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"The Death of a Beautiful Woman": Women's Suicide by Drowning in 19th Century American Literature

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Abstract*— *Throughout the nineteenth century, there was a cultural interest in suicide, particularly suicidal methods that infiltrated every aspect of cultural production, from art to literature. This author seeks to provide a brief overview of nineteenth century suicidal ideation, methods of suicide, and instances of suicide in literature by looking specifically at portrayals of women's suicide by drowning in nineteenth century American literature. Rather than being a comprehensive examination, this article is intended to provide a foundation for future scholarly exploration: this particular topic is largely unstudied, especially in American literature, and so this article seeks to rectify that gap in scholarly knowledge. The author looks at works of literature written by women in an effort to draw conclusions about the significance of drowning as a method of women's suicide, and the implications of this action.

Keywords*— *Drowning, Women's Suicide, 19th Century Literature, Psychology.

"The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world." - Edgar Allen Poe

I. INTRODUCTION

In both America and Britain, throughout the nineteenth century, there was a transatlantic fascination with the idea of women's death. Drowning in particular was an object of much public interest—it was seen as a very gendered way to die, as women were statistically far more likely to drown as a result of a variety of social conditions, primarily fashion and beliefs in women's physical inferiority. The phenomenon of women's drowning sparked an increase in cases of women's suicide via drowning, which became an increasingly common occurrence and captured global attention. An excellent example of this is the mannequin used in CPR training, modeled after a young woman who committed suicide by drowning in the late nineteenth century. Known as "L'Inconnue de la Seine," or, more colloquially, as Resuscitation Annie, the woman's face was made into a wax mask by a Paris pathologist, and remains "the most kissed face of all time" ("CPR Doll's Face," 2019). The charm of L'Inconnue de la Seine was so strikingly captivating because it conveyed an incredible sense of peace, oddly juxtaposed against the gruesome knowledge of her suicide.

There has been a great deal of research focusing on the implications of the public fascination with women's drowning in Victorian England, but little has been said about the specifics of this in nineteenth century America, and in particular, little has been noted about women's willful drowning, or suicide via drowning. Though there was clearly an American fascination with the idea of women's suicide, and a specific interest in women's drowning, there is little literary scholarship on why American women chose to drown themselves. In this paper, I look to nineteenth century literature to examine this question, specifically Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces*, and Louisa May Alcott's *Work*. These narratives, all written by female authors, all depict instances of women either attempting or committing suicide by drowning, and provide an intimate examination of the societal factors that influenced women's decisions to end their lives, and what role drowning played in these decisions.

At the time, suicide, or self-murder, as it was sometimes called, was still very much a taboo topic: people

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who had committed suicide were viewed without compassion, and were seen as a disgrace to themselves, their families, and God. A woman who had committed suicide by drowning herself became quickly associated with the trope of the "fallen woman"—a woman who had degraded herself so greatly that death became a preferable option to living in disgrace. Despite the stereotypes surrounding this form of death, several female authors of the nineteenth century worked to dramatically reconceptualize the idea of women's drowning by portraying it as a victory—a preservation of feminine virtue, or a triumph over a constrictive, patriarchal society.

II. HISTORY OF DROWNING IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In the modern-day United States, nearly every child is taught to swim. Swimming lessons are an important part of childhood experiences, and are almost universally viewed as a necessary safety tool, with numerous studies confirming that swimming lessons reduce the number of accidental drownings (Brenner et al., 2009). Despite the progress made in swimming education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that accidental drowning remains an area of concern, with an average of ten people drowning every day in the United States alone ("Unintentional Drowning," 2016). Interestingly, the demographics of those most likely to drown have shifted dramatically over one hundred and fifty years: in the twenty-first century, the most at-risk populations are males and children under fourteen ("Unintentional Drowning," 2016). The nineteenth century, however, shows a very different story—women, rather than men, were far more likely to accidentally drown *and* more likely to choose drowning as their method of suicide (Thomas et al., 2013). Falling into a body of water thus became a dreaded, and very real, fear for women.

This fear continued even into the early twentieth century, where an incident cemented the idea that drowning was most fatal for women and children. On January 15, 1904, the *General Slocum*, a New York steamboat, caught fire and began to sink. Despite the fact that the boat was on fire, the majority of women on board "waited until the flames were upon them, until they felt their flesh blister, before they took the alternative of the river" ("1000 Lives," 1904). More than nine hundred women and children died that day, many burned beyond recognition, simply because they would rather take their chances with fire than risk drowning. Their fears were not unjustified—of the women who did jump overboard, the majority died quite near shore and in fairly shallow waters. This tragic incident was not a normal occurrence, thankfully, but it does clearly illustrate the fear nineteenth century women experienced when near bodies of water.

There are several reasons why swimming was so often fatal for women: first, as Carolyn Mathews notes, women's clothing in the nineteenth century weighed between twenty and thirty pounds (Mathews, 2002). If this much fabric were to get wet, it acted almost as an anchor, dragging women underwater and making it virtually impossible for them to save themselves, even if they knew how to swim. Some attempted to remedy this by the introduction of fashion specifically intended for swimming, but it ultimately posed a similar danger. Even women's bathing suits were a risk, as the immense amounts of fabric that made up a swim skirt could become entangled around a woman's legs as she tried to swim, causing her to drown if she couldn't make it to shore in time. *Godey's Lady's Book* illustrates another dangerous element of bathing suit fashion—these suits were, most popularly, made from flannel, a very heavy fabric that retains water and becomes even weightier when wet ("Bathing Dresses," 1864). The sheer amount of fabric, coupled with poor design features and an already heavy fabric choice made bathing suits an extremely dangerous choice of clothing, particularly for women actively trying to swim.

A second, related reason, that women disproportionately drowned more often, is that very few women actually *knew* how to swim. Historically, swimming was viewed as a man's sport—something that women could not partake in for a variety of reasons. Even in the nineteenth century, there remained a prevalent superstition that, when it came to women swimming, there were ties to witchcraft trials, as one popular test to determine if a woman was a witch involved submersion in a body of water—if she floated, she was a witch, and if she drowned, she was innocent. This is, in part, a transatlantic superstition: there were still witch trials in England in the early 1800s, and as late as the Civil War era, a newspaper in North Carolina published that perhaps it would be a good distraction if the North had "a witch or two to drown or burn" (Adams, 2010). Women floating, or swimming, or otherwise being able to simply survive being put in a body of water, thus still had very negative connotations.

Despite the numerous reasons women were discouraged from swimming, as the century went on, women became increasingly interested in learning to swim and familiarizing themselves with water and water safety. In both the United States and Britain, there was a rise in women swimmers, partially due to an increasing interest in bathing as a health benefit (Day, 2012). The concept of the "summer place" was popularized in the late nineteenth century; lauded as a place to cure ills of all sorts, upper and middle class families flocked in droves to summer places all along the coast—one of the main draws of the summer place was its proximity to water. The water, and the idea of daily healing baths, was a key component of the summer place cure, and this "cure" worked twofold. Tara Parmiter describes it as both a preventative cure and a cure for preexisting illness: the summer place was a place "to escape the diseases of the summer months or to recuperate from already contracted illnesses" (Parmiter, 2006). Another draw to the summer place was its lack of gender norms—for most families, the men were seldom present (Parmiter, 2006). While the women and children spent summers recuperating or sheltering from future illness, men still had to conduct business—and, because they were seen as physically superior, had less justification for needing shelter at a summer place. The lack of an overwhelming male presence created an element of freedom that women lacked in their everyday society. At a summer home, they were free to do as they pleased, and this often involved some sort of involvement with the water. Whether or not women chose to actively swim, they typically spent a portion of each day bathing—for health and recreation—and mothers would spend time playing with and supervising their swimming children.

III. A CULTURAL FASCINATION WITH SUICIDE

Just as there was an increased interest in women swimming, there was also an increased interest in women drowning, particularly when drowning was used as a method of suicide. By the end of the century, people became far more comfortable with direct discussions of suicide; rather than shrouding the topic with claims of insanity and terms such as "self-murder," conversations and publications alike shifted to a frank discussion of both the nature of suicide and the causes behind it. Newspapers across the country began to devote entire columns to accounts of suicide, and focused particularly on the methods by which the deceased had ended their lives. *The Times* (1894), published in Owosso, Michigan, was one such paper that published a "Suicide" column, noting that a "Mrs. Hunt strapped her baby to herself and jumped into the river, leaving the baby carriage on the bank" and providing a general musing about suicide stereotypes, writing that "among Frenchmen hanging is the favorite method of suicide; among women, drowning. In all countries women will seldom use firearms in suicide." There was a great deal of interest surrounding the method of suicide, with several papers, such as the *Watertown Republican* (1898),reporting similar data: they claimed, in a single-line entry, that "women generally commit suicide by drowning, men by shooting." This fairly blasé statement was inserted amongst a variety of other casual anecdotes, and speaks to the almost trivial nature of suicide commentary of the time. In fact, suicide frequently became a topic of casual conversations, and was even published in sections of papers that focused on jokes. In 1892, the Michigan *Weekly Expositor* wrote in their "Tricks and Trifles" column a brief joke: "'I wonder why it is,' said old Tope to his wife, 'that women prefer drowning and men shooting in case of suicide?' 'I suppose,' she replied, as she thoughtfully contemplated his nose, 'that it is because men hate water so.'" Stories of women who committed suicide became popular entertainment: the double suicide of Catharine B. Cotton and Clara C. Cochran, who leapt into a river together, was turned into a popular sensation story, with only "slight variations" ("Disappointed Love," 1853). Their story was turned into a short book, with their actual letters and communications with friends and loved ones added in an appendix at the end. However, this dramatic and popular story, written in 1853, emphasized the belief that suicide was a sin, and condemned the act. It did, interestingly, acknowledge the "itching desire to know the cause" that many readers felt when reading about suicides, but implored readers to "analyze the act" which should be "strenuously condemned" (*Weekly Expositor*, 1892).

This would not have been uncommon: particularly in the early part of the century, preachers were still actively delivering sermons condemning the practice of suicide. One such notable case is Samuel Miller's 1805 New York sermon, "The Guilt, Folly, and Sources of Suicide: Two Discourses." These sermons presented an extremely conservative view. Miller regarded putting one's life in any sort of reasonable danger was enough to be regarded as an attempted suicide—duels, committing a crime that might lead to execution, or otherwise committing what might be

perceived as suicide by proxy, were likened to the willful act of taking one's life. Suicide, according to Miller, was a "miserable insanity, either intellectual or moral," and was to be avoided by good, God-fearing Christians at all costs (Miller, 1805). The vast majority of Americans were Christian, and thus would have understood the religious and social implications of suicide—according to common thought, those who killed themselves were not able to go to Heaven: 1 Corinthians 3:17 was often cited as a rationale for this belief. The consequences of suicide went far beyond the individual's potential jeopardization of their afterlife. There was not only an incredibly damaging social stigma associated with suicide, but up until the middle of the century, some family members would often not be allowed to claim the financial assets of the deceased, unless a verdict of insanity was reached (this was particularly seen in Britain, but occasionally practiced in America; Gates, 2014). This perpetuated the idea that those who had taken their own life had something intrinsically wrong with them—something shameful, malignant, and unknown, which added another element of disgrace to their legacy and their families.

In this context, it seems that suicide would have been something that was swept under the rug, something that families preferred to forget, and something the public should not have been interested in. And yet, we know this is not true; the American public was deeply interested in the idea of suicide, and even more so in portrayals of women's suicides. I argue that this interest was sparked by a desire to enforce heteronormative, patriarchal gender roles by sexualizing, shaming, and penalizing women who deviated from societal norms. When we look to nineteenth century literature, we can see evidence of this—women who committed suicide in literary works were all somehow defying cultural norms or not living up to the expectations of womanhood.

The fascination with suicide was not strictly an American phenomenon, though the prevalence of articles and publications centered around suicide suggests that American readers had an avid interest in reading and learning about suicide and even global suicide statistics. The Washington D.C. based *Evening Star*(1894) devoted nearly an entire page to demographic and statistical discussions of suicide, with particular attention paid to instances of suicide by drowning. Interestingly, this article directly takes up the issue of the motive behind the suicide, writing that "there is much difficult in ascertaining them, as families always find it in their interest to set up insanity." This insanity, the article posits, can come from a variety of sources: "in men the moving cause is oftenest drink, in women it is oftenest downright want and misery, domestic troubles or desertion" (*Evening Star*,1894). The article concludes by claiming that "in every category and for fifty years the suicides upon the morgue's books have been made up, in a vast majority, of workingmen and women, and not of the happier classes. An investigation shows the same proportion in those suicides who never reach the morgue" (*Evening Star*, 1894). The prevalence of articles that enforced common perceptions encouraged the belief that drowning was a woman's death—attributed, as the *Weekly Expositor*'s joke alluded, to men's fear of water. Further, there was a very classist view of suicide, contributed to by articles such as this, which claimed that suicide was something that largely only occurred in lower- or working classes. This is a stereotype with basis in reality—even today, studies have shown that because of the hardships experienced by people of a lower socioeconomic status and a lack of adequate mental healthcare, suicide rates are highest amongst working classes and people with lower levels of education (Näher et al., 2020).

IV. GENDERED SUICIDE

We understand, of course, that men were not truly afraid of the water: the incredibly prevalent male interest in swimming negates that point. However, there are undeniably gendered components of suicide that are impossible to ignore. There has consistently been a vast discrepancy in successful suicide attempts between men and women, in both the nineteenth century and the present day.[1]A recent study has also confirmed that while men are statistically far more likely to complete their suicide attempt, women demonstrate a "disproportionately higher rate of suicide attempts compared to males" (Freeman et al., 2017). This phenomenon—that men are statistically more likely to complete their attempts, though women are statistically more likely to attempt, or repeatedly attempt, suicide—is "known as the gender paradox of suicidal behavior," and there are a variety of psychological explanations for this gender paradox (Freeman et al., 2017).

The stereotype perpetuated in the nineteenth century publications is grounded in fact: men do tend to choose more violent forms of suicide, while women tend toward less

[1]Because I personally hesitate to term any suicide or suicide attempt a "success," for the purposes of this article, I will use "completed suicide attempts" to signal that the person attempting to commit suicide did so.

aggressive or violent methods. This plays a significant role in the discrepancy between attempt and success rates. Something like a bullet to the brain is incredibly difficult to reverse, and is almost always fatal, whereas something less violent, like an overdose on medication, poisoning, or even a drowning attempt, is more easily reversible. Thus, the methods that are chosen when a person is attempting to commit suicide play an important role in the success rate of the attempt. There have been several studies suggesting that women intentionally choose less violent, or less "messy" ways to commit suicide in an effort to make things less traumatic for those who will find the body. L'Inconnue de la Seine is a perfect example of this—even in death, her appearance was so peaceful, so sleep-like, that it became widely renowned as beautiful and remains immortalized to this day. The methods of suicide that men more often choose, however, create horrifyingly gruesome scenes that can cause significant and lasting psychological trauma to those who discover the body.[2] Another study noted the completion rates of different methods of suicide according to gender, and in every category except one—drowning—men had exponentially higher case fatalities (Cibis et al., 2012). And, in the nineteenth century, drowning was the most commonly used method of suicide for women, which begs the question: why did women choose drowning as their method of suicide? (Haw &Hawton, 2015).

The possibility was not considered in nineteenth century society that perhaps women were not attempting to commit suicide because they were insane, but because they were deeply unhappy with the oppressive and restrictive roles offered to them by society. Female authors provide an interesting take on this situation, as they themselves had first-hand experience with the oppressive nature of a society founded on heteronormative gender roles. Thus, it is important to look specifically at female-authored representations of women's suicide, particularly the culturally sexualized portrayals of women's drowning.

V. PORTRAYALS OF DROWNING IN LITERATURE

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) is perhaps one of the most well-known literary portrayals of women's suicide by drowning. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Edna Pontellier grapples with the meaning of freedom in a society that wholly restricts the liberties of half of its population. Exploring the extent to which society attempts to limit women's individuality and autonomy, Chopin examines the implications of patriarchal values on female expression and well-being. As an upper middle-class white woman, though Edna is in a position of relative comfort, she is offered limited societally acceptable roles. She faces an unattainable standard that forces women to attempt to determine their place in a culture built upon a false dichotomy—a woman must be either a mother, fated to be a model wife and child-caretaker, or she must be a spinster, destined to remain alone, but allowed partial "freedom."

Edna struggles throughout the novel to exist within the framework of these societal expectations. She is, unlike the other female characters in *The Awakening*, neither a stereotypical maternal figure nor an isolated single woman, and she slowly comes to the realization that she wishes to reject these stereotypes. By refusing to follow the script written by society, Edna must suffer the direst of consequences. Her rejection of these societal expectations results in her death—a vivid, shocking representation of the extremely limited choices available to women who seek true freedom and autonomy in a patriarchal society. Edna's death unquestionably shows that true freedom can never be realized in a society which oppresses a large percentage of its population, and demonstrates that women's suicide was not a result of insanity, but of incredible unhappiness.

Edna's struggle throughout *The Awakening* illustrates the difficulty women face when attempting to shape their own identity, separate from that which society deems suitable for a woman. Léonce Pontellier, Edna's husband, has the first spoken lines of the novel, in which he sums up the female reality of marital life at the time. Observing that Edna has suffered a sunburn, he comments, "'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin, 1980, p. 4). Léonce views Edna as an object which belongs to him; she is his wife—a person he owns, rather than an individual he loves. This sentence is often emphasized by feminist scholars, as it draws attention to the economic and social

[2]This is not intended in any way to underscore the trauma of finding the body of someone who has committed suicide, regardless of the method, but simply to draw attention to the rationale behind the gendered differences in the most often used methods.

gender inequalities, while erasing women's individuality. In this society, Edna is Léonce's possession—she belongs to him, and her identity is not her own. This is particularly key in this specific social context. Edna's marriage has inextricably tied her economically to her husband, and, if she chose to leave, her life would be bleak—far bleaker than it currently was—and she would almost certainly be living in poverty unless she found another man to provide for her.

During her stay at Grand Isle, a summer vacation spot, Edna learns to swim. Here is where we see the importance of water illustrated for the first time in this novel. Her time in the sea becomes cathartic for her, healing her and opening her eyes to the quality of her life; Grand Isle, functioning as an environment of unrestrictive freedom, unlike her New Orleans home, affords Edna with the opportunity to exercise both her body and her mind, which she does. This exercise, physical and mental, leads Edna to the realization that she is unhappy with her current life, and has been for quite some time.

As a mother, Edna is expected to be the doting, Madonna-esque caretaker of her children. Motherhood, expected of all married women, yet only suitable to some, is deemed as the only socially suitable occupation for Edna to hold. Ivy Schweitzer writes that "motherhood…[is] a bourgeois ideology which makes femininity and maternity inseparable, crucial to the maintenance of patriarchal society and laissez-faire capitalism, but incompatible with female desire, autonomy, or independence subjectivity" (Schweitzer, 1990). Edna, though expected to be a wholly maternal figure, is markedly different from the women she lives amongst; she is differentiated from the "mother-women" in the very first pages of the novel. Chopin writes, "Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman…[The mother-women] were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin, 1980, p. 19). Spoken almost derisively, Chopin demonstrates the loss of self required by the institution of motherhood; to become one of these "mother-women," one must surrender wholly to the care of everyone but themselves.

And yet, despite the obvious erasure of identity in a culture that dictated that mothers must put aside their personal identities to raise children, motherhood was a deeply rooted, intrinsic societal value—it was an identity, one of very few offered to women. Women who had borne children but were unable or unwilling to devote themselves to the care of their children were considered social pariahs. Ali Khoshnood writes, "if a mother does not put her children first, she is regarded as monstrous. An accusation that is particularly intimidating for women is…to be accused of insensitivity, even of bigotry, which would portray them as not real women" (Clark, 2008). Motherhood, for Edna, is a form of both physical and psychological imprisonment. She is physically bound to the children she gave life to, while being simultaneously bound to their care, even at the expense of her personal happiness.

The central question of *The Awakening* regards Edna's death, an act of suicide by drowning. Is her suicide a victory, a blatant denial of patriarchal values and an achievement of independence? Or is it a defeat, the inevitable fate of women in a society where men dominate? I argue that Edna's death functions as neither a triumph nor a defeat, but a warning about the consequences of what happens to women living in the confines of such oppressive gender roles. Edna has come to the realization, over the course of the novel, that she can either resign herself to a fate of being a mother-woman, or she can attempt to assert her freedom as an individual; in doing so, she leaves the realm traditionally assigned to women, and enters the world conventionally given to men. In taking a lover, Edna embodies stereotypically masculine roles, but ultimately rejects those as well. As Peter Ramos writes, Edna ultimately refuses all of the "roles available to her: whether that of wife, mother, woman of society, artist and/or lover" (Ramos, 2010).

Edna is, ultimately, helpless—to an extent. She is free to choose her identity, as long as she chooses from the selections society offers her. As she walks to the ocean, whose voice was "seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in the abyss of solitude," Edna realizes that if she wants to escape the realities of her life, death is the only option available (Chopin, 1980, p. 300). It is clear that Edna's death is no accident: she consciously strips herself of her bathing suit before entering the ocean, thus negating the possibility that she simply swam out too far and was bogged down by her clothing. This brings us back to the question: why drowning? For Edna, it was likely a combination of many factors. It was peaceful—even at the end, Edna heard the voices of her father and sister, and revisited happy bygone moments in her mind. Second, it was accessible. She didn't have to find a weapon, tie a noose, or find poison—she simply had to walk outside and keep walking. Finally, it was private. She was entirely alone, and depending on the pull of the tides, and

how far out she swum, it could take days to find her body—or it may simply never show up. While this would create a lack of closure for her family, it could also make it more difficult to definitely rule her death a suicide. After all, with no body to examine, foul play cannot be ruled out. On a less literal level, Edna's death was symbolic of her rebirth into a world that did not constrict her humanity. She was free, truly free, for the first time in her life, as she became one with the ocean—the very thing that had enabled her to seek freedom in the first place.

Pauline Hopkins' novel *Contending Forces* (1900) shows another dramatic suicide by drowning—this one borne out of desperation and motivated by a desire to preserve respectability. Grace Montfort appears only briefly in the novel, so her character is not as developed as Edna's, and Grace also provides the most stereotypical portrayal of a woman committing suicide. Grace is, by all accounts, a perfect model of true womanhood until she is accused by Anson Pollock, a man who wanted to possess her for himself, of being the descendant of African Americans. At this point in her life, Grace has lived entirely as a white woman, and as other scholars have noted, Hopkins makes a point to never confirm the truth behind Grace's racial identity (Somerville, 1997). Nonetheless, this accusation is enough to thoroughly destroy Grace's social reputation; her situation becomes even more dire after the death of her husband. She is brutally beaten, and is set to become the mistress of the very man who began the rumor about her ancestry. Rather than live with the shame and brutality that faces her, Grace drowns herself.[3] Hopkins writes that "shortly after these events Grace Montfort disappeared and was never seen again. The waters of Pamlico Sound tell of sweet oblivion for the broken-hearted found within their soft embrace" (Hopkins, 1988, p. 71). The message here is explicit: "Mrs. Montfort had destroyed herself" rather than live with the terrible reality that faced her (Hopkins, 1988, p. 71). In this language, we see a very stereotypical portrayal of women's suicide, as it implies Grace has drowned herself because she is broken-hearted. This reinforces the prevalent trope of the fallen woman committing suicide rather than living in disgrace. *The Awakening* and *Contending Forces* were published just one year apart, and yet they present very different views of women's suicide.

The scenario seen in *Contending Forces* is markedly different from the one portrayed in *The Awakening*: while Edna's marriage and life was certainly restrictive and unhappy, Grace's situation was infinitely complicated by the presence of racial threats and immense domestic violence. However, the fundamental reality remains the same: unhappy women—whether that unhappiness comes from restrictive social norms, domestic violence, or something else entirely—felt that they had little recourse other than ending their own lives. It is worth noting that although these suicides appear to have had little in common, in terms of motivation, they reveal a great deal about the social climate of the time. Grace's death would have been celebrated, as she did the "right" thing by ending her life to preserve what was left of her dignity and virtue. Edna's death, however, would have been viewed as a disgrace—a certain sign of insanity, because, from the outside it appeared that she had everything worth living for. Edna's life looked like a nineteenth century woman's life ought to look. She had money, good social standing, a decent husband, and healthy children: she had met all of the societal markers for happiness. Grace had none of these things. Her husband's wealth and property were ripped away from her by potentially false allegations, her husband was dead, and her social standing and legacy were irreparably tainted. Her death would have been logical, even almost respectable; Edna's would have been insane.

A further stake to examine is the racial identity of the characters and authors. Kate Chopin was a white woman, writing a white character, and Pauline Hopkins was a Black woman, writing a potentially biracial character. It is interesting, then, to note that Grace follows the societal convention, earning her the praise of doing the "right" thing—she was noble and preserved her honor and respectability by ending her life, thus conforming to societal values. Edna, contrarily, wholly defied cultural expectations by choosing to end her life. However, just because Grace's suicide followed convention does not mean that her life or the events leading up to her death were by any means conventional: Grace's suicide serves as a biting condemnation of the violence inflicted on Black women by white men. Death is preferable, and even honorable, for Grace, and by dying she shows that it is her abuser, not her, who is sinful, insane, and to be abhorred—all accusations that would have been hurled against women committing suicide.

[3] Interestingly, Grace's suicide is not the only one noted in the novel. Anson Pollock's wife had also died under mysterious circumstances, and "rumor said his ill treatment and infidelity had driven her to suicide" (Hopkins 50).

In Louisa May Alcott's semi-autobiographical novel *Work* (1873), we encounter yet another example of suicide by drowning; this, however, is not a completed attempt. Christie, the novel's protagonist, is younger than Edna and Grace, and is an unmarried woman with no children. She is also of a very different social and economic class, as she is a working-class woman, relying on herself, rather than a wealthy husband or family. These would have made her statistically more likely to be a victim of suicide: as noted in the *Evening Star*, members of the working class committed suicide at much higher rates than members of the upper class.

Alcott's depiction of suicide is interesting to note; because Christie is the protagonist of *Work*, like Edna was of *The Awakening*, we see a much more detailed view of her mental state. Alcott is the author who describes the rationale behind her character's choice with the most detail, as she intimately describes Christie's decision and shows how quickly suicidal thoughts can become a reality. After a series of misfortunes and discouraging events, specifically illness and unemployment, Christie begins to wonder if there is any real reason to continue living, and this quickly becomes suicidal ideation. Though she starts off by simply gazing into the water, mesmerized by its movements, she soon spots something floating by: "Something white swept by below,—only a broken oar—but she began to wonder how a human body would look floating through the night. It was an awesome fancy, but it took possession of her" (Alcott, 2001, p. 176). This fantasy slowly builds until the body that Christie imagines becomes her own, and she begins to explicitly imagine how her dead body would look. The line between reality and Christie's fantasy blurred, until she could no longer distinguish the two; "so peaceful was the white face, so full of rest the folded hands, so strangely like, and yet unlike, herself, that she seemed to lose her identity, and wondered which was the real and which the imaginary Christie" (Alcott, 2001, p. 177). Almost without making a conscious choice, Christie finds herself in the water, and is only saved at the last moment by the fortuitous appearance of her friend. When she later discusses why she tried to end her life, Christie comments, "'People disappoint and worry me; and I was so worn out, and weak, and wicked, I think I meant to take my life,'" to which her friend replies, "'No, dear; it was not you that meant to do it, but the weakness and the trouble that bewildered you'" (Alcott, 2001, p. 178).

The language that Alcott uses is of particular interest: we see Christie describing her attempt as wicked, again returning to the pervasive cultural idea that suicide was a sin. Her friend, however, argues that the desire to commit suicide was not Christie's fault, it was not some inherent fault of hers, but a result of the environment she was in and the circumstances she faced. In a modern context, we might diagnose Christie—and Edna, and Grace—with depression, something that psychologists now understand is intimately linked to suicidal ideation. Rather than victim blaming and dismissing suicide and suicidal ideation as a sin, as much of nineteenth century society did, Alcott shows a compassionate understanding of mental health issues, and seeks to provide comfort rather than blame. In fact, Edna and Grace would perhaps both had made different decisions if they had been treated compassionately or been given other options; unlike Christie, however, they had no one to turn to, no one who really understood what they were experiencing. This perhaps accounts for the difference between Edna, Grace, and Christie. Christie had a friend to turn to, while Edna and Grace were isolated and lacked a support system. The difference in social class may also have played a role: particularly for Edna, suicidal ideation would have been an incredible deviance from the norm, while Christie, because she had friends with similar experiences, was both better supported and better equipped to move forward.

Despite writing nearly thirty years before Chopin and Hopkins, Alcott offers the most clearly articulately rationale of women's suicidal ideation, writing,

> It is not always want, insanity, or sin that drives women to desperate deaths; often it is a dreadful loneliness of heart, a hunger for home and friends, worse than starvation, a bitter sense of wrong in being denied the tender ties, the pleasant duties, the sweet rewards that can make the humblest life happy; a rebellious protest against God, who, when they cry for bread, seems to offer them a stone. (Alcott, 2001, p. 167).

This, rather than simply the stereotype of the fallen woman, was the reason many women committed suicide. It was not a matter of virtue, or a matter of failing to live up to societal expectations, it was a desperation caused by being denied basic humanrights. Edna was denied the ability to live authentically as herself; Grace was denied the ability to defend herself and her children, physically and socially; and Christie was denied the ability to live as a woman in a man's world. These circumstantial issues would have been complicated by a lack of mental health resources, economic freedom, societally acceptable options, proper medication, and, for women like Edna and Grace, a lack of a friendly or

compassionate ear. Suicide was a very real, and very important, issue for women in the nineteenth century, and one that was too often suppressed or hidden. By examining works of literature by and about nineteenth century women, we can reach a better understanding of the realities of women's experiences—unpleasant as they may be.

Christie, as the only woman who survived an attempted suicide by drowning, is thus the only one who can show us what life *could* have been for women without the options Christie was offered. As Alcott writes, she was rescued and supported, "not by a man's invitation to accept his protection, but by a welcome into unconventionally organized homes. Neither of the families which shelters her lives according to the traditional patriarchal patterns that assign money and power to men and morality and powerlessness to women" (Yellin, 1980, p. 531). Only by erasing the restrictive societal norms that oppressed women, could women reach a fullness of life that would enable them to be fully, authentically, happy and true to themselves.

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