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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Representations of Privileged Motherhood in Nineteenth-
Century Literature: A Comparative Analysis of Leo
Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Masters of Arts

by

Dina Alhassani

Under the supervision of **Dr. Ira Dworkin**

June / 2014

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Dedication

To my phenomenal children, Teymour and Tamara Seifelnasr, it is I who is indeed privileged to be your mother.

Abstract

The heroines of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Chopin's *The Awakening* enjoy the autonomy of privileged motherhood in the nineteenth century. This role allows them the opportunities to forge their identities independent of most of the societal expectations which defined nineteenth-century feminine gender roles. The spinster enjoyed independence and yet had limited social interactions due to her perceived lack of femininity. By contrast, most mothers from lower and middle class backgrounds had fulfilled the idealized maternal role at the expense of independence and self-determination. In the context of nineteenth-century gender roles, the privileged mother enjoys the combined best aspects of spinsterhood (independence) and motherhood (perceived biological essentialism and social acceptance).

The similarities between the positions of the protagonists of *Anna Karenina* and *The Awakening* are striking when one considers that these novels were written in dissimilar cultures and geographical locations. Russian nobility was based on family connections and historical precedence dating back centuries, whereas Louisiana nobility was relatively recent and implied wealth. The depictions of privileged motherhood in both books are different, but both represent a cross-cultural paradigm shift in the roles of women that would reflect the concerns of first wave feminists including Elizabeth Cady Stanton who wrote: "the woman is uniformly sacrificed to the wife and mother" (14).

The novels depict women who are wives and mothers and yet retain their agency due to their status. Their journeys represent a rebellion against these gender roles. Their privileged mother statuses do not grant them complete autonomy and the tensions between their relative autonomy and an ideal autonomy lead to suicide scenes that represent a pursuit of an ultimately sublime experience.

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I. The Concept of “Privileged Motherhood”

Privileged motherhood as a concept is the product of nineteenth-century culture which allows the women designated as privileged mothers a type of autonomy within the restricted gender roles of the era. Beyond the definition of privilege as a position of relative ease within society, the details of privilege vary depending on the social order. Often privilege can best be assessed by what the privilege allows the person to avoid – whether it is labor, institutional oppression, or disease. In her 2007 article on breast-feeding attitudes, Orit Avishai provides a definition of privileged motherhood based on the differences between privilege and non-privilege in motherhood stating that “poor and working-class women are faced with structural barriers to breast-feeding such as inadequate healthcare, nutrition, and maternity leaves, and that women of color are additionally straddled by racialized images...privileged women are faced with a different set of complexities...the target of discourses of health promotion, good outcome childrearing, science, rationality, and the market” (149).

Avishai writes about privilege in the twenty-first century and the details of privilege vary between time periods and cultures. In contemporary America, wealthy straight white men are the most privileged members due to the history of homophobia, racism and gender bias. In Ancient Rome, the most privileged members of society were the males with prestigious ancestors and the most slaves. In the nineteenth century, privilege combined wealth and class. The privileged mother was celebrated in the nineteenth century because she managed to secure an autonomous and yet socially accepted position without needing to directly challenge the gender roles that defined cultural discourse.

Privilege is relative to the social order. Privileged motherhood conveys a certain amount of opportunity and license; however, it is not a pure equality. One needs to place the privileged

mother in a spectrum of nineteenth-century gender roles, particularly the spinster and the mother. The spinster has independence and yet stands at a position outside of the social order. Her femininity is called into question due to the lack of children and marriage. Mona Gleason notes that the motherhood emphasis came from a strong gendered definition of women where nineteenth-century experts insisted that women were only worthy when they wanted to be mothers: “Robust and well-cared-for babies from ‘good’ stock represented the bedrock of a strong nation, social reformers repeatedly argued” (237). The spinster’s very presence upsets the social order and causes discomfort. By contrast, the non-privileged mother has sacrificed independence and self-determination to an idealized role that tends to place all family responsibility on the woman. Privileged motherhood combines the independence of spinsterhood with the perceived biological essentialism of motherhood.

A major dilemma of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society for women lay in the tension between independence and marriage, which included children. Emily Toth notes that in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, the heroine faces a dilemma between love and autonomy: the wife vs. the spinster: “If the heroine chooses Love, she loses her independence, her freedom to make any more choices – for romance, marriage, and motherhood confine her to her sphere. If she chooses independence (Freedom), too often she must renounce Love, especially its sexual aspect” (647).

The tension between Love and Freedom often resulted in marriages to substandard men in both literature and society. In popular literature, the spinster of the nineteenth century was a monster and an outcast. In one such book *My Old Maid’s Corner* (1903), Lillie Hamilton French depicts the spinster in the following way: “They belong nowhere, are no man’s possession, like fruit dropped from a sunny garden wall on to the highway beyond. Every passer-by has a right to

them, and may devour them as he travels; but they are never reckoned again among the proprietor's belongings, nor taken to adorn a table round which his guests are gathered" (404).

Being "no man's possession" is both liberating and terrifying in a nineteenth-century context. Marriage has traditionally been contextualized as an ownership arrangement with men obtaining women from their families. In a nineteenth-century milieu where gender differences were viewed as natural and unchangeable, the spinster's "un-feminine" nature becomes even more discomfiting. Ruth Groenhout best defines essentialism as the belief that the reproductive process genetically codes men and women to be different:

What counts as 'rational' from the perspective of genes that find themselves in a male body is, we are told, profoundly different from what counts as "rational" for genes that find themselves in a female body. Strategies that lead to success in propagation for men are different from strategies that lead to success in propagation for women. These differences, further, have been selected for over millennia of evolutionary processes, and are now ineradicably a part of what it is to be a man or a woman. (52-53)

It would be a misnomer to state that the nineteenth-century feminists endorsed essentialism; however, they did use essentialist arguments because they were talking to audiences that not only believed in the essentialism but reinforced it in a variety of discourse methodologies including religion, science, and literature. Thus, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her rhetoric would respond to essentialist arguments with essentialist arguments, such as an assertion (by Horace Mann) that it would be indelicate to allow women to mingle in politics, the realm of the rude representatives by stating: "we are told it is woman's province to soothe the angry passions and calm the belligerent feelings of man, and if what Horace Mann says is true, where can we find a riper harvest awaiting us than in the halls of legislation!" (287). In a broadly essentialist setting where men and women were "naturally" inclined to certain traits, the societal drives that led women to become mothers were considered to be biological and natural. Society

endowed women with spiritual and religious authority. Stanton is working in this milieu and uses the argument based in spiritual and religious authority. In a less essentialist era, Stanton might have been inclined to point out that neither the “roughness” of males nor the “soothing calm” of females is necessarily innate or natural.

For most women, the spiritual authority that came with maternal achievement was mitigated by the lack of autonomy. Women had more children in the nineteenth century than today due to the high infant and child mortality rates. According to Kwang-Sun Lee: “During the second half of the nineteenth century, infant mortality in different regions of the United States and Western European countries ranged from about 100 to 350 per 1000 live births ... in the United States, approximately one out of every three deaths was a child under five years of age and one out of every five deaths was an infant” (586). Maintaining several children was often a debilitating job and most mothers did not have enough time for leisure.

Tolstoy and Chopin wrote about privileged motherhood, which in the context of nineteenth-century society represented a rare but important third option. With privileged motherhood, the protagonists could achieve both security and freedom. Their marriages allow them the same freedom that for most women only came with spinsterhood. Marriage is the first stage of their growth with motherhood as the second stage. When the novels begin, they have grown accustomed to their relative autonomy and seek out full autonomy. However, it should be noted that even though privileged mothers were released from the mundane duties of maternal care, their freedom was deemed excessive by nineteenth-century standards. “This creates a guilt that forces the mother to extend special efforts in the discharge of family duties” (Treu 25).

Tolstoy is more inclined to depict the guilt of privileged motherhood than Chopin. In *Anna Karenina*, there are several bathetic scenes between Anna and the son that she abandoned

to follow her heart. Furthermore, her journey is set in contrast to Kitty and Dolly who vary in their acceptance of their privileged motherhood roles. Kate Chopin chooses to depict her heroine beginning with her abandonment of her concerns. Anna frets over the tensions between her societally determined role – as privileged as it might be – and her desires; Edna transcends the concerns of guilt and privilege.

The privileged mother is a particular nineteenth-century type. As feminists continued to challenge gender roles, they would be less inclined to accept or use essentialist arguments that made privileged motherhood so attractive. However, it would be a mistake to confuse intellectual history with general acceptance. Women were still expected to be either mothers or spinsters and the work/motherhood debate has continued into the modern era. Still the feminist discourse, while not eliminating the privileged mother role, challenged gender roles to the point where privileged motherhood was no longer the highest possible role for women.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton would be followed by feminists who were much less eager to respect an essentialist viewpoint. Emma Goldman preached both anarchism and free love while actively working to free women from biological determinism by providing (illegal) birth control options and information to women in poor New York neighborhoods. Trotsky sought to free women from “the mind- and soul-destroying tyranny of nursery and kitchen, from a world that kept them out of politics, society and culture unless they belonged to the privileged few who were in fact, and virtually in status, superior courtesans” (Tay 662). In a few generations after Stanton, Simone de Beauvoir could advance an unrepentantly constructivist form of feminism. In *The Second Sex*, she writes: “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female represents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature” (249). In the nineteenth century,

this constructivist argument that would dominate feminist and cultural discourse were too fringe for most feminists.

In this context, a privileged mother represented an ideal role for nineteenth-century women in Russia and the United States. She has both the spiritual authority of maternity and the autonomy of spinsterhood. She does not have to struggle to keep her children alive in an era of typhus, poor hygiene, and starvation.

A privileged mother is still symbolically a man's possession; however, her status allowed her more freedom within this framework. Many nineteenth-century novels depict the privileged mother as a character with agency to forge identities against the prevailing social order. In the absence of a direct challenge to gender roles, the privileged mother position is what allows the heroines to step away from their societal expectations.

II. The Novels and their Heroines: An Overview

Both *Anna Karenina* and *The Awakening* share several elements not only with each other, but also with *Madame Bovary*. These elements include a weak husband, an unsatisfied privileged wife, an extramarital affair, and ultimately a suicide. However, *Madame Bovary*'s title character finds dissatisfaction with her marriage due to its inability to conform to her personal romantic fantasies. By contrast, Anna Karenina and Edna Pontellier are more eager to explore their motivations and belief structures. Madame Bovary is similar to Willy Loman in her inability to negotiate between reality and fantasy; Anna and Edna are Hamlet-like characters whose actions inspire internal explorations of faith, society, and ultimately death.

Anna Karenina and *The Awakening* are dissimilar in several fairly obvious but notable ways. *Anna Karenina* is a long sprawling novel written by a Russian man who had a reputation as a great author and a mystic noble. It was recognized as a classic in its time and its reputation has remained strong. *The Awakening* is a compact novel where no word is wasted and nothing is extraneous. As a novel written by an American woman, *The Awakening* scandalized audiences. The *Chicago Times Herald* described Chopin as a writer of "sex fiction" ("Books of the Day" 9). The *Boston Herald* stated that it was "most unpleasant" ("Books of the Week" 7). The *Providence Sunday Journal* condescendingly stated that Chopin was "another clever woman [who] has put her cleverness to a very bad use" ("Current Literature" 15). Willa Cather agreed with this sentiment when she stated that "Miss Chopin has devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme" (6). Due to these negative reactions, the novel "was largely forgotten in the early part of the century [and] its ascent in literary hierarchy began in the 1950s" (Corse and Westervelt 140). Its re-publication in 1964 followed by its emerging canonization coincided with second-wave feminism.

The differences in the novels become especially interesting in light of the similar ways that they depict the privileged mother protagonists and their societies. Despite being in different societies, these novels depict women who have achieved high status in their privileged motherhood and yet find their lives unsatisfactory and take the step towards a truer autonomy away from the culturally constructed privileges. Jessica Salamin argues that Edna wants a life without personal or familial obligations: “a completely free life. Because Edna married and had children young- before she was fully ‘awake’ to the possibilities of life – that free life is no longer an option. She refuses to desert and thereby humiliate her children, but the most shocking thing of all, especially in that time period, is that Edna also refuses to desert herself. She chooses her self over everything and everyone in her life” (2).

In both texts, the concept of privileged motherhood asserts itself into the narrative. Note the following passage from Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*: “She stood watching the fair woman walk down the long line of galleries with the grace and majesty which queens are sometimes supposed to possess. Her little ones ran to meet her. Two of them clung about white skirts, the third she took from its nurse and with a thousand endearments bore it along in her own fond, encircling arms. Though, as everybody well knew, the doctor had forbidden her to lift so much as a pin” (27). In the context of nineteenth-century New Orleans society, the grace and majesty of queens invoke an image that is more evocative than actual.

This same privileged motherhood role proves just as limiting and luxurious in *Anna Karenina*. Before Anna even appears in the novel, Oblonsky’s wife is portrayed as a privileged mother in relation to an incident where Oblonsky has admitted to having an affair with the French governess. Tolstoy tells the reader that there are two governesses in this household – an English one and a French one – so the house is only in a semi-state of chaos. The narrator states

that “the wife did not leave her own rooms, and the husband had not been home for three days. The children ran about all over the house looking lost; the English governess had quarreled with the housekeeper and had written to a friend to ask her to find her a new place; the chef had left the house the day before, at dinnertime; the undercook and the driver had given notice” (5).

Where *The Awakening* portrays a life of privilege as something invoking royalty, Tolstoy’s milieu is a world of actual royalty. The mothers of *Anna Karenina* not only have the luxury of refraining from physical exertion, but they can also stay in their rooms (note that the wife has multiple rooms designated for her privacy) for three days, never interacting with their children or the servants. Also one should note that the passage mentions five servants plus the French governess. Presumably, there are other servants in place to keep the children from running away or hurting themselves, since all of the servants mentioned are either leaving the employ or otherwise occupied. In *Anna Karenina*, the privileged mother has a parasitic aspect. The household runs because she married Oblonsky, yet she is not taking part in it.

Edna and Anna both behave like dilettantes who do not need to contribute to their households; however, this freedom allows them to explore their autonomy. They have already completed the “work” of becoming mothers when the books open and they need not concern themselves with the household duties that most dominated the lives of most nineteenth-century mothers. They may not be as privileged as Dolly who can hide in her rooms for three days while the servants run the household, but they are spared the toil and the social stigma that burdened most of the women of their generation.

The ability to take three-day vacations away from their children sets the tone for *Anna Karenina*. The accepted mother-child relationship is secondary to the action of both Anna and Edna. Joe Andrew states that “neither Tolstoy nor Dostoyevsky offers a full-scale account of [the

mother-daughter] relationship as a central theme in his work – although the relationship between Kitty and her mother in *Anna Karenina* is an important example of a positive picture of this relationship in a male author’s work” (59). Kitty, the love and bride of Levin, works as a counterpoint to Anna; however, toward the end of the book Kitty has bypassed her initial accomplishment of bride and is on her way to a position of privileged motherhood. Kitty’s mother tends to be not only a confidante but also a woman who takes a particular interest in Kitty’s marriage prospects.

Kitty is a prototypical version of the privileged mothers in the novel. She is linked to Anna Karenina in the beginning when she is pursuing Vronsky, but finds rejection instead. In the narrative, her normative romance with Levin provides a contrast to the dysfunctional relationship that Anna engages in. “The Levin and Kitty story is sweet, patient, and even spiritual“ (Rothman), in sharp contrast to the Anna and Vronsky romance. Even though her marriage to Levin is a heartwarming romance, it is in the context of a society that is composed of unhappy marriages and the cynicism. Since Levin is surrounded by unhappy marriages and evidence that marriage is doomed, “his own physical space is threatened despite his longing for Kitty. So his ‘disobedient tears’ are responses to the presence of marriage in a life that has not known the roles of a wife, children, and all the other responsibilities that accompany the acceptance of being a husband” (Champagne 154). Even if Levin and Kitty represent a healthy relationship, they are at the beginning of their marriage and even though Tolstoy places them in contrast to the corrupting societal forces that led Anna astray, the privilege and the possibility for dissolution is constant as the social order that created nobility is quickly fading.

Edna Pontellier and Anna Karenina both have independence within the framework of nineteenth-century society, but also specifically within their privileged social circles. They are

allowed the freedom to spend time away from their children. This does not make them neglectful. Anna Karenina, in particular, has her most bathetic scenes with her son. Yet, the acceptable gendered roles would have these women as primarily caregivers to their children and this is not a role either woman has much interest in fulfilling. Robert Treu notes that the role of the privileged mother forces the mother to extend special efforts in the discharge of family duties (25). Despite the fact that there are several commonalities including themes of marriage, privilege, equality, and feminism in these narratives coupled with existential journeys of self-discovery, the journeys take on the particular details of the cultural milieus and main themes. Even the ultimate fates of the heroines bespeak the cultural obsessions of the novelists – natural self-discovery and technology overtaking the social order.

Thus the heroines are defined by their cultures. In *The Awakening*, nineteenth-century Louisiana is a society that fetishizes tradition and romantic heritage. “Edna suffers a dilemma that many contemplative and independent people encounter at some point in their lives, but her dilemma is exacerbated by her being a woman in the fin de siècle South” (Salamin 3). The American South in the nineteenth century is a particular place that is married to its delusions of a grand tradition that it can recapture or never abandon. Louisiana is even more entrenched in this discourse as New Orleans has traditionally been the major center of shipping and culture. To maintain a privileged lifestyle in such a milieu takes a great deal of undeclared effort.

When Chopin states, “Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life,” there is a cultural undertone to that statement (123). Not only is Edna stripping away her personal illusions, she is abandoning the societal illusions that were such an integral element of the Old South. Parvulescu states that “Edna’s drama is that she experiences herself as double. There is an empirical self, living in ‘the world’ and going

about its daily routine, and there is a self-reflective self that meditates on the empirical self and has insights into its fiction” (478). Edna is part of an emerging middle class. Edna can be emotional, such as when Leonce confronts her about her apparent neglect of the children; however, her emotional response tends to be limited to a crying scene before she admits that she enjoys her personal space. She does not try to excuse or mitigate the enjoyment of such space.

In contrast to *Anna Karenina*'s theme of a society moving quickly and out of control, the self-determination in *The Awakening* is akin to the Virginia Woolf maxim about having a room of one's own. In one particular scene of quiet repose in *The Awakening*, the only noise is “the hooting of an old owl in the top of the water oak and the everlasting voice of the sea that was not uplifted at that soft hour. It broke like mournful lullaby upon the night” (7).

The rural imagery and sensations of a slow Southern lifestyle guide Edna's journey of self-discovery. Edna lives in the solitude and the peace, where noise is “no longer the noise of socially constructed voices repeating whatever is proper or conventional; and it stands for a good deal that realism tries to reject. It is subjective” (Treu 26). Edna is a product of southern Louisiana but she also transcends her social order. When she breaks away from her husband, she finds models for female independence in the maternal Madame Ratignolle and the spinster Mademoiselle Reisz.

Mademoiselle Reisz eschews all expectations of gentility and maternal behavior. Reisz refuses to fulfill even the minimal expectations of women as caregivers. “Some people contended that the reason Mademoiselle Reisz always chose apartments up under the roof was to discourage the approach of beggars, peddlars and callers” (59). She does not shop. She does not entertain potential mates and she certainly does not give money in a charitable fashion. Her main emotional outlet is music. According to Joseph Church: “however much Mademoiselle Reisz

rejects passion and the body she regains it vicariously, which is to say symbolically, in several ways, most obviously in her music” (21). Mademoiselle Reisz embodies the stereotype of the mercurial musician who sacrifices personal satisfaction for art.

While Mademoiselle Reisz is the musician, Madame Ratignolle is the enthusiastic audience for Edna’s stories. “It is to Madame Ratignolle that Edna makes her first attempts to narrate, telling of childhood memories of Kentucky” (Urgo 25). Furthermore, Madame Ratignolle provides a space for self-discovery. The Ratignolle house serves as a salon with music performances and card playing. Unlike the nobility of *Anna Karenina* that viewed invitations as obligations of their class, the characters of *The Awakening* view the invitation to Madame Ratignolle’s parties as a privilege because of the intrinsic satisfaction of the event.

Salamin states that: “Kate Chopin has created a woman, who in many ways, finds herself experiencing both the Dionysiac rapture and the Apollonian abyss for the first time in her life” (6). Edna is unable to keep her impulses in balance so she is questions her life choices from the position of upheaval. Yet these questions are ultimately liberating and much less painful than the same explorations conducted by Anna Karenina.

Like Edna, Anna is in the maelstrom of Apollonian and Dionysian tensions; however, Anna Karenina is very much a product of post-feudal Russian society and Russian nobility standards inform her journey. Like the American South, late nineteenth-century Russian society had only recently ended slavery. However, Russia was a feudal system with a medieval serfdom social order that was ended by popular appeal. Southern slavery was a relatively recent institution that was exacerbated by the racial component and the South fought a war to preserve slavery and spent the latter part of the nineteenth century attempting to reassert its social order in the wake of Reconstruction. The South of the nineteenth century was beginning a new literary

tradition based on the romanticism of the plantation era – a romanticism that inspired authors like Margaret Mitchell and William Faulkner.

The Creole society in which Edna lives provides a contrasting backdrop to her muted existence. What impresses Edna “most forcibly” about the Creole people “was their entire absence of prudery” when they engaged in their social practice of story-telling. From Madame Ratignolle’s harrowing story of giving birth to Robert’s droll story, designed to entertain married women, Edna finds their universal freedom of expression to be at first incomprehensible to her...she desires this freedom, and seems attracted to the potential power which that freedom might give her. (Urgo 24)

Russia by contrast was a nation that was rapidly modernizing with the end of serfdom and the intrusion of technology. Thus, *The Awakening* seems to take place in a South independent of outside influences, while the Russia of *Anna Karenina* is a rapidly changing society with technology (trains) and tradition (agriculture) fighting for supremacy.

Like nineteenth-century Russian society, Anna is thrown into a maelstrom of passions and tension. In sharp contrast to Edna’s disdain for maternal roles, Anna maintains an almost obsessive relationship with her son even as she engages in a chaotic and passionate affair with Vronsky. Besides their social roles, the main similarity between Anna and Edna consists of their husbands.

Similar to Leonce Pontellier, Karenin is an emotional deadweight. Gayle Greene notes that “Karenin and Koznyshev occupy the most prestigious positions, move in the highest social circles in the novel, and are the furthest removed from their feelings and least capable of love” (108). Even when Anna’s affair comes to light, Tolstoy tells us that “Outwardly Alexy Karenin’s relations with his wife remained the same. The only difference was that he was more busy than before” (236). The image of propriety overwhelms all other considerations. Anna’s flight from the cold Karenin to the passionate affair with Vronsky bespeaks a need for a life of

passion – one that is Dionysian in tone as she spends a great deal of her relationship with Vronsky in the midst of fights and jealous outbursts.

In order to emphasize the contrasts between Anna and her social expectations, the opening passages of the book depict Anna's counterpoint, Dolly, who takes to her rooms for three days as she contemplates her marriage to Oblonsky. Well before Anna is introduced into the novel, Dolly is established as the default privileged mother. She too has issues with her lot in life, but she is never going to seriously consider alternatives.

Dolly may envy Anna's liberation from her husband, but she will never follow Anna's example. Dolly's visit to Anna only reinforces her weakness: "The world of hers now seemed so precious and sweet to her that she did not wish on any account to spend another day away from it, and she made up her mind to go back the next day" (740). The character of Dolly references the trope of the nineteenth-century woman led astray by her friends. Male writers were prone to depicting "fallen women" as both wicked and naïve, by not even allowing them agency to own their decisions. In Kathleen Kalpin's survey of literary texts, she finds that common narratives "suggest that women are eager to persuade each other even on highly sensitive topics and that they have access to other women out of the sight of men" (775). Thus men are found assuming that women are being led astray by wicked women.

Tolstoy is depicting the feminine space as one where influence is strong and yet both Dolly and Anna have agency. Anna and Dolly can both choose to maintain their privileged mother statuses or disregard them. Dolly, however, chooses the seemingly easier path by maintaining her social status. *Anna Karenina* is a novel that is obsessed with social status. Unlike the American South depicted in *The Awakening* where social status is based upon American capitalism and individuality and thus derives from wealth and the ability to entertain a party, the

social status in Russia derives from centuries of feudal tradition. The characters in *Anna Karenina* are members of the nobility; several are princes and princesses. Even though Tolstoy died before the Russian Revolution that swept away the Russian royalty, there are several indications that the Russian nobility as an institution is an anachronism in the novel.

Anna's position as a privileged mother does not come so much from her husband's wealth as from his social standing and her family history. Her privilege is so profound that it extends to her lover Vronsky. "Most of the young people envied him just on account of what was the most painful aspect of his love affair, namely Karenin's high position and, consequently, the prominence that this liaison might acquire in society" (205). The social status is so profoundly integral to Russian society in the nineteenth century that even Vronsky's mother approves of the liaison.

The social stratification of nineteenth-century Russian society is much more defined than American class distinctions, primarily because nineteenth-century Russian society supported and encouraged the stratification, whereas American society thrives on myths of upward mobility and social equality. Gary Browning's examination of *Anna Karenina* explores the linkages between peasant aspirations to social status and pleasant daily life ostensibly enjoyed by women in Anna's position of privileged motherhood. Browning points out that even though Tolstoy romanticizes peasant life in *Anna Karenina*, both Nabokov and Sydney Schultz saw the peasant as a corrupting influence on the royalty. Nabokov interpreted the peasant as symbolic of Anna's sin and Browning notes that in Schultz's interpretation, "the peasant serves as a symbol of Anna and Russia's familial and societal descent into moral degradation" (525).

In contrast to the quiet strength of Edna's existential journey, Anna's break from her lifestyle as a privileged mother is uncomfortable and chaotic. Anna has the strength to leave her

husband for a lover, but she often regrets it. She serves to reinforce Dolly's weakness by remaining in a marriage that Tolstoy announces as miserable in the opening sentence of the book when he writes: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1). Dolly and Anna are both unhappy privileged mothers who are at the pinnacle of the Russian social order.

Anna's rebellion against her position as a privileged mother puts her outside of her society, but it also reinforces the societally driven gender roles. According to Nina Auerbach, "Victorian conventions ordain that a woman's fall ends in death" (30). The fact that Anna is still alive immediately after her affair begins provides a source of tension that Dolly needs to deal with in her place as a non-fallen woman, so much that she needs to explore and dismiss Anna's lifestyle. Whatever questions that Dolly had about her position as a privileged mother are counteracted by her horror of Anna's life. Anna's choices challenge Dolly's decision to remain in a marriage with a man who continually cheats on her; however, Dolly meets that challenge with a re-affirmation of her familial role.

As privileged mothers, Anna and Dolly represent the two faces of a society that is imploding. Dolly is the mask of stability that Russian gentry struggled to maintain throughout the final century of their reign. Dolly will challenge some norms, but only within the safety of her rooms. Anna, by contrast, depicts the Russian society in flux swiftly careening into a time of upheaval and chaos. According to Byford: "The most significant moment of this era was February 1861-the date of the Emancipation of the Serfs...the period was marked by significant cultural changes in general, affecting every stratum and domain of social life...an epoch of radical transformation that demanded a critical re-examination of all social and cultural foundations" (212). Tolstoy died before the Bolshevik Revolution and wrote *Anna Karenina*

before the 1905 revolution, yet there were several reasons that Russian nobles had to fear the future. Czar Alexander II wasn't assassinated until after the publication of *Anna Karenina*; however, after the first assassination attempt on Tzar Alexander in 1866, the social order became very fragile. Ana Siljak writes: "The year 1866 began Russia's cycle of terror and counter-terror. The state and radicals increasingly viewed each other with unflagging suspicion and loathing" (111). No one in *Anna Karenina* has reason to believe that their position, titles and security will last indefinitely.

By contrast, *The Awakening* depicts an upper class that enjoys an American culture that has rebuilt itself from the Civil War. Expansion, Manifest Destiny, and the optimism of the capitalist system were on the rise. "By the eve of the First World War, the national product of the United States was already equal to that of all the other Great Powers combined...there was a great energy among the people, whether corporate robber barons or frontier farmers...There was a sense that no limits existed to potential future growth, a confidence imbued by the vastness of the country itself" (Kennedy 52-53). *The Awakening* was written when America became a prime destination for immigrants. By contrast, Russia was falling apart from inside. Assassination attempts on nobility and czars were becoming common. The freed serfs were in need of work and the proliferation of radical ideology was taking hold. Even though it would be anachronistic to view these novels through the lens of early twentieth-century events where Russian instability would culminate in two revolutions and American expansionist beliefs would lead to the Spanish American War and an American dominance in world markets, these contrasting societal tensions were in place throughout the late nineteenth century.

Another contrast with *The Awakening* is in the way that Anna finds a sense of solitude. Edna is eminently satisfied with her isolation from the social order, whereas Anna is messy.

During Dolly's visit, Anna "returned to her boudoir, took a glass and poured into it several drops of medicine, the chief ingredient of which was morphine. She drank it and sitting still for a few minutes, went into her bedroom feeling calm and cheerful" (740). Anna's journey is almost the complete opposite of Edna's increasing self-fulfillment as it notes just how isolating life can be when women move away from their proscribed roles. In the absence of her status as a privileged mother, Anna is a fallen woman who needs to take morphine to function in a society that seems out of control.

III. Nineteenth-Century Social Constructions of Appropriate Female Behavior

According to Emma Dominguez-Rue: “Middle- and upper-middle-class women who displayed symptoms of emaciation showed their decorative status – and their husbands’ wealth in being able to afford such an unproductive wife – and clearly exhibited their opposition to the typically large and fleshy working-class woman” (298). The ideal woman of the nineteenth century is not just detached from her duties but also from her body. Paradoxically, the Victorians also worshipped the maternal role. The privilege of their social positions allows Edna and Anna to regain the ethereal and fragile image that imbues them with power.

Edna in particular uses this power dynamic to her advantage as Chopin states early in the novel that “the doctor had forbidden her to lift so much as a pin” (27). Critics have often described Edna Pontellier as a transitional female figure, seeking to escape an existence that is superficially attractive and coveted by most nineteenth-century women. Her attitude towards her marriage and children is part of the reason why the book shocked so many critics and readers.

Gabrielle Baldwin, in discussing Kate Chopin’s relatively recent entry into the literary canon, notes that among American women, “the only woman in the canon for many decades from the nineteenth century was Emily Dickinson” (50). The patriarchal structure encourages males to speak over each other while women are discouraged from communicating with their own words. Jokes about women talking too much betray a discomfort with an open exchange of ideas. Thus, Emily Dickinson becomes the quintessential female writer for almost a century due almost as much to her life story as the reclusive poet as her poetry.

Even when the canon is opened up in the 1970s and 1980s to include women, Kate Chopin’s novel remains problematic. One of the best encapsulations of the tensions surrounding Edna comes from Joseph Urgo: “the history of critical reaction to Chopin's novel has largely

been concerned with what Edna's story amounts to. Is it a feminist novel? Is Edna mad? Is it a failed feminist novel? Is Chopin mad? That Edna is rebellious is fairly agreed upon-but against what does she rebel, and is her rebellion 'realistic'?" (22).

Too shocking to be read in the nineteenth century, twentieth-century critics were more inclined to interpret *The Awakening* in a reductive fashion, focusing primarily on Edna as a victim of patriarchy. The most blatant example of this reductive treatment comes from Streater who states: "Obviously, through Edna's growing unrest and eventual rejection of the roles society has assigned to her, the burden of these expectations is shown to be a real dilemma on a woman's psyche" (407).

Other literary critics, in response to the previous interpretations that villainized Edna, tended to interpret Edna as a victim. Nina Auerbach states that "Feminist critics writing about the fallen woman today are as eager to demythicize her as forward-looking Victorians were, constructing the same morally purged models of victim and survivor" (32). Edna poses a difficulty that comes from a discomfort in the depiction of a woman forging a flexible and non-retributive sexuality. This discomfort can manifest in hostility or condescension, in an effort to place Edna and Anna in roles of 'fallen women' to be pitied or scorned. Note the recent experience of the Duke University freshman whose pornography career was discovered by her fellow students. She received death threats and hostility. "I suppose I should not be surprised by this level of disrespect as to my welfare and safety. I suppose I should not be shocked at the lack of sensitivity I have been afforded. Because, sadly, these are the realities that women -- especially sex workers -- face every day. We are scorned by the very same people that encourage us to be sexual" (Knox).

Belle Knox's personal experience with the hypocrisy of the patriarchal dismissal of women's sexuality is echoed by Kate Millet who states: "While patriarchy tends to convert women to a sexual object...she is made to suffer for and be ashamed of her sexuality, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence" (116). The difference between Knox and Millet lies in the fact that Knox insists upon her agency, whereas Millet focuses on the patriarchal baggage that comes with the expressions of female sexuality. When audiences refuse to acknowledge Edna's agency, Edna's journey is a journey of martyrdom.

Even though these readings might be technically true, they miss a great deal of the empowerment in Edna's journey. They also ignore the celebration implicit in Edna's journey and the amusement that Chopin took from scandalizing the public. Chopin stated "Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late" (*Kate Chopin's Private Papers* 296). By this quote, one can tell that Chopin fully enjoyed writing about Edna's rebellion. Edna is growing restless and rejecting her roles; however, she seems to be calmly taking these roles off like they are ill-fitting clothing rather than laboring under a burden of expectations. Note how Chopin describes Edna's relationship with her husband: "Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness" (55). Edna does not have the kind of guilt-ridden scenes with her husband and children that characterize Anna Karenina's break from her position. Edna enjoys her infidelity.

Privileged motherhood is not merely a goal that can be achieved for the characters. It is a state of being that must be constantly tended and revived. In many contexts, the privileged mother is the purest representation of Apollonian stability. Her maternal role is largely symbolic and attempts to force her into an active role such as when Leonce attempts to berate Edna in *The Awakening*, is met with derision. “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. He could not be in two places at once, making a living for his family on the street and staying home to see that no harm befell them. He talked in a monotonous, insistent way” (7).

Leonce’s bargaining with Edna is from a position of weakness. Edna is not expected to perform maternal duties and Leonce’s entreaties seem desperate and doomed to failure. Privileged mothers are not active mothers. Edna does not even make the effort to reject his entreaties. The narrative merely states that he was monotonous and insistent and this is from Edna’s perspective, the novel is stating that she finds his words so trivial that she is focusing on his tone more than his message.

One possible reason why *Anna Karenina* became an instant classic while *The Awakening* languished in obscurity after a premiere that offended contemporary critics may very well have to do with sentences like the one above where Edna is describing her husband’s monotonous and insistent way of talking rather than his words. Edna has no qualms about finding her husband tedious and she doesn’t have the kind of pathos that characterizes Anna Karenina’s guilt over her abandonment of her husband and son.

Edna even has a spiritual guide in the personage of Mademoiselle Reisz, the “disagreeable, self-assertive little woman, no longer young. Her independent status gives her strength and the right to eccentricities” (Toth 659). Even though Anna has a similar mentor, she

looks upon her mentor with distaste, which reflects Anna's self-loathing that allowed contemporary readers to pity her. Gayle Greene notes that the supporting older female characters in *Anna Karenina* carry out independence in order to be spiritual or promiscuous or infant terrible. She notes that their independence is due to the fact that "having outlived the necessity of functioning as sexual objects, they can finally afford the courage of their convictions" (107).

A major undercurrent in both novels is the tension between idealized motherhood and the experiences and attitudes of the women who have secured such a valued role. The active mother—particularly in a privileged position—was a relatively recent dynamic. However, maternity as a means to fulfilment became increasingly prevalent. By the turn of the nineteenth century, "the image of the chaste, tender, and dutiful mother proliferated in advice manuals and popular literature, emphasizing the sentimental familial bonds that could be forged by a good mother and strengthened by the act of nursing" (Doyle 961). It may seem odd to include the term "chaste" in that portrayal, yet the Virgin Mary was a cultural icon that managed to remain influential long after the domination of the Catholic veneration. In such a cultural milieu, a woman would find it almost impossible to live up to such expectations. When Anna and Edna leave their children to pursue lovers, their societies designate them as bad mothers; however, the definition of a "good mother" had become so immersed in sentimentality and impossible standards that they could only aspire to appear maternal without truly fulfilling the role. In her essay on *The Awakening*, Kathleen M. Streater writes "Chopin reveals how women are being defined by a male construct of motherhood that not only denies their individual identity, but also continually reinforces a sense of inferiority, for what woman can measure up to the standard of an 'angel'?" (407).

Anna is especially damaged by the tensions between the independence derived from the privileged mother role and the expectations that the role places upon her. Bill Overton points out

the Freudian metaphorical context in Anna's journey, but noting that almost everything in Anna's world is the product of patriarchy and gender bias.

Anna bears a male child while she is a "good" wife, a female child while she is a "bad" one...the novel suggests that Anna channels into her relation with her son the need for loving that is not met by her marriage. Second, Anna not only nearly dies in bearing her daughter, but pregnancy and childbirth come to represent for her the danger of losing Vronsky through the loss of what she believes binds him to her: her looks. Third, under Russian law the husband had rights over all children born to his wife...from Anna's point of view, her daughter therefore constitutes an obstacle to her happiness with Vronsky. (320)

Anna can step away from her marriage, but her role as a privileged mother follows her throughout the book. Her journey from her privileged mother position to personal autonomy is fraught with pain and backsliding. As long as Anna is attached to the son that she has with Karenin, she feels the need to negotiate between social expectations. It isn't until she disdains her daughter with Vronsky that she liberates herself from the expectations of an Apollonian caregiver.

By contrast, Edna treats her privileged mother role with disdain. Here children are props. Another reason why *The Awakening* failed to find a sympathetic audience in its time period could have to do with the complete disregard that Edna seems to have for her children. American cultural standards about motherhood fail to provoke the intended maternal response in Edna. For the most part, she treats her children like props. "She had the whole household enrolled in the service of art. The boys posed for her. They thought it amusing at first, but the occupation soon lost its attractiveness when they discovered that it was not a game arranged especially for their entertainment" (55).

In both novels, the heroines leave their positions as privileged mothers with varying degrees of success. Edna and Anna have found a position of privilege within their society and the

best one that they could possibly obtain as women in the nineteenth century without challenging their societally defined gender roles.

For both Anna and Edna, the privileged mother role is both liberating and imprisoning. The privileges give them the license to explore their personal autonomy; however, they cannot pursue the autonomy without paying drastic prices. Female sexual desire is the key to their liberation and it is also the method by which the heroines become vilified by the societies which have nurtured them only so far.

As noted, the liberation of the protagonists is a relative liberation within the gender-proscribed roles without directly challenging the roles. Any modern discussion of either Edna or Anna needs to address the question of whether these characters can be viewed as feminist prototypes. The characters do not possess feminist consciousness. They do not purposefully challenge their gender roles. When they first take steps beyond their roles as privileged mothers, they are more concerned with their independence and their lovers than a broad critique of the gender roles which have defined them until they choose to take lovers.

The evolution of feminist discourse can be seen in the reactions to the books. Feminism as a movement advocates for a widespread acceptance of ideas that challenge traditional gender roles. Even though Edna does not put her challenge to the patriarchal into words, her actions and thoughts were enough to warrant a major backlash on the part of readers and critics. In Allison Berg's *Mothering the Race*, she notes that feminist activists long sought to expand the feminine role beyond the mother-woman: "an identifiable cross-racial tradition of women's fiction rejected a strictly instrumental definition of maternity, imagining mothers as subjects and agents in their own right" (5). Neither Anna nor Edna can be considered the subjects of a feminist movement. They are not going to be enlightened by the works of Emma Goldman; however, they

are both working towards an autonomy that moves them beyond their statuses as mother-women. The theoretical basis for liberation can both drive and follow the acts of liberation.

Contemporary critics of *The Awakening* attacked the book as both disgraceful and immoral. “The attacks were also harsh enough to effectively end Chopin’s career as a writer and, incidentally, end serious discussion of the book for half a century” (Treu 21). Edna’s embrace of freedom outside the roles of marriage or motherhood – even privileged motherhood – may have been accepted by the radicals including Emma Goldman, who practiced free love and anarchism. In fact, Goldman echoed the Edna’s attitude when she wrote: “If ever I love a man again, I will give myself to him without being bound by the rabbi or the law, and when that love dies, I will leave without permission” (Falk xii). However, the general public found this attitude distasteful both in Emma Goldman and Chopin’s novel.

Even when *The Awakening* was revived by second-wave feminism, the independence of Edna Pontellier was too brazen for most readers. Most proponents of second-wave feminism embraced *The Awakening* with “the feminist fatalism of presenting Edna as the victim of an oppressive society” (Wolkenfeld 241). This may seem counterintuitive since Edna has an impressive disdain for the proscribed gender roles that belies any claims to victimhood. Yet, it dovetailed nicely into a discussion of how “difficult” women – real and fictional were edited out of history.

In both *The Awakening* and *Anna Karenina*, questions of gender roles are addressed in ways that are uncomfortable to readers. In that context, one should expect that Edna Pontellier will be simplistically interpreted as either a victim of patriarchy or an immoral villainess. Anna Karenina is also a disconcerting character; however, a patriarchal moralist could easily interpret her story as one in which she is punished for her rebellion against her privileged mother position.

The privilege gives her the means to rebel against social conventions; however, it does not allow her to enjoy her rebellion.

The heroines of the novels are moving against the privileged mother position for reasons of personal and existential awakening. In both novels, the rebellion is against a systemic role that cannot be attributed to an abusive husband. Both heroines' husbands are blandly virtuous. Leonce Pontellier is even praised for his softness: "all declared Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew none better" (9). Tolstoy and Chopin refuse to give their heroines easy justifications that would excuse their actions and uphold a patriarchal system.

The paradoxical nature of privileged motherhood in the novels lies in the fact that it acts as both a high position and the bases for the heroines to explore their sexual and personal liberation paths. The sexual liberation is only the first step toward personal liberation and neither Edna nor Anna necessarily needs to leave their husbands to explore a freer form of sexuality. Both Russian and nouveau riche Louisiana social orders were influenced by French court traditions that accepted a certain degree of infidelity in the context of nominally monogamous marriages. In Russia, the French influence began with the reign of Catherine the Great. "During Catherine II's reign, millinery and fashion shops became popular in St. Petersburg and Moscow. They often had French names such as 'Au temple de goût' [The Temple of Taste] and 'Musée de Nouveautés' [The Museum of Novelties]" (Ivleva 365). This Francophile standard would continue into the nineteenth century with French as the language of nobles. Louisiana, by contrast, represented the major French territory in America until Napoleon sold it to Thomas Jefferson.

Yet Anna and Edna do not stay within the private affairs that could leave their marriages officially intact. Neither Anna nor Edna enters into their marriages with much forethought. Edna enters into a matrimonial bond with Leonce as the culmination of boredom, youthful rebellion, and whim: “He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband” (18-19).

IV. Suicide and the Pursuit of the Sublime

In both *Anna Karenina* and *The Awakening*, suicide serves as the ultimate liberation from societal norms. Anna and Edna have different methods of suicide which become a culmination of their journeys and their cultures. In both novels, the suicides are foreshadowed in earlier chapters, with Edna wistfully imagining her ultimate fate which involves swimming out into the water and never returning while *Anna Karenina* has characters delayed because a woman fell in front of a train.

Before discussing the final liberation of suicide, it should be noted that the bridge between the autonomy and the ultimate fate can be interpreted in two general ways. In one interpretation, Anna and Edna are crushed by the autonomy. The second interpretation sees the heroines less like Icarus characters and more like women who have found the limits of their existential journeys and freely accept their deaths. In suicide, they become complete existential persons, fully liberated from societal expectations. “As readers of the novel we must continually react to Edna’s preference of death to compromise, and to the textually implicit equations between the silencing of the human voice and its result – a quite logical and perhaps even reasonable choice of death” (Urgo 23).

Edna’s death is not the result of despair or depression. Note how her initial steps into the water are described: “The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (108). Edna is not only welcoming death, but she is meeting death as if it is a friend that will give her a place of contentment and stability. Seeing the gleaming million lights of the sun, she hears the sea which speaks to her as if it is a lover.

This euphoria in Edna's final moments is not unnoticed by critics. "*The Awakening's* final scene is breathtaking; Edna Pontellier transcends her circumscribed status as sensual entity – as the object of others' desires – and stands before us as her own subject as a blissfully embodied being" (Yaeger 197). However, Edna has been transcending the limitations of this status throughout the book. What distinguishes her suicide from the freedom that she so stubbornly pursues throughout the narrative is the utter rejection of all societal rejections. Definitely her position as a wife and mother is disputed in her thoughts about her husband and children. "They need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (109). Yet she also transcends the expectations that she freely chose as she imagines that "Madame Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered if she knew" (109). Edna is enjoying the way that she is disappointing expectations and this enjoyment represents the transcendence.

Even though Anna's death is less serene and includes a point where she changes her mind and desperately wants to get off the tracks, she also finds a moment of transcendence in the last breath. Tolstoy writes her demise as a brilliant conflagration of life and darkness. "And then the candle, by the light of which she had been reading the book filled with anxieties, deceits, grief, and evil, flared up with a brighter light than before, lit up for her all that had hitherto been shrouded in darkness, flickered, began to grow dim and went out forever" (884). Even though Anna is struggling more with her suicide than Edna, the final moment is a celebration of the release of earthly cares. The depiction of death as a flame that goes out and becomes nothingness is common to mystical traditions and nirvana myths.

For society, suicide represents a mystery and a source of fascination. Generally people take steps in order to extend their lives and even those who engage in activities that could potentially kill them – such as smoking cigarettes or using drugs – often justify their behavior as

something that they can quit at any time. By contrast, the decision to end one's life willingly and without reservation serves as a tension to society at large.

The moments of revelation for both women become integral to their suicides and these endings fit in with the tones that both authors are trying to depict. The methods used in the suicides allow for a doubling effect where both Edna and Anna use the obsessions of their respective societies (water and train) in order to transcend their societies and their roles. In their suicidal endings, they become truly independent from the roles that have only allowed them a limited freedom. As Ringe states, Edna is "a solitary, defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her, and who accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender" (227).

Edna's suicide is a quiet affair that feels like a rebirth, whereas Anna's suicide contains that revelation of pure joy, followed quickly by the panic that comes from contemplating her actions. Thus, Edna's liberation in a slow setting comes from a series of revelations culminating in her statement that "perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life" (105). Anna's suicide occurs in a rush of a society that is being pushed forward into the future where everything must pass quickly, even moments of revelation and delight. The death roars down on Anna in the form of a train that represents progress and yet in Anna's death, the chaotic fears and worries must disappear. Just as Anna decides to die via train, Tolstoy states that "suddenly the darkness that enveloped everything for her was torn apart, and for an instant life presented itself to her with all its bright past joys" (884).

Jessica Salamin's essay on the Nietzschean dimensions in *The Awakening* posits a tension between the Apollonian stability and Dionysian freedom. They begin the novels in positions of

Apollonian stability and their very stability gives them the freedom to explore their Dionysian personalities. Whereas Anna Karenina rushes through her narrative alternating as a prisoner and an agent of the Apollonian/Dionysian tensions, Edna maintains an Apollonian demeanor even as she is exploring the Dionysian emancipation. As Salamin notes that “when Edna finally awakens from her stupor and tastes physical, emotional, and artistic passion for the first time, she can no longer return to the life she had previously known, a life that she felt she had stumbled upon accidentally through a series of what Chopin describes as non-decisions” (5).

The novel is an exploration of a journey of self-discovery and expanding existential power. According to Toth: “Kate Chopin, like Edna, ventured where no woman had before, extending the definition of the American independent woman to include sexual freedom, at a time when women were still presumed to lack sexual feeling” (659). Not only does Edna venture into the realms of sensation and sexual freedom without guilt or reservation, her suicide reflects the freedom that has characterized her journey throughout the novel. Edna’s death is depicted as a rebirth. In the final scene, Edna “looked to the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again” (109). The brief moment of terror is the last point where Edna holds onto her old life but she releases it in a capitulation to fate.

By contrast, Anna experiences a suicide that is beholden to the mechanistic universe that has overtaken her and her entire class. *Anna Karenina* is a book in which the society is moving far and away from the characters. Writing about *Anna Karenina*, Joshua Rothman states “she herself could not distinguish between what she was choosing to do and what she was driven to do. In life, we sometimes relinquish our freedom too easily, while, at other times, we struggle unwisely against laws that will not change. Give in too easily, and you drift through life; struggle too much, and you suffer for it” (n.p.).

The train death very appropriately represents the death of Anna, and the death of an epoch in Russian history. The era of nobility and dinner parties is an era that is being pushed aside by technology. Jacques Barzun notes that the first death by train happened on September 15, 1830, during the inaugural trip between Manchester and Liverpool. William Huskisson was standing near an open door when the train started, which knocked him down and he died from his injuries: “The accident is charged with special meaning: from then on, human beings have had to sharpen their reflexes under the threat of moving objects. It has been a continual re-education of the nervous system as ever-new warnings by sight and sound command the body to halt, or step in the safe direction” (466).

Contrast the train with the Russian nobility depicted in *Anna Karenina*. The train is a force of destruction and progress, pushing iron through the countryside and changing all that is in its path. Yet, it barely affects the characters in the novel that might as well be living in a social milieu from centuries back. When Levin is working the fields with the peasants, the narrative states that “he heard nothing, except the swishing of the scythes and saw the erect figure of Titus receding in front of him, the curved half-circle of the mown grass, the grasses, and heads of flowers slowly falling in waves about the blade of his scythe” (294). This farming methodology is not only rustic; it’s medieval. The machinery that would make farming faster and more efficient is not only anachronistic to the narrative, but it is something that would get in the way of Levin’s spiritual purity.

By that same token, the nobility of the book are engaged in parties and family connections with an increasingly obsolete feudal system. Many consider Nicholas I as the reactionary tsar who fought against reforms from the French Revolution. “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationalism were the holy trinity of Nicholas’s ideology at home, and the

‘gendarme of Europe’ was only too willing to lend his armed forces to anyone trying to stamp out the serpents of liberalism and revolution” (Neilson 142). Yet, the fight against revolution and liberalism represented a fight against modernity and even if the Russians of the nineteenth century wish to live in an idealized past of scythes and dinner parties, the train is constantly pushing its way through the countryside.

Anna voluntarily places herself outside the traditionalist virtues of Russian nobility. Her privileged motherhood gives her the license to challenge both her role and the values of a society that is immersed in dinner parties. In her rebellion against the privileged position, she opens her life to the possibilities of a world in Dionysian flux and a demise of established social orders. Unlike the rest of Russia which would be taken unawares by the social upheaval and revolution that it cannot possibly stop, Anna meets the oncoming symbol of modernity and ultimately accepts the destruction.

Conclusion

Both *Anna Karenina* and *The Awakening* were quintessential nineteenth-century novels that depicted their heroines as privileged mothers who were granted the independence and the security to explore their places in society. By extension, their journeys allowed their readers to explore gender relations and the social constructions of appropriate female behavior. As privileged mothers, the heroines had fulfilled the societally appropriate roles for nineteenth-century women by giving birth; however, they also have relative independence -- thanks to their positions of privilege. In essence their social standing allows them to combine the best aspects of spinsterhood and motherhood.

This privilege allows them to further explore their positions in their social order. The exploration involves loves and an existential journey of self-discovery. Even if they are in positions to enjoy their constrained gender roles, the heroines are still limited by these roles. The lovers serve as their exit from secure, yet unsatisfying roles into the insecurity of forging their own identities.

A primary difference in the novels is the attitude of the heroines – which is also reflected in the initial reception that both novels received. Even though both Anna and Edna are rebelling against their privileged positions, Anna represents a much less threatening model for a privileged mother leaving her family. Throughout the novel, she is alternately pathetic, angry, and insecure. In several scenes, she is upset over the fact that she sacrificed her family life – including her son – in order to be with her lover Vronsky. She is constantly attempting to negotiate her place in society and re-integrate into the privileged mother role which she abandoned. The nineteenth-century reader could both pity and sympathize with Anna Karenina who suffered for love. Anna moves with reluctance and trepidation throughout her world.

By contrast, Edna from *The Awakening* does not lend herself to easy interpretations. She is not suffering enough for moralists to pity her. Nor is she a victim of a patriarchal society. She does not even have requisite bathetic scenes with her children, whom she often treats as props. Edna is a powerful heroine who takes strength from every facet of her journey away from respectability. In that context, it is not surprising that *The Awakening* was met with disdain where even the critics who acknowledged Chopin's stylistic mastery, openly wondered why the author would use her talents to depict such a terrible woman. Even when the novel was revived by feminist critics in the late twentieth century, Edna was shoehorned into the position of a victim of patriarchy for many years.

In both novels, the heroines find transcendence in suicide; however, their different methods represent the divergent viewpoints of the authors and the culture milieus. Anna's suicide by train is indicative of a Russian society which is wildly out of control and headed for a collapse as more nobles would be assassinated in the ultimate end to centuries of feudalism. Anna becomes a reflection of insecure nobility and a woman who is out of synch with her life and purposefully destroys it, even as she has doubts. Edna's placid walk into a lake reflects the serenity of Creole society in nineteenth-century Louisiana and serves as her final victory in a journey of self-discovery.

The heroines begin with positions of privileged motherhood, which ironically gives them the liberty to reject their roles as privileged mothers and engage in behavior that falls outside the acceptable standards of their societies. They are ultimately fulfilled by suicides, which transcend concerns and restrictions.

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