JACLR
Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research

JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

Volume 9 Issue 2 (December 2021)

Verónica Sánchez Gil

"The Female Expression and Identity of the Artist and the Artwork in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*"

Recommended Citation

Sánchez Gil, Verónica. "The Female Expression and Identity of the Artist and the Artwork in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 9.2.3 (2021): <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Abstract: The hardships endured by the female protagonists in Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton's literary works become a general portrayal of twentieth-century women's confinement to gender roles and their struggle to reconcile them with their own identity. Chopin and Wharton create, as a psychological exercise, the journey of a woman in a search for a sense of identity in defiance of the norms imposed by society. This paper aims to analysethrough the characters of Edna and Lily this journey and the issues that arise concerning the expression of the self and the conflict that emerges when everything is against all odds. Thus, it is necessary to examine the evolution and outcome of two different characters through their contrasts as well as their similarities, and how they channel their expression through art, being one an artist and the other a work of art. Female identity, in both literary works, is shaped under the lens of a socio-cultural ideology that establishes the paradigms of femininity in binary opposition and provides a definition for the notion of womanhood.

Keywords: female identity, social expectations, twentieth-century gender roles, antagonistic paradigms of femininity, *The Awakening, The House of Mirth.*

Verónica SÁNCHEZ GIL

The Female Expression and Identity of the Artist and the Artwork in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

1. Introduction

Both the *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* portray a female protagonist in a quest for identity, even if it means to begin by tearing down their social roles of mother, wife, daughter or lady. Authors have reflected how the human being tries desperately to know the world outside, so that everything makes sense and the craving for solid truths is satisfied. In the same way, there is a desire for order amid the chaos that characterizes humans that leads them to organise themselves and their position in the world by falling in one category or another, creating labels that aim to simplify and understand all those complex schemas. Suddenly, however, emerges the notion that fixed things will survive the change that constantly takes place, because, in order to keep that sense of security, there are agents whose task is to make sure everything is in the right place. This includes people as well. Writers like Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton reflect and criticize how this system does not adjust itself to the actual reality or to the actual needs of the individuals that conform the world.

Instead, it is society through its obsolete diagnosis that holds the power to determine the way of things. Those individuals that begin to question the social norm will be considered obstacles impeding the working and unfolding of the world. And, when they try even further and break away from those impositions, they will be pushed to the margins as outcasts of society, as happens with Lily Bart and Edna Pontellier, protagonists of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, respectively. Both female characters have a heightened sense of awareness concerning the expectations around them and know how to fulfil them: embracing the roles of the perfect lady, the perfect friend, the perfect mother, the perfect wife… But they become careless, and it must be said that their carelessness is deliberate. They neglect and ignore potential and actual husbands for the attention and flirtations of other men. They adopt a risky behaviour that jeopardises their status. This is the active participation these two women take in rebelling against the patriarchal world they live in by gambling, knowingly, with their social death at stake. They also try to escape from the imposed identity through art: Lily Bart as a work of art for the delight and visual pleasure of others, Edna Pontellier as an independent artist that explores her inner self. However, being an artwork implies that there always has to be a spectator or an audience, which results in a need for external definition shaping Lily's identity. Differently, Edna is able to distance herself from her family, her friends and acquaintances in order to find herself, embrace it, and create new meaningful relationships. Nevertheless, Edna is no more capable than Lily to attain their goals; since they rejected the world outside and the world also rejected them, they reconcile their differences through death, considering it as the only outcome.

Chopin and Wharton present two different stories that, despite all the contrasts and inherent characteristics of each, are connected by the central issue of identity portrayed in the

evolution of both female protagonists, and both pose the question "how does one form a genuine self in a world designed to suppress that self?" (Wershoven 29).

1. **A Quest for the True Self**

Women in the twentieth-century had more limitations than they might have imagined at that time. As Maloni explains, the 'New Woman' was an "image of modernity", more a fabrication than an attainable symbol at the time, for "the modern goals of equality and personal autonomy were often elusive" (880). Relations of power have always been in the hands of the wealthy, and it is obvious that women were not part of those rulers since patriarchy impeded this. It is not only that women had few options, almost nonexistent if compared to men's, but the kind of life they were supposed to lead was also imposed on them. There were clear boundaries of what was acceptable or not for a woman, and, when they trespassed them, those transgressors were punished. Then they became outcasts and were pushed to the margins, and society used them as living examples to warn women and to tame girls into docile beings. Women had not even the freedom to be themselves, to embrace their differences: this was suppressed in order to achieve homogeneity because variety in females was something dangerous. Society had to be able to control them, hence, it made their work much easier to create binary categories that opposed each other: black and white, good and evil.

The antagonist paradigms of femininity were still present: a woman could either be the Angel in the House or the Fallen Woman. For if a woman did not embody the ideal of the Angel in the House, who "represented both an imposition of men's needs on women and a continuing fantasy of perfection, beauty, and power" (Stansell 483), she would fail to fulfill the expectations gathered by patriarchal society; by falling of that altar, she would become the opposite archetype of femininity, the Fallen Woman, "a type which ranges from the successful courtesan to the passionate adulteress, from the destitute streetwalker to the seduced innocent, from the unscrupulous procuress to the raped child" (Leighton 111). But there was no place in between. However, in both novels, it is also possible to identify a new model: that of the New Woman, "a definition of identity, helping to explain the process of women finding space in the public arena" (Maloni 880). In a polarized society that only imposed this demanding and alienating rule on women, it is impossible to find a voice of one's own. Nonetheless, this does not mean that women do not possess a personal identity under the label they have been condemned to carry; the problem lies in the fact that finding one's identity means to go against the established norms and patriarchal society, and this also becomes a transgressive act. Thus, women trying to be themselves are rejected by society because, in the process of being aware of the dimension of the self in its extension, they become potential threats that challenge the realm of patriarchal society. This way, it can be noted that *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* portray this evolution in the characters of Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart. In Wershoven's words, "[b]oth books recount a woman's steps (and mis-steps)

as she moves to identity, through a process of rebellion, renunciation and isolation" (27). In trying to break away from the impositions of society, they move forward in the quest for their true self. Edna promises herself "to put myself together for a while and think–try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know" (Chopin 137–38); whereas Lily's "personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent, and when she made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain doors she did not open" (Wharton 82).

In relation to this, there are clues from the very beginning of both literary works in which the protagonists reflect on their desire of breaking away from the norm: in the case of Edna, "[s]he wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Chopin 73), and, Lily, arising herself the question, wonders "[w]hy must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine?" (Wharton 15). As they express it, in different ways –being the first example more metaphorical whereas the second is literal, as Lily wonders at the consequences of breaking her conduct pattern–, there is a desire of going beyond, of discovering new opportunities and embracing new and varied experiences. However, there is something that is holding both protagonists captive: they are not supposed to move outside their small circle and society's different agents are the ones in charge to make sure they remain in their place. It seems that routines are a way of expression, and if the individual, concretely a woman, changes anything, it means that something is not working well inside oneself. Edna cannot go far away because there is an inner thought determining what she is able of doing, and, being an 'inexperienced swimmer', she depends on the help of others to come to her rescue in case her body fails her: this proves that she has assimilated the idea that placing her trust on her own self is something mistaken because she is weak, or at least that is what she has been forced to accept as something only natural. "I was watching you" (Chopin 74) is her husband's answer, which is supposed to reassure her, but it is clear that he has not really understood her. What is even more interesting is Edna's reaction: she does not contradict him or try to express herself in order to make the explanation easier for Léonce; instead, she leaves in silence (Chopin 74). Madame Lebrun and Léonce associate this behaviour as a natural trait of a "capricious" person. This adjective acts as a label, determining the nature of Edna's personality, as if whims ruled over her life, something that may be associated with a feeble and plain character, and even childish.

However, the reader is aware that this is not Edna's case despite other characters' statements: moreover, this shows that she is defined by others and, additionally, it proves that she is under constant surveillance, always chased by a critical eye. Something similar happens with Wharton's protagonist, who, wary of the pervasive scrutiny on part of society's agents, has developed a strong sensitivity in order to meet society's expectations:

> [S]he was already sufficiently informed to make the task of f[u]rther instruction as easy as it was agreeable. She questioned him [Percy Gryce] intelligently, she heard him submissively; and, prepared for the look of lassitude which usually crept over his listeners' faces, he grew eloquent under her receptive gaze. (Wharton 20)

Lily is well aware of her capacities and adapts herself constantly according to the taste of the spectator of her beauty. Nevertheless, in Lily's case, the reader must never forget that her

beauty without her acute intelligence would not have taken her far in life. Miss Bart knows that "beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required" (34). What does she refer to? Well, she must be beautiful without being arrogant, she must stand out in a crowd but never loudly or inappropriately; of course, she must never be involved in a scandal, but she is expected to please everyone. However, there is an abiding danger: she is in her late twenties and time is announcing its coming in the slight wrinkles of her beautiful face (28). As Elaine Showalter describes, her progressive "realization that her status as a lady does not exempt her from the sufferings of womanhood is conveyed through her perceptions of her own body as its exquisite ornamentality begins to decline" (143).

There emerges, however, an ironic contradiction: why did two women from the upper class become so careless with their appearances and attitudes? They are supposed to be the perfect lady, the perfect friend, the perfect wife and the perfect mother. But Edna begins to leave aside her duties as a woman: she "was not a mother-woman" (Chopin 51); she neglects her social relations, not paying back visits to their acquaintances (101) or staying inside the house on Tuesdays, as it would be expected of her since this is the "reception day" with a "constant stream of callers" (100). And it is even more interesting to note how she "awaited the consequences with indifference" (162), being conscious of her attitude and changes that had not been an accident, but rather a deliberate choice. She begins to question the imposed agenda of womanhood and wifehood, which, clearly dissatisfying, is rejected. Similarly, Lily has been forced to accept the whole program of guiding lines on how to be the Perfect Lady. Always there, at the disposal of others, such as providing help to Judy Trenor when organizing her correspondence: "[i]t was understood that Miss Bart should fill the gap in such emergencies, and she usually recognized the obligation without a murmur" (Wharton 39). And there is also the issue of maternity and childbirth in *The House of Mirth*, which appears to be displaced to the margins, maybe due to its decisive role in the novel, as will be exposed progressively. Showalter explains that, although "childbirth and maternity are the emotional and spiritual centres of the nineteenth-century female world ... the Perfect Lady cannot mar her body or betray her sexuality in giving birth" (138).

Moreover, in relation to the carelessness mentioned above, both protagonists begin to present more radical intentions of breaking away from their suffocating social prison through coquettish flirtations with other men. Whershoven justifies their actions as an attempt "close to social suicide, [in which] Lily rejects the eminently eligible Gryce for a flirtation with Lawrence Selden. Her action parallels Edna's own rejection of her complacent, indulgent husband Léonce for the attentions of Robert Le Brun" (29). This parallelism becomes even more interesting when the reader takes into account that they are about the same age, so their behaviour does not appear to be something exceptional anymore. Following a similar line of thought, Showalter claims that the "threshold of thirty established for women by nineteenth-century conventions of 'girlhood' and marriageability continued in the twentieth century as a psychological observation about the formation of feminine identity" (133). It is as if the thirties were the expiration date for women: thus, it is not surprising that both novels end with the death of Wharton and Chopin's protagonists when they begin their thirties. Connected with this is the notion of animalization and commodification in order to take away the human dimension

of the woman: for instance, Edna is described as "some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (Chopin 123), and Lily's adapting skills remind the reader of a chameleon, always changing to survive the hostile environments around her: when thinking about Gryce, "she now knew how to adapt her pace to the object of pursuit" (Wharton 46); a "faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings" (53); "she could honestly be proud of the skill with which she had adapted herself to somewhat delicate conditions" (197). Moreover, women like them are expected to embody the traits of the perfect companion, always suiting themselves to their audience and their preferences. This is the case of Lily when she becomes the *tableau vivant* of Reynolds' picture, incarnating the figure of Mrs. Joanna Loyd, satisfying all the voracious gazes of the people she exists for (134). She "becomes the object of male myths and fantasies, like that of the wood nymph" (Showalter 139), and as quoted, she is an object, not a subject. They are nothing but passive commodities in the hands of a patriarchal society that will not take care of them when they become obsolete. However, realizing this and being tired of society's creeds, both women undertake a process of finding themselves, finding their own identity, and, although there are many contrasts, it is also possible to look at some key elements that draw clear parallelisms between both novels.

In their quest for their new self, they need to separate themselves from the definition their social relations have made of them. They have been submissive through the years, but they also show what could be understood as deviations from the imposed role. Lily's love and addiction to gambling when playing bridge —"since she had played regularly the [gambling] passion had grown on her" (Wharton 26)— resembles Edna's feelings when, in the horse race, she "played for very high stakes, and the fortune favored her", resulting in a "fever of the game that ... got into her blood and into her brain like an intoxicant" (Chopin 128). They try to find experiences that move in them the thrill of being alive. Playing bridge or making bets at the horse races is a way they must channel part of the inner self to the exterior. This is something quite logical if one thinks of how in these moments of betting, they hold the power of decision. However, whereas Edna is financially protected, Lily needs economic support, because, as Preston explains, she "practises an ultimately, fatal art of the self whose originality is unsustainable in an age of reproduction which insists on the perpetually new" (138). This is why Lily cannot live without power, which derives from wealth, because in a capitalist society that fosters competition among women, she must be essential, she has to learn how to be an indispensable commodity, her value must lie in the fact that she is one of a kind. That is why she can also be considered an artist. At the same time, she is a work of art, because she also takes part in composing her frame and picture, renewing herself to the appeal of the social customers –of her beauty but also of everything that is there and can be consumed– around her.

2. **The Destiny of the Artwork and the Artist**

In relation to artwork and artist, Wershoven proposes the idea that both protagonists "seek to use art as an escape from self: Lily, to become the external, beautiful object of others' desire; Edna, to envision new and titillating experiences. But both escapes prove futile" (35). Nevertheless, as Preston indicates, Edna's inclination towards the arts needs to be considered

"as a vehicle for some general enlargement of the soul" (138), since her position did not require her to look for economic sustenance and she could freely explore this dimension of her awakening. Furthermore, creating an extension of the economic power and in connection with status and power, it is important to remark on the nature of Lily and Edna: as Showalter indicates, Lily is not "the educated, socially conscious, rebellious New Woman [...] Her skills and morality are those of the Perfect Lady" (135). Lily herself is aware of this dimension of herself, something she reflects introspectively and intertwined with a sense of having been conditioned in the process of forming her character, or what is more, having taken none part at all:

> She had learned by experience that she had neither the aptitude nor the moral constancy to remake her life on new lines; to become a worker among workers, and let the world of luxury and pleasure sweep by her unregarded. She could not hold herself much to blame for this ineffectiveness, and she was perhaps less to blame than she believed. Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; to what other end does nature round the rose-leaf and paint the humming-bird's breast? (Wharton 301)

Lily has been shaped by external forces and she is helpless when devoid of that connection with the outer world. She has been taught to devote herself to others, beginning with letting her mother feel there was something else valuable to carry on living that she had been part of: Mrs. Bart had been the craftswoman of her daughter's beauty. Thus, Lily will avoid any kind of intimism with herself –"[f]eeling no desire for the self-communion which awaited her in her room, she lingered on the broad stairway" (24)–, and will turn to the noisy environment of playing bridge. She needs to shut off herself and mute her voice in order to be completely at the disposal of her "friends", because she is not ready to face the darkness and suffering inside her, being the room the space in which she would be alone and could find "self-communion." She looks for external noise in order to engage her attention somewhere else and not to listen to her true voice, because once the self is unveiled, she will not be able to deceive herself anymore. Furthermore, she is also aware that in the process of revealing the true Lily Bart she will need help, comfort, and solace, but she does not know how to get that because she perceives that it is never the right time, and, since she is so used to play the reassuring party, she is not even sure how to be helped either. This can be perceived in her prompt elusiveness and self-deprecating manoeuvre after feeling she had confided too much in Gerty –"[d]on't look so worried, you dear thing—don't think too much about the nonsense I've been talking" (267)–, since she has "been accustomed to take herself at the popular valuation, as a person of energy and resource, naturally fitted to dominate any situation in which she found herself" (268). This can be illustrated in another episode involving George Dorset, in which Lily is presented as a source of active listening and comfortable presence just by simply being there, in attentive silence: "But for her, what ear would have been open to his cries? And what hand but hers could drag him up again to a footing of sanity and self-respect?", nevertheless, he wanted neither to be alone in his moment of grief nor to get back on his feet, just to "feel some

one floundering in the depths with him" (203). Lily's resistance to being drawn into that black pit of self-pity demonstrates that she was strong for both of them. Furthermore, this proves that she needs to be around others to be defined. She flows constantly in an endless stream of actually putting her own desire behind, which is something that also defines her because she is not a ruthless gold-digger and neither has she expertise in the crafts of manipulation nor is a self-centred individual. She cares about everything and everyone. In a cold-hearted world, she will not be able to survive, least of all to embody her real self, because in order to draw her own identity near fulfilment she needs warmth, human touch and love. However, she sees the world bleak and hostile and constantly the conviction that only money has the power to attain any ultimate goal grows bigger.

Whereas Lily seems to be always available and under the suitable attitude, cancelling her own inner noises and pain, it is possible to perceive how Edna distances herself from society, searching for solitude and introspection in daily walks (Chopin 100), in a white canvas (108) and in music (72), and all this happens without words being required. The novel begins with Edna's passivity reproduced through her silence evolving to an active distance through the resistance of being compelled to do anything that will not constitute active participation in the unfolding of her identity. As Urgo explains, "[s]he achieves the necessary first step towards making herself into the kind of woman capable of rebelling ..., she learns how to speak out; or, simply put, she learns to say No" (22). This demonstrates that she begins to assert herself, drawing her person closer to major independence than what she had ever known before. She had been able until the moment to escape reality through her daydreaming, but now she is able to take a further step by refusing to subordinate her person to the decisions of others: beginning with the exercise of opposing her husband's wish of going to bed instead of remaining outside in the hammock (Chopin 78). She had previously obeyed her husband, moved by his scoldings on account of an invented fever of their son Raoul (48), which provoked her great agony and a sense of powerlessness that, even though she had accepted as something natural in any marriage –"[s]he could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life [but] they seemed never before to have weighed" (49)–, was another drop in the process of taking herself to the bearable limits. This progressive detachment happens in order for her to unwrap her identity, and this can only be possible in isolation because, as Edna herself explains, "[s]he thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (176). Following Edna's own line of thought, Cynthia Griffin Wolff indicates that her "psychic needs to produce an 'identity' which is predicated on the conscious process of concealment" (451); moreover, reflecting on the idea of a division of character, or what she refers to as "two Ednas" (451), Wolff creates an emphasis on Edna's choice of marriage as "a defensive [manoeuvre] designed to maintain the integrity of the two 'selves' that formed her character and to reinforce the distance between them" (452). While the version she presented towards the world was strengthened by her marriage to Léonce, she was able to keep safe and hidden her inner self, which was only accessible to Edna and no one else. There are instances where this feeling of escaping her conventional life as a wife and as a mother is further evidenced when she leaves Madame Ratignolle's house:

> Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered [to] her , gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui. She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle,—a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium. (Chopin 107)

She realizes that she cannot turn back to her old life and her old self, because she is finally getting closer to her inner self and she wants to remain loyal to herself. In this aspect, both protagonists deviate from each other, but at the end of the novels they will be reunited through death. Theoretically, they are both aware of the requirements, because "each woman must first feel complete and confident in isolation before she can attempt a new relationship with others on new terms" (Wershoven 35). However, they do not achieve this process of reconciliation with the self because they do not break away from the social relations and conventions that have constructed their personalities. As mentioned before, Lily needs warmth to grow and to feel alive, and so does Edna, who switches between moments of evasion from her own children and friends in her solitude but also seeks something else in the outside world. There is a reconnection with the purity and innocence of childhood in the awakening of the inner self: feeling like "some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (Chopin 175). The remarkable connection between Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Chopin's *The Awakening* in the defining moments of childhood at the end of the novels is perfectly conveyed in Wershoven's words:

> The most striking familiarity between the two novels is in the images and symbols of childbirth used to express this concept of death-as-preservation. Immediately before the deaths of both heroines, they are involved in scenes with newborn children, scenes that encapsulate the women's desires and ultimate defeats. In each case, the infant is the central symbol of a potential but painful rebirth, a reemergence of self into the world, one that will require enormous courage and inner strength. The woman, in each novel, must suffer to bring forth a new self, and she must be strong enough to be her own parent, to nurture that new and helpless being. (37)

They are defeated in the process of achieving their own identity precisely because they are not able to return to their previous lives because they have opened their eyes to their new reality –they have awakened–, but neither are they capable of completing the process they started. And in that stage of in-betweenness, they find that death is the only possible and natural outcome of the series of decisions that have taken them to the encounter with the inner self. They cannot be blinded anymore by ignorance, and it does not seem that they would have wished to return to the blissful stage of unfamiliarity with their own selves. Even though Lily, in her feverish state, thought that she had "lost hold of [Nettie's] child ... she was mistaken—the tender pressure of its body was still close to hers: the recovered warmth flowed through her once more, she yielded to it, sank into it, and slept" (Wharton 323). And Edna's terror when recalling the "night she swam far out" is overcome because "[s]he did not look back now,

but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end" (Chopin 176), just like the sea.

3. **Conclusion**

As a way to summarise the topic of this paper, it has to be noted that there are many similarities in the construction of both novels and the comparison of both makes a greater emphasis on "their comments on a society that arrests the full development of women, making both the reconstruction of self and the formation of genuine relationships nearly impossible", due to the clash between the process of creating a genuine self and a world determining what the norm should be (Wershoven 28–29). So, in their quest for identity, even though it is not possible for both protagonists to develop their real self in the outer world dominated by relations of patriarchal and capitalist power that determines the price, value, and nature of women as commodities that can be easily replaceable, they achieve a reunion with their authentic self in special instants right before their death. Both realize the extent of the social dimension and their place in a world ruled by insurmountable forces, they are enlightened by this awareness, and they need to find themselves in such a complex world throughout art, becoming Edna the artist and Lily the artwork. The antagonistic paradigms of the Angel in the House and the Fallen Woman do not suit Chopin and Wharton's protagonist, since they are both fixed categories imposed by a patriarchal society so as to reach homogeneity. The individual, however, is a unique puzzle of personality and experience: just like Lily "had never been able to understand the laws of a universe which was so ready to leave her out of its calculations" (Wharton 27), but still she tries: Edna "was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 57). It is remarkable how both Edna and Lily escape to the world of dreams moments before the arrival of death and they can find that warmth and wholeness through the recollection of key moments for them. They lastly embrace their true selves: in the life and touch of Nettie's baby, in the case of Lily, and in the freedom and embrace of the blue-grass meadow and of the sea. Furthermore, both novels convey a sense of identity being reinforced through death, as a stage of reconnecting with their interiors rid of everything that is corrupted, tainted and broken: death becomes a final embrace with their own selves and an act of loyalty and allegiance with the ones that were always there for them: Lily and Edna themselves. Something that needs not to be omitted or forgotten is that both novels present the idea that it is not so much a matter of creating identity, but rather of unfolding it, of cleaning and searching through all the layers of polished, imposed and unnatural behaviour inflicted by a social requirement of displaying homogeneity, in order to find a chaotic and even contradictory self. Perfection was always an imposed standard to subdue women and they were confined to thrive for that perfection in their prescribed female gender roles. The consequence after the realization that perfection is an unattainable ideal is death, at first it is a social death since they had to separate themselves from the constant expectations and definitions coming from the characters around them, but eventually it means the actual suicide for both protagonists. In this process, art becomes an essential tool Edna

and Lily use differently: Lily shapes herself according to others' preferences for she believes that by doing so she will receive human warmth and love, whereas Edna realizes that she needs the isolation she finds as an artist to find herself, far from the relentless interference of the world outside. The reconciliation of both characters comes with the ending of the novels as their similarities emerge again in the shape of their deaths, for it is the only possible outcome after their deviation from the expectations they were supposed to fulfil.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening and Selected Stories*. Edited By Sandra M. Gilbert, New York, Penguin, 2003.

Leighton, Angela. ""Because men made the laws": The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet." *Victorian Poetry,* vol. 27, no. 2, 1989, pp. 109–127, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40002337. Accessed 26 Dec. 2021.

Maloni, Ruby. "Dissonance between norms and behaviour: early 20th century America's 'New Woman.'" *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress,* vol. 70, 2009, pp. 880–886, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44147735. Accessed 20 Dec. 2021.

Preston, Claire. *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 54, no. 213, 2003, pp. 137–139, *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/3661553. Accessed 30 Apr. 2021.

Showalter, Elaine. "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's House of Mirth." *Representations*, no. 9, , 1985, pp. 133–149. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3043768. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.

Stansell, Christine. "Revisiting the Angel in the House: Revisions of Victorian Womanhood." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1987, pp. 466–483, https://www.jstor.org/stable/365026. Accessed 26 Dec. 2021.

Urgo, Joseph R. "A Prologue to Rebellion: 'The Awakening' and the Habit of Self-Expression." *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1987, pp. 22–32. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20077844. Accessed 30 Apr. 2021.

Wershoven, C.J. "The Awakening and The House of Mirth: Studies of Arrested Development." *American Literary Realism, 1870–1910,* vol. 19, no. 3, , 1987, pp. 27–41. *JSTOR* www.jstor.org/stable/27746245. Accessed 20 April 2021.

Wharton, Edith. *The House of Mirth*. London, Penguin, 2010.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's the Awakening." *American Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1973, pp. 449–471. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2711633. Accessed 30 Apr. 2021.

Bioprofile of the author: Verónica Sánchez Gil is an undergraduate student at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, pursuing a Degree in English Studies and aiming to become a teacher and a writer. Her research and literary interests revolve around classic mythology and its pervasive presence in Shakespeare, modernism and postmodernism and the frailty of language to convey thoughts and express feelings. She acknowledges the importance and influence her studies have on her work.

Contact: < verons03@ucm.es >