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The American University in Cairo  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Discourse and Identity in**  
*Antigone, The Awakening, and The House of Mirth.*

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

**Ahmed Tarek Kadry**

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

**May/ 2012**



## Abstract

Identity is a presupposed notion of individual qualities or beliefs that are inherent in one's character. However, through the application of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and discourse, this thesis argues that the representations of identity found in *Antigone*, *The Awakening*, and *The House of Mirth* are born out of experience with society rather than something innate. Following the trail of discourse, the female protagonist in each text develops a discourse that each character remains loyal to even in the face of social adversity. While their suicides may appear to end their dialogue with society, the ethical meaning of their deaths and its reflection on their discourse shapes the future outlook of the remaining characters in each text. Moreover, by choosing death for their female protagonist, each author enters into an inferred dialogue with their audience that highlights a moral value that resonates with readers because each text is reflective of its contemporary social hierarchy and customs.

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## *Introduction*

Upon reading the first seventy-five lines of Sophocles' tragic play *Antigone*, one could be forgiven for forgetting that the female protagonist is only a young teenage girl. The opening encounter between Antigone and her younger sister, Ismene, immediately highlights that Antigone is unlike her female peers. It is not only the direct and righteous speech that Antigone makes to Ismene that forces us to recognize that Antigone is unique, but just as importantly, the timidity of Ismene's response. John Ferguson expands on the importance of the opening scene when he explains, "First, it establishes the situation clearly and concisely, and points to the plot. Second, Ismene and Antigone are both beautifully sketched. It was a brilliant idea of Sophocles, repeated in *Electra*, to produce a normal woman to offset his central character" (164). What Ferguson describes as "a normal woman" is crucial. Sophocles was writing in a time where his Athenian audience was accustomed to a male dominated society where women were expected to be obedient and subservient.<sup>1</sup> The opening scene clearly models Ismene on this social structure where she dares not go against the orders of her uncle and king, Creon. Consequently, Antigone's forthright speech to her sister, laced with anger and intent to disobey the orders of Creon, makes it immediately clear that Antigone's journey throughout the play will be one of conflict and contradictory to contemporary social norms. Ferguson comments on the expectations of the Athenian audience concisely, "Ismene shows herself gentle, loving, somewhat timid, essentially obedient to her womanhood, the sort of woman the Athenians understood and admired. Antigone is brash and obstinate" (164).

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<sup>1</sup> For further insight into the social and political position of women in ancient Athens, see Saxonhouse (475–476).

It is not sufficient to simply deem Antigone as a rebel or as a disobedient child without understanding the process she went through to reach the stage of anger and despair we find in the beginning of the play. An important clue is in her opening words to Ismene where she sincerely proclaims, “My own dear sister, Ismene, of all the sufferings bequeathed by Oedipus, can you think of one that Zeus has not given the two of us in our lifetime?” (3). As readers we are immediately referenced back to the history of the two girls as the daughters of the tragic Theban king, Oedipus, and his infamous demise.<sup>2</sup> Antigone’s decision to disobey Creon is not born out of events during the play but through the awful history of her family and her desire to uphold the laws of the gods in order to fend off any future tragic events.

While *Antigone* is considered one of the first pieces of literature to inject a female protagonist with a desire to challenge a patriarchal society, this theme is no longer unique.<sup>3</sup> *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton are two American novels written by women in the same period that follow a similar journey to the one found in *Antigone*. Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart reside in male dominated worlds like Antigone’s and are expected to follow social convention and serve as obedient women who do not question the authority and actions of the men and society around them. However, like Antigone, Edna and Lily develop a desire to challenge the status quo and seek a new position of parity in society. The similarities do not end there. All three female protagonists are met along the course of their journeys with conflict and real threats to their safety, particularly Antigone and Lily. Yet, all three continue to push on in their pursuits, unwilling to relent or have

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<sup>2</sup> See Sourvinou-Inwood (138) where she reconstructs the opening scene and identifies the importance of reminding the audience very quickly about the demise of Antigone’s family.

<sup>3</sup> Saxonhouse makes the argument that *Antigone* was potentially the catalyst behind other Greek tragediennes using female characters at the center of their conflicts (474-475).

their discourse silenced. Moreover, both Chopin and Wharton, writing at the turn and the beginning of the twentieth century respectively, had to contend with the critical reception their female protagonists would receive. While the notion of a novel advocating the rights and equality for women may now seem normal, it was Chopin and Wharton who helped us get here. On *The Awakening*, Emily Toth expands on this point further when she explains, “The novel moves us because it illustrates the need for women’s psychological, physical, social, and sexual emancipation – the goals of feminists in the twentieth century as well as the nineteenth” (231). Toth is clearly complimentary towards *The Awakening* and its success in raising reader awareness of women’s rights; however, the uniqueness of the novel at the time of publication, in 1899, did not always entice a positive response from a largely patriarchal American literary and social society. Joseph Urgo highlights the confusion *The Awakening* enthused when he argues, “The story of Edna Pontellier is a problematic one, and the history of critical reaction to Chopin's novel has largely been concerned with what Edna's story amounts to. Is Edna mad? Is it a failed feminist novel? Is Chopin mad?” (22). These are just some of the questions that would have been raised by Chopin’s readers who were not accustomed to having a female protagonist push the barriers of social and literary expectations.

*Antigone*, *The Awakening*, and *The House of Mirth* are three literary texts that contain the journey of a female protagonist striving to break the limitations of their male dominated worlds, both within their texts and in the real worlds of the authors daring to break the restrictions of their respective genres. Antigone, Edna, and Lily share a commitment to an identity founded on a desire to fulfil their goals and uphold their beliefs in the face of adversity and social conflict. However, while all three characters have identities, which, from the very word, would suggest something



individualistic and exclusive to them only, these identities are actually born out of discourse and experience with society. This in itself is problematic: these three women create and continue to develop an identity throughout their respective texts through discourse with society. Yet, all three eventually shun society and apparently choose death rather than continuing on within this discourse. While Antigone's suicide appears straightforward and an affirmation of her discourse, the deaths of Edna and Lily remain vexed. The deaths of Edna and Lily are vastly different and equally intriguing because of the multitude of interpretations that are left available to readers. These interpretations will be addressed in this thesis, with a particular focus on the implications of the obvious ambiguity of their deaths and the affect it has on our understanding of each text and the possible intentions of each author.

At the heart of these questions and discussions is Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin because his theory of dialogism encourages us to gain further understanding of a literary text by placing it in dialogue with other literary texts. By placing *Antigone*, *The Awakening*, and *The House of Mirth* in dialogue with one another, the themes and language found in each text can potentially have a deeper meaning or history that cannot be understood if each text is simply read monologically. In particular, dialogism will allow us to explore alternative meanings on what it means to have an identity and the role that society plays in shaping identity.

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is not a straightforward concept. While he may now be wholly accepted and revered as one of the most important philosophers and literary critics of the twentieth century, his concept of dialogism, born out of studying the novel, has forever changed the landscape of literary study and in many respects has revolutionized literary theories that were accepted for centuries long before his arrival. Tzvetan Todorov offers a definition of dialogism when he surmises, "There is

no utterance without relation to other utterances, and that is essential. The term Bakhtin uses to designate the relation of every utterance to other utterances is dialogism” (60). In essence, Bakhtin suggests that every literary text enters into a direct or indirect dialogue with a literary text preceding it, consequently creating a dialogue between literary texts as opposed to them being written and read in isolation. This theory of dialogism is not without controversy or confusion. An obvious question would be: how is it possible to connect words and types of speech in literature across a multitude of languages and countries, as well as across vast time periods? Bakhtin combats this problem of language through what he calls “heteroglossia” (270). This concept, as the name suggests, implies that many languages or types of speech are available to us, across multitudes of countries and cultures. How, then, does Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia, provide a platform for reading literary texts in dialogue with other texts? Michael Holquist tries to answer this question when he explains, “Heteroglossia is a situation, the situation of a subject surrounded by the myriad responses he or she might make at any particular point, but any one of which must be framed in a specific discourse selected from the teeming thousands available” (69). What Holquist is arguing here is that most actions or speech are not accidents. Rather we must try to understand the action or speech in a framed context out of the many options available to us. If we accept this argument, Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia allows for the possibility of more than one interpretation for the meaning of a word or action. However, whatever that interpretation may be, that word or action must be contextualized or placed in dialogue with its literary past in order to understand its full significance and meaning.

Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism will remain at the center of several discussions taking place in this thesis. In particular, one of the key areas where Bakhtin will be

applied is concerning the deaths of Antigone, Edna, and Lily and whether their deaths can be placed in dialogue with one another and, more importantly, whether we receive any added dimensions or interpretations that would otherwise be missed if each text is read in isolation. The discussion on each woman's identity will be centred on Bakhtin's concept of discourse which is brought to a halt when all three women commit suicide and consequently end their future discourse potential. The implications of this will be addressed by looking into the possibility of whether the discourse of all three women continues even after their deaths, both internally in their texts and externally in literary criticism.

## *Chapter One – Tracing the Development of Identity*

*Antigone* is separated from *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* by a vast time difference, language, and genre. However, Bakhtin's dialogism provides a framework for comparing the development of personal identity found in each text's female protagonist. Moreover, his theory of discourse in the novel provides a platform to structure the numerous discourses that take place throughout these texts and allows us to consider how their discourses on identity relate to one another. *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* were published only six years apart, written in English, and share the same genre. They also seemingly follow the tradition of many female authors in the nineteenth century, like Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters, in campaigning for a female protagonist to achieve gender equality in society and at home.

Moreover, the novels are similar in that both Chopin and Wharton suggest the identities of Edna and Lily are based on their experiences in society rather than in something innate. Edna is only able to surmise she no longer wants to be a subservient wife because she has already been a subservient wife, while Lily is able to make personal choices about her potential husband because she has met an array of men and seen her fellow women become entangled in unequal marriages. It is these experiences and their choice to use them in their decision making that formulates their identities and sets them on their journeys. C.J. Wershoven expands on this point for both novels when she explains, "Both books recount a woman's steps (and mis-steps) as she moves to identity, through a process of rebellion, renunciation and isolation" (27). For instance, when we first encounter Edna Pontellier, the wife of Leonce Pontellier and mother of two children, she is not in her home in New Orleans but

rather on holiday in Grand Isle. This may seem like a trivial detail but in fact is crucial to tracing and understanding the process by which Edna came to change her life and her own outlook on herself. For the very reason that Grand Isle is not her home and that a holiday by definition is a chance to get away from daily routine, it is no accident that Chopin uses a neutral location for the married couple to initiate the first stage of Edna's identity process which Wershoven terms rebellion. Lily Bart's first important encounter in *The House of Mirth* almost mirrors the beginning of Edna's awakening on Grand Isle because Lily first meets Lawrence Selden away from the gazing eyes of society. The chance meeting at Grand Central Station that leads to a private conversation in Selden's apartment serves as Lily's first step into realizing that there are alternative ways to live her life that she was previously unaware of. Upon settling into Selden's apartment which was an unthinkable social taboo for an unmarried woman, Lily proclaims, "How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman!" (7). This parallel between Chopin and Wharton initiating the journeys of Edna and Lily far away from the restrictions of society sets the tone for each novel where both women strive to continue on in their journeys even in the face of society's backlash.

The catalyst for change can largely be found in Edna's interaction with the Creole society on Grand Isle, particularly Adele Ratignolle, whose vitality and confidence contrast with Edna's apparent shyness. As readers we are able to understand from Edna's character in the beginning of the novel that her life up until that point had been extremely conservative and sheltered. Her only act of rebelliousness that we can gauge is her decision to marry Leonce despite the objection of her family. As a result, her interaction with the Creoles, who are far more liberal and sensual than what she is accustomed to, spurs Edna to realize that she possessed

an individuality that she was previously unaware of.<sup>4</sup> Anna Elfenbein analyzes Edna's experience with the Creole society when she explains, "Her disorientation concerning the behavior appropriate for privileged white women in Creole society is perceived by Adele Ratignolle, the exemplar of white Creole femininity, when she warns Robert Lebrun [...] that Edna 'might make the unfortunate mistake of taking you seriously'" (305). Of course the words of Adele Ratignolle become prophetic when Robert does appear to fulfill the prophecy of Adele and leave Edna at a crucial point in her life. While the link between Robert leaving Edna at the end of the novel and her decision to commit suicide may be argued, there is no debate that his interest in her aroused a deep sense of emotional contact that Edna was simply unaccustomed to and unprepared for. At the end of the novel when Edna has reached the peak of her independence, she is unable to comprehend going back to being the woman who was not in touch with her soul and emotions. Prior to her interactions with Adele and the rest of the Creole society, Edna remained focused on being a socially correct wife and mother, and it is her interaction with the Creoles and meeting with Robert that serve as catalysts for the spirited and free Edna to emerge.

Edna's return to New Orleans marks the beginning of her trying to establish independence and committing herself to her newly found emotions. It could be argued that Edna's quest for independence begins on Grand Isle; however, I believe it is important to note that Grand Isle was a vacation setting and therefore Edna's defiance becomes more significant when she returns to New Orleans and into the world that is controlled by her husband. Rosemary Franklin correctly points out in describing the somewhat fictitious setting of Grand Isle for Edna, "In the resort life of Grand Isle, the

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<sup>4</sup> Chopin narrates, "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realise her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (34).

men are only weekend guests, and the matriarchs dominate” (512). If we now view Grand Isle as only a temporary setting for Edna’s life whereby it does not resemble her life in the city and under the control of her husband, we also notice that her initial perceptions of Adele Ratignolle are not entirely accurate. Just as Grand Isle serves as the ideal opportunity for Edna to begin her awakening, Grand Isle is also the same setting where Adele is not restricted to being a wife and mother. Edna is surprised by the freedom and openness of Adele but crucially forgets that Grand Isle does not represent Adele’s day-to-day life. This point is decisive because her inaccurate perceptions of Adele ultimately lead to misunderstandings and issues with her search for independence later in the novel. It is evident that Edna admires Adele for her femininity, sensuality, and marital equality, but she first witnesses this at Grand Isle which is not reflective of Adele in her entirety. Through Edna’s visits to Adele’s home back in the city, we see that while Adele retains the sensual and feminine qualities she held at Grand Isle, she also fulfills her duty as a wife and mother, a delicate balance that Edna first fails to understand and then ultimately rejects.

Unlike Edna who goes through a process from perceived weakness to strength, Edith Wharton’s protagonist in *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart, appears to go through the exact opposite journey. While Edna begins the novel as timid and is clearly subservient to her husband, Lily leaps out from the page as a strong willed and clever character who, while far from perfect, is clearly aware of the society around her and her position within it. Comparing herself to Gerty Farish, Lily admits, “She likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not” (8). In this very early stage of the novel, Lily is very perceptive about her situation and how she differs from other women. Moreover, she is astute enough to recognize the path she needs to take in order to be successful. Joan Lidoff explains the appeal of Lily aptly,

“Lily charms the reader as she does the other characters in the novel (and as she has her creator). We are bewitched by the beauty of her grace and vitality of spirit as well as her appearance” (520). Of course, readers of the novel find out that Lily is unsuccessful in finding a man who provides her with both social materialism and marital equality, and is instead left to lead a life of destitution and poverty before finally submitting to illness and death. She is unsuccessful because she chooses to remain loyal to the idea of an equal marriage based on love rather than succumbing to the offers that society presented to her. While that may suggest she is to blame for her tragic end, her alternative options were limited to marrying a man of high society and experiencing the same problems that Judy Trenor and other married women in the novel suffer from. By staying loyal to her discourse on marital equality, Lily turns her back on the traditional options of marriage available to her. Tricia Farwell delves deeper into the meaning of Lily’s demise and its possible implications when she argues, “Wharton sought to show how a woman who wanted to live by her high romantic ideals was discredited by those who could not live up to her standards” (23).

Lily, unlike Edna, is calculated and aware enough to both understand and at times manipulate other characters in the novel. On more than one occasion, she successfully places herself on the brink of achieving what she wants: a marriage to a member of high society and wealth. Yet, when the time comes to actually go through with it, she always manages to find a way out. Carry Fisher, a quasi-match maker in the novel who is known for introducing people of new wealth into high society, outlines Lily’s inclinations of sabotaging her chances of happiness when she explains, “That’s Lily all over, you know: she works like a slave preparing the ground and sowing her seed; but the day she ought to be reaping the harvest she over-sleeps herself or goes off on a picnic” (184).



Why then, does Lily go through all the trouble of attracting the type of wealthy men she desires if she plans to not go through with marriage in the end? One major clue is found in her discourse with Lawrence Selden, a middle class lawyer who is neither completely detached from nor entrenched with high society. Her conversations with him are rare moments away from the cloud of upper society which is characterized by social materialism and character facades. While Lily and Selden do not completely break social taboo and have conversations with each other that directly criticize the materialistic society they engage in, there is enough in their discourse to provide us with an understanding of why Lily is reluctant to commit to marriage. One of the key conversations that takes place between the two is at Bellomont, the ostentatious house of Gus and Judy Trenor, a rich and upper class married couple who hosts parties and numerous social events in the novel. While the rest of the group attend Sunday mass, Lily and Selden go for a walk and engage in a compelling discussion on the meaning of happiness and the concept of freedom:

“My idea of success,” he said, “is personal freedom.”

“Freedom? Freedom from worries?”

“From everything – from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit – that’s what I call success.”

“I know – it’s strange; but that’s just what I’ve been feeling today.” (Wharton 67)

From this short dialogue between the two characters, we come to understand that Lily and Selden are both interested in an ideal that is separate from society. While they seem connected to elite social circles, both appear to yearn for something very

different and unique that is free from social constraints. There also appears to be an affection growing between the two characters, particularly from Lily who, prior to her interaction with Selden, was unable to find someone who shared her inner desires for freedom from social constraints. Lily declares:

“You think me horribly sordid, don’t you? But perhaps it’s rather that I never had any choice. There was no one, I mean, to tell me about the republic of the spirit.”

“There never is – it’s a country one has to find the way to one’s self.”

“But I should never have found my way there if you hadn’t told me.” (Wharton 67)

Lily believes she has learnt something from Selden and the two characters talk about a concept of identity or spirit that is free from the confines of social expectation and convention. However, as with Edna Pontellier, there is enough in her discourse to indicate that her choices and her identity are products of her environment and interactions with society, including Selden himself. Without Selden’s interaction with Lily, she may have possessed a desire for freedom and “republic of the spirit,” but it would have lain dormant without Selden’s encouragement. Similarly, without Adele Ratignolle and the freer nature of the Creoles on Grand Isle, Edna’s own journey to independence may have never taken place. This later leads to tragic irony when Edna’s journey and motives are questioned at one point by the very woman who set her on her way: Adele. Sensing Edna’s new attitude will have a disastrous outcome, Adele delivers one of the most famous lines in the novel to Edna when she begs, “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (182). Similar irony is found in *The House of Mirth* where Lawrence Selden serves as a

catalyst for Lily, like Adele did for Edna, to begin contemplating the importance of marital equality and the pitfalls of social materialism. Tragically, however, while he has meaningful conversations with Lily about freedom, spirit, and society, he never engages deeply enough to fully understand and help her. They never seem to get past the social customs and taboos that the very nature of their conversations regarding freedom should ignore. The irony of this is not lost on the overall construction in the novel where Lily is left destitute and alone, seemingly punished by society for not adhering to its rules.<sup>5</sup> Selden is the only person in the novel to have gotten close to understanding Lily, yet, he cannot help her because neither he nor Lily broke the limitations of social convention and reached out to one another. Wharton highlights the ambiguous nature of their relationship at the end of the novel by giving Lily “some word she had found that should make life clear between them” (318). That word, which Wharton never reveals, also comes to Selden, and Wharton successfully achieves tragic irony at the end of her novel when this mysterious word that could unite these two social outliers arrives far too late: Selden goes to Lily’s home only to find she has already over-dosed on sleeping medicine.

As a result, Edna and Lily owe the formation of their identities to their interactions with society. How then, do their formations of identity and discourses regarding identity fit in with the identity of Antigone? The first important thing to note is that Antigone’s journey in Sophocles’ play largely begins before the play has even begun. Sophocles uses the myth of the ill-fated Oedipus to serve as the catalyst for Antigone’s initial unrelenting desire to bury her deceased brother, Polyneices. Her discourse, as Bakhtin would term it, stems from her yearning to rid herself of the

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<sup>5</sup> Commenting on the critical reception of the novel, Helen Killoran notes, “At its publication, reactions were for the most part either scathing or ecstatic, depending to a great extent on whether the reviewers caught the novel’s irony” (25).

pollution and curse that remains over the heads of her family. Her parents may be long dead when the play begins but there is no getting away from the fact that she is still the daughter to an incestuous marriage, and, to add insult to injury, the most recent event to take place right before the opening of the play is the rivalry and war between her two brothers, resulting in both their deaths. Her only salvation, it appears she has decided, is to ward off any future ignominy by adhering to the laws of the gods starting with the burial of her brother Polyneices and ensuring that he receives the sacred burial rights. More importantly, she has also decided that this dedication to the laws of the gods shall override any loyalty or obedience to the laws of men. Commenting on Antigone's reaction to being caught in the act of burying her brother by her uncle and king, Creon, Christian Meier concludes concisely, "She is not at all scared of the death penalty: finding herself in the cursed position of being a daughter of Oedipus, an early death would be a blessing to her. She will never accept that her brother should remain unburied" (189).

Consequently, Antigone's discourse at the beginning of the play is centered on her family curse and her decision to combat it through religious belief. This is clearly very different from the discourse we find from Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart as neither enter into the concept of a religious discourse or the concept of family shame. One could compare Lily's concern with her social standing and reputation to Antigone's own shame in what her family has become. However, Antigone seems far less concerned with how society views her family and is more concerned with how she can escape the cursed fate suffered by her parents and two brothers. Once she is caught in the act of defying Creon's edict, the first of many confrontations takes place between Creon and Antigone. The dynamics of their relationship is intriguingly unique as they are bound and offset to one another on three levels: uncle and niece,

king and citizen, and, finally, male and female.<sup>6</sup> The outlines of Antigone's religious discourse are clear and she does not hesitate to reinforce her commitment to her religious discourse in front of Creon when she boldly criticizes his edict: "Yes; for it was not Zeus who made this proclamation to me; nor did Justice who dwells with the gods below lay down these laws for mankind. Nor did I think that your human proclamation had sufficient power to override the unwritten, unassailable laws of the gods" (35). Just as Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* begins to develop her discourse on identity on Grand Isle but only takes effect when she begins to act on her discourse in the domain of her husband in New Orleans, a similar process occurs with Antigone. She may have begun to develop her discourse prior to her first encounter with Creon, but by burying the body and standing face to face with Creon and continuing to oppose him, there is now no turning back or allowing her discourse to fall silent. Bakhtin would argue that the similarities between Antigone and Edna are not accidents. He states that, "in such [double-voiced] discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they – as it were – know about each other" (324). If we accept this theory, as readers we can identify the dialogue between the novel and *Antigone*. That does not just mean that *The Awakening* is a continuation or reminder of the struggles that Antigone faced as their discourses are very different; however, this acceptance that the play and novel can be read dialogically becomes important when considering how loyalty to an identity is formed and developed.

During the first encounter between Antigone and Creon, Antigone underlines her loyalty to her discourse. The same cannot be said for Creon. As the newly crowned King of Thebes, a city that has suffered from the cursed fate of Oedipus, his

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<sup>6</sup> See Wiersma (28–30) for more on the gender conflict between Creon and Antigone.

position is highly precarious. The city has gone through a period of unparalleled instability and his first priority as king is to bring strength and order. Creon's first speech to the Chorus suggests that he is the right man for the job: "A man in command of an entire city, who does not adhere to the best policies, but keeps his mouth closed through fear, is worthless. I think that now, as I always have done" (15). From this short passage, we hear democratic sentiments that resonate in Sophocles' era as well as today's.<sup>7</sup> However, Creon's discourse on being a ruler who will do the very best for his nation is soon put to the test when Antigone defies his royal edict. Confronted with her unremorseful speech denying any wrongdoing in burying her brother as the laws of the gods prescribed, Creon's previous discourse on being a good political ruler fades to the background as his discourse as a man and an unchallenged king emerges to the fore. Erich Segal expands on Creon's position further: "The conflict between Creon and Antigone is not only between city and house, but also between man and woman. Creon identifies his political authority and his sexual identity" (171). Segal's argument is supported by Creon's reaction to Antigone's disobedience. Having confronted Antigone and finding out that she buried her brother in full knowledge and defiance of his edict, Creon proclaims, "The second outrage is that, having done it, she boasts and laughs at what she has done. Surely I am not the man now – she is! – if victory goes to her without punishment" (37). Creon's discourse begins as politically motivated but is soon joined by a discourse that aims to uphold his position as a man able to exercise his authority over a woman.

This outline of Creon's discourse leads us to once again return to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism in order gauge whether the reactions of the male characters that

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<sup>7</sup> Sophocles' Athenian audience is still a point for debate for critics when discussing the conflict between Antigone and Creon. Sourvinou-Wood warns, "It must not be assumed that the latter [Athenian polis] was perceived as a mimetic representation of Athenian democracy" (136).

have their own discourses challenged by previously subservient female characters has any affect on the female protagonists' loyalty to their discourse and identity. The most obvious starting point is Leonce Pontellier in *The Awakening* and whether his reaction to Edna's character development can be read dialogically with that of Creon's. Edna and Antigone have already been identified as similar characters in the way they both actively dispute the rules and social expectations of men in a very practical way: Antigone physically buries her brother and thus defies Creon while Edna moves out of the house of her husband and into a smaller home that is exclusively her domain. However, our concern here is how the reactions of both men are vastly different and whether these differing reactions affect the discourses of both women.

Creon is just as stubborn and relentless in his discourse as his opponent, Antigone. Just as she wholly believes that she is religiously justified in her actions and that no law of man can supersede the laws of the gods, Creon is equally adamant that as a king, he must punish those who are insubordinate to his rule or otherwise open the doors to instability and chaos that Thebes was previously subjected to under the rule of her father, Oedipus. On the other hand, things are slightly more complex in *The Awakening*. Rather than being aggressive and forcing Edna to return to her previous conformity as a wife and mother, Leonce Pontellier is in fact extremely patient and sincerely concerned with the changes taking place in his wife. Even in the face of her own outburst towards him, he never fully engages in a battle of discourses with her as Creon does with Antigone. The most pro-active thing he does in the face of these changes is to consult a local doctor on the belief that his wife is suffering from mental or physical illness as opposed to fully understanding that his wife is changing because she has chosen to do so. Scholar Hugh Dawson underlines the reasons for Leonce's unsuccessful attempts to understand the changes happening with

Edna when he explains, “He is too obtuse and self-centered to appreciate her problems” (9). The argument is in fact twofold: Dawson is correct in his summary of Leonce. The second problem lies with Edna herself. Unlike Antigone, Edna does not fully reveal her discourse to her husband who ironically is the one person who needs to hear it more than any other character in the novel. Admittedly, revealing the truth about her feelings about her position as a wife and mother, not to mention her affair with Robert, would lead to other problems. However, this distance that exists between the married couple is no doubt paramount to the journey and ending of the novel. While Creon and Antigone may not agree regarding each other’s discourses, at the very least they are aware of each other and make their decisions based on this awareness. In essence, they both believe they are correct until Creon finally realizes his errors. No such awareness can be found in *The Awakening* between Edna and Leonce. Leonce can see there is a problem but remains tragically unaware of the feelings of his own wife and for that reason, as well as his own patriarchal personality, leaves Edna to make crucial decisions about her life on her own.

A similar problem can be found in *The House of Mirth*. While Lily Bart may not have an obvious male opponent as do Antigone and Edna, she does have several interactions with Lawrence Selden who appears to represent the only male character who understands Lily’s discourse on wanting social and materialistic goods and marital equality at the same time. However, in reality, though they are both seemingly aware that they share the same predicament and could potentially be a perfect match for one another, Lawrence Selden, who the onus is on to make the first step, never plucks up the courage to do so until it is too late. It would be too harsh to solely blame Selden for this distance as he is still socially restricted from speaking frankly with Lily despite his own discourse being centered on wanting to break free from the



limitations of society. On the other hand, as Edna's husband and therefore less limited by social restraints, Leonce is in a position to speak frankly with his wife and close the distance in their relationship that her newly found discourse has created. As readers of the novel we know that he ultimately fails and the distance between Leonce and Edna never recedes. In contrast and to Lily's credit, even in the face of involuntary destitution and death, and without the advice or support of Selden, she remains loyal to her discourse, making her in many ways the most respected of the three women and having the strongest discourse and understanding of her identity.

Reading these texts dialogically with one another, Antigone had little option but to continue with her discourse in the face of Creon sentencing her to death. She was offered the chance to repent which she refused and in the face of a death sentence she gains nothing by relenting on her religious discourse. Of the three women, Edna has the most options available to her. Yet, where Antigone succeeds in expressing her discourse to the fullest to her adversary, Edna fails. Her consequent suicide almost leaves the novel open-ended despite the closure that death, and in particular suicide, should provide. As readers, we are left with questions about the future Edna could have had if only she was able to express herself more directly as could Antigone. At first glance it may appear that Lily Bart is similar to her predecessor in *The Awakening* as she too appears to have options available to her that society has presented. However, those options directly conflicted with her discourse on love and marriage and her tragic reward is social abandonment, destitution and eventual death. While Edna's death in *The Awakening* leaves us lamenting the loss of potential options for her, no such questions are left with Lily's death. She strives to live her life by her discourse, in both society and later alone when society has abandoned her, making her far more heroic and tragic than Edna because she understands the

decisions she makes and does them for her own honor and morality even in the face of a death she does not welcome. In view of this perspective, her discourse and the decisions she makes resonate with Antigone's journey more than Edna Pontellier's.

*Chapter 2: Death Before Dishonor: Three Tales of Suicide*

While all three women developed and continued with a personal discourse even in the face of opposition, they also suffered the same fate: death. However, while death may suggest closure, their deaths retain a significance that extends beyond their texts and into the real world of the authors and their readers. Antigone clearly commits suicide, mirroring her discourse throughout the play. More importantly, however, is that Sophocles continues the play long after her suicide, including the all-important punishment of Creon that allows the audience to understand Antigone's suicide as a sort of discursive victory. Without Creon's punishment, we would be left with the same questions that are presented in the wake of the deaths of Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart. Their willingness to die as well as the implications of their deaths raise questions that remain unanswered at the end of both novels, which, unlike *Antigone*, end with their protagonists' deaths. For instance, there is no concrete way for readers to certify whether Lily Bart in actual fact committed suicide. She does knowingly overdose on sleeping pills in desperation to finally succumb to a deep and relaxing sleep but there is no clear indication that she knew it would lead to her death. Wharton provides insight into Lily's mind prior to her death when she narrates, "She had long since raised the dose to its highest limit, but tonight she felt she must increase it. She knew she took a slight risk in doing so – she remembered the chemist's warning" (317). This narration provides enough evidence to suggest that Lily was fully aware that by maximizing the dosage, she was putting her health in danger.

A similar ambiguity can be found regarding Edna's willingness to die in *The Awakening*. Just like *The House of Mirth*, there is almost no warning in *The Awakening* to suggest that Edna is about to take her own life. At the end of the novel

Chopin takes Edna back to Grand Isle where her awakening and her love affair with Robert began; however, it is not until Edna is swimming in the sea that we begin to realize that something is about to happen. Chopin narrates, “She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the bluegrass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end. Her arms and legs were growing tired” (139). A mere two paragraphs later, Edna is dead. Jane Tompkins summarizes the reception *The Awakening* received when it was first published: “The critics asked ‘cui bono?’ and called Chopin ‘morbid’ because she rehearsed evil things to no apparent purpose” (22). The debate as to who benefits from this unexpected death rages on. Just as Antigone’s suicide mirrors her discourse throughout the play, this chapter will use Bakhtin’s dialogism to decide whether the deaths of Edna and Lily mirror their respective discourses. Furthermore, using Bakhtin’s notion of “double-voiced discourse” (324), we will be able to gauge the intentions of Chopin and Wharton in leading their heroines to unexpected and controversial deaths and the resulting dialogue each author enters into with her readers.

In many respects, Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart resemble Antigone’s character as all three share the same fate, albeit through different methods, discourses, and reasoning. The most intriguing aspect about using Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism is that it encourages us to view literary texts side by side and to consider how respective discourses and actions interact with one another. In this case, identifying the potential different interpretations for the death of each woman and how their deaths relate to their respective discourse. Ken Hirschkop delves further into the possibilities that Bakhtin’s theory provides when he surmises, “Bakhtin argues that dialogical interaction is built into the very structure of language itself, so

that any statement actually involves debate with alternative value positions” (104). Consequently, as all three women have a discourse on identity and decide to end that discourse through death, an ideal setting is provided to see if Bakhtin’s dialogism provides insight into whether or not reconciliation can take place for each of their deaths.

Perhaps the most intriguing suicide of all three characters is that of Edna Pontellier because Kate Chopin centers the entire novel on Edna’s character evolution, a quasi-conflict between her newfound desires for personal development and her previous subservient self. Maria Anastasopoulou concisely sketches out the journey Edna takes in the novella when she explains:

Chopin hints at rites of passage at two crucial points in the novel, a fact that encourages the reader to expect that Edna will successfully complete the passage from the stage of a woman married to a man who considers her as ‘a valuable piece of personal property’ (173), to that of an independent and aware person functioning to her full capacity towards growth and fulfilment. (19)

Tragically, however, Edna is never able to complete her rite of passage on earth. It could be argued that her suicide marks her final step into leaving her position of subservitude and taking her life into her own hands, metaphorically as well as physically; however, by the same token, her suicide can also present the futility of her endeavour and an admission of defeat in her objective.

Bakhtin is largely concerned with how the dialogue in the novel represents a double-voice and this can be perfectly demonstrated in the suicide of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. Chopin, intentionally or otherwise, leaves readers unaware of how to react to Edna’s suicide. It is this ambiguity that makes *The Awakening* compelling

and frustrating. William Bartley correctly points out the questions that remain over her suicide when he reflects, "Should she be praised or blamed? Does she command sympathy or disapproval? Does it mark a victory or a defeat? I would argue that these opposing positions concerning Edna actually reflect a tension dramatized in the novel itself" (720). What Bartley argues here is that the whole novel is a build up to what we hope and believe would lead to a life of contentment and personal understanding for Edna, yet she ostentatiously takes her own life while possibilities for the future still remain open. The fact that she still has available options proves to be disturbing and distinguishes her from Antigone and Lily Bart: Edna still had opportunities for herself and it is for that reason that readers often lose the sympathy they gained for her during her journey. While there is merit in the argument that Chopin leads her protagonist to suicide as a literary device to highlight the struggles of women at the end of the nineteenth century, the ethical dilemma it causes cannot be ignored. In particular, by leaving behind her children to grow up without a mother, Edna's suicide can be viewed as an act of selfishness. This view is supported by the plea made earlier by Adele Ratignolle to urge Edna to think of her children. Chopin provides an answer to Adele's plea moments before Edna's suicide when she narrates, "She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (138). There is no ambiguity in this statement: Edna is clearly aware she is about to leave her children behind but deems that necessary in order to attain her own contentment. This apparent selfishness on Edna's part is often the most troubling concept for readers to understand and accept.

The frustrations we encounter with *The Awakening* are further highlighted when we view it alongside *The House of Mirth*. Elaine Showalter delves further into

the genre of both novels and describes the reasons behind the similarities of Edna and Lily: “These novels pose the problem of female maturation in narrative terms: What can happen to the heroine as she grows up? What plots, transformations, and endings are imaginable for her? Is she capable of change at all?” (133). As a result, the same “rite of passage” that Anastasopoulou describes for Edna appears to happen for Lily Bart. Showalter’s conclusion allows readers to understand the similarities between Edna and Lily through the concept of their genres. However, although the eventualities of both their journeys, namely death, at first may appear similar, they are in actual fact vastly different.

It has already been noted that Lily Bart appears to be far more aware of her social surroundings than Edna Pontellier, and perhaps more importantly, is slightly clearer on what she wants to achieve. While firmly embedded in elite social circles, Lily is acutely aware of the hypocrisy and mistrust that embodies her society and she is determined to find her own balance of contentment with a husband who will not subject her to the same life as the women in the novel who she calls her friends. The tragedy of Lily is that the only man who appears able to provide her with such a life is Lawrence Selden who, despite engaging in various deep and meaningful conversations with Lily about morality and soul searching, fails to look past Lily’s social exterior and see her for someone who shares his ideals. William Modellmog concisely summarises the frustrating relationship between Lily and Selden:

Although Lily's consciousness forms the subject of intense scrutiny throughout much of the work, the subjective process that leads her to change her mind - to burn the instruments of her salvation - remains opaque, and even the act itself is filtered through the “tranced” perception of Selden, who “hardly noticed the gesture.” (338)

This understanding of Lily's character and delicate relationship with Selden leads to a discussion on how her death can be interpreted. Robin Beaty suggests that Lily's death highlights Wharton's intention to criticize the highly immoral nature of her contemporary society. This supports Bakhtin's notion of double-voiced discourse because Wharton's voice is now apparent and a second dialogue has been created between Wharton and her readers. Beaty argues, "Wharton matches Lily's physical beauty with a moral fineness so pure that she is crushed not so much by the social system that produced her as by her own new-found honour. Lily is at last able to recognize as the 'central truth of existence' " (264). Consequently, just as Creon is severely punished at the end of *Antigone* in a way that affirms Antigone's discourse and deems her morally correct, Lily's death and the subsequent reaction of Lawrence Selden provides a similar conclusion: Wharton, just like Sophocles, is siding with Lily's discourse and providing her with a moral victory that will outlast her own lifetime. Selden and readers of the novel understand her death and are affected, if not touched, by the moral fortitude she maintained until the very end that enthralls sympathy and applause. This reaction to Lily's death is starkly contrasted to the reaction Edna receives for her abrupt suicide.

Unlike the deaths of Edna and Lily, Antigone's obvious suicide puts an exclamation mark on everything she has been saying throughout the play: she will adhere to the laws of the gods and she is settled upon either living her life according to that principle or to otherwise leave this world forever. Creon's reaction to the prophecy of the ever present Teiresias and his subsequent punishment, however, are our points of interest. Upon hearing from Teiresias that he is polluting the state of Thebes with the unholy edict, Creon immediately sets off to undo what he has done throughout the play. This immediate change of mind is extremely compelling because



it suggests that Creon himself was never fully convinced of the merits of his decision to not bury Polyneices and, perhaps more importantly, it seems to vindicate Antigone's discourse. John Ferguson provides a compelling explanation of Creon's reaction to Teiresias's prophecy when he states, "Teiresias by implication and the chorus explicitly tell him to release Antigone and bury the body, in that order. If he does them in that order it is not too late. Why does he reverse the order? Plainly because of his psychological makeup. He has held out against the burial" (179). Alongside the deaths of Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, there is no question that Antigone's suicide is the most aggressive because it makes an acute point to her society. It could be argued that Chopin and Wharton also make acute points to society through the deaths of their characters; however that is only understood through our interpretation of the novels as opposed to Chopin and Wharton speaking directly. Sophocles, however, by punishing Creon so severely and the consequent speech by the Chorus regarding wisdom and adhering to the laws of the gods leaves no room for interpretation but rather directly vindicates Antigone's religious discourse to the fullest.<sup>8</sup>

The punishment that befalls Creon does appear to severely outweigh his crime and has left many to question whether in fact the play is actually about the tragedy of Creon as opposed to the tragedy of Antigone. Creon has almost been a victim to the strength of character of Antigone and her unrelenting position. As M.S. Adams correctly points out, "As for Antigone, she will not allow Creon the slightest opportunity to recede from his position; she goads him on, pressing him to take her life" (50). Creon is left with no room to maneuver except when Teiresias finally explains what is to befall him if he does not change his mind. Once Teiresias makes it

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<sup>8</sup> Pritchard suggests there are problems with reading *Antigone* as a conflict between Antigone's morality against Creon's oppressive government (79).

clear that Creon's edict is causing harm to Thebes, he abides by his earlier speeches about good governance by yielding from his position, only to find that he is too late and has lost everything in the process. As Creon puts it himself in his final words in the play, "Everything in my hands has twisted from my grip, and on my head has fallen a fate that is hard to bear" (101).

This focus on what happens to Creon after the death of Antigone aids readers in understanding what follows in *The House of Mirth* after Lily's death and juxtaposing it to the abrupt ending in *The Awakening*. Through Creon's reaction to Antigone's suicide and his punishment, readers are able to retrospectively view Antigone's suicide beyond a mere exclamation mark of her discourse. The play's continuance beyond her suicide is almost as vital as the events that happen before it because the discourses of Antigone and Creon can finally be reconciled after their tumultuous relationship throughout the play. Sophocles uses the Chorus to bring about this reconciliation when they proclaim the last lines of the play, "Wisdom is by far the greatest part of happiness. No irreverence must be shown to the gods. The mighty words of over proud men with mighty blows are punished, and, with old age, teach wisdom" (103). The Chorus clearly make reference to the supremacy of the law of the gods over the laws of men which falls in line with Antigone's discourse. They also indirectly reference Creon regarding "proud men" who "are punished" which would once again suggest that Sophocles is stating his favor for Antigone and criticizing Creon.

Another vital dimension to Antigone's suicide are the events that proceed it. Creon's subsequent punishment and the Chorus' speech at the end of the play advocating the importance of wisdom are integral to Sophocles delivering a didactic message as was expected in Greek tragedy. In other words, Antigone's suicide is not

just about her commitment to her discourse but is also intertwined with Sophocles' intention to punish Creon in order to educate his audience about respecting the law of the gods and to always seek wisdom. Antigone's suicide is what Bakhtin would term double-voiced or dialogical: one action is not just limited to a straightforward meaning in the literary text it is contained in, but also possesses an inferred meaning that goes beyond the restrictions of one single text. In other words, there exists a dialogue between Antigone's suicide and Creon's reaction to it, and there also exists a dialogue between Sophocles and his audience. In order for dialogism to work, Michael Holquist explains, "Dialogism assumes that at any given time, in any given place, there is a set of powerful but highly unstable conditions at work that will give a word uttered then and there a meaning that is different from what it would be at other times and in other places" (69). Consequently, dialogism works with Antigone's suicide combined with the consequent punishment of Creon and the final word by the Chorus because the language and meaning of particular words would have resonated with the audience and they automatically entered into dialogue with the play because particular words had a history that the audience understood. By the same token, modern readers of the play who do not share the same belief and awareness of the laws of Greek gods or possess the same concept of wisdom as our Greek predecessors will not become as involved in an inferred dialogue with Sophocles as he had with his own contemporary audience.

This Bakhtinian reading into the suicide of Antigone leads us to the deaths of Edna in *The Awakening* and Lily in *The House of Mirth*. The point of interest is now firmly centered on whether the deaths of Edna and Lily can be read dialogically, analyzing the discourse that is happening both within their respective texts as well as any dialogue that is created with the outside world as a result of their deaths. The

interpretations of the deaths of Edna and Lily are starkly different because of what follows on from their deaths. Lily's death resembles the process of understanding and reconciliation that we find in *Antigone* because of Lawrence Selden's reaction. Just like Creon, Selden finally realizes how brave and morally sound Lily is. Most importantly, however, he can only view her in this light because she is dead. While alive, this understanding never takes place because of the social restrictions placed upon them which ironically are the same social restrictions both characters seek to emancipate themselves from. Selden is able to finally see Lily for the person she was and the loyalty she held to her discourse on identity and love. Both tragic and genius, in her narrative, Wharton decided that Lily's death is needed, just like Antigone's, for this understanding to take place.

While this dialogue occurs within the text, beyond the text, Wharton enters into dialogue with her readers on the immorality of society. Deborah Lambert provides us with insight into Wharton's contemporary reader response when she comments, "Some readers [...] praised Wharton for revealing the corruption that idleness and wealth must inevitably produce. Other letters expressed outrage at her attack on the rich, arguing that these were the very people responsible for the city's public libraries, hospitals, and charitable and artistic organization" (69). In essence, a dialogue had been created between Wharton and her readers. Just like in *Antigone*, readers of *The House of Mirth* are able to hear a double-voice because Wharton uses a specific context and language that resonates with her audience. Once again, the death of Lily, just like that of Antigone, is not just about her discourse and loyalty to it. It is also about the dialogue it creates with its readers. If we imagine Antigone and Lily surviving in their respective texts and somehow attaining their goals while staying

loyal to their discourse, a dialogue is still held with readers but the underlying message from Sophocles and Wharton becomes less poignant and direct.<sup>9</sup>

Where Antigone and Lily's deaths are understood by the events that succeed it, no such thing happens in *The Awakening*. It is the abrupt ending in the novel, climaxing with Edna's apparent suicide that makes it the most difficult to hear a distinct single double-voice. Where Creon and Selden provide us with an understanding after the deaths of Antigone and Lily, we are left to make our conclusions about Chopin's intended dialogue with her readers because the novel ends with Edna's death. We are left with a moral dilemma: a wife and mother commits suicide, leaving behind all her responsibilities and casting away her own future without explanation. Chopin does not help us solve this dilemma because she does not afford us any insight into her own feelings or intentions for the suicide of her protagonist, nor does she provide us with any insight from any other character in the novel as Sophocles and Wharton provide. Readers could interpret Edna's suicide as highlighting the struggle for women in the nineteenth century while they could also interpret Edna's suicide as criticism towards women who commit adultery and are left in limbo after having been left by a lover, and feel too ashamed to return to their husband and family. Those are just two contrary interpretations available to us and both can be found from the text. As a result, not just one dialogue with readers is created but several. A reader could read *The Awakening* and view Edna's suicide completely differently from another, making it far more complex to hear a distinct double-voice as we do with *Antigone* and *The House of Mirth*, making *The Awakening* both more complicated, yet more intriguing. In essence, however, the most

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<sup>9</sup> For further insight into the perceived didacticism in *The House of Mirth*, see Lambert (70). Her point mirrors Silk's argument (53) regarding overt didacticism in Greek tragedy.

important aspect we gain from Bakhtinian readings of each death is that the death of each woman adds a different dimension to the discourse they held in each text, as well as a second discourse that is communicated to the reader by the author that aids us in our understanding and interpretation of their deaths. Sophocles and Wharton's double-voice is somewhat clear and parallels the discourse held by their respective heroines. However, Chopin's double-voice in *The Awakening* remains vexed because it does not give a clear enough indication whether Chopin is condemning or freeing Edna through her suicide.

### *Chapter 3: Literary Genre and Discourse*

When analyzing any literary text, the genre it belongs to cannot be ignored. Despite authors being given poetic license to produce and arrange their literary texts as they please, they almost always ultimately find themselves associated with one genre or another. Furthermore, because of particular conventions found in genres, as readers we retain pre-supposed expectations that we expect a literary text to fulfill. The annual Dionysian festival was a time for celebration and drama had a special role to play in educating its audience in a variety of lessons including morality, hubris, and politics. M.S. Silk explores Aristotle's *Poetics* and highlights, "Tragedy deals with people who are better than us or people of substance, comedy deals with people who are worse than us" (53). As a result, Greek tragedy is almost always centred on a royal family or the Greek pantheon, with the aim of amplifying the errors and misjudgements of figures the Athenian audience would have recognized, and consequently sending a stronger didactic message about the perils that can befall even gods and kings. What Silk explains here can clearly be seen in *Antigone*. In his writing and following the tradition of Greek drama, Sophocles purposefully chooses a royal family as his subject matter in order to highlight the errors that can befall even the most educated of men and women. However, the interest in genre is intriguing to the discussion of *Antigone* and Antigone's religious discourse because of the expectations a contemporary audience would have had and Sophocles' decision to write and end the play the way he does.

The central conflict in *Antigone* is between Antigone's religious discourse and Creon's political discourse, with gender complicating matters in the middle. What makes *Antigone* such a celebrated play is that contemporary and modern audiences find that both characters are morally and socially correct and incorrect at different

intervals. The Athenian audience would have already been aware of the myth of Oedipus so they would have in all likelihood sympathized with Antigone's grief and misfortune. However, they would have disagreed with her aggressive nature towards her sister, Ismene, who they would have identified more with than her older, brash sister. M.S. Silk comments on the expectations of the Athenian audience concerning the role of women in society: "Confined largely to their households and to participation in religious events, women had little or no direct influence on the political or military life of classical Athens (49). The edict to not bury Polyneices is far from straightforward. To not obey the laws and rituals of the gods was sacrilege. However, Polyneices was a man who marched against his own city and it could easily have been agreed that, as a traitor as Creon proclaims, Polyneices did not deserve the honor of burial rights. Furthermore, Creon's speech concerning political stability and the need to bring peace to Thebes would also have been met with favor by a contemporary audience. Sophocles uses the Chorus to highlight this moral dilemma posed by the conundrum between Antigone and Creon's respective arguments. The Chorus shift between agreement with Creon and sympathy for Antigone. However, when things become clearer and Creon hears Teiresias' prophecy, the Chorus, acting almost as the voice peace for both the audience and Sophocles himself, side with Antigone's religious discourse and lament the power of the gods and the punishment they place on those who do not follow their laws. Antigone must die in order for Creon to receive his punishment and consequently to highlight the moral lesson of the entire play. By delivering a didactic message, Sophocles adheres to the convention of Greek tragedy.

In contrast, the messages in *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* are not straightforward. As two novels written by female authors at the end of the nineteenth



and beginning of the twentieth centuries respectively, they are not unique in narrating stories about young women in search of marriage equality and independence. However, what makes these two novels so compelling are the decisions by both authors to render the journeys of their protagonists unsuccessful and to seemingly punish them for their endeavors. To put it simply, neither Edna nor Lily achieve their goals and they both suffer death as a result of trying to break social order. The whole purpose of employing Bakhtin's theories on dialogism and discourse is aptly stated by Paul de Man: "To put it in the terms of this issue: how does dialogism, as developed by Bakhtin and his group, cope with and indeed seem to overcome the ever-recurring question of the status of fact, meaning and fiction in the novel?" (106).

This question of "meaning" that de Man refers to needs to be asked with *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* because the tragic endings of both novels strongly suggest criticism of the worlds they have created. When Chopin introduces readers to Edna Pontellier, it is hard not to support Edna on her admirable journey in trying to understand her individuality and real place in the world. She is not in search of wealth or fame or other so called fickle ambitions, but rather in search for love and equality. To have her commit suicide at the end of the novel is not limited to our sympathy for her act but extends to our anger and criticism at the society that placed her in this seemingly impossible position. Chopin's decision to kill Edna as a literary tool to highlight and criticize the limited options for women in society is one strong possibility into understanding the overall meaning of the novel.

However, the abrupt ending of *The Awakening* leaves many explanations available, including a reading of the novel that sides with society and opposes Edna. Interpretations of *The Awakening* are often diverted away from accusing society of malpractice, and instead, firmly placing criticism at the doorstep of Edna Pontellier

herself.<sup>10</sup> Edna follows literary convention up to a point when she starts to realize her position of inequality in her marriage and begins to seek a more meaningful life for herself. Until that stage, Edna and Chopin follow literary convention and genre. However, Edna seemingly deviates away from our expectations both internally and externally: she begins to reject society including her house, family, and Adele Ratignolle, and because she disconnects herself from her world, it becomes increasingly difficult for readers to understand her character and predict her next move. This is reflected in the role of Leonce Pontellier who makes attempts to understand the changes in his wife but ultimately fails. Scholar Robert Evans makes this very point and states, “No wonder Leonce is confused by Edna! Interpreting her changes is at least as hard for him as it is for Chopin’s readers” (19). This confusion that Evans outlines within the novel and for Chopin’s readers makes *The Awakening* so compelling and distinct within its genre. By placing Edna on a familiar journey for readers of novels in the nineteenth century, Chopin provides a level of comfort and familiarity. However, she ostentatiously takes that comfort and familiarity away when she transforms Edna from a woman in search of true love and an understanding of her identity, to a woman we hardly recognize. Chopin does not hold back. Once Edna gains momentum, so too does Chopin, even as far as narrating, “She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (139). By the end of the novel, Edna is distinctly different from the woman she was in the beginning of the novel and distinctly different from the woman readers presumed she would become.

Where *Antigone* largely follows the convention of its genre, Chopin appears to break rank. Her novel follows convention up until a point and we expect a specific

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<sup>10</sup> For criticism on Edna’s death while future possibilities remain unexplored, see Bartley (719-720).

ending that would somehow reconcile Edna's position as a wife and mother while succeeding in her goals in attaining self-fulfillment. Chopin, however, does not compromise, and it is for that very reason that Edna stands out from her literary peers. Nancy Walker comments on the title of the novel when she argues, "*The Awakening* suggests that Chopin saw something universal in Edna's experience, and further, that she intended the novel as a general critique of a culture that severely restricted women's opportunities for emotional fulfillment and self-expression" (19). Walker is not mistaken. However, Chopin could just as easily have critiqued society while also securing Edna's future, such as we find with other nineteenth-century novels such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that employs the same theme of a woman on her quest for marriage equality and love. By going against this tradition, Chopin not only manages to critique society to the fullest, but also gains notoriety for both Edna and herself and expands the limitations of her genre. Chopin provides an alternative journey and ending for women who are on a quest for marital and social equality that is markedly different from the convention of many nineteenth-century novels.

Unlike Edna, Lily is not married in *The House of Mirth* yet is digesting the same questions as Edna regarding her identity as a woman and the role she would be expected to play as a wife. The novel gives stronger indication in its criticism of society than *The Awakening*; however, it is only at the end of the novel that Wharton hones in on the problem: the moral pulse of society. *The House of Mirth* ends with elite society remaining strong and protected because Lily chooses to burn the letters that would humiliate others but save herself, but by choosing a higher path, she is left to destitution and death. On the growing strength of society in *The House of Mirth* and its evident immortality, James Gargano explains, "The calculating Bertha Dorset holds on to her fortune and her cowed husband, and the Brys and Rosedale are ready

to pump their new-made millions into the perpetuation of a system that cruelly snubbed them” (139). By showing this hypocritical and fickle nature of society through the Dorset’s and Rosedale, Wharton’s criticism of society now undertakes a deeper meaning than just one woman’s struggle to find her place in society. *The House of Mirth* can be seen to possess a moral lesson worthy of its Greek predecessor, *Antigone*. Just like Sophocles, Wharton had to take her heroine on an excruciating journey to death in order for the moral lesson to be highlighted and amplified. If Lily survived her ordeal, the assumption would be that society will always correct its mistakes, and criticism is once again deflected. However, Lily dies a lonely death while keeping her morality intact, leaving society open for criticism for its apparent moral irresponsibility. Gargano makes this very point and concludes on Wharton’s implied message in the novel:

She shows Lily's nascent hope blighted and Selden's life in the “republic of the spirit” reduced to a sterile posture. .... Goodness and the freedom to achieve it are commodities too fragile to survive in such a civilized social state; indeed, if one disregards the crucial last chapter of *The House of Mirth*, one may feel that the author is attempting to expose the existence of a social conspiracy against creative and moral impulses. (139)

This understanding of *The House of Mirth* lends itself to further analysis of *The Awakening*. Chopin’s novel cannot be seen to have the same intention of criticizing society as Wharton’s because Chopin does not exonerate Edna the way Wharton exonerates Lily. The blame is shared between society and Edna. *The Awakening* can almost be seen as a warning both to women who become far too detached from their inner emotions and to women who become obsessed with an ideal

that does not conform to social expectations. Having spent years putting her role as a wife and mother first, Edna finds it too hard to adjust to her newfound emotions and the prospect of an equal love with Robert. Even in his absence, she desperately clings onto the hope he has brought her by partaking in various affairs with men she clearly does not love. Once Robert disappears for a second time, leaving Edna with no question that she will never again feel the same self-fulfilment she has recently felt, it becomes incomprehensible to her that she return to her former life. That in essence is the tragedy that Chopin is making us aware of and the “meaning” that Bakhtin would encourage us to concentrate on beyond the novel itself.

The “meaning” in *Antigone* and *The House of Mirth* is somewhat clearer than in *The Awakening* for two main reasons. First, both Sophocles and Wharton provide time and reflection following the deaths of their protagonists. Antigone’s death, the consequent punishment of Creon and the final word by the Chorus highlights the importance of following the law of the gods. Similarly, the tragic death of Lily and Selden’s realization of Lily’s true character overtly criticizes the harsh and immoral nature of society over individual attempts at goodness because Lily dies alone while society continues to flourish. Second, both *Antigone* and *The House of Mirth* follow the traditions of their respective genres whereas *The Awakening* begins within the framework of genre but soon creates its own path free from genre expectation and convention. Chopin’s overall intended meaning for her novel is almost parallel to the way she constructs her protagonist. Confusion, detachment, and unpredictability are associated not just with Edna but now also with Chopin. As a result of breaking literary convention of the feminist novel and refusing to compromise on Edna’s discourse and quest for self-fulfilment, a multitude of interpretations of the “meaning” of the novel are left open and diverse. This is ironically appropriate to the overall

construction of the novel because it parallels the ambiguity and unpredictability that readers face throughout Edna's journey. It is fitting that Edna's death does not bring closure to readers as that would over-simplify the unique journey and decisions that Chopin took when writing the novel.

This understanding of how all three authors adhered to or strayed away from literary convention aids us in identifying the "meaning" of each text and the inferred dialogue it creates. What is most interesting is that the discourse held by each female protagonist continues long after her death. The discourses held by Antigone, Edna, and Lily continue both internally within their texts and externally in the outside world. As readers we are left unsure what is to happen to Creon, but we are certain that Antigone's religious discourse remains embedded in the Chorus judging by their final speech, as well as in Creon himself, who, if he lives on, will no doubt remember and most likely abide by the same religious discourse that he opposed in Antigone. As Silk earlier explained, Greek tragedy had a clear didactic agenda which Sophocles adhered to. In this particular case, the didactic message to the audience is Antigone religious discourse, encouraging others to respect the law of the gods over the law of men.

Chopin and Wharton were under no such didactic constraints but there is no doubt that the discourses held by Edna and Lily continued long after their deaths. Despite *The Awakening* ending abruptly with Edna's suicide, Leonce and their children survive, creating an ethical dilemma that cannot be ignored: Edna neglects her children who will now grow up without a mother. Most intriguing, however, is that this ethical dilemma extends externally to readers of the novel who are left to reflect on her discourse and her final decision. William Bartley's focus is on this ethical dilemma and its affect on the novel as a whole: "There may well be a virtue,

then, in claiming that *The Awakening*, as a kind of arena of ethical reflection, puzzles out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live” (722). Consequently, despite Chopin choosing not to provide any further information in her own narrative or through the voice of any another character, Edna’s discourse and suicide have a direct impact on the characters she leaves behind in the novel, as well as readers of the novel who reflect upon her discourse and actions and its relevance in their real worlds.

If Antigone and Edna’s discourse can be seen to effect other characters in each text even after both women have committed suicide, the same can certainly be applied to Lily’s discourse in *The House of Mirth*. Unlike Chopin, Wharton’s novel continues after Lily’s death. Lawrence Selden sees things more clearly at the end of the novel because he is now seeing things through the lens of Lily and her discourse. Roslyn Dixon hones in on the importance of Selden’s reflection regarding Lily’s death and its implications for the genre of *The House of Mirth* when she argues, “Wharton’s decision to use contrasting angles of vision marks her move away from the ‘great tradition’ in literature and toward modernism” (211). Of course, we are in no position to speculate on the other characters in the novel, except to perhaps assume that Lily’s former friends and members of elite social circles would be unmoved or unchanged as a result of Lily’s death. There is even the possibility that they would condemn it. However, Wharton does not afford us with an answer except through Selden who already held an affinity with Lily and felt that affinity even more after her death. Just like Creon who is now in a position to continue on with his life while fully understanding the importance of Antigone’s discourse and even applying it to his own life, Selden can now continue his life but without ignoring the importance of Lily’s discourse. The final scene where Gerty Farish discovers Lily’s body and decides to

leave Selden alone with Lily's belongings because "this is what [Lily] would have wished" (321), highlights that Lily's discourse on identity will continue to live on with Selden. The social decorum that Selden and Lily abided by despite their affinity for one another no longer exists as a result of Lily's death: Selden now completely understands her character without any restrictions. Readers are left assured of the continuance of Lily's discourse through Selden when Wharton narrates: "He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear" (324). Selden's importance is now amplified because he serves to portray Lily's final image as a social martyr within the text as well as acting as a messenger for Wharton to her readers about the inadequacies and flaws of society that Selden will no longer tolerate.



### *Conclusion: The Social Nature of Discourse*

Sophocles' play is centered on the conflict between Antigone and Creon. Since both characters have valid arguments, the play is very balanced while also successfully creating suspense and anticipation of the final outcome. Sophocles highlights this balance through the role of the Chorus who are reluctant to side with either party until it is too late. From the beginning it is clear that they are unsure on who to support and as A.J.A. Waldak puts it referring to Creon's edict, "The Chorus are not prepared to oppose it but they have no particle of enthusiasm for it" (111). This indecision allows Creon to continue with his political discourse which is connected to his pride as a man and his unwillingness to be openly defied by a woman. As a result of Creon's opposition to Antigone's religious discourse, she becomes even more committed to it and provokes Creon even further, leaving him little option but to effectively deal with her subordination. It is this efficiency that has always been a source of criticism towards Creon's character. He does not even entertain the very thought of providing clemency to the clearly distraught Antigone but is rather caught up in his new role as king and his desire to ensure that the law of the land is upheld. Consequently, Antigone is left with only two options: to plea for Creon's forgiveness or to continue on with her discourse knowing that she has been sentenced to death and, as a result, has nothing to lose. She evidently chooses the latter.

Unlike Antigone, Edna and Lily seemingly have control of their own fates. At no stage in *The Awakening* does Leonce Pontellier threaten to divorce or punish Edna even though her actions not only contradict social expectations of female behavior, but also contradict her former self. While he does display concern for her new attitude as well as for her neglect of her supposed duties as a wife and mother, he never tries

to restrict her. However, even without restriction and male interference, Edna still cannot find solace. One could argue that she is unable to reconcile the varying emotions within herself and find contentment because her emotions are based on the actions of another person and not herself. This of course refers to Robert who is heavily responsible for Edna's "awakening" on Grand Isle, and the catalyst behind her suicide. When he abandons her for a second time, she realizes that they will never be together. She identifies her new found self with the love she has for Robert and it is his abandonment of her that leads her to abandon herself completely. In contrast, Lily Bart appears to mirror Antigone's situation when she continues with her discourse despite being opposed by men and society around her. Gus Trenor, Simon Rosedale, and even some female characters such as Judy Trenor tempt Lily into dropping her ideals but she refuses. The only person who appears to be aligned with Lily's discourse is Lawrence Selden, and with the courage to speak more directly to one another, they could have been a perfect match. However, sadly this does not occur and Lily is left to largely fend for herself. She is given multiple opportunities to attain high social standing and wealth but, to her credit, she stays loyal to her discourse on marriage based on equality, and tragically, she fails in her attempt to make it a reality. Her discourse and loyalty to her morals leads her to reject the advances of rich, patriarchal men and the only man who appears to share her goals arrives too late in the hour.

Discourse with society is responsible for helping all three protagonists create identities and contributing to how those identities are developed. As Bakhtin explains: "Speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced* discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author"

(324). What Bakhtin argues here is critical to our understanding of both novels in their entirety. Edna's discourse with society clearly contributes to the journey her life takes. She owes her initial timidity as a wife and woman to her interaction with society, and later, her interaction with the Creoles and her love affair with Robert lead her to develop a new identity for herself, albeit an identity that is continuing to evolve. More importantly, however, is that one could argue that through Edna's journey and discourse, Chopin's "refracted intention" highlights the importance of social influence on the individual, even so far as saying that identity is never a personal trait as it is born out of something that is wholly communal: society. Readers lament Edna's suicide because it is unexpected and comes at a time when there is still more discourse to be exchanged between herself and society. If further exchanges took place, Edna would have potentially gained further understanding into the meaning of her discourse and the overall construction of her identity.

*The House of Mirth* is very direct in its criticism of contemporary society. Withstanding the subtle criticism Edith Wharton outlines through characters of high society such as Gus and Judy Trenor, she criticizes society through the death of Lily Bart. Throughout the novel we are given every indication that Lily is not just a survivor but also someone who prospers. Every character she comes into contact with appears to be infatuated with her beauty, personality, or both. However, she is only able to maintain this success through a specific discourse that society itself demands. In other words, her success depends on doing and saying what society expects from her or otherwise she risks failure. A perfect example of this is found in the beginning of the novel where she continues to gamble socially even though she is already in debt because she fears being cut off and labeled as not worthy of the company of her friends. This in itself is blatant criticism by Wharton of the materialism that society is

entrenched in. What changes the complexion of the novel is Lily's decision to stop playing society's game including the incessant gambling at Bellomont and to stop adhering to society's expectation of her. Instead, she starts using her own moral impulses. From that point on, Wharton only becomes more acute in her criticism of society as we sympathize more and more with Lily and admire her for not exposing Lawrence Selden. Society demanded she should reveal the affair between Selden and Bertha Dorset if she wanted to return to her former social self, but she refuses. In other words, she takes the moral high ground but by doing so, her fate is sealed.

Just like in *Antigone*, Wharton had to give Lily a tragic ending in order for her criticism of society to be heard loud and clear. The novel perfectly illustrates how it is possible that personal identity can be formed through social discourse. However, once that personal identity begins to outweigh the individuals' concerns for society's demands, society is relentless in its punishment of the individual. If we are left to question what could have been in *The Awakening* if Edna had not committed suicide, Wharton provides us with one possible answer through the destitution and death of Lily as punishment for refusing social conformity. Most importantly, however, is that while *Antigone*, *The Awakening*, and *The House of Mirth* make us lament the fact that all three tragedies could have been avoided, Bakhtin forces us to acknowledge that the discourses that lead to each tragedy is vital to our consideration of each text and aids us in understanding the meaning of each tragic ending.

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