THE POWER OF THE PHALLUS IN KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING:
A CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST READING

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ABSTRACT

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In 1899, Kate Chopin published her only novel, *The Awakening*. Initially, it was received very poorly and was the catalyst to the end of her career as an author. In recent history, *The Awakening* has gained much notoriety and a place in academia. It has also been the focus of many literary debates. Throughout time, however, there have been moments where the text seems to have been forgotten, or “shelved” in a manner of speaking, and we are entering one of those moments now. One aspect of this thesis is to keep the scholarships and debates about this novel alive.

Much of the scholarship on *The Awakening* looks at the text through a psychoanalytic lens, but the lens tends to be limited to a Freudian psychoanalytic reading. Since Chopin and Freud were contemporaries, this may not seem initially to be problematic. Many scholars, like Cynthia Wolff, also tend to psychoanalyze the text, the characters, and Chopin herself within this framework. However, despite the large amount of feminist scholarship, psychoanalytic scholarship, and feminist psychoanalytic scholarship on this novel, no one has examined the context of the novel from the perspective of feminist critiques of psychoanalysis. Luce Irigaray provides the basis for my argument when she states, “Woman’s lack of penis, and her envy of the penis ensure the function of the negative, serve as representatives of the negative, in what could be called a *phallocentric*—or phallotropic—dialectic” (original emphasis, *Speculum* 52). I argue that Chopin not only anticipated Freud’s psychoanalytic theories, but she also anticipated Irigaray’s critics of phallocentric psychology. Chopin humanizes the damage that a
phallocentric society can cause a woman who dares to defy the conventions, and who begins to see her life in her own terms rather than functioning under erasure.
For Alyssa
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I.</td>
<td>CHOPIN’S CONTEMPORARIES</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II.</td>
<td>SCHOLARLY CRITIQUES</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III.</td>
<td>FEMINIST CRITIQUES</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV.</td>
<td>THE PHALLUS IN PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V.</td>
<td>HISTORICALLY SITUATED</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER VI.</td>
<td>PERFORMING THE PHALLUS IN THE AWAKENING</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER VII.</td>
<td>CONCLUSION: THE TIMELESSNESS OF THE AWAKENING</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In 1899, Kate Chopin published her only novel, *The Awakening*. Initially, it was received very poorly and was the catalyst to the end of her career as an author. In recent history, *The Awakening* has gained much notoriety and a place in academia. It has also been the focus of many literary debates. Throughout time, however, there have been moments where the text seems to have been forgotten, or “shelved” in a manner of speaking, and we are entering one of those moments now. One aspect of this thesis is to keep the scholarships and debates about this novel alive.

*The Awakening* follows the journey of Edna Pontellier, wife and mother, from her acceptance of normative gender roles to a place of discontentment and, ultimately, to her realization that her society will never be accepting of nonconformity. The novel opens while she and her family are vacationing on Grand Isle. This island, located in the Gulf of Mexico, is where Edna’s “awakening” begins. Here she learns to swim, rediscovers her passion for painting, and falls in love with a young, single man, Robert Lebrun—all signs of an ever increasing independence. While at Grand Isle, she is introduced to a dense network of female community, which also contributes to her awakening. She forges close bonds with two women, Madame (Adele) Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, which continues after her return home. Shortly after she returns to her New Orleans home, she stops observing social conventions such as calling on other women of her class and accepting callers. She continues her painting, which becomes her means of financial independence. Edna also begins to participate in gambling at the race track which, in turn, affords her more control over decisions about money. This newfound financial independence allows her to purchase a house of her own, and allows her to leave her husband. Edna’s desire for further freedom leads her to send her children to her mother-in-law’s house,
pursue an affair with another man, and reunite with Lebrun (who ultimately leaves her). In the end, she realizes that despite the female community in which she participates, she is denied the agency she desires. As a result, she returns to Grand Isle and swims to her death—perhaps the only act Edna can foresee as a truly librating gesture. In summary, *The Awakening* indicts the phallocentric hegemony requiring women to submit to, financially depend upon, and remain faithful to their husbands. The hegemonic institutions also require women to place their children above themselves and maintain social appearances. Filled with intense imagery and symbolism, Chopin delivered a text that has opened many avenues of interpretation.

Much of the scholarship on *The Awakening* looks at the text through a psychoanalytic lens, but the lens tends to be limited to a Freudian psychoanalytic reading. Since Chopin and Freud were contemporaries, this may not seem initially to be problematic. Many scholars, like Cynthia Wolff, also tend to psychoanalyze the text, the characters, and Chopin herself within this framework. However, despite the large amount of feminist scholarship, psychoanalytic scholarship, and feminist psychoanalytic scholarship on this novel, no one has examined the context of the novel from the perspective of feminist critiques of psychoanalysis. Luce Irigaray provides the basis for my argument when she states, “Woman’s lack of penis, and her envy of the penis *ensure the function of the negative*, serve as representatives of the negative, in what could be called a *phallocentric*—or phallotropic—dialectic” (original emphasis, *Speculum* 52). I argue that Chopin not only anticipated Freud’s psychoanalytic theories, but she also anticipated Irigaray’s critiques of phallocentric psychology. Chopin humanizes the damage that a phallocentric society can cause a woman who dares to defy the conventions and who begins to see her life in her own terms rather than functioning under erasure.
CHOPIN’S CONTEMPORARIES

In the initial months that followed the publication of Chopin’s notorious novel, reviews of the book were mixed. One critic argues that “the thing shows a very subtle and brilliant kind of art” (“Contemporary” 161). Another critic wrote, “The integrity of its art is that of well-knit individuality at one with itself, with nothing superfluous to weaken the impression of a perfect whole” (165). Yet another suggests that the novel “leaves one sick of human nature and so one feels—cui bono!”1 (163). Others are much more critical of the text as a whole: “It is not a healthy book...It is a morbid book, and the thought suggests itself that the author herself would probably like nothing better than to ‘tear it to pieces’ by criticism if only some other person had written it” (163).

Most critics acknowledged Chopin’s capacity to write colorfully and deftly, yet as the months passed, more negative criticism prevailed. The criticism of the book grew harsher: “The story was not really worth telling” (166). Another critic stated, “…We are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims to her death…” (168). Much of this sentiment is due to the strictures of Victorian society which one critic aptly describes: “[Edna] fails to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion which experience has taught her, by its very nature, evanescent…” (167). Several months after its publication, critics turn on Chopin: “The recording reviewer drops a tear over one more clever author gone wrong” for writing such an “unwholesome” text (173). “…When she [Chopin] writes another book,” one critic suggested, “it is to be hoped that she will choose a theme more healthful and sweeter of smell” (170). Even Willa Cather echoes this sentiment when she writes, “And next time, I hope that Miss Chopin will devote that flexible iridescent style of hers to a better cause” (172). Over the course of a few short months, March 1899

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1Original emphasis. Trans from Norton editor, Margo Culley: “What’s the use?”
through August 1899, reviews of the book grew more and more unfavorable, and despite being at the height of her popularity, Chopin’s career virtually ended.

Due to the fervor of negative reviews, Kate Chopin issued a “retraction” of her novel, which many scholars today read as a “tongue-in-cheek” retort (178). On May 28, 1899, she wrote:

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. (178).

Because of such unfavorable attention and because the book was authored by a woman, this text was left virtually unnoticed for over half of a century.
SCHOLARLY CRITIQUES

Due to its radical content, Kate Chopin’s most controversial work, *The Awakening*, rendered her forgotten. In 1932, Daniel S. Rankin, Chopin’s biographer, wrote that “*The Awakening* is exotic in setting, morbid in theme, and erotic in motivation” (183). Yet, he, too, echoed one of Chopin’s contemporaries, asking—“*cui bono?*” (184). Rankin, like many of Chopin’s contemporaries, wrote favorably of her ability to describe New Orleans’s culture and nineteenth century society. Nevertheless, he does not move beyond the general sentiment exhibited by Chopin’s contemporaries, and leads his readers no where new. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1930s, Rankin was one of few scholars who wrote about Chopin. From the 1930s until the mid-1950s, Chopin was virtually forgotten again.

In the 1950s, scholars began again to write about *The Awakening*. Interestingly, one scholar argues that in order to appreciate Edna, we have to “find the human value and psychological truth in her tragedy” (Arnavon 184). Ironically, at one point, Arnavon suggests that had Edna been able to consult Dr. Freud, she could have been cured (187). Without fully explaining how Edna could be cured by Freud, Arnavon leaves more to the reader’s imagination; yet this critic begins to point the way towards a psychoanalytic approach to this text.

Another scholar, Kenneth Eble, critiques Rankin’s moralistic approach to *The Awakening*, and argues that the novel, because it is a *roman pur*, should be placed among the great American novels.2 Eble furthers his argument by seeing, for the first time in the literary criticism of the novel, Edna’s plight as having credence. This stands in contrast to the many readings of Edna as a Madame Bovary figure who is all-consuming by romantic notions. Eble possibly gives us the first glimpse at a feminist critique on this text, though he was a bit too

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2 Norton editor’s note states that *roman pur* is a phrase that means the “pure novel” (188).
early. Beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s, we begin to see the majority of feminist critiques beginning to emerge.

The second-wave feminists of the 1970s introduced this text into academia, which led to alternative and new interpretations of the text. Per Seyersted, a leading Chopin scholar of the latter half of the twentieth century, was the first to identify Chopin as a realist, feminist, and a naturalist. His most interesting assertion appears at the end of his article “Kate Chopin and the American Realists”: “[Chopin’s] work is thus no feminist plea in the usual sense, but an illustration—rather than an assertion—of woman’s right to be herself, to be individual and independent whether she wants to be weak or strong, a nest-maker or a soaring bird” (207). His assertion is interesting because many scholars of this time period disagreed.

Many scholars examine Seyersted’s arguments about Chopin and her works, some arguing that Chopin was a naturalist (non-feminist) and some that she was a feminist. This debate leads to her secured place in academia for decades to come. Scholars pitted feminism against other movements, rather than seeing the text as having a combination of influences. One such scholar, Nancy Walker, reiterates Seyersted’s naturalistic reading of the text in her article “Feminist or Naturalist?” Unlike Seyersted, though, Walker pits naturalism against feminism. Margo Culley, in her article “Edna Pontellier: ‘A Solitary Soul,’” argues that the text is existential. Jules Chametzky suggests that Chopin, through her protagonist, negotiates the “Woman Question.” Other scholars identified Chopin as a Darwinist. Yet others, still, argued that Chopin was a feminist ahead of her time. Scholars in the 1970s were primarily concerned with placing the text within one specific category. However, one analysis from this time period stands out; Cynthia Griffin Wolff psychoanalyzed the novel in her article “Thantos and Eros.”
Wolff approaches the text from a clinical-psychological perspective. She argues that all throughout the novel, Edna cannot move beyond the oral infantile stage, and, therefore, she can never be satisfied. Further, Wolff argues that Adele experiences the unity with her unborn child, which makes her complete in the Freudian sense. Wolff further posits that Edna’s deep attachment to Adele and Edna’s return to the sea at the end of the novel are examples of her ever increasing regression to return to Freud’s Oceanic state. Wolff’s approach, here, is interesting because she employs Freud’s theories, but as with many early psychoanalytic approaches, she does so to figure out what is wrong with Edna. In a manner of speaking, Edna becomes her patient. More recent psychoanalytic approaches move beyond this limitation.
FEMINIST CRITIQUES

From the 1980s through today, many more feminist readings of the text have emerged to take us beyond the arguments of what influenced Chopin more: transcendentalism, feminism, naturalism, and so on. These feminist readings explore the confines of patriarchy, offer alternative readings of certain scenes in the text, and examine the psychological elements of the text. Many feminist scholars have read Edna as the tragic hero; a victim of a society that does not allow for individuality.

In her article, “Old Critics and New: The Treatment of Chopin’s The Awakening,” Pricilla Allen argues that modern critics perpetuate the same ideals in their readings of The Awakening as those who were Chopin’s contemporaries. First, she argues that despite presumably more sexually liberated readers, the critics arrive at the same interpretation of Edna’s sexual activity, and ultimately condemn the protagonist for her sexual activity. Allen then turns to critics’ interpretations of Edna’s “‘failure to her duty’ as wife and mother” (227). Rather than reading Edna’s ability to procure an income of her own and obtain her own house and independence, many critics, according to Allen, try to place Edna back into her rightful role as a wife to Léonce and a mother to her children. Allen further points out modern critics’ inability or unwillingness to realize the vast differences in the restrictions and consequences placed on women of the late nineteenth century versus today. Throughout this article, Allen exposes the “misogynistic strictures” many critics have not yet been able to remove from their critical lenses, and she explains why critics should be reading Edna as a heroine in her own right (Allen 224-238).

Much of what Allen does in this article is enlightening and very useful for the purposes of this thesis. Her reinterpretations of the text are much in-line with my own readings of the
text. Allen and many other critics ultimately arrive at the same conclusion: Edna was a woman ahead of her time, and because of societal restrictions placed on women, she never truly would have had the opportunity to be free; therefore, she chose death. Patriarchy and misogyny have been examined countless times in the last thirty-plus years that this text has been prevalent in academia, but this analysis can only take us so far.

Other critics, like Sandra M. Gilbert, a leading feminist scholar, examine specific scenes in the text as alternative to traditional patriarchal structures. In her article “The Second Coming of Aphrodite,” Gilbert reads Edna as Chopin’s invention of a feminist version of a second coming of Aphrodite. In other words, she is paralleling this second coming with that of the second coming of Jesus Christ in many Judeo-Christian belief systems. The difference, here, is that Aphrodite was born of the sea and a female community, denying the patriarchal strictures that could be read into the scenes of Edna learning how to swim (arguably a baptismal scene) and Edna’s “last supper.” Rather these scenes become reread as matriarchal structures (Gilbert 271-281).

Elaine Showalter, in her article “Chopin and American Writers,” examines Edna’s choices between the roles like Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz. Later in this text I take a similar approach; however, Showalter examines these from a strictly literary perspective. She states,

Adele’s story suggests that Edna will give up her rebellion, return to her marriage, have another baby, and by degrees learn to appreciate, love, and even desire her husband….Mademoiselle Reisz’s story suggests that Edna will lose her beauty, her youth, her husband, and children—everything, in short, but her art and her pride—to become a kind of New Orleans nun. (317)
She continues to argue that Chopin desired to escape the confining literary traditions of the
nineteenth century, yet she could not negotiate a new literary tradition.

A more recent article written by Walter and Jo Ann B. Fineman, “Kate Chopin: Pre-Freudian Freudian,” argues that Chopin anticipates Freud through her characterization of Edna. They suggest that Edna regresses to a pre-Oedipal stage as an attempt at reunification with her mother whom she lost at too young of an age. While they suggest at the end of the article that much more could be said of Chopin’s use of psychology in the novel, they echo Seyersted’s notion of Chopin being years ahead of her time. While this article is important in pointing out Chopin’s understanding of psychology, the premise is hardly new, as we have seen from previous scholars. Though Chopin did anticipate Freud by a couple of decades, these authors do not account for her feminist critique of the phallocentric structure by which psychology was based.

The majority of these critiques were written in the 1980s and 1990s. Because feminism continues to change, it is also important for third-wave feminists to continue to revisit Chopin’s work using a new lens in order to understand central issues at work in texts such as this. I enter this conversation with an understanding of not only Freudian psychoanalysis, but also of Luce Irigaray’s feminist critiques of psychoanalysis’ phallocentric bias and Judith Butler’s notion of gender as performative. My analysis focuses on gender and the inscription of the phallus upon “masculinized” women in The Awakening. As we have seen, while some scholars have examine phallocentrism in this text and many examine the roles the characters of the text perform, no one has examined the way that Chopin’s novel anticipates feminist critiques of psychoanalysis. Here I explore the representation of the roles of women within Chopin’s text as they are phallocentrically defined, and I discuss the repercussions for women who attempt to subvert
patriarchy, as Chopin intended. Part of what I hope to explore in this thesis is how Chopin humanizes the effects of inherent phallocentrism on the female who is attempting to be autonomous.
THE PHALLUS IN PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

The most appropriate place to begin this section is with Freud’s theories on femininity. The works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan offer psychoanalytic definitions of the phallus which are necessary to understanding the psychoanalytic critique Chopin is inadvertently making in this novel. Although some basic differences in their theories exist, neither theoretical viewpoint allows for a woman to possess phallic power.

In Freudian psychology, the phallus literally denotes the penis, as can be understood through his explanations of the phallic stage. Despite his argument that humans have bisexual origins, Freud equates masculinity with activity, and conversely, femininity with passivity—his analysis depends on a masculine/feminine binary. Because little girls are active and aggressive, Freud suggests that they should be recognized as “little [men]” (347). Pleasurable stimulations, for boys at the phallic stage, are generated through his small penis and, for girls, her “penis equivalent”—her clitoris (347). Later, as part of the maturity process, the woman’s clitoris is to “hand over its sensitivity, and…its importance, to the vagina” (347). Women are to deny their clitoris as part of the process to reach “normal” femininity.

The Oedipus complex is a much simpler process for boys than it is for girls. Boys, Freud argues, not only identify with their phallic mothers, but they identify their mothers as love objects from the beginning and throughout their lives. When they reach the oedipal stage, they see their mother’s lack of a penis. At this point, boys begin to identify with their fathers, but continue to regard their mothers as their love object. However, over time they begin to see their

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3 Unless otherwise noted, all of Freud’s theories are taken from his essay “Femininity.”
4 It is important to note that Freud does not use the term phallus in place of penis.
5 This is a very important point of contention for feminist scholars.
6 In Freudian psychoanalysis, mothers are considered phallic mothers before they are discovered by their children to be lacking a penis.
father as a threat, and as a result they begin to fear castration by the father. The castration complex ends the Oedipal complex for boys.

For girls, the process is much more complicated. Like boys, Freud continues to argue, girls also begin this stage by identifying with their mothers, and viewing their mothers as their love object. Freud speculates the various reasons for the end of the girl’s attachment to her mother. He suggests that the mother may have given the daughter too little milk, or she forbid the daughter’s clitoral stimulation, despite the fact that she was the first to introduce it. But Freud argues that the most probable reason for the detachment stemmed from the daughter’s discovery of her mother’s missing penis. This begins the castration complex for girls. As a result of this discovery, the girl places the blame on the mother for her own missing penis, and she then looks to her father to supply her with the penis. At this point, girls experience penis envy, which remains with them throughout adulthood. At some point, women realize that the desire for the penis is unattainable, and the desire becomes repressed. Freud further argues that the reason some women seek and obtain intellectual professions is due to this repressed desire.

Finally, Freud suggests that there are three possible “lines of development” as a result of the girl’s maturation. First, after the girl enjoys the phallic stage, the girl renounces her clitoris in light of the boy’s “far superior equipment” (354). She then replaces her mother, as love object, in favor of her father. Once she goes on to marry a man like her father, she has his “penis baby,” and ultimately, she becomes passive (356). A woman’s super-ego never becomes fully developed, thereby denying any possibility of “strength and independence” (357). The second line of development is the masculinity complex. In this complex, the girl continues clitoral stimulation and masculine aggression from the phallic stage, and either identifies with the phallic mother or the father. This could result, Freud argues, in homosexual desires. The third possible
line of development is sexual frigidity. This is caused by their narcissistic view of love and shame of their “genital deficiency” (360).

For Freud, “the enigma of women” was so thoroughly complicated that his theories never arrive at a clear analysis of women (359). In fact, he contends that “psychoanalysis too is unable to solve the riddle of femininity” (362). So he suggests that his readers look to poets and future science to give them the answers they are looking for.

More concerned with semiotics and language, Lacan argues that the phallus does not necessarily signify the penis; rather, the phallus represents the desire for the things one has lost. As with Freud, one matures through the Oedipus complex. In order to function within culture, one must recognize the symbolic order and one’s self in relation to others through language. All are identified by their lack; hence their movement into a symbolic order and need for language. One can have phallic power without possessing a literal penis; anyone in a position of power assumes the symbolic phallus. While Lacan’s theory would seem to be open to all in society, women, according to Lacan, are to be doubly identified by their lack. Women lack a literal penis which removes them further than men from access to the symbolic phallus, and their close ties with Lacan’s notion of jouissance places them further from the phallic center as well. The phallus, then, is an ideal of power—the patriarchal order of the Father—and a desire to be fulfilled.

An analysis of Chopin’s work can be aided by reading *The Awakening* through the lens of Irigaray and Butler, two feminist critics who have criticized performative gender roles and the inscription of phallocentric ideology on the body. Luce Irigaray, a French feminist, psychoanalyst and philosopher, is particularly concerned with phallocentric discourse as it

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7 This is a point of contention in feminism. For a more positive adaptation of Lacan’s work on the phallus, see Judith Butler’s “The Lesbian Phallus” in *Bodies that Matter*. 
prevails in psychoanalysis which understands women through erasure. She asserts that “The phallus…is the emblem, the signifier and the product of a single sex” (“The Poverty” 79). Here, Irigaray establishes that phallocentrism is coextensive with patriarchal order. According to Irigaray, society is controlled by, theories made by, and social customs determined by men; therefore, phallocentrism is inherent to patriarchal order. Phallocentrism provides the means for social interpretations of bodies, specifically as they are applied to women. The phallus, or lack of a phallus, then becomes the signifier that determines one’s participation within that social order.

Irigaray, much like Lacan, focuses on language; however, she critiques phallogocentric language that pervades psychoanalytic theory. Irigaray wants to break down dominant notions of the binary system which says that the male (equipped with his penis/phallus) is privileged, where woman is lack or nothingness. She further points out that Freud’s analysis of female sexuality always leads back to male sexuality and at times is understood through the language of reproduction. So woman is consistently reduced to a position of lack, or an empty signifier.

Furthermore, Irigaray’s theories critique the patriarchal interpretation of motherhood; phallocentrism dictates that this particularly female experience is reduced to simply a gender role—a duty—necessary for the rearing of children. Patriarchal structures interpret this role as naturally feminine, and hence, any woman’s desire that falls outside of the confines of motherhood is seen as unnatural or heinous. She also argues that motherhood should be interpreted in female terms and by women rather than confined to a patriarchal discourse.

Both Freud and Lacan have been accused by contemporary feminists like Irigaray of employing phallocentric ideology in their theories. Irigaray, a former student of Lacan, has adamantly argued against the notions of lack and the phallus; she demands that women can be
identified by non-phallic means. She says, “the constitution of the sex of woman does not mean a ‘lack’, ‘atrophy’, or even ‘envy’ of the male sex (unless it is a socio-culturally induced envy), nor does it mean a one-sided call for completion by the male sex in a penile or phallic mode” (“The Poverty” 98). Quite simply, in a phallocentric, patriarchal society, those who possess phallic power have subjectivity; those who do not possess phallic power become objectified. To possess phallic power, the subject must hold some sort of legislative, private, or social power. The subject must also prescribe the expectations of all who function within that society. In return, the subject gains the liberty to justify their own actions and laws. Furthermore, the subject can limit access to positions of power for all those who do not fit the prescribed profile. Irigaray clearly defines the space that women occupy within psychoanalysis:

The feminine must be deciphered as inter-dict: within the signs or between them, between the realized meanings, between the lines…and as a function of the (re)productive necessities of an intentionally phallic currency, which, for lack of the collaboration of a (potentially female) other, can immediately be assumed to need its other, a sort of inverted or negative alter ego….This is an intervention required of those effects of negation that result from or are set in motion through a censure of the feminine, though the feminine will be allowed and even obliged to return in such oppositions as: be/become, have/not have sex (organ), phallic/non-phallic, penis/clitoris or else penis/vagina, plus/minus, clearly representable/dark continent, logos/silence or idle chatter, desire for the mother/desire to be the mother, etc…A reserve supply of negativity sustaining the articulation of their moves, or refusals to move, in a partly fictional progress toward the mastery of power. Of knowledge. In which she will have no part.
Off stage, off-side, beyond representation, beyond selfhood. A power in reserve for the dialectical operations to come. (Irigaray, Speculum 22)

In the binary system, the feminine is always read as the negative to the phallic positive. Clearly the female “other” remains in a position of subordination to males who hold the phallic power. This is so not only because of her lack of a penis, but because everything she represents is negative. Phallocentric ideology becomes engrained in a society that practices such beliefs: patriarchy. Ultimately, patriarchy and phallocentricism become synonymous, or at the very least, patriarchy requires that phallocentrism be practiced for it to be prevalent and successful.

Freud and Lacan also define the phallus as symbolic of desire: a desire for the origin or to return to the origins. Specifically in “The Meaning of the Phallus,” Lacan defines the phallus as “the privileged signifier of that mark where the share of the logos is wedded to the advent of desire” (82). The phallus, then, stands for desire and is articulated through language. However, as Irigaray argues, desire is an ideal appropriated in psychoanalysis exclusively for masculine purposes and perpetuated by a masculine discourse since in Freudian psychoanalysis women should not desire a reunification with/re-identification with their mother; rather women should desire to fill their lack with a phallus or a phallic child. In the following excerpt, Irigaray explains that in psychoanalysis “penis envy” theoretically may allow women access to the masculine discourse from which they are excluded because they desire more than what society has deems acceptable for women (i.e. a career, sexual agency); paradoxically, women who achieve this are diagnosed as masculine, and are forced to deny their femininity:

“Penis-envy” would represent, would be the only effective representative of woman’s desire to enter into symbolic exchange as a “subject” and raise woman from her status as a mere “commodity.” So, she will have to undergo treatment for this “envy” in order to
achieve sublimation. Which means, here, paying the price of repression of the appetite for sexual potency so as to gain access to a discourse that denies women any right on the exchange market. Women can realize the “capacity to carry on an intellectual profession,” once again, only by indirect means…For there is no way out of this “envy.”…This accounts for her grievance at being excluded as “subject” from a phallocentric scene upon which she can appear only if she accepts derision, guilt, and the loss of what they call, or he calls, her “femininity”…Intellectuality only at the price of her female condition. (Irigaray, Speculum 56-7)

As we will see, if we read Edna as having “penis envy,” in theory she is reduced to being less than feminine. However, if we read her through Irigarayan psychoanalysis, she is more than a character who fails at trying to subvert patriarchal structures. Edna becomes the woman-identified-woman, but at a hefty price tag. For female members of a patriarchal society who refuse to accept dominant ideology are marginalized from the phallic center, as we will see with certain characters in Chopin’s text.

Judith Butler concentrates her theories on the critique of performative gender roles within a traditionally heterosexual domain. Butler’s theories on performativity suggest that one is neither already male nor female as determined by genitalia, but rather, society expects people to perform a specific gender according to their biological anatomy. Those who are culturally intelligible as masculine or feminine are so because they perform the required prescriptions set forth by a patriarchal society. People within American society are socially conditioned with phallocentric values to perform a specific gender; in other words, we perform a gender that

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8 It is important to note that Chopin does not incorporate into her novel the specific taboo issues that Butler’s theories ask us to examine (e.g. drag, butch/femme lesbianism, homosexuality, transgendered peoples, etc.). Nevertheless, by extrapolating the basis of Butler’s theories on performativity and cultural intelligibility, we can come to a more third-wave feminist understanding of this novel and its characters.
seems inherent, but we are really socially conditioned to expect certain sexes to act, speak, and move a certain way within society. Also, performativity is required by phallocentrism for the further perpetuation of phallocentric ideals; if gender roles are not performed according to the strictures of phallocentrism, phallocentrism holds no value.

Irigaray’s theories on the phallus and motherhood and Butler’s theories on cultural intelligibility and performativity help us understand the phallocentric structures at work in this text. These theories also provide us with new perspectives for understanding the actions of the participants in a patriarchal society; a society which places and keeps the women of this text in subordinate positions. These theories also provide us the means to discover non-phallic discourses already at work.

It will also be important to analyze women’s relationships with each other in the novel. I will not, however, be analyzing Edna’s relationships with other women of the text from a psychosexual perspective. Unlike Taylor and Fineman’s article “Kate Chopin: Pre-Freudian Freudian,” I feel that it is counterproductive to simply psychoanalyze the characters. Rather, I intend, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg suggests, to read the female relationships “within [their] cultural and social setting” (54), that which is governed by a phallocentric order. Through this, I will show how Chopin humanizes the arguments that Irigaray makes against phallogocentric psychology.
HISTORICALLY SITUATED

It is important for scholars to understand and remember how *The Awakening* was historically situated, both in setting and when it was published. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg provides a thorough examination of nineteenth century women’s lives in her book *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America.* Smith-Rosenberg, and many feminist historians like her, opened up new avenues of analyzing women’s participation in society and their participation politically through historical accounts. A need for this analysis was discovered when second-wave feminist historians began discovering the absence of women in history.

Jennifer Gray suggests that the lives of upper and upper-middle class women of the nineteenth century virtually centered on their husbands and children. Gray is correct in arguing that “The hegemonic institutions of nineteenth-century society required women to be objects in marriage and in motherhood, existing as vessels of maternity and sexuality with little opportunity for individuality” (Gray 53). Gray examines the two roles available to women in the nineteenth century under these hegemonic institutions, and ultimately decides that Edna cannot survive. While Gray uses this framework to analyze the text, more could be said about how the phallocentric psychology is at work in this novel, and by extension, how Chopin works to critique these notions. Gray’s analysis does not fully account for the intense social networks created and sustained by women for women in the nineteenth century.

First, it is important to understand the limitations placed on women in the nineteenth century. Men of the nineteenth century imposed phallocentrism through their enforcement of societal expectations for women. In this society, those who possessed phallic power controlled

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9 Smith-Rosenberg covers a wide range of material in this book, much of which does not apply to my analysis, but is important to understanding the gender roles of the nineteenth century. I, however, will only be highlighting the points that Smith-Rosenberg makes that will be important to understanding my analysis of *The Awakening.*
the hegemonic institution; hence, the result for women of this time period was that they had little choice but to be identified by their lack: their lack of a phallus and self-assertive individuality. This lack became a vicious circle: because women lacked phallic power, they could not break the confines of societal expectations which denied them subject status. Women’s object status within nineteenth century society translated into a lack of opportunity for autonomy and, hence, their lack of subjectivity.

With this understanding of a phallocentric culture, women in *The Awakening* are objectified in two basic ways. First, in this patriarchal society, women have limited power because they physically and symbolically do not have a penis/phallus. Therefore, the patriarchal society determines that women can be physically and symbolically controlled. However, if we are to understand the Lacanian notion of the phallus where it signifies a power ideal, then it would seem that Edna is capable of possessing the phallus as she takes on masculine qualities such as financial independence, multiple lovers, and property ownership. The possibility of phallic power becomes a catch 22 for Edna as, according to Lacan, she must reject her femininity through masquerading (Lacan 84). The Lacanian notion of the phallus, thus, falls short for Edna because of the inability of her society to recognize her desire for phallic power despite society’s recognition of her rejection of proscribed femininity; this renders her supposed phallic power and her identity impotent. In other words, her society, very much a product of phallocentric psychology, is only capable of recognizing her disruption of feminine values; society is not capable of recognizing her advancements toward autonomy without losing her femininity. Because there is no other possible power other than phallic power that society recognizes, Edna has no other means available to her to obtain the autonomy that she desires.
Secondly, the discourse of women’s identity in the novel revolves around physical beauty and grace or the lack thereof. In nineteenth century society, either a woman is deemed beautiful, or she is not. The beauty discourse is not limited to simply physical looks, but it also includes actions, mannerism, and language. Interestingly, even if a woman is deemed ugly, or disagreeable, she is still participating in the beauty discourse. However, when a woman, like Edna, as we shall see, becomes handsome, she does not participate in the beauty discourse. Notably, men are not held to this same standard. Thus, Chopin’s use of the beauty discourse serves to highlight the limitations placed on women through this discourse as it is only applied to women. Chopin’s critique ultimately states that society decides whether a female is a participant in its discourse as long as the participant willingly (or naively) adheres to the beauty standards. The discursive limitations of a phallocentric society do not allow women the power to create their own discourse of identity. Two principle female characters of the text—Madame Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz—shed light upon these restrictions for women within the phallocentric discourse and the repercussions on those who do not adhere. They operate to emphasize Edna’s subversive nature and Chopin’s critique of the only two possible modes of identification for women in the nineteenth century.

As Smith-Rosenberg contends the social networks that women created were exclusively female. Their emotional connections were with women, as opposed to men, despite the fact that many of their actions were dictated by the patriarchal society. Female friendships that were formed when the women were young often lasted throughout their lives (Smith-Rosenberg 55). This is much like Irigaray’s notion of woman-identified-woman. Smith-Rosenberg exemplifies woman-identified-woman relationships through her examples of real women’s lives. Even through their daily routines, the women were primarily surrounded by and engaged with other
women. “Women helped one another with domestic chores and in times of sickness, sorrow, or trouble. Entire days, even weeks, might be spent almost exclusively with other women” (61). Oftentimes great amounts of emotion would be expressed for these lasting relationships, even if marriage or distance separated the parties. Women also experienced a close network of female kin. Mothers, daughters, aunts, cousins, sisters-in-law and so forth also valued closeness that lasted throughout their lives (62). Even married life involved and necessitated close female relationships. Women consoled each other during the passing of a loved one, helped each other during child birth, and gave each other advice (70). The closeness of the female relationships offered these women an opportunity at intimacy that they often did not experience with their husbands.  

What is important to understand about these intricately interwoven networks of women is that they provided women a way to express themselves emotionally and verbally. These methods of expression, whether they were written letters to a loved female or longing for a female friend or family member expressed in diaries, were not heard within the male world. According to Smith-Rosenberg, women did not express themselves in the same way to men as they did to other women. Smith-Rosenberg continues, “This was, as well, a female world in which hostility and criticism of other women were discouraged, and thus a milieu in which women could develop a sense of inner security and self-esteem….Women, who had little status or power in the larger world of male concerns, possessed status and power in the lives and worlds of other women” (64). If this is true, the question then becomes one of autonomy. If women were able to find power and status within the close, intimate female networks, then why did this power and status not transfer into the world of exclusively male concerns? Did the

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10 This is not to say that the women were sexually involved with each other, as it is easy to misunderstand the connotations of intimacy in the 21st century. Though, it is possible that some women did experience sexual relations with each other. Intimacy, here, is meant to convey the close emotional attachment of friendship.
power and status that a woman’s husband or father hold also influence the power and status that women were recognized as holding within these all-female networks? In other words, did phallocentrism still find its way into these all-female communities? I contend that despite the power and status that may have been possible within these social networks, women’s autonomy was continually deemed ineffectual within the phallocentric culture at large. This is precisely why it is imperative that the phallic modes of power are examined within the nineteenth century and novels like Chopin’s *The Awakening*. 
PERFORMING THE PHALLUS IN *THE AWAKENING*

Adele Ratignolle represents one of the phallocentric ideals for women because she exists within her “proper” womanly place. This ideal was imposed upon her, and all women of the nineteenth century, through the demands of patriarchal, hegemonic institutions. Irigaray asserts, “Man appears to have attempted, not without disappropriation, to reappropriate [woman’s] desire for himself…to construct a phallic morpho-logic. What [he is] trying to impose as a universal law is therefore [his] response to [his] requirements, reducing sexual difference to nothing in an endlessly repeated gesture” (original emphasis, “The Poverty” 97). According to Irigaray, men have appropriated women’s desires in service of a phallic morpho-logic that reduces women like Adele to nothing more than a beautiful mother and wife, allowing them to perform nothing more than the actions of these identifications to keep their rightful place. In this sense, the third person narrator’s description of Adele, largely reminiscent of Petrarchian notions of beauty,11 is not only focused on the physical appearance and beauty of women, but also employs phallic morpho-logic tendencies:

her beauty was all there, flaming and apparent: the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them. … One would not have wanted her white neck a mite less full or her beautiful arms more slender. Never were hands more exquisite than hers. (Chopin 51)

The description of Adele is clearly from a patriarchal gaze, confining Adele to physical descriptions of beauty which reinforce a phallic morpho-logic construction of beauty and desire

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11 Renaissance poet Petrarch wrote to a figure named Laura establishing notions of his love for Laura through extensive use of metaphor. Ultimately, we understand Petrarchian notions of beauty as being limited to idealized notions of physical beauty.
of a woman. Clearly, the narrator is guilty of this type of gaze, at least in this instance. However, it is absolutely necessary for Chopin to characterize Adele in this manner. Without it, readers would not know the extent to which societal expectations determine a woman’s identity as far as beauty is concerned. Adele is the embodiment of the feminine beauty ideal. Thereby, her characterization creates the contrast by which Edna’s beauty is measured. Once readers establish that Adele meets societal expectations of feminine beauty, they can later see how Edna’s contrasting “beauty” is thus subversive.

Moreover, Adele’s identity delineates her cultural intelligibility through the patriarchal definitions of femininity. By using Butler’s theories of performativity, we can see that the description of Adele further indicates conformity to societal notions of femininity. She is not only described as beautiful from the perspective of a patriarchal gaze, but she performs this beauty ideal as well. Butler posits:

- it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. (original emphasis, “Bodily” 417)

According to Butler, gender is performed, and it is the phallocentric society which dictates the words, acts, gestures and desires required of those who identify as female. Adele’s desirability is specifically limited to her body. What is not said, the signifying absences, in Adele’s description is that these are the physical features that the phallocentric society deems as important for the “marketability,” or desirability, of a woman. In other words, these are the features a man finds attractive in a marriageable woman. Adele is idealized as society’s exemplary model for women
by several characters and the narrator of the text as she represents a successful attempt at
dictating standards of beauty and at conditioning women to perform their roles; though Chopin
did not have access to Butlerian language in the nineteenth century, she shows through Adele
that feminine performance determines women’s identification. To be identified as a viable
feminine being, women have to perform their lack; their lack of masculine qualities, and by
extension the desire of phallic power. This performance of the female gender is not more
evident than through the representation of mother-women in *The Awakening*.

Not only were women confined to the physical, but women in middle to upper-middle
classes of nineteenth century Creole culture were expected to perform the “mother-woman”
ideal. And, indeed, Adele is also the exemplary mother-woman of the text. The mother-women
of Grand Isle performed their lack, as observed by the narrator, by “flutter[ing] about with
extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood.
They were women who *idolized their children, worshiped their husbands*, and esteemed it a holy
privilege to *efface themselves as individuals* and grow wings as ministering angels” (my
emphasis, Chopin 51). Even the descriptions of the mother-women force the reader to identify
them by their lack. The mother-women’s lack of selfhood is demonstrated through this
description; they are identified through an association with their children, husbands, and religion.
If the characters who subscribe to these ideals efface themselves as individuals, the readers
cannot interpret their status as an individual. In fact, their description as mother-women
precludes any interpretation of them outside of motherhood. Therefore, their lack is literally
their lack of a full identity and a lack of power to create their own spaces. Again, while it may
seem that Chopin would not want to create this type of character in her text, this type of
character is absolutely necessary to demarcate the line between the type of women who are deemed acceptable by society’s standards and those who are not. Irigaray asserts that

The empire of the phallus…is necessitated by the establishment of a society based upon patriarchal power in which the natural-maternal power to give birth comes to be seen as the phallic attribute of god-men, and established a new order that has to appear natural. Hence the need for representation of ‘nature’, seen as good or bad depending on whether it is created by men or engendered by women.

(original emphasis, “The Poverty” 96)

The mother-woman ideal is a representative of a societal prescription of what is “natural” for the women of the text who bear children. In fact, it was “natural” for Adele to have several children as it was seen as an inevitable consequence of the fruitfulness of her husband. In other words, the phallus, or in this sense literally the penis, was interpreted as giving men the god-like power to create not only societal laws but also life itself. Since, during this time period, “naturally” the focus of bearing children was on women, the logic followed that women needed men to have children, which in turn demonstrated the ability of men, not women, to procreate.

Furthermore, Adele made no appearances in society when she was clearly pregnant; to make appearances in pubic when clearly pregnant was an act which was strictly forbidden by her society. Her adherence to societal codes of conduct and her willingness to perform unlimited sexual intercourse with her husband (despite the number of children produced) further proves her devotion in perfectly performing her gender. Had Adele blatantly displayed her condition, she would have violated the codes of conduct created by men and violated her responsibility to her

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12 Many historians have researched the lowering birthrates in the nineteenth century, and as a result, much evidence has been produced to suggest that while the rates were declining, social order and law supported large families. There are many contemporary theories of that state various medical and social reasons for the encouragement of procreation. For an extensive look at these issues, see Carol Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg’s “The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America.”
proper gender role; theoretically speaking, she would not have been properly performing the requirements of her gender. While pregnancy is considered natural, it is a “good” form of nature as the man has donated the sperm to fertilize the egg and as it was seen as a natural means to secure the establishment of the races and classes. The terms of the pregnancy are engendered by women, which would render public display of pregnancy “bad.”

Adele’s actions and conversations in the novel revolve around her husband and her children, thereby erasing all evidence of her identity as an individual. For example, the narrator reveals that “She was keeping up with her music on account of the children, she said; because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (Chopin 69). Adele’s actions are not a choice of her own but that of her husband’s. Additionally, because her husband has “helped” her make this decision, he has clearly laid out the patriarchal expectations of a woman in his home which further erases her from any decision-making even within her confinement to the domestic realm. Throughout the novel, Adele sews, whether it is winter clothes for her children or some form of needlework, and she cannot be persuaded to leave these projects behind, even for a walk. Adele’s refusal to leave the domestic task behind is exemplary of the pervasiveness of the dominant ideology; no part of her day is willingly spent away from her duties to the patriarchal order. While arts such as music and needlework are often seen as creative outlets for individuality (as is the case for Edna and Reisz), there is no evidence suggesting that Adele completes these domestic demands as artistic expressions. In fact, Adele’s sewing activities created and supported by the patriarchal system are two-fold: first, Adele’s sewing is a task completed out of necessity as she is sewing winter clothes for her children; if she does not complete this task, there is no one else to do so since it would not be expected of her husband to assist in the tailoring. Second, it is yet again another
example of how patriarchal structures are designed to confine women to the home and children. Adele’s activities are consumed by performing domesticity; even when her children are not present, she negates any opportunity to create her own space apart from the patriarchal structures. Consequently, by conforming ‘naturally’ to patriarchal standards of motherhood, all of her actions render her unnoticeable; she blends in with the patriarchal structures.

Adele’s cultural intelligibility renders her actions and language understandable to her society; she fits the mold for her gender. Butler’s definition of cultural intelligibility further delineates Irigaray’s notion of the phallic morpho-logic: men’s ability and power to create law by which people who operate within society are understood. In her book *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler explains that ‘“Sex” is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility’ (236). Adele is not only consistent with the phallic morpho-logic, but, according to Butler, she is culturally intelligible because she conforms to the norms for her sex; therefore, society posits her as a viable being. However, not all characters of the text are culturally viable; Adele is the only developed character who conforms perfectly.

By contrast, Mademoiselle Reisz stands out as a disagreeable, and seemingly unintelligible character. Butler states that “…the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (“Subjects” 312); Reisz’s identity as a socially viable being is clearly called into question throughout the novel because she does not conform to patriarchal expectations of a female gendered being. She remains a single, eccentric musician, who never
considers marriage or conformity. Precisely because Reisz does not conform, Reisz’s character could be read as a “discontinuous gendered being” within her community on Grand Isle and in New Orleans and throughout the novel. The fact that Reisz does not have or accept visitors renders her disagreeable since she does not observe the conventional visitation requirements of women. Those who adhere to the traditions of society cannot understand her, and therefore, they avoid her. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily constitute an unintelligible being.

To further illustrate this point, Chopin’s construction of Reisz leads us further to understand Reisz as a discontinuous gendered being, or a person who does not perform their gender correctly, through the narrator’s description of her:

[Reisz] was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one, owing to a temper what was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others…. She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair. (Chopin 70-71)

This description of Reisz stands in contrast to the description of Adele. Whereas Adele was described in physical terms, the description of Reisz focuses on her temperament and appearance. Reisz, therefore, becomes disagreeable through her description because she does not fit the profile for an idyllic gendered female. Because Mlle. Reisz’s first name is never disclosed to the reader and because she is unmarried, there is a further sense of alienation of Reisz for both the reader and the characters of the text. For the reader, Reisz is a flat character despite the many interactions she has with Edna, and for the characters of the text, she does not project a likeable personality as she is rough, blunt and reclusive.
Furthermore, it could be argued that Reisz has phallic attributes. She is not identified through children as she has none, and she, also, is not required to defer any decision-making to a man as she has no husband, father or brother. She is a musician, and this type of life meant a social suicide of sorts. Reisz holds control over her own life, and this argument could be further extrapolated to suggest that Reisz is a masculinized woman. Based on Freudian theory of femininity, Reisz is extremely frigid. There is no textual evidence to suggest that she seeks fulfillment or to fill her “void,” with a penis or a penis-child, and she has a career; therefore, she is masculinized. She is denied femininity in her own right by her society. Because Reisz can be read as a masculinized being, she is not established by Chopin as the ideal feminist character. We can deduce that Reisz rejects the notions of gender performativity, and thereby rejects adherence to performing traditionally female roles. However, despite Reisz’s deliberate non-participation in societal conventions, she is still participating in phallocentric discourse. After all, masculine behavior and language falls well within phallocentric discourse. For example, if we think of sexuality (as nineteenth century society understood it) as a continuum, with femininity at one end and masculinity at the other, Reisz still falls within the parameters of this continuum. Therefore, she cannot be rendered culturally unintelligible; though at first glance she may seem to be so.

Reisz’s masculinity can further be understood through the confines of heterosexual ideals of beauty, which are often expressed through performative gender. Butler states that “asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’…are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (“Subjects” 312). Because Adele is sexually desirable in a phallocentric society, she is the exemplary woman. Furthermore, because Reisz is not sexually desirable by heterosexual standards, she is not perceived as a sexual being, and, therefore, neither
feminine nor female. Rather, as Jennifer Gray argues, she is “an alternative female, hardly
female at all according to the dominant ideology” (Gray 62). Reisz cannot possibly be read as
Chopin’s ideal feminist character because she is denied all feminine characteristics as they are
understood in phallocentric discourse. This is where we can begin to see how Chopin predates,
or predicts, Irigaray’s critiques of phallocentric psychology, but we first have to examine
Chopin’s protagonist before we can understand her critiques.

Edna’s identity lies somewhere in between the desirable Adele and the repulsive Reisz.
Edna is neither considered as beautiful as Adele nor is Edna as disagreeable as Reisz; in fact, she
is described as “handsome” (Chopin 46). Edna fills an unidentifiable space as the narrator
illustrates through Edna’s description that renders her an incoherent being at times and a viable
being at other times:

[Edna’s] eyes were quick and bright; they were a yellowish-brown, about the color of her
hair. She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if
lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought. Her eyebrows were a shade
darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her
eyes. She was rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a
certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features. Her manner
was engaging. (Chopin 45-46)

This description seems to subvert the Petrarchian notions of desire of feminine beauty as we saw
with Adele. Clearly, there is no use of metaphor when describing Edna. For example, Adele’s
beauty is equated with gold, jewels and fruit—notably things that can be purchased.
Furthermore, Edna’s mental capacity is alluded to in her description giving her more mental
abilities than Adele. The description of Edna also stands in contrast to the description of Reisz.
Reisz is described in negative terms: “disagreeable,…no longer, young,…quarreled,…temper,…trample,…homely,…weazened,…no taste,…rusty,…[and] artificial” (70-71), whereas the description of Edna is discursively more intriguing and emphasizes her physical appearance and mental capacity in much more positive terms.

Edna realizes that her cultural identity is made viable through not only the desirability of her physical appearance but also through her words, acts and gestures. Edna is initially assumed by her Creole society to be a mother-woman because that was the expectation for women. Quickly, however, this expectation of her is dispelled. Early in the novel, the narrator reveals to the reader what the other characters eventually discover about Edna: “In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman” (Chopin 51). She never identifies herself as such, and her actions—lack of attention to her children—slowly reveal this to the people in her company. And, the more Edna experiences through her awakening and as the novel progresses, the less culturally intelligible she becomes to her society.

Edna did not assume the responsibilities that her patriarchal society demanded of the mother-women, but Edna does more than just not meet gender expectations. Many instances that prove this appear early in the novel. For example, after returning home from the club one night, Léonce went to see his sons who were sleeping. Thinking that one of his sons had a fever, “He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother’s place to look after the children, whose on earth was it?” (48). When applying Irigaray’s critiques of phallocentrism, it is apparent that Chopin uses Léonce to represent the voice of the patriarchal order. This scene between Edna and her husband illustrates Chopin’s anticipation of Freudian psychology because Léonce represents this point of view. Perhaps he cannot understand why she would not be more attentive to her phallic children. Freudian
psychology would suggest that since they are boys, she should feel some sort of fulfillment through them. However, Chopin’s anticipation of Irigaray’s critiques is most apparent through Edna’s response to Léonce. Although Edna goes to her son and discovers that he in fact did not have a fever, she returns to her bed without another word to her husband that night. This is not an instance of “bad” mothering as some critics have expressed; this is, however, one of the first signs that Chopin gives the reader of Edna’s resistance to conventional notions of motherhood. She does not alter her performances as a mother anywhere in the novel to conform to the phallocentric definition of motherhood.

Other instances of Edna’s subversion of the phallocentrically defined motherhood are as follows. She leaves the children with the domestic servant hired to care for the children. Through her direct mothering, Adele again stands in stark contrast to Edna; while Adele always seems to have one of her children clinging to her skirts, Edna’s children are off at a distance with the domestic care-taker. At other times, Edna’s children are with her mother-in-law who lives in another city, and by contrast, we never read of Adele sending her children off to stay with other family members. Edna’s cultural intelligibility as a good mother becomes damaged as a result of her inability or unwillingness to adhere to the patriarchal definitions of motherhood. Edna’s rejection of the phallocentric understanding of motherhood is ultimately successful precisely because she violates every expectation of motherhood prescribed by her society. Ultimately, Edna’s rejection of phallocentrically defined motherhood and other patriarchal ideals cannot withstand the pressure placed upon women to conform. At no point in the novel does the narrator or Edna lead the reader to believe that she is a “bad” mother; the only times evidence appears of “bad” mothering are when Edna’s mothering is being interpreted by other characters of the novel, as we have seen with Léonce. Edna’s interpretation of motherhood is defined in her
own terms, which is again a precursor to the argument that Irigaray later makes about motherhood.

Edna’s options become extremely limited since the patriarchal society reinterprets all of her subversive actions as absurdity. Irigaray argues that men “reject any inside or outside which resists, and would rather accuse the other of all kinds of idiocies than undergo what [they] call…symbolic castration: the possibility of an order that is different to [theirs]” (“The Poverty” 96). For example, just as Adele is an object to be gazed upon by the phallocentric order, Edna is an object to be possessed by her husband. Léonce illustrates Irigaray’s assertion and perpetuates the phallocentric order. After Edna bathes in the gulf and returns to their cottage, Léonce reprimands her: “‘What folly! to bathe at such an hour in such heat! …You are burnt beyond recognition,’ he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 44). This early instance in the novel shows that Léonce accuses Edna of idiocies and regards her as a piece of property; by extension, it could be argued that Léonce is protecting himself from his wife’s potential to symbolically castrate him.

Edna never establishes an order outside of the phallocentric order; however, she does assume some masculine attributes, which clearly troubles the men in her life. Jarlath Killeen suggests that “Part of [Edna’s] revenge on this society is that she wishes to act like a man, and behave like a man. Her strategy for obtaining independence is to appropriate masculine values to herself” (420). For example, she stops taking callers on her established Tuesdays because she “simply felt like going out” (Chopin 100), much like her husband does when he goes to the club. She throws her wedding ring on the floor and stomps on it (103). She spends her days painting in her studio. She refuses sexual relations with her husband. She buys a house, and she moves out of Léonce’s domicile. Because of Edna’s increasing masculine activities, Léonce reduces
Edna’s coup to the idiocies that Irigaray suggests in order to prevent symbolic castration. For example, of Edna’s painting, he says, “It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of the household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family” (Chopin 108). Furthermore, Léonce’s reaction to Edna’s change leads him to consult Dr. Mandelet, the family physician, which is perhaps the most blatant Freudian moment of the text. Léonce says to Dr. Mandelet that “She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (Chopin 118). Dr. Mandelet responds by saying that “Most women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn’t try to fathom. But it will happily pass over…” (Chopin 119). Edna’s new-found phallic power has the potential to symbolically castrate men’s phallic power within the system. If women can viably demonstrate their abilities to operate within the system without having to adhere to the phallocentric dictates, they could disrupt phallocentrism; hence, denying men their exclusive power rights. The perpetual fear of castration and the need to preserve male power are so great that even the doctor reduces Edna’s new-found identity to an idiocy, rendering her culturally unintelligible. The conversation between Léonce and Dr. Mandelet later leads Dr. Mandelet to consult with Edna about her responsibilities to her husband. Moreover, Edna’s refusal to conform also highlights the chaos that results from those who do not perform their gender according to the dominant ideology, and highlights Chopin’s further anticipation of feminist critique of the psychoanalysis of women. Those who represent patriarchy need to render her harmless lest she believe that she actually holds the power to subvert ideology and create her own understanding of feminine values.
Chopin even draws attention to the fact that women, too, as part of their oppression, help enforce the phallocentric order. Adele tries to acclimate Edna to the mother-woman ideal through the “highly regulatory practices” that Butler claims are necessary for ‘sex’ to become idealized (“Bodies” 236). Often Adele and Edna would sew garments for their children; simultaneously, Adele would discuss her “condition,” implying pregnancy, and thereby limiting their conversations and tasks to children (Chopin 52). Instances of the domestication of women, such as this, appear throughout the novel and illustrate our contemporary understanding of Butler’s definition of performativity. “Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler, “Bodies” 236). Edna’s reaction to Adele’s participation and reinforcement of the normative practices prescribed by a phallocentric society is another moment where Chopin is anticipating Irigaray’s critiques of psychoanalysis. For example, Irigaray suggests that “No doubt some [women] have, more or less triumphantly, acceded to the phallic ‘lot/division’, and have become past mistresses at applying [men’s] laws, terrorizing and despising women who do not submit to them. Like the vestals of a cult in which they believe. But not without having sacrificed something of themselves” (Irigaray, “The Poverty” 99). While Adele did not terrorize or despise Edna, Adele’s exigency of the cult-like beliefs of phallocentrism and the sacrifice of a self-assertive identity suggests that Adele completely reproduces phallocentric ideals.

If women cannot create their own discourse, then they are limited to the phallocentric discourse, which only reinforces its own ideology. The dialogue between Edna and Adele illustrates the break-down of the performative action of communication. Since the narrator is third-person limited omniscient, the narrator can only reveal the thoughts and feelings of one
character. In this novel, that one character is Edna, which makes Chopin’s critique more astute through dialogue; it is through the dialogue where we see Edna beginning to articulate her own identity. For example, when Edna’s mind and body stray from her children and/or her husband, Adele “reminds” Edna of her place and duty to her family through dialogue. Readers are not informed of what Adele thinks other than what is iterated through her speech. Chopin understands the power of discourse, which is perhaps why she chose to articulate a disagreement between Edna and Adele through dialogue rather than continuing the comparing and contrasting of the characters through the narrator. This disagreement is over how much a woman is to sacrifice for her children. Edna tells Adele, “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 97). This scene is yet another moment where Chopin is anticipating the critiques of ideological motherhood. This scene is also important because it is a crucial moment for Edna; Edna’s sense of self is not embodied in simply existing as a mother or as participating in the collective idea of motherhood. She is verbalizing what she has awakened to, rather than trying to subvert ideology through her actions alone. Edna tries to communicate her idea of self as being separate from being totally ensconced as a mother. Butler’s notion that discursive limitations are produced through acts and reiterative and citational practices can be used to further understand Adele’s attempt at discursive domestication of Edna. Edna’s assertion is clearly lost on Adele because she responds to Edna by saying, “I don’t know what you would call the essential, or what you mean by unessential […] but a woman who would give her life for her children could do no more than that—your Bible tells you so” (Chopin 97). Here, Adele references scripture to describe a woman’s duties to her children; she uses the patriarchal and phallocentric religious institution to justify her adherence to the dominant norms. Edna, on the other hand, has created her own
discourse, which renders her unintelligible to Adele. Adele cannot understand what Edna is saying because she cannot see existence outside of the cultural norms.

When analyzing a conflict between Edna and her husband, Marion Muirhead argues that “Part of the problem, at least, is their [women’s] lack of a discourse to communicate their perceptions of the situation” (Muirhead 44). But what Muirhead is not seeing is the lack of understanding between Edna and Adele. Edna is not speaking from the privileged discourse, which means that she must be speaking from a woman-identified position. Women’s lack of an available discourse is precisely what Irigaray critiques; she urges women to negotiate their lives in their own terms. Chopin demonstrates that communication does not occur between those who conform and those who defy conventions. She also demonstrates that women who support the phallocentric order are just as guilty of the outcome as men who benefit the most from this system. Adele assumes that, because they both are women, they have the same common goal: ‘unity’ towards the mother-woman ideal. But clearly, Edna’s and Adele’s goals are different. Edna’s desire is to move beyond the constraints placed upon her; Adele’s goal is to remain within the constraints of phallocentrism, or at least, she cannot imagine a self outside of this system. Unless Edna and other women can create a collective discourse that does not perpetuate phallocentrism, she will not and cannot be understood. Because of the social situation of the nineteenth century, feminists of the time were focused on legal rights, and it would not be until the mid-twentieth century before women would start looking and creating collective voices. Nevertheless, Chopin does anticipate the need for collective voices, and demonstrates the damage that could be done, as she did with Adele and Edna’s conversation, when no collective voice is accessible to women. In other words, Edna cannot survive as a solitary soul.
This is precisely where the dialogic paradox between Edna and Adele becomes more significant to the ending of the text. The dialogic paradox is the contrast between what Edna says and does and what Adele says and does, and this paradox cannot be sustained within this society or this relationship—something has to give. Edna knows that the two women will never be able to fully communicate. She pities Adele “for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium” (Chopin 107). As scholars, we must be cautious of how we interpret this passage. For example, Katherine Kearns states in her article, “The Nullification of Edna Pontellier,” that “there is a profound irony in Edna’s evaluation of Adele. For Edna seems fully to have accepted a masculinist definition of selfhood that brings her to be ‘fondly’ condescending to her ‘intimate’ friend” (73). The problem with this reading is that Edna has not fully adopted the masculinist definition of selfhood, and Kearns does not consider that Adele allows herself to be identified in such a manner. Kearns faults Edna for acting like a man. What is interesting about Kearns’ reading is that she seems to be echoing the critiques of all who have argued against feminism, which of course is unfounded.

Butler cautions the speaker against the use of a discourse that “uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms” (“Subjects” 309). This is precisely what happens in Kearns’s argument about Edna. She states that Edna becomes completely masculinized through her language, actions, and regard for other women. Kearns believes that Edna actually reiterates the dominant male view that presupposes that the phallus is center, and anything outside the center is colorless—Edna does not subvert the dominate discourse. Kearns goes as far as to state that “Edna becomes increasingly possessed by the
language games that draw her into anti-feminism” (74). Kearns is wrong in her assumption that the language Edna uses is to strictly identify her in masculine terms. When Edna does use masculine discourse, she uses it to subvert it.

Edna offers the “different set of terms” by which to understand the independent female. She sees life in the center of phallocentrism as life to be pitied; Adele’s life is in the center. Chopin offers a new set of terms by which Edna can see her own existence, which is perhaps Chopin’s most striking social commentary. Edna, in essence, becomes the empowered female. Her ownership of a house, her painting and her paint brushes, and her extra-marital affairs all symbolize her attempt at mimicking the strategy of the oppressor which she can then subvert phallocentrism through her own definition of femaleness.

Ultimately though, Edna’s discourse is doomed to failure within her society because she can only signify her lack of the phallus within the phallocentric order. Irigaray’s notion of semiotics explains that the systems of power regulate the signifiers and the signified. Therefore, woman as a signifier becomes only an “exclusion from herself,” and she cannot have any hope of recognizing herself as a signifier as she is not subject (“Volume” 57). Although Edna no longer accepts the limited dialogic constraints placed upon women, she has not moved into a viable speaking subject position. Edna cannot move beyond a pseudo-subject speaking position because for her to be in a subject speaking position she must be recognized by her community as occupying a subject position. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged by her society that she can and does exhibit a legitimate power other than phallic power. However, since this is impossible in her society, Edna can only continue speaking in what society deems a foreign language. Just as semiotics are controlled by the phallocentric order, so are the power positions available to women.
“Though Chopin presents more than one option, or ‘avenue,’ through her female characters,” Jennifer Gray argues, “each role is either a singular and limited expression of identity or ultimately an impossibility beneath the pressures of hegemonic society” (Gray 56). Additionally, the “mother-women” and the “women,” the two types of women at odds in this novel, do not hold the same power positions; Adele only retains “power” by remaining within the hegemonic ideology, which ironically disempowers her. Because the only power she has reinforces the phallocentric order, Adele ironically disempowers herself, as she, too, has a choice in which type of woman she wishes to be. Edna, on the other hand, obtains pseudo power through her painting, house, and sexual relationships with men other than her husband; ironically, Kearns is correct, to an extent: Edna desires the phallic power in the manner that men traditionally obtain power in phallocentric cultures. Nevertheless, because this power is never validated by her society, Edna holds no authentic phallic power within this patriarchal system. Chopin attempts to criticize society through Edna’s plight; Edna’s problem is that she can only see a viable existence through possession of the phallus, and thus attempts to obtain phallic power through the means reserved for men in a patriarchal society. The problem with Edna’s method of gaining power separate from phallic power is that she never gains enough power to completely subvert the patriarchal order and gain full autonomy. Irigaray wants women to create their own power system which would disempower the phallocentric control over their lives. But in the novel, Edna did disrupt the system within her society for a short time, which validates all her attempts at individuality. Perhaps Chopin was ahead of her time by suggesting just as much.

Edna’s ability and insistence to disturb patriarchal systems places her in a realm that is outside of the confines of societal ideals. Yet, her ability to be captivating and engaging renders her intelligible. She is, therefore, neither a discontinuous nor an idyllic gendered being.
Ultimately, though, Edna invents her desired identity; however, because she assumes phallic attributes and she is biologically female, she is never accepted as a viable being within a patriarchal society. Edna may not have been accepted as a result of her growing independence, but she was certainly accepted as a threat. She was a threat primarily through her unwillingness to be silenced by the phallocentric order. Though she commits suicide at the end of the novel, she chose how she would be silenced rather than being forced back into the system through her husband’s and her children’s possession of her.

In the nineteenth century, a woman who asserted subjectivity subverted the patriarchal system, but the subversion also had dire consequences for the female subject. Butler posits that “Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (“Bodily Inscriptions” 420). Both Edna’s inability to conform and society’s unwillingness to accept unconformity are made apparent through Edna’s suicide. Edna’s choice would be to remain in her “pigeon house,” without her husband and her children, but to what end? Her society would eventually begin identifying her with Mlle. Reisz (and artist and a recluse), and punish her for completely abandoning her children and leaving her husband to carry on extra-marital affairs. Socially, Edna would not be able to survive the scrutiny since her objective was to not be identified by her children and her husband.

Edna’s failure as an autonomous subject through her death, though, tends to be a point of contention among critics. After all, one cannot become autonomous or be made subject through death; it is through life that one may possibly find independence. Chopin intentionally created a female subject who failed to achieve full autonomy as part of a larger social critique. Her

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13 It is debatable whether or not Edna commits suicide. Some argue that she swam out too far and was not physically able to take herself back to shore.
critique is not just a theoretical critique of the phallocentric system, but it is also a humanized critique of this system. Chopin humanizes the struggle for female autonomy through a character that readers, even today, can relate to. Furthermore, Chopin does succeed in making a scathing indictment of this phallocentric society precisely because of Edna’s suicide.

Edna’s death comes as a shock to many first-time, twenty-first century readers who are not familiar with the conventions of Victorian fiction. Many modern readers are angry that Chopin kills her heroine instead of creating an autonomous individual who can withstand the pressures of a patriarchal—dictatorship-like—society. But what many readers fail to realize is that because Edna was a product of phallocentricism and phallocentricism prevailed in this society, she never has the opportunity to be truly free. Furthermore, Chopin was also limited by the same phallocentric, nineteenth century society that she was critiquing, which limits how much freedom she can afford her heroine. The height of Chopin’s critique clearly culminates with Edna’s suicide, and this is precisely why we must continue examining the society that invalidates the possibility of feminine self-assertive individuality within a phallocentric order.

Irigaray and Butler are concerned with how gender and sexuality are performed and how gender and sexuality are “read.” Chopin anticipated the critiques of the phallocentric society that these feminist theorists argued nearly a century later. Chopin delineates the ideal of feminine beauty as defined by men, and then disrupts the ideal through a handsome female character. Chopin argued against the male-defined notions of motherhood through Edna’s resistance to the mother-woman ideal. She critiqued the access to language, or the lack there of, for women, and she demonstrates the society’s inability to understand a truly feminine discourse. She demonstrated the repercussions of defying the phallocentric order on those who chose to defy it through their own language, their own defined identity, and their own sexuality, all of which
both Irigaray and Butler argue for in their theories. As we have seen, other critics have
recognized Chopin’s ability to anticipate Freudian psychoanalysis. However, a more accurate
reading of Chopin would be her ability to anticipate feminist critiques of phallocentric biases at
work in psychoanalysis. Chopin was not only ahead of her time for her feminist views alone or
for her understanding of human psychology, but she was ahead of her time for combining the
two into a profound social critique.
CONCLUSION: THE TIMELESSNESS OF THE AWAKENING

As literary students and scholars, we are often pressed to come to conclusions that differ from our colleagues’ readings and interpretations of a text. However, sometimes the difference is not in the conclusions that we draw; it is in how we arrive at our conclusions. In this project, I argue that looking only at patriarchy and its influence on women’s lives in this novel is too simplistic. Rather, we need to be looking further into how authors are humanizing theories that do not appear until decades, or sometimes a century, after the publication of a work of art. Feminist scholars and literary critics cannot overlook the pervasiveness of phallocentrism since it was not only insidious in nineteenth century culture, but it remains so today.

Furthermore, literary scholars should not lose sight of why we continue to analyze texts. Do we analyze simply to keep them confined to the period in which they are set? Joyce Hackett states in her article “The ReAwakening” that “just as Edna cannot endure love at the price of possession, she cannot pursue a vocation—at the price of arid exile” (86). It has been more than 100 years since the publication of this novel. And after reading Hackett’s statement, I wonder why only one of her statements has become partially false for most women? Only recently, middle and upper-middle class women have been able to obtain careers without much public scrutiny or, at the very least, without arid exile. However, many women who are mothers continue to receive scrutiny if their children are cared for by other people. Many mothers are blamed for the decline in “morals and values” in the country and their children since they work. If career women choose not to have children, they are bombarded with societal and familial inquiries as to why they have chosen not to, as though not having children makes a woman less feminine. Single mothers are still regarded as a societal “problem,” despite many of our efforts
to dispel the negative connotations surrounding single-parenthood and despite the fact that it is not our fault alone that we are single parents.

Despite the slight acceptance of working women, many feminists today continue to struggle with the notion of love without possession. Many studies have shown that a relatively large amount of women are choosing single-hood. In 2006, the United States Census Bureau released a special report that indicated that of the 89.8 million unmarried Americans in 2005, 54% were women (“Special”). While this statistic does not prove that the women choosing an unmarried life are feminists or women who fear possession by men through marriage, what it does show is that more women now have the option not to marry and are exercising that option. Because American society is still firmly grounded in phallocentric ideology though, some women’s fear of not obtaining love without possession is legitimated. In other words, many feminist are still questioning if love without possession is possible since this ideal is still largely at work in, specifically, heterosexual relationships.  

One must wonder what kind of ending *The Awakening* would have had, had Chopin been able to predict American culture today and set it in this millennium. Would it have been much different? Would Edna still have swum to her death? The point is that because scholarship on this novel has significantly dropped off in the last 10 years or so, we scholars need to continue to keep texts like this alive in academia. Scholars should not simply allow the text to settle into the literary cannon. We should continue to teach this text to in-coming freshmen, but we also need to continue scholarship on timeless texts such as this. As long as phallocentric ideology and phallocentric psychology prevail, we have not said all that needs to be said. As long as feminism continues to evolve, we should be examining and reexamining our readings of the text and other

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14 This is not to say that possession does not happen in homosexual or transsexual relationships, also. Because phallocentric ideals of possession are so pervasive, it is most certain to be at work in all types of romantic relationships, of course depending on the people involved.
critics’ readings of the text. *The Awakening* is a timeless tale—a story that should be told over and over again.
WORKS CITED


