

### **Regaining of Sanity, Sexuality, and Self-respect through Death, or the Story of Ophelia, the Awakening of Mrs. Pontellier, and the Triumph of Lily Bart.**

"I think nothing, my lord."

"I do not know, my lord, what I should think"

*Hamlet*

"Of whom - of what are you thinking?" asked Adele of her companion...

"Nothing," returned Mrs. Pontellier, with a start, adding at once: "How stupid! But it seems to me it is the reply we make instinctively to such a question. Let me see: I was really not conscious of thinking of anything; but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts."

"One of these days [...] I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think - try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know."

*The Awakening*

[Dorset] lingered entreatingly on the threshold to blurt out: "It's been such a comfort " do say you'll let me see you again- But to this direct appeal it was impossible to give an assent; and she said with friendly decisiveness: "I'm sorry- but you know why I can't."

He coloured to the eyes, pushed the door shut, and stood before her embarrassed but insistent. "I know how you might, if you would - if things were different-and it lies with you to make them so. It's just a word to say, and you put me out of my misery!"

Their eyes met, and for a second she trembled again with the nearness of the temptation. "You're mistaken; I know nothing; I saw nothing," she exclaimed, [...]; and as he turned away, groaning out "You sacrifice us both," she continued to repeat, as if it were a charm: "I know nothing - absolutely nothing."

*The House of Mirth*

Once upon a time there was a fair fictitious heroine named Ophelia, whose life and story, while significant for the development of action in the play, had no meaning whatsoever for the drama's overall message. Shakespeare wrote his female roles for men, which partly helps to explain why Ophelia's character is so dull and overcast. There were always limitations on male actors that restricted and defined the characterizations devised, but in spite of those constraints to render subtle nuances of femininity, which might have prevented the playwright from fleshing out the character more fully, Shakespeare did Ophelia more justice than he probably realized or even intended to.

In her article, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism," Elaine Showalter argues that Ophelia *does* have a story of her own that feminist criticism can tell, which is not "linked forever, for centuries,

to the figure of Hamlet" (223). Ophelia has what can be called "the *history* of her representation" reflected in numerous stage productions, paintings, photography and real life cases of mad, young women (Showalter 223). This is not necessarily to say that Ophelia has been provided with the ability to tell her own story and that Showalter has reclaimed Ophelia's language, which would help Shakespeare's heroine express her inner self. This task seemed to be left for the female characters and their creators (mostly female writers) in the centuries to come.

Just like Shakespeare, Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton felt they had to kill their heroines to fulfill the mode of the dramatic literary tradition. The deaths of their female protagonists, however, gave an official birth to a major change, to the process of long and difficult remaking of an inherited literary/fictitious and literal/social consciousness. What "mad" Ophelia might have only dreamed about and tried to imply in her bawdy songs, Edna Pontelier and Lily Bart make the subject of their life and death.

In chapter I of Writing beyond the Ending, Rachel Blau DuPlessis observes:

Death is the price exacted for female critique, whether explicit (*The Awakening*) or implicit (*The Mill on the Floss*). Death occurs as the price for the character's sometimes bemused destabilizing of the limited equilibrium of respectable female behavior [...] And death occurs because a female hero has no alternative community where the stain of energy (whether sexual or, in more general terms, passionate) will go unnoticed or even be welcomed. [I]n the nineteenth-century texts, death occurs as a "cosmic" or essentialist ending when a woman tests the social and historical rules governing the tolerable limits of her aspirations.

Yet her punishment is often treated as her triumph. Death itself becomes a symbolic protest against the production of a respectable female and the connivances of respectable community. [...] When the character wants more and more, certainly more than she is allowed, yet can get less and less, the flare of energy or desire surrounding death is the trope of "more": the buzzing bees and flowers in Kate Chopin, the imaginary baby's nestling head in Edith Wharton, [...] (16)

By comparing Ophelia's story with the female heroes of Kate Chopin's The Awakening, and Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth, I would like to analyze what led to the characters' (un)happy endings, and in what way the stories/deaths of Edna and Lily find a satisfactory way of dealing with the literary ideology/convention, which often would judge and punish women by ugly and meaningless deaths without giving them any credit for testing the fictional, social, and historical rules "governing the tolerable limits of [their] aspirations"(vide Daisy Miller, Madam Bovary, or Anna Karenina). In short, I would like to examine how big a step Edna's and Lily's stories mark in the evolution of the

independence of female heroes, and since Ophelia's background and fate strikingly resembles the events in the life of Chopin's and Wharton's protagonists, I would like to use her case as the basis for my Darwinist analysis.

All three women, Ophelia, Edna, and Lily, come from noble but more or less dysfunctional, not to say pathological, families. Shakespeare himself does not seem to have much sympathy for the household of Polonius. When Laertes is taking leave of his sister and makes her a long speech full of cordial brotherly advice, the audience can see that "the terrible thing about [Laertes] and his father is not that they are fools, for they are not fools," but that they are "two very shrewd and sensible men" (Mackenzie 206) ready to sacrifice Ophelia's happiness. Ophelia's mother is dead and without motherly guidance, or any other female alliance, she cannot really build up her own code of ethics, which is hardly surprising as her brother and her father leave her no space to think, both literally and metaphorically. There is a brief moment of resistance in Ophelia's response to her brother's directive when she jokingly lectures him back to be careful lest he be one of those "ungracious pastors" or "reckless libertines," who "recks not his own rede." (Hamlet 1.3) However, her apt, sharp-witted remark is almost immediately obliterated as her brother's platitudes lead straight to Polonius's speech full of "fussy curiosity roused" by his son's words, and "Ophelia has the scolding all over again" (Mackenzie 206). The reader may get an impression that the whole event is not an exception in the Polonius family, especially that the father, wasting no time at all, sends a confidential servant to spy upon his son.

Edna Pontellier's father defines the roles of women in society and the rules in his own family in the Polonius-like mode:

Edna and her father had a warm, and almost violent dispute upon the subject of her refusal to attend her sister's wedding. Mr. Pontellier declined to interfere, to interpose either his influence or his authority. He was following Doctor Mandelet's advice, and letting her do as she liked. The Colonel reproached his daughter for her lack of filial kindness and respect, her want of sisterly affection and womanly consideration. His arguments were labored and unconvincing. [...] "You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Leonce," asserted the Colonel. "Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it." The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave. (91-92)

Although Edna is more capable of standing up to her father than Ophelia, their family and social backgrounds do not differ much. Both women are well born and well off, which, however, does not really privilege them to speak up for themselves as they are trapped between two father-figure men who know what is best for them. Chopin's protagonist, however, really lucked out because her mother, before having been "coerced" by her husband "into her grave," left Edna enough money to live on and this is probably the only reason why Edna ventures

to rebel against her father and her husband. Like Laertes and Ophelia, Leonce Pontellier and Edna have between them a working familiarity and some traces of human feelings, but Leonce, in a truly Laertesque mode, frequently reproaches Edna accusing her of acting foolishly or neglecting her domestic responsibilities:

"What a folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat!" exclaimed Mr. Pontellier. "You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage. (21)

[Mr. Pontellier] reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. (24)

Similarly to Laertes, who, after tormenting his sister with the shoulds and shouldn'ts of a young woman's life, hurriedly sets off to France, Mr. Pontellier gives his wife a bulk of useless advice and immediately leaves either for Klein's hotel to entertain himself with a game of billiards or for an extended business trip to New York.

Unlike Ophelia and Edna, Lily Bart has been brought up and trained by her mother, who is an epitome of the male-female relationships at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mrs. Bart is a reversed picture of what Edna's father wanted women to be. She is a female Colonel who bosses her husband around and never takes "no" for an answer:

Ruling the turbulent element called home was the vigorous and determined figure of a mother still young enough to dance her ball-dresses to rags, while the hazy outline of a neutral-tinted father filled an intermediate space between the butler and the man who came to wind the docks. Even to the eyes of infancy, Mrs. Hudson Bart had appeared young; but Lily could not recall the time when her father had not been bald and slightly stooping, with streaks of grey in his hair, and a tired walk. It was a shock to her to learn afterward that he was but two years older than her mother.

Lily seldom saw her father by daylight. All day he was "down town" (52-53) [Lily] had been brought up in the faith that, whatever it cost, one must have a good cook, and be what Mrs. Bart called "decently dressed." Mrs. Bart's worst reproach to her husband was to ask him if he expected her to "live like a pig"; and his replying in the negative was always regarded as a justification for cabling to Paris for an extra dress or two, and telephoning to the jeweller that he might, after all, send home the turquoise bracelet which Mrs. Bart had looked at that morning. (54)

While Lily's mother acts like Edna's father, Mr. Bart resembles Leonce Pontellier in his constant absence from home in order to earn enough money for his wife's expenses. In Ophelia's world the power is dominated by men. In Edna's world, the domestic, motherly, and feminine are the core of the Creole world around

which everything revolves, but it is still men who easily and effortlessly obtain social freedom for which women have to struggle and pay a high price (Mademoiselle Reisz). In Lily's world female characters, like her mother or Bertha Dorset, rule unquestionably, and although "the basis for [economic] power [and] money making is a male prerogative, the actual wielders of power in the book are often not men but women" (Wai-Chee Dimock, 377). However, Lily's own ability to assess the various forms of currency and power in her society is much less developed than that of her mother's. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes:

[Lily's] mother had been "a wonderful manager," a woman with the cold-blooded capacity to limit her private delicacies in pursuit of public display. Lily, on the other hand, has been pampered and spoiled: she is childish, sublimely insensitive to the facts that inform her mother's management and "she knew very little of the value of money" (p. 49). (324)

Although equally disturbing, Lily's upbringing greatly differs from the other two heroines discussed here, but she shares with them "the practical feminist message that women bred to be frilly decorations run risks of various sorts of death" (Restuccia, 404).

To her father and brother, Ophelia is the eternal virgin, the vessel of morality whose purpose is to be a dutiful wife and steadfast mother. To Hamlet, she is a sexual object and deceitful lover. Edna Pontellier takes on her husband's last name to escape her abusive father. This takes her a step further in developing her personal identity than Ophelia managed to go but Leonce Pontellier sees his beautiful wife as "a valuable piece of property" and diminishes all her efforts of self-awareness and self-development. Lily Bart was raised to get back with her face all the money her mother lacked, which enables Lawrence Selden to see her more as a piece of art, or a commodity of an industrial process, than a human being:

In judging Miss Bart, he had always made use of the "argument form design" (19) He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine, but the circumstances had fashioned it into a futile shape. (20)

In the course of their stories, all three heroines have to struggle to choose between two worlds they find themselves in: the outside world of paternal/maternal/social impositions and the internal world of their feelings. With no mother to guide her, Ophelia has no way of deciphering the contradictory expectations inflicted upon her by her father and by Hamlet. Her heart is pining for the Prince of Denmark but her mind, twisted and manipulated by the fearful obedience to her father, pushes Ophelia towards the choice which seals her fate. Although more determined and independent than Shakespeare's female hero, Edna also finds herself trapped between two conflicting worlds: the world of

being a mother and a wife and the world of imaginary love and sexual awakening. Lily Bart admires her mother but her own abilities do not live up to the expectations and demands set by Mrs. Bart. Her fascination with being able to live a much better life than a pig turns out to be a deadly quest. Lily needs "wealth because it is the only atmosphere in which her exquisite femininity can thrive" (Wolff, 325) but unlike her mother, she is unable to sustain appearances and fulfill Mrs. Bart's desires by accepting a marriage of convenience. In contrast to Ophelia and Edna, Lily, however, is able to articulate very clearly the contradictory rules governing the society, which endlessly make women choose between the world of poverty/seeming independence and the world of opulence/bondage. As Frances L. Restuccia points out:

In chapter I Lily has a feminist moment of lucidity and verbal felicity that demonstrates how deftly she can capture the essence of Selden's reflex taxonomy. She makes plain her awareness of the sexism of her society by spelling out the difference between an insufficiently rich man and an insufficiently rich woman: "Ah, there's a difference - a girl must [marry], a man if he chooses." A man's shabby coat won't lose him a dinner invitation, but "a woman [Lily understands perfectly] is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself" (33). These are Lily's, not just Wharton's, words; *if* Lily is victimized, she is intelligent about it. (407)

Similarly to Ophelia and Edna, Lily's true nature and heart would prefer to be with the man she loves but there seems to be no choice as her upbringing and sick social rules condition Lily to obey the artificial codes of the materialistic world. What is more, her object of desire, Lawrence Selden, shares many qualities with the men surrounding Ophelia and Edna, which does not help Lily to defy the social norms. Selden is outspoken and charming like Hamlet or Robert, but he is also judgmental and sexist like the Colonel or Leonce Pontellier. As a clever and educated lawyer, Lawrence Selden knows the "suavities" of the capitalist society, and he realizes that his own background and gender make him extremely privileged in this world (just like Hamlet). However, this does not stop him from reducing the woman he loves to an object and lecturing her on different aspects and cheap alternatives for the female species in life:

"How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman." She leaned back in a luxury of discontent.

Selden was rummaging in a cupboard for the cake.

"Even women," he said "have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat."

"Oh, governesses - or widows. But not girls - not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!"

"I even know a girl who lives in a flat." [..]

"Oh, I know - you mean Gerty Farish." She smiled a little unkindly.

"But I said *marriageable*" and besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat." (22-23)

"Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?"

[Lily] sighed. "I suppose so. What else is there?"

"Exactly. And so why not take the plunge and have it over?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "You speak as if I ought to marry the first man who came along." (26)

Neither are Ophelia's and Edna's lovers more supportive and true to their feelings to stand by the women they adore. Having more social freedom and being widely exposed to traveling and studies in foreign lands, Hamlet is exceptionally gifted in writing amazing love letters to Ophelia (2.2), but he fails to use his worldly wisdom to realize her predicament. After scaring her to death in her closet, tormenting her in the nunnery scene, and killing her father, Hamlet leaves Ophelia on her own and goes to England. His departure is not voluntary but the fact remains that he is not there when she most needs him, which later makes his surprise at her death unconvincing and hollow. Had he left Ophelia in peace after the nunnery scene, she might have been able to come to terms with his cruelty during his absence but, as G.F. Bradby aptly observes:

[Hamlet] singles her out conspicuously in the play scene (Act III, Sc.2) and insults her in language of unpardonable grossness. It is true that Elizabethan standards differed in this respect from ours; but as A.C. Bradley rightly insists, no other of Shakespeare's hero's talks like this to women. And then, after her death, when indifference becomes an offence, he exhibits a lack of taste and good feeling which almost takes one's breath away. His exclamation, 'What, the fair Ophelia' (5.1, l. 267), when he recognizes her body on the bier, may express emotion, but sounds more like a surprise: and a few minutes afterwards he is fighting in the grave with Laertes, the man whose father he has killed and whose sister is being buried. (?)

Just like Shakespeare's troubled hero, Edna Pontellier's lover is equally tasteless and reckless in his treatment of the female protagonist. Robert Lebrun's romantic swims and boat trips with Edna are an equivalent of Hamlet's passionate love letter but his sudden departure for Mexico and a callous good-bye make all his previous affections meaningless. Like Ophelia, Edna suddenly is given a space to think and analyze her situation but she is not prepared for it:

And since Edna lacks an alternative register of language to describe her tumultuous feelings, Robert's conceit soon becomes her own; his language comes to stand for the nameless feelings she has just begun to experience. [...] Edna Pontellier has no language to help her integrate and interrogate the diversity of her feelings; she experiences neither world nor signifying system capacious enough to accommodate her desires. (Walker 280, 294)

Always told what to think and how to act, Edna, like Ophelia, feels lonely, lost and empty. To paraphrase Marvin Rosenberg's rhetorical question describing Ophelia's predicament, both women have spent their lives in their box and have suddenly been given a chance to break out of it, which leaves them disoriented in so much space (762). The only difference between Ophelia and Edna in their loneliness is that the latter feels annoyed at being suddenly deserted, which, however, makes her life different, if not infinitely better.

Lily Bart also lives in a box of social constraints but she seems to be less disoriented in her space than either Ophelia or Edna. Lawrence Selden, on the other hand, falls into the box of appearances and false assumptions about Lily's character after seeing Lily with Gus Trenor. Selden is a lawyer, the representative of justice, but he judges before he can prove Lily guilty. As Margot Norris observes, commenting on the novel's narrative technique enabling the reader to see Lily's innocence:

The narration itself introduces the trope of the stereopticon, the double magic lantern that combines two images of the same scene upon a screen in order to create a single image with the solidity of a three-dimensional figure, to describe what Van Alstyne and Selden think they see. Selden, who had been harboring a contradictory image of Lily ("He was no less conscious than before of what was said of Lily Bart, but he could separate the woman he knew from the vulgar estimate of her"[155]) now merges his double vision with Van Alstyne's to create the consensus of a single solid figure of a fallen Lily. (444)

As the result of his unjust verdict passed on oblivious Lily, Selden fails to keep his pre-planned appointment with her, just when she most needs his rescue. After Lily escapes the attempted rape by Trenor and has a discouraging conversation with her pretentious and stupid aunt, Selden, who made her believe he had feelings for her, is her only hope, her only friend, who, however, miserably lets her down:

But now his love was her only hope, and as she sat alone with her wretchedness the thought of confiding in him became as seductive as the river's flow to the suicide. This first plunge would be terrible - but afterward, what blessedness might come! She remembered Gerty's words: "I know him - he will help you"; and her mind clung to them as a sick person might cling to a healing relic. [...] (249) But the hour sped on and Selden did not come. (250) [...] she understood it was now too late to hope for Selden. He would write explaining his absence, of course; there would be a note from him by the late post. But her confession would have to be postponed; and the chill of the delay settled heavily on her heart.

It lay heavier when the postman's last ring brought no note for her, and she had to go upstairs to a lonely night- a night as grim and sleepless as her tortured fancy had pictured it to Gerty. [...]

Daylight disbanded the phantom crew, and made it clear to her that she would hear from Selden before noon; but the day passed without his writing or coming. [...] Mrs. Peniston went to bed early, and when she had gone Lily sat down and wrote a note to Selden. She was about to ring for a messenger to despatch it when her eye fell on a paragraph in the evening paper which lay at her elbow: "Mr. Lawrence Selden was among the passengers sailing this afternoon for Havana and the West Indies on the Windward Liner Antilles." (256)

Like Hamlet and Robert, Selden not only abandons the female character by letting her down but he also literally leaves the country.

Even more disappointing is Selden's behavior after Bertha Dorset's unjust accusations. As Bertha's former lover, Selden could have easily helped Lily out by illuminating George Dorset about his wife's conduct, but instead he chooses to be a double-faced friend, who allows himself to be in an adulterous relationship while holding a similar behavior on Lily's part against her:

[The] scene at the Trenor house - whose cost remains private and confined to Selden's lost respect - is reenacted publicly, in a highly dramatic scene, some months later when Bertha Dorset impugns Lily's virtue by forbidding her return to the yacht in the harbor of Monte Carlo. The scene's moral structure - the false imputation of adultery to Lily - is identical to the Trenor house scene, but the damage of an implicit accusation delivered before Selden, an assortment of *haute monde* guests, and the gossip reporter for *Society Notes from the Riviera*, is fatal. [...] Bertha Dorset has contrived to use an "innocent" affair to front a guilty one, and it was Lawrence Selden, Lily's judge throughout the novel ("you had judged me - I understood" [287]), who stood precisely in Ned Silverton's adulterous place only a year or so earlier. (Norris, 444,445)

By failing to save Lily on several occasions, which was supposedly "his mission in life," Selden joins the club of bookish and spineless love objects (Hamlet and Robert), who contribute to ruin the person they could have easily helped. Selden's untimely grief over Lily's dead body bears a lot of resemblance to the conduct of Shakespeare's hero in particular:

The novel's final grotesque self-righteousness "letting us "forgive" a tragic Lily for an imaginary crime because she has protected a sexual double standard with her life " repeats Selden's own hypocrisy. Selden's utter innocence of the irony of his own judgmentalism is borrowed from what was surely one of his own classics: Hamlet leaping histrionically into Ophelia's grave to declare his love while conveniently forgetting that he killed her with tormenting and unjust imputations and accusations. (Norris, 446)

To argue that Hamlet, Robert, and Selden are the only and direct cause of the female heroes' deaths would certainly be too much of a simplification. The upbringing and other females (Gertrude, Adele Ratignolle, and Bertha Dorset) greatly contribute to the downfalls of Ophelia, Edna, and Lily. The question remains to what extent different or similar the three deaths are and if there is any comfort or triumph resulting from the reasons which led to the three female heroes' (un)happy endings.

Ophelia and Lily share the accidentality of their deaths, while Ophelia and Edna end their life in a similar way, by drowning. What all three heroines have undoubtedly in common is the romantic beauty of their last trip. Ophelia sings sad songs of unrequited love hours before her death, and then disappears from the action of the play only to come back in Gertrude's picturesque report of her drowning. The Queen describes the young woman's graphically and poetically, explaining how she had fallen into the brook while weaving flower garlands. Ophelia's clothing carried her afloat for a time, but eventually she sank to her death while still singing her songs.

Edna Pontellier goes to the beach, puts on her bathing suit but then casts it off, standing naked on the beach and feeling as if she is seeing everything for the first time. Entering the water, she swims farther and farther to meet her end. Her hard-won indifference to society demands is defeated and Chopin compares Edna to the bird her heroine sees on the beach, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.

Lily Bart's ambiguous suicide, an accidental side effect ("one chance in a hundred") of delivering herself from the temporary insanity of insomnia, is neither willed nor merely escapist. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments:

In its coming, death is sensual, a seduction into the drug climaxing in her illusion of maternal bliss. Lily has been compromised by money, time, sexuality: all the high-risk components of female life. And yet she has arranged herself as a beautiful object so that her bier resonates with both narcissism and the failed community of the earlier tableaux scene. (17)

Ophelia's, Edna's, and Lily's respective deaths are certainly not judgmental of their sexual or social failure. Picturesque and personal as they may be, however, they also prove that "the rules invented by a newly awakened but socially powerless individual cannot survive the impact of real power" (DuPlessis, 17), especially if betrayed by those who seemed to be the main source of help in regaining the just social position. Nevertheless, each of the heroines in question marks progress in feminine revolt against the rules of the mostly patriarchal world. The gradual development of their individual consciousness, as well as their more and more extended testing of social constraints, can be traced in the words of Ophelia, Edna, and Lily which open this essay. Their deaths take on different symbolic dimensions as the heroines proceed to find a language to express their needs and desires. From Ophelia's "I think nothing, my lord,"

through Edna's struggle to articulate her thoughts, to Lily's determined and consciously self-sacrificial denial of being aware of Bertha's affairs, a whole gamut of emotions and changes have been achieved, which make the female heroes' deaths meaningful and essential to the growth of other fictional women characters and their creators.

Shortly before her death, in a bunch of seemingly incoherent songs (4.5), Ophelia manages to express what the patriarchal order so long made her repress:

[Ophelia] sings songs of lost love, true-love, death, and burial. Some critics have interpreted the first song as a veiled reference to the Queen's two husbands since it asks, "How should I your true-love know / From another one?" (23-24) then continues with the lines "He is dead and gone, lady, / He is dead and gone" (29-30). Other critics have felt that the early lines refer to Ophelia's own lost love, Hamlet, and later lines to her father. During this first mad appearance of Ophelia, she also sings a ballad of a maid who lost her virginity to her lover who then deserted her. (Dash 30)

Regardless of what still "other critics" might have felt, Ophelia finally speaks her mind in her own voice, which, in spite of insanity or maybe just because of it, defies the patriarchal order and makes sense to her listeners:

To be mad was one power an Elizabethan woman could have over her men. In a Laingian world only the mad dare to speak the truth. [...] What will emerge in Ophelia's ramblings may signal the particular pressures to which her sanity became vulnerable. (761) How much can be said without sensible words? [...] How do hearers find - or construct - meanings in fractures of what seem irrelevances? Gertrude is told that Ophelia:

Speaks things in doubt  
That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,  
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move  
The hearers to collection. They aim at it,  
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts.

Folio's *aim* suggests [...] the image of hunting for a meaning to fit preconceived ideas, a pursuit partly fueled by Ophelia's irrational but highly suggestive signals:

Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield  
them,  
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,  
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.  
(Rosenberg 767)

Unlike Ophelia, Edna has a female mentor, Mademoiselle Reisz, who via music enables her "to speak the truth." Ophelia's seemingly irrational and bawdy songs are the result of her mental state while Mrs. Pontellier uses music to initiate the liberation in expressing her long suppressed emotions:

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth.

She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, at the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (44-45)

Similarly to Ophelia, who in insanity and singing "finds release from her repressions" (Rosenberg 761), Edna's inexpressible in "the material pictures" passions find release in her extraordinary emotional and physical state. Through art (songs and music) Ophelia and Edna are not so much "divided from themselves" as from what weighs them down, namely the patriarchal world.

In their final moments both heroines are equally unperturbed by the outside world. They seem to take command of their lives as best they can, sacrificing "the inessential" ([http://www.academinst.org/mp/mp\\_archive/archive/archive06/ampt5.html](http://www.academinst.org/mp/mp_archive/archive/archive06/ampt5.html) - \_ftn1 (their lives) for the essential (freedom of the self). Had they not drowned Ophelia and Edna would have most likely ended up in an asylum, which would be just another form of patriarchal confinement. Claudius has already diagnosed Ophelia's case ("Divided from herself" 4.5, l. 81) and although initially "no treatment is proposed for Ophelia, except that she be watched" (Rosenberg 764), there is hardly any doubt the royal highnesses will not let the poor girl wander forever around the castle startling them with her fits. After all, the Queen refuses to see Ophelia at one point as she does not want to be bothered.

Edna's husband has also already made some arrangements to diagnose her state of mind. He had a chat with their family doctor, who, although very understanding and full of compassion for Edna, might have finally found her hysterical. Be it Edward Jorden, Dr. Mandelet, or Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, both Ophelia and Edna would not have escaped "Rest Treatment" ([http://www.academinst.org/mp/mp\\_archive/archive/archive06/ampt5.html](http://www.academinst.org/mp/mp_archive/archive/archive06/ampt5.html) - \_ftn2 since their uncommon behaviour was "a disturbing threat to phallic power" (Levin 24).

Lily Bart is as dangerous "to phallic power" as Ophelia and Edna put together, and that is why she must die. Miss Bart not only finds precise words to name what is hateful to her and wrong with the society but she also continues to slip from the stultifying containment of marriage by scaring (Percy Gryce), humiliating, or simply rejecting (Gus Trenor, George Dorset, and Simon

Rosedale) her potential suitors or rapists. As it was mentioned before, Lily knows she is being "victimized, [but] she is intelligent about it." It is her inner instinct of what is right, however, that makes Lily so reluctant to become a property, which, in turn, helps her develop a self-preserving ability to adjust to different situations the society presents her with ("Misfortune had made Lily supple instead of hardening her, and a pliable substance is less easy to break than a stiff one." [63]). Lily neither complies with the law of the father (like Ophelia) nor rebels against it (Edna's moving out to the pigeon house), and that is why, before her inevitable death, she is capable to achieve much more in terms of personal and social development than both Ophelia and Edna.

Lily resists the patriarchal order as long as she can by not adjusting to all of its demands, but she is also ready to take the consequences of her actions which put her in trouble. She refuses Rosedale's monetary help and Selden's "friendly" advice not because she is too proud, but because she does not want to be compromised again. Always as outspoken as Hamlet, Robert, and Selden put together, she becomes even more so when most of her friends abandon her and she is disinherited, which forces her to take up a job. In her emotional encounter with Selden, when he tries to convince her that she should stop working for Mrs. Hatch, Lily's reply reveals his hypocrisy, which also happens to be the characteristics of the entire society:

However doubtful she might feel her situation to be, she would rather persist in darkness than owe her enlightenment to Selden.

"I don't know," she said, when he ceased to speak, "why you imagine me to be situated as you describe; but as you have always told me that the sole object of a bringing-up like mine was to teach a girl to get what she wants, why not assume that that is precisely what I am doing?" [...] "Don't give me up; I may still do credit to my training!" she affirmed (396).

Selden, however, had given her up long before the above conversation took place, which only gives more meaning to Lily's achievement to improve the status of female characters both in the fictional and real world. She picks up Edna's story at the moment when Mrs. Pontellier makes her successful but short-lived attempts to establish life on her own. Edna's husband managed to diminish her protest and prove to the society that she has never really revolted. Lily overtly defies face-saving strategies which the men around her have to offer and actually achieves the impossible autonomy. Like Edna, Lily "claims for herself the script of death usually punitively accorded female characters in her position" (17), but unlike Edna, or at least for a longer period of time which gives her death an extra dimension, Lily also manages to take command of her life as best she can.

Ophelia, Edna and Lily maneuver their way through the patriarchal world and their respective stories mark an unquestionable progress of the female status and power against all adversities. Although their efforts at self-realization on different levels eventually lead to death, their developing characters stress the

fact that there is and always will be an ongoing struggle for personal independence and freedom of choice. Ophelia, Edna, and Lily end their life in the same way but while Ophelia's drowning seems to solve everyone's problems (e.g. it is a pretext for Laertes to kill Hamlet), Edna's suicide is just a beginning of troubles for her relatives (e.g. confused husband and orphaned children). Lily's death is even more dangerous as it exposes the deceitfulness of her society and, paradoxically, contributes to what may be called the female *Buildungsroman* as her quest for self-realization and freedom are fulfilled without the weakening service of the marriage plot or a happy/unrealistic ending.

"To be awake is to be alive," says Thoreau in Walden (134). Ironically, neither of the three heroines find it true. They do, however, refuse to "lead lives of quiet desperation" (Thoreau 50) and living "what is not life" (Thoreau 135). Their respective stories gradually transcend the limitations of the social/male superego and show the way to growth for other fictional characters and real-life women. The three female deaths, like Thoreau's transcendentalist vision of simplicity and his attempts to escape the grids of ideology, help the readers to know what they don't know they don't know. If nothing else, American transcendentalists, and maybe Darwin too, should be infinitely proud of Ophelia, Edna, and Lily.

[1] See The Awakening, p. 67

[2] [http://www.academist.org/mp/mp\\_archive/archive/archive06/ampt5.html](http://www.academist.org/mp/mp_archive/archive/archive06/ampt5.html) - [\\_ftnref2http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~clit121/weirmit.html](http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~clit121/weirmit.html); Dr. Mitchell (1829-1914) on his Rest Cure treatment used on patients suffering from hysteria at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries;

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