the arrival of Ellen, what he already knew started to be questioned. Therefore, with that attitude Archer has shown an evolution: he prefers to suffer rather than seeing Ellen suffer. The family is not aware of

the affair, therefore they idealize Archer: "I know everything, dear Mr. Archer - my child has told me all you have done for her. Your wise advice: your courageous firmness" (Wharton: 134). The topic of her divorce, and of her life in general, was a daily event, they gathered, made a plan for her and she just must follow the steps, because "the clan holds that a woman can be defined only in relation to men" (Knights: 33). However, Ellen just wanted to be accepted in society again and live a normal life, not labeled as an outsider: "If you knew how I hate to be different!" (Wharton: 91). Ellen's presence is also challenged by the fact that she may be a threat to the innocence of May: "Ellen Olenska's spoils pattern suggests both danger and power in some potential pattern on its own" (Fryer: 164). She is simply introducing new ways of life. However, all the assumptions of Madame Olenska suggested that people know her, that anyone can expect her next movement, but we can observe that this is not true: "Archer thinks of himself as an artistic person who sees and appreciates Ellen Olenska's sophisticated aesthetic taste. He is, however, mistaken about himself" (Blackwood: 24). In the course of chapter 22, Archer Newland goes to Newport in order to search for Ellen, since she has escaped from New York society and she does not want anyone to find her. Even though the book is told from the perspective of Newland Archer, the third-person narrator does not always portray him in a positive light, as has happened here, he is a selfish and flawed young man. At the porch of a house in Newport he saw a pink parasol and undoubtedly thought that it belonged to Ellen, but "Ellen Olenska would never carry a frilly, pink parasol" (Blackwood: 24). He was just being guided by his feelings, not by reason.

As is typical of the stereotype of the New Woman, Ellen is considered a threat to New York society and to her family: "a figure defined by her challenge to conventions in behavior and dress, her education and aspirations for greater public and private

recognition, independence of spirit, competence, fearlessness, and a thirst for marital and sexual independence” (Elaman-Garner: 3). Therefore, instead of accepting her as a part of the Mingott clan, she is sent to Paris, back to Europe. She represents what most women of the society reject, that is, sexual liberation: “presenting herself as the image of sexuality [...] she seems unequivocally the type of the sensual” (Knights: 33). Her stay in Europe provided her with a wider sense of opinion on sexual affairs, but the world which she stands for is not ready to be brought to America, that is the reason why she has received so much rejection. Moreover, we can observe similarities with the author of the book, who wanted the readers to understand Ellen Olenska’s point of view through her actions, as Knights states: “Ellen’s life in Paris as recent feminist criticism suggests, points toward new roles for women” (40). Ellen, as Edith Wharton, exiled to Paris, for different reasons but with the main aim: to be a wealthy independent woman in Paris: “at least her life on the same street in Paris as Edith Wharton’s suggests that she has created her own sources of tradition and continuity” (Fryer: 165). Ellen was not a traditional common woman, neither was Archer as a man, and their relationship, due to different factors such as family or past events, could never work: “Ellen Olenska was like no other woman, he was like no other man: their situation, therefore, resembled no one else’s” (Wharton: 254). Therefore, what represents Ellen is uniqueness, individuality, freedom and the fact that she was the only one responsible for her life.

At the end of the book, the author moves to the immediate past, 1900s when Ellen has established her own space in Parisian society and her influence is widely known, besides, she is not defined as a woman in need of a man, or in need to be accepted in a society that does not accept her: “Ellen Olenska’s life in full, as something that extends beyond the question of whether she might be pair-bond with a flawed man trying to achieve his own

freedom through her” (Blackwood: 26). New York simply was not ready for her, neither was Archer. She helped him open his eyes since her “otherness” was something foreign for him, something he was not obtaining from May. She stirred up his usual order in life, and brought some excitement, he awakened his senses and opened his mind. That is the reason why at the end of the novel he stopped being selfish, and never interrupted Ellen’s life again.

3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

In the previous sections I have analyzed separately the two empowered secondary characters that work as independent and challenging women for society: Mademoiselle Reisz and Ellen Olenska. Therefore, in this final section I will focus on the comparative analysis between them both, how they have influenced the main character and their similarities and differences.

To begin with, both Mademoiselle Reisz and Ellen Olenska fulfilled their role as supporters that made their main character awaken their senses. In order to present the differences between the two empowered and independent women, I will focus mostly on the influence they provide to the main character they are attached to. Mademoiselle Reisz is actually providing some realistic guidance to a twenty-eight year old woman whose life is lost to a patriarchal society since it is already planned: she is married, possesses a house, not precisely her but her husband, and they have descendants. Society was not expecting of her more than being the “mother-figure” which she refuses to be. Therefore, there is a clear need to introduce a character with courage, with a strong independent mentality and who does not care about the opinion society has on her. Thus, Edna’s quest for freedom is accompanied by the figure of the “Artist-woman” Mademoiselle Reisz who illustrated

her with the most necessary advice to do only what she wants to do. Mademoiselle Reisz lives alone in her apartment, she is unmarried, cooking and taking care only of herself, and she works as an artistic guide that Edna needed to begin her transformation. She is a disagreeable woman who is uninterested in any affair other than her own, that is why, it gained significance for Edna that she was being so attentive in helping her develop her artistic and musical skills. However, Edna's end is presented with ambivalence: Mademoiselle Reisz's helper role may be criticized due to the fact that even though her advice has helped Edna in opening her wings, it was not enough to save her from her tragic end. Or, the readers would accept and understand that Edna's fate was already written but with Mademoiselle Reisz's help she took the courage she had developed and eventually committed to her decision: "To succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul" (Chopin: 81). For Edna, courage meant liberation from social expectations.

On the other hand, Ellen Olenska does not entirely function as a helper to Archer Newland, a man in his late-twenties. She is just in part responsible for his development since the book also focuses on her own development independently, not only serving as a helping force to Archer but rather a figure to prompt new sensations on him. Moreover, Ellen and Archer have opposite aims: he wants to stand out in New York society, while Ellen Olenska wants to integrate in that old-fashioned world, thinking that it is what she needs. They both presented differences in behavior and the way in which they have chosen their life partners. However, they both realized that their union was an impossible dream. Ellen wanted to escape from her abusive husband while Archer was going mad from the innocence that May was projecting. He wanted a woman aware of the world they are living in, who can look after herself and whose main characteristic was independence. Therefore, in order to open his mind and begin to look after someone else,

he finds Ellen who embodies the stereotype of the “New Woman”. Ellen is not innocent, she is experienced, and it would not be easy to trick her into marriage again. “It is clear that she chooses the Parisian life rather than returning to her husband, Count Olenska, or having an extramarital affair with Newland Archer” (Yalcin: 291). Her escape to Paris at the end of the book is the act of liberation she deserved and the fact that Archer ends up alone, without May or Ellen is a valuable lesson to him. He can not have everything he wants, neither Ellen nor May are his possession, he must learn the value of every person and change his behavior towards women. He loved Ellen, but not in the way she deserved it.

In contrast, with relation to the similarities between Mademoiselle Reisz and Ellen Olenska I will rely on the fact that neither book’s end revolves around the issue of marriage, as was expected of the figure of the “New Woman”. Neither Mademoiselle Reisz nor Ellen Olenska are interested in committing themselves to a man. They remain as single, independent and focused on themselves women who enjoy society life as they please. Mademoiselle Reisz appreciates solitude, music, art and peace; while Ellen Olenska enjoys high-fashion life and sophistication. She is described by Archer as a “golden-light” (Wharton: 289) who illuminates the house she lives in Paris and where she celebrates the gatherings of influential people, as she was the one to decide who enters into her property, into her private sphere, as the embodiment of freedom and independence. Moreover, in order to mention another similarity, both Mademoiselle Reisz and Ellen Olenska deal with characters guided by selfishness. Edna ignored her responsibilities as a mother-woman and committed suicide, while Archer married the woman he does not love just to not end up dying alone. Both Mademoiselle Reisz and Ellen Olenska play an important role in the development of the main character, to help

them shape their identities and act according to a not-established behavior. To discover their new side, either artistic or more minded-open.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this dissertation I tried to remark the importance of an empowered feminine character in a nineteenth century society, who may be labeled as an outsider, but will serve as an example to follow for the next generation of women. Due to the period in which both books were written, we can suppose that some women may identify themselves with either Ellen Olenska, since most of them were unsatisfied in their marriage, or Mademoiselle Reisz, since their main aim was to develop their artistic side and only being focused on their personal development, among other women who were not interested in being one of those. In conclusion, we can observe that Mademoiselle Reisz and Ellen Olenska share more differences than similarities. Both women present a difference in age, Mademoiselle Reisz is an old woman while Ellen is in her late-twenties in the middle of discovering her true self. The fact that Mademoiselle's main aim was to help a twenty-year old woman to find her artistic side is contrasted with the main aim of Ellen Olenska who was attached, and emotionally attracted, to the figure of the self-absorbed man who is guided by his feelings and emotions rather than by rational thought. In addition, they have proved that the evolution of the main character would have been a difficult task without the influence of the secondary empowered woman on his or her decisions and the way in which they shaped a new personality.

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