

ROBERTSON, ELIZABETH PADGETT, M.A. *The Racism of Maternalism: Grace King's Feminine White Supremacy*. (2022)
Directed by Dr. Scott Romine. 32 pp.

Most of the scholarship about Grace King focuses on the subversion of patriarchy in her fiction. Thus, many scholars overlook the conservative aspects of King's work, including her racism and support for the Lost Cause. I locate King within a tradition of southern writers perpetuating the Lost Cause and explore how this goal impacts King's focus on women's issues. Through an analysis of King's short stories, I demonstrate King frequently invokes the Mammy stereotype in her depiction of black women to protest the social dynamics of a post-Emancipation society and reinscribes black women into subservient roles that replicate slavery.

ROBERTSON, ELIZABETH PADGETT, M.A. Edna Pontellier's Hidden Self: The Queer Possibilities of *The Awakening*. (2022)
Directed by Dr. Scott Romine. 26 pp.

I advocate using queer theory to analyze *The Awakening* in addition to feminist theory to emphasize Edna's non-normative desires and the pleasure she experiences when she acts upon these desires. I show Edna repeatedly challenges heteronormativity by having non-normative sexual interactions with men, women, and non-human entities. I use these non-normative sexual interactions to trace Edna's movement toward autonomous self-expression and her transformation into a queer subject. Lastly, I argue Edna rejects heteronormativity altogether with her suicide.

THE RACISM OF MATERNALISM: GRACE KING'S FEMININE WHITE SUPERMACY

AND

EDNA PONTELLIER'S HIDDEN SELF: THE QUEER POSSIBILITIES OF *THE*

AWAKENING

by

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INTRODUCTION

Grace King and Kate Chopin are best known for their representations of women's lives and Louisiana society at the end of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the works of both women slipped into obscurity. King simply became more focused on writing histories and continued writing about topics the general public no longer cared about. Chopin quit publishing after the negative reception of *The Awakening* and died a few years later. Scholars rediscovered King's and Chopin's works in the 1960s and 1970s, with some literary critics categorizing them as minor authors. While their earliest champions were men (Robert Bush for King and Per Seyersted for Chopin), women scholars' praise of King's and Chopin's radical portrayal of women and gender issues brought increased attention to their work. Some feminist scholars even began locating King and Chopin within southern and American women's literary genealogies. For Chopin, this attention was enough to secure her place in the American literary canon, but most literary critics still consider King a minor writer of local color. Nevertheless, the legacies of both writers continue to be defined by feminist interpretations of their work. The emphasis on gender in King and Chopin scholarship has caused other aspects of their work to be overlooked, such as racism and queerness. In the papers that follow, I explore the aforementioned blind spots in feminist literary criticism.

THE RACISM OF MATERNALISM: GRACE KING'S FEMININE WHITE SUPREMACY

Despite reaching national recognition and achieving international acclaim in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Grace King remains regulated to the outskirts of American literary history. The publication of *Grace King of New Orleans: A Selection of Her Writings* in 1973 revived interest in King among literary critics. The anthology primarily attracted the attention of feminist critics engaging in the recovery of works by women writers. King's focus on women and their hardships following the Civil War made her fiction a good subject for feminist analysis. Feminist critics quickly turned to gender as a category of analysis to interpret King's fiction, noting subtle critiques of patriarchy and the roles of women in southern society. By focusing on the significance of gender in King's fiction, many feminist critics suggest King crosses racial boundaries by identifying and/or sympathizing with the plight of black women. However, these interpretations ignore King's racism and lack historical context. A consideration of King's work through a historical lens reveals the political implications of King's negative and superficial depictions of black women.

King quickly rose to prominence for her stories and histories about Louisiana and New Orleans when regional stories from the south were in high demand. Like many southern writers of her time, King attempts to shape public perception on national events and politics by producing sympathetic depictions of the south with a white, hegemonic class for a national audience's consumption. By promoting the Lost Cause and white supremacy, King participates in the creation of what David W. Blight calls a national memory of the Civil War on "southern terms" (2). The solidification of this national memory coincides with the expansion of Jim Crow and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, indicating the widespread and long-term ramifications of the Lost Cause. Reconciliation and Lost Cause literature frequently includes racist stereotypes, romanticized

portrayals of plantation life, and depictions of Confederate soldiers as honorable men. King deviates somewhat from this formula due to her focus on women and their struggles. I use the term maternalism to describe the women-centric Lost Cause and southern apologetics King espouses. King engages in maternalism by invoking the Mammy stereotype and assuming her understanding of the social and living conditions that comprise a good life for black women supersedes their knowledge. In “Monsieur Motte” and “A Crippled Hope,” King uses maternalism to protest the social dynamics of a post-Emancipation society and reinscribes black women into subservient roles that replicate slavery.

My approach to King differs from previous scholars because my analysis is rooted in an intersectional feminist methodology. Most scholars emphasize either King’s concern for women’s issues or King’s commitment to Lost Cause ideology. I aim to create a more thorough interpretation of King and her literary project by giving equal consideration to her gender, race, class, and region. All of these factors inform King’s perspective on the Civil War’s aftermath, her motivation to write, and her treatment of these categories in her work. I apply this same approach to my analysis of King’s fiction to explore her portrayal of black women by giving equal consideration to characters’ race and gender. To counter feminist interpretations that King challenges racial orthodoxies of the late nineteenth century, I demonstrate King routinely uses racial stereotypes and romanticizes the relationships between white and black women in her portrayal of black women. While many of these feminist interpretations are problematic, I do not want to simply dismiss the work of feminist scholars on King. Like many King scholars, I believe she criticizes traditional gender roles and sometimes (usually unintentionally) points out the flaws in the prevailing racial ideology of her time. However, the interpretations that King crosses racial boundaries in expressions of gender solidarity simply go too far. Since most

examinations of race in King's fiction conclude she deviates from the traditional white supremacy of the postbellum era in some way, her racism and advocacy for the Lost Cause remain largely unacknowledged in scholarship. None of these examinations of King explore the ways feminine discourse and Lost Cause ideology work in tandem to construct essentialist conceptions of black women. My analysis shows King includes feminine values in her application of the Lost Cause to reduce black women into one dimensional figures.

King identifies southern white and black women as the primary subject of her fiction at the beginning of her career. In a letter about her first short story to Charles Dudley Warner, a close friend and respected literary critic, King writes "I shall be satisfied with your opinion and my own endeavor to call attention at least to some of those relations brought on by slavery, honorable to all concerned. It seems to me, white as well as black women have a sad showing in what people call romance... I think I shall try to write them- [local stories] if no one else does it better" (11). In sharing her motivations for writing with Warner, King describes the four interrelated themes that appear repeatedly in her work through her writing career. Foremost, King is interested in women, the experiences specific to women, and their portrayal in literature. Most of King's fiction focuses on women and their problems. Her concern for women includes black women, even though this concern remains veiled by racism. Secondly, King assumes a condescending attitude toward black women. She patronizes people of African descent by presenting slavery as resulting in positive social conditions for them and assuming she knows the social conditions that will provide them with a good life. This racist attitude appears in all of King's stories with black characters. Third, King elects to write about local matters, setting most of her stories in New Orleans and Louisiana. Lastly, King commits to creating realistic depictions of the lives of women and Louisianans. She wants to contradict the representations of

both groups she finds in literature and construct depictions that accurately reflect her conception of southern women's lives. King views a maternal relationship between white and black women as central to the experiences of both groups of southern women.

Maternalism encompasses the feminine values King employs, her concern for women, and her paternalistic attitude towards black women. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel define maternalism as the "ideologies and discourses that exalted women's capacity to mother and applied to society as a whole the values they attached to that role: care, nurturance, and morality" (4). King celebrates these traditional feminine values in her fiction. Linda Coleman points out that "female experience and values" serve as the foundation for King's fiction, especially nurturance (34). Focusing on friendship, Coleman demonstrates nurturance manifests primarily in King's fiction through female bonds (36). King also exalts women's capacity to care and love by portraying (surrogate) mother-daughter and servant-mistress relationships. Coleman adds that King views feminine values and female bonds as capable of soothing women's personal, political, and social displacement (34). By applying feminine virtues to societal problems, King uses maternalist discourse. Margaret D. Jacobs considers maternalism a kind of precursor to feminism because of women's emphasis on addressing the disadvantages of women and expanding women's political authority (89). In her fiction, King shows an awareness of the oppression women experience and a desire for change. She criticizes patriarchal beauty standards, women's limited educational and economic opportunities, and women's societally forced dependence on men. However, King's concern for women does not equate to feminism since her critiques do not translate into a belief for gender equality or a radical restructuring of society. Furthermore, King's conception of gender oppression is limited by her racism. King views black people as naturally primitive, requiring socialization within a white society to tame

their more barbaric instincts and help them find a productive role in society. Jacobs lists women's perception of other women as inferior and in need of rescue and uplift as another characteristic of maternalism (89). In this form, maternalism resembles the paternalism of Old South myths. Paternalism describes the inherently unequal and supposedly reciprocal relationship between white and black people in the south. In this system, a benevolent white person provides a black person with care and guidance and receives devotion and care from the black person in return. These beliefs infused by feminine values and employed by women become the maternalism King uses.

Many feminist scholars focus on the portrayal of women and critiques of patriarchal structures in King's fiction. For example, Anne Goodwyn Jones locates King within a liberal tradition of southern women writers that critique sexual and racial oppression as well as hierarchal class structures (45). She adds "More often, anything that felt radical was suppressed, masked, or transformed into the familiar paradox of the strong southern woman arguing for her own fragility" (Jones 45). In other words, southern women writers, such as King, use the image of southern womanhood to preserve their respectability while subtly questioning the social and cultural structures that define womanhood. Jones argues King begins to remove the mask of southern womanhood in her fiction (127). However, Jones begrudgingly admits "King consciously and, if put to the test, politically held to this racist southern heritage," but her focus remains on the "rebellious opposite" in King's fiction (128). Clara Juncker also concentrates on King's subtle criticisms of southern patriarchy, conflating King's interest in women's issues with feminism. She states, "As an advocate of womankind, writing from and of marginality, Grace King was, perhaps inadvertently, a feminist" (Juncker 15). Juncker mistakes King's criticism of society's treatment of women and her concern for the challenges women face with advocating

for societal change. She also conflates advocacy for women with feminism. While Juncker goes on to discuss King's deference to men and opposition to women's suffrage, she never addresses how King's ambiguous relationship with conventional constructions of femininity shape her fiction. She ignores King's racism altogether. Like many scholars, Juncker avoids any substantial discussion about how King's conservative social ideals manifest in her work.

By overemphasizing the similarities between white and black women in King's fiction, feminist scholars overlook King's racism and claim she challenge racial barriers. Anna Shannon Effenbein's analysis of King's fiction exemplifies this problem. She believes, "King created women characters whose complexity transcends sexual and racial stereotypes" (Effenbein 74). She suggests King produces realistic depictions of women of various racial backgrounds that overcome the common negative assumptions about white and black women. Effenbein continues, "We hardly need to know the racial identities of the women in these stories, for their oppression seems inextricably bound up in the conventional restrictions imposed upon all women" (82). She focuses on the similar experiences of King's women characters, ignoring the differences in King's portrayals of black women. Effenbein briefly admits King's stories "are undeniably infected by the racism of the author" before returning her attention to "white and black women struggling for a sense of place and identity in a dissolving social order" (83). In other words, Effenbein's analysis places more emphasis on gender than race. Therefore, she overlooks King's racism in order to build an argument about the similarities between white and black women in King's fiction. Juncker makes the same mistake. She thinks King's depictions of female bonding and self-sufficiency construct alternatives to the isolation and exploitation women experience in traditional family units. Juncker adds, "Often inhabited by white and black women together, King's female communes implicitly advocate gender solidarity across established borders of race

and class” (25). Juncker uses communes as a synonym for communities, ignoring the hierarchical relationship between white and black women in King’s fiction. By ignoring the power differences in white and black women’s relationships, she assumes white and black women experience the same forms of gender oppression and accepts King’s romanticized portrayal of race relations in the nineteenth century.

While most literary critics avoid any substantial discussion of King’s politics or the importance of King’s politics in her fiction, a handful of scholars locate King within a white supremacist tradition and the Lost Cause movement. Robert Bush describes King as a southern patriot, explaining her memories of the Civil War’s and Reconstruction’s indignities prevent her from developing “a fully conciliatory national spirit” (5). He views King as a representative of Louisiana’s upper-class whites and considers her political opinions conventional for someone of her position. Helen Taylor takes this stance a little further. She calls King a staunch advocate of the Lost Cause and a fierce defender of Louisiana’s white professional class (Taylor “The Case of Grace King” 686). Taylor also makes King’s racist attitudes central to her analysis of King’s fiction in *Gender, Race, and Region*, recognizing the importance of black women’s racial inferiority to King’s literary and political goals. Lori Robinson directly connects King’s racism and politics with her literary aspirations. Robinson contends King depicts a white upper- and middle-class South to reframe the national perception of the South and an acceptable “discourse of femininity” masks this political agenda (56-8).¹ However, with the exception of Taylor, these scholars downplay or discount King’s very real concern for women and women’s issues, which includes black women. Ultimately, this compassion and anxiety for women and their struggles

¹ Rien Fertel finds a similar aim in King’s histories in *Imagining the Creole City: The Rise of Literary Culture in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*. See Chapter 5.

compels King to write about women's daily lives. She just cannot conceptualize a productive, societal role for black women beyond servitude.

King establishes the construction of a white, hegemonic class at the top of a social hierarchy based on conditions of slavery as her literary project at the beginning of her career. She wrote her first short story, "Monsieur Motte" in defense of New Orleans's elite Creoles. In her autobiography, King recalls her conversation with Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *The Century*, about George Washington Cable that motivated her to write. When Gilder expressed admiration for Cable, King "hastened to enlighten him to the effect that Cable proclaimed his preference for colored people over white and assumed the inevitable superiority- according to his theories -of the quadroons over the Creoles" (*Memories* 60). She perceives Cable's sympathetic depiction of African Americans as insulting to Creoles, whom she racializes as white, and dangerous to a white supremacist social order. Furthermore, she views Cable's support for black rights as a betrayal of the white race and the values of his native New Orleans. After this explanation, Gilder asks, "if Cable is so false to you, why do not some of you write better?" King responded with "Monsieur Motte" (*Memories* 60-1). Originally published in the *New Princeton Review* in January 1886, "Monsieur Motte" focuses on the relationship between Marie Modeste, an orphaned white girl about to graduate from an elite New Orleans boarding school and a quadroon hairdresser, Marcélite. Marie anticipates meeting Monsieur Motte, her uncle and benefactor, only to discover Marcélite created the figure of Monsieur Motte to hide that she paid for Marie's education out of love and loyalty to Marie's mother, Marcélite's dead mistress, and Marie. Positioning "Monsieur Motte" as a response to Cable's negative portrayal of Creole society and sympathetic portrayal of African Americans, King shows the significance of race to her literary

project. She starts writing to show the “true” relationship between Creoles and African Americans, emphasizing freedwomen’s love for their former enslavers.

King immediately signals maternal love as Marcéline’s defining characteristic by establishing her as a mammy figure with her appearance. By the time of “Monsieur Motte’s” publication, the mammy is an established figure with recognizable traits. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders identifies the mammy’s traditional appearance as a fundamental element of the figure. The mammy is usually overweight, broad-shouldered, and dark-skinned. She typically wears colorful clothes with a headscarf and apron (Wallace-Sanders 6). This description matches King’s characterization of Marcéline perfectly:

The green leaves formed a harmonious frame for the dark brown face, red and yellow *tignon*, and the large gold ear-rings hanging beneath two glossy *coques* of black wool. Her features were regular and handsome according to the African type, with a strong, sensuous expression, subdued but not obliterated. Her soft black eyes showed in their voluptuous depths intelligence and strength and protecting tenderness. Her stiff purple calico dress settled in defining folds about her portly limbs. A white kerchief was pinned over her untrammelled bosom; her large, full, supple, waist was encircled by the strings on her apron, which were tied in a careful bow at her side. (“Monsieur Motte” 58)

King intends for Marcéline’s appearance to reflect her personality traits, such as attentiveness and compassion. These qualities indicate Marcéline’s role as a caretaker, which simply reinforces that she is a mammy. Significantly, the narrator’s tone changes from informative to admiring when describing Marcéline’s maternal characteristics, suggesting white approval and respect for her role as a mammy. However, King also implies the passion associated with people of African descent lingers beneath the collected demeanor Marcéline displays. King elaborates, “her familiar, polite, gentle, servile manners were those contracted during a courtly life of dependent intimacy with superiors” (“Monsieur Motte” 58). Through contact with elite Creole society and proper training, Marcéline channels the passion King views as natural to people of African descent into socially acceptable manifestations of maternal love and care toward white girls and

women. Marcéline's neat and clean appearance represents white society's success in directing her into a productive role in service of white girls and women.

Marcéline fulfills the expected servile role of a mammy by working as a hairdresser for the Creole elite, including the staff and students at the Institute St. Denis. King describes Marcéline as "indispensable" to the school ("Monsieur Mote" 58). Zita Z. Dresner explains elite women depend on Marcéline's abilities to appear beautiful because this attractiveness helps maintain their high social and economic position (174). The importance of Marcéline's role at the school becomes clear when the students and staff are forced to appear disheveled at the graduation ceremony because she fails to arrive and fix their hair. However, Marcéline acts as more than a mere hairdresser. King adds as the school's hairdresser Marcéline was "the general *chargée d'affaires, confidente*, messenger, and advisor of teachers and scholars" ("Monsieur Motte" 58). She offers nurturance and guidance to the school's white girls and women, adding another characteristic of the mammy stereotype to Marcéline's character and furthering the school residents' dependence on Marcéline.

In her role as a hairdresser and caregiver, Marcéline exerts authority alongside maternalism. Dresner points out the elite white women's dependence on Marcéline gives her power, which she displays as self-confidence in her early interaction with Jeanne, the school's white, lower-class gatekeeper (174). By threatening to ring the headmistress's bell to gain entrance Marcéline forces Jeanne to admit her because "if carried out, would quickly reverse their relative positions... in the shape of a reprimand to Jeanne" (King "Monsieur Motte" 58). This interaction exemplifies the reciprocal nature of King's ideal maternal servant-mistress relationship. By providing care and performing tasks for the people at the Institute St. Denis, Marcéline gains some status from her association with the elite, which offers her authority in

certain social situations. Marcéline recognizes the authority her role at the school affords her, and she wields it as necessary. However, she only uses this authority in service to the school residents. For instance, she needs entrance into the school to bring Marie her dress for graduation (King “Monsieur Motte” 57). Since Marcéline invokes her authority to assist Marie, she practices maternal love and stays within the acceptable boundaries of a servant.

While King specifically commends the maternal love and care Marcéline shows Marie, King emphasizes her belief in Marcéline’s racial inferiority. King quickly establishes that Marcéline shares a closer relationship with Marie than the other school residents. As Marie waits for her first look at her graduation dress, King gives some insights into her thoughts, “Good, devoted, loyal as she was, Marcéline was not a mother – not her mother. She had stopped at the boundary where the mother ceases to be a physical and becomes a psychical necessity. The child still clung to Marcéline, but the young woman was motherless” (“Monsieur Motte” 63). As the adult closest to her, Marie views Marcéline as a mother figure. Marcéline performs all the typical duties of a mother for Marie. However, King emphasizes Marcéline can never truly fulfill the role of mother for Marie since the comfort Marcéline brings Marie remains limited. For example, Marie feels uncomfortable asking Marcéline about the overwhelming, confusing, and sensuous emotions she experiences as part of growing up (King “Monsieur Motte” 62-3). Marie’s discomfort demonstrates her awareness that their race and class cause her and Marcéline to occupy very different social positions. She also recognizes their social positions prescribe social rules of conduct that shape their interactions. By deeming it inappropriate to discuss her complex emotions about her impending womanhood, Marie reaffirms Marcéline’s inferior social position and views her as other. Nevertheless, Marcéline showers Marie with affection and nurturance. King describes the fervent hug Marcéline gives Marie, “She [Marie] felt that hands patting her

back and the lips presses against her hair, but she could not see the desperate, passionate, caressing eyes, ‘savoring’ her like the lips of an eager dog” (“Monsieur Motte” 64). Marcélite has an intense and unconditional love for Marie. However, King dehumanizes Marcélite by comparing her with an animal. Marcélite is the only black character and the only character in the story that King describes in relation to animals, suggesting the potential for a barbaric nature beneath her collected, maternal exterior.

In addition to the mammy stereotype, King romanticizes slavery through the maternalist relationship Marie’s family had with Marcélite. King reveals the maternal relationship between Marie’s family and Marcélite in Marcélite and Marie’s romantic backstory, which reflects popular American literature of the late nineteenth century. Blight explains American literary market of the 1880s and 1890s was characterized by sentimental literature about the Civil War and its aftermath (216). This literature typically features brave soldiers, sick people, families decimated by the war, and southerners losing their wealth. King includes all these tropes in Marcélite and Marie’s backstory. Marcélite explains Marie’s father died fighting in the Civil War and Marie’s mother died from illness clinging to her baby (King “Monsieur Motte” 93). This backstory makes Marie a tragic figure. Despite her faults and the problems that arise from secretly supporting Marie, King presents Marcélite as Marie’s hero because she embodies the faithful servant. King implies Marcélite’s devotion to Marie stems from the generous treatment Marcélite received from Marie’s family. Marcélite continues, “When my mother was sold out the parish, who took me and brought me up, and made me sleep at the foot of her bed, and fed me like her own baby, *hein?* Mamzelle Marie Viel’s mother [Marie’s grandmother], and Mamzelle [Marie’s mother] was the other baby; she nursed us like twins” (King “Monsieur Motte” 93). King depicts a maternal relationship between Marie’s grandmother and Marcélite, painting

Marie's grandmother as the benevolent slave mistress that protects and nurtures her slaves. King even presents Marie's grandmother as a kind of surrogate mother to Marcéline. Marcéline replicates this care and tenderness in her relationship with Marie. With Marcéline's backstory, King portrays slavery as a benign institution that benefitted black people. She imagines slavery as an opportunity for black people to gain skills that will make them productive members of society. Most importantly for King, slavery teaches black people to view their societal position as inferior to and in service of white people.

Marcéline's devotion to Marie and her self-abasement shows her acceptance of the racial hierarchy. Marcéline's degradation of herself always occurs in relation to her secretly funding Marie's education. She admits, "She's got no uncle—no Monsieur Motte! It was all a lie. It was me,—me a nigger that sent her to school and paid for her—" (King "Monsieur Motte" 92). Marcéline recognizes her position as a black woman limits the kind of care and life she can give Marie as a white child. In order to maintain Marie's elite status, Marcéline circumvents the social proprieties that restrict her ability to care for Marie with the creation of Monsieur Motte. Under the guise of Monsieur Motte, Marcéline produces and provides for Marie the proper background befitting a southern lady. She eventually discovers the shortsightedness of this solution and berates herself. The narrator previously points out Marcéline refers to herself as a "nigger" to "humiliate and insult herself" (King "Monsieur Motte" 68). By calling herself a racial slur, Marcéline affirms her inferior social position and distinguishes herself from Marie. She fears Marie experiencing social consequences, such as loss of status or humiliation, from being supported by a black woman. Marcéline also fears Marie's rejection. She pleads with Marie, "Speak to me just once! Pardon me, my little mistress! Pardon me! I did not know what I was doing; I am only a fool nigger, anyhow!" (King "Monsieur Motte" 92). Her fear of losing Marie

demonstrates the importance of the young white woman to Marcéline. She wants Marie to understand her actions and forgive her for deception, which shows Marcéline's longing for Marie's love and approval. Marcéline's desire for Marie's validation suggests her contentment with the existing racial hierarchy. She wants to continue serving and caring for Marie. In other words, Marcéline, representing King's ideal black woman, likes and accepts her subordinate role to white women. Marcéline believes her blackness justifies this inferior position. Viewing the flaws of her plan as resulting from the natural defects of her race, Marcéline associates blackness with incompetency.

However, Marcéline displays authority and ingenuity in adherence to the mammy stereotype. King states, "Marcéline could always manage her own affairs without the assistance of anyone. But her *bébé*, for whom she had distinctly prayed and burned candles, and confessed and communed, and worked and toiled, and kept straight!" (King "Monsieur Motte" 68). King characterizes Marcéline as strong, independent, intelligent, and industrious. She employs all these traits to physically and emotionally care for Marie. Marcéline's positive attributes generate much confusion and debate among scholars. Dresner considers Marcéline's exhibition of these qualities as contradictory to King's racist views (173-4). Jones explains this apparent contradiction by contending that King focuses on Marcéline's position as a woman. Marcéline's possession of favorable, feminine characteristics supports Jones's argument that Marcéline represents southern white women's oppression and King emotionally identifies with Marcéline (104-5). In contrast, Elfenbein does not find any dissonance between King's portrayal of Marcéline and her beliefs on race. Elfenbein believes funding Marie's education (which requires all the afore mentioned characteristics) raises Marcéline above "the stereotype of the devoted slave" (97). All these critics forget that King constructs Marcéline as a strong woman to provide for Marie. King's depiction

of Marcéline does not contradict her racism, make a statement about women's oppression, or defy racist stereotypes. Her characterization of Marcéline follows the recognizable features of the mammy stereotype. Wallace-Sanders explains the mammy typically exercises authority within the plantation household (6). M. M. Manring adds that the traditional mammy functions to support white southern womanhood and instructs their female charges to adhere to this idealized role (40). With Marcéline, King merely extends the mammy's authority into the postbellum era. While the plantation system has ended, Marcéline continues to hold and share knowledge about the social order and proper etiquette. By sending Marie to the Institute St. Denis, Marcéline facilitates Marie's development into a respectable southern woman. She says, "I wanted you [Marie] to go to the finest school with ladies" ("Monsieur Motte" 92). Marcéline implies her desire for Marie to become a southern lady, believing Marie would learn by example from other women and girls at the Institute St. Denis. While Marcéline exhibits strength and intelligence, she employs these characteristics in expected ways and remains within the confines of the mammy figure.

Marcéline's high reputation among the elite depends upon her ability to perform as a model servant. Whenever Marcéline deviates from the ideal servant or mammy, the white characters' opinions of Marcéline fall. For example, when Marcéline fails to appear and fix the school residents' hair, the students and staff lose all faith in her. Many students swear to never forgive Marcéline (King "Monsieur Motte" 82). They exhibit no concern for Marcéline's well-being, focusing only on being inconvenienced. Their lack of concern demonstrates their inability to comprehend Marcéline as a subject with individual desires or problems. Instead, they believe Marcéline exists only to serve their needs. Ironically, the audience knows severe emotional distress causes Marcéline's absence. While King only describes Marcéline's distress to show her

unwavering devotion to Marie, the juxtaposition reveals the racist ideology underlying the whole story. The headmistress, Madam Lareveillère's estimate of Marcélite also drops. When Jeanne tells Madam Lareveillère "It's a shame of that negress! She ought to be punished for it, too, ha! Not to come for that poor young lady last night... a delicate little nervous thing like that; and a great, big, fat, lazy, good-for-nothing quadroon like Marcélite," she does not reproach Jeanne (King "Monsieur Motte" 85). Madam Lareveillère even begins to repeat Jeanne's insult later (King "Monsieur Motte" 89). Both characters believe Marcélite's personal worth depends upon her work ethic and perfect results. Their treatment and opinion of Marcélite, as a black woman, relies on their perception of Marcélite's usefulness to them.

King views Marcélite's divergence from a faithful servant as her African traits overcoming acceptable behavior she learned through social interaction with her white superiors. Once Marcélite realizes her scheme must come to an end "her untamed African blood" has a "rebellion against the religion and civilization whose symbols were all about her in that dim and stately chamber [Madam Lareveillère's bedchamber]" (King "Monsieur Motte" 72). Containing expensive furniture and religious idols (King "Monsieur Motte" 71-2), Madam Lareveillère's bedchamber represents the modern and normative society Marcélite strives to emulate and participate in, even if only in a limited manner. King believes Marcélite's biological African characteristics conflict with the Institute St. Denis's civilized, white society, indicating Marcélite's social training taught her to suppress the savagery King associates with blackness. However, experiencing extreme distress over Marie's situation, Marcélite struggles with her natural and passionate impulses. She wants "to annihilate the miserable little weak devices of intelligence, and reassert the proud supremacy of brute force" (King "Monsieur Motte" 72). King shows that Marcélite temporarily gives into her barbaric tendencies. Toward the end of the story,

Jeanne triumphantly drags an almost unrecognizable Marcéline into Madam Lareveillère's private quarters. King says, "Her *tignon* had been dragged from her head. Her calico dress, torn and defaced, showed her skin in naked streaks. Her black wooly hair, always so carefully packed away under her head-kerchief, stood in grotesque masses around her face, scratched and bleeding like her exposed bosom" (King "Monsieur Motte" 91). This description of Marcéline starkly contrasts with her earlier neat appearance, displaying Marcéline's complete loss of control over herself. The tears in her dress and scratches on her skin suggest she used brute force on herself. In this instance, King presents Marcéline as uncivilized and overcome by her African passions. Marcéline is unable to channel her passion into a socially acceptable outlet. With this image of Marcéline, King demonstrates the behavior of African Americans without white guidance and warns against a social order that would cause this behavior.

King considers the care Marcéline gives Marie redemptive and reaffirms Marcéline's position as Marie's servile caregiver. In the story's closing paragraphs, Madame Lareveillère and Monsieur Goupilleau, Madame Lareveillère's trusted friend and love interest, declare themselves Marie's surrogate parents. Marcéline proves Marie's parentage and whiteness with her mother's family prayer book, containing locks of hair and certificates. The last description King gives of Marcéline shows Marie clutching the black woman's hand after pulling the prayer book from her dress (King "Monsieur Motte" 94-5). Jones interprets the ending of "Monsieur Motte" as "creating a community of feeling" that exceeds class or race (106). Expanding upon this argument, Joan Dejean contends the white characters "welcome... the quadroon born a slave into the camp of the southerners" (119). She believes King suggests Creoles begin to expand their definition of Creole to include people of interracial ancestry (Dejean 119). However, Dejean forgets that King racializes Creoles as white. She also ignores how King constructs the

relationships between the characters at the end of the story. As Coleman points out King creates a nuclear family that closely “mirrors the antebellum family in structure” (52). The new family of Marie, Madame Lareveillère, and Monsieur Goupilleau includes Marcélite in a traditional and subservient role. Monsieur Goupilleau says, “Nothing is wanting here, – nothing, nothing except the forgiveness of this good woman, and the assurances of our love and gratitude” (King “Monsieur Motte” 95). Once Marcélite explains the reason for her erratic behavior and proves Marie’s whiteness, Monsieur Goupilleau views Marcélite’s actions as reasonable and even heroic. He values Marcélite’s devotion to Marie. By offering her love and gratitude in return, Monsieur Goupilleau assures Marcélite of a role in their new family and in Marie’s life. However, his use of “our” is exclusionary, limiting Marcélite’s role to a subordinate caregiver. In other words, Marcélite remains a mammy figure.

Contemporary reviews of *Monsieur Motte* suggest King’s depiction of Marcélite conforms to late nineteenth-century American society’s white supremacist beliefs. King’s contemporary critics find Marcélite a favorable and accurate representation of African Americans. For example, in the June 1892 issue of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, the “Editor’s Study” praises King’s realistic portrayal of New Orleans Creoles and African Americans.² The author says, “There was no question here of the truth of dialect or the external characterizations of race” (156). By using King’s portrayal of African Americans as one of the only examples to demonstrate the accuracy of her representation of Creole society, this reviewer recognizes the significance of blackness to Marcélite’s character. Furthermore, the reviewer

² Robert Bush attributes this review to William Dean Howells in his brief introduction to “Monsieur Motte” in the anthology of Grace King’s work. However, Xavier Baron explains Howells’s contract with *Harper’s* for “The Editor’s Study” expired in 1891, which calls Bush’s attribution of this review to Howells into question. King’s friend, Charles Dudley Warner succeeded Howells as the author of “The Editor’s Study.” Warner also could have authored the review and possibly with the intention to promote a friend’s work.

accepts the racist assumptions King makes about black women, such as their sensuous appearance and barbaric nature, as fact. The reviewer's casual acceptance of the racist assumptions constructing Marcélite's character indicates the existence and circulation of these and similar beliefs throughout American society in the late nineteenth century. Henry N. Snyder takes the acceptance of King's racist doctrine a step further, celebrating the relationship between Marcélite and Marie. He calls Marcélite a "freedwoman before the law of man, but bondswoman still under God's higher law of love" (284). Snyder understands the love and care Marcélite shows Marie as replicating the role of an enslaved woman. While I view the depiction of the relationship between Marcélite and Marie as racist and romanticized, Snyder's reference to a higher power suggests he commends Marcélite's love for Marie and exalts the position this love produces for Marcélite. In short, Snyder praises King's reproduction of the antebellum era's racial hierarchy. Significantly, both the anonymous critic and Snyder express admiration at King's portrayal of African Americans. Their positive reactions counter feminist critics' claims that King challenges racial norms.

King revisits the issue of race relations following the Civil War in her most blatantly racist story, "A Crippled Hope." "A Crippled Hope" is the eighth story in King's second short story collection, *Balcony Stories*. The collection's introductory sketch, "The Balcony" establishes the balcony in summertime as a gathering place for women to talk and exchange stories after putting their children to bed. Presumably, the women on the balcony tell the short stories that follow. Bush explains the stories that comprise *Balcony Stories* originally appeared in *Century Magazine* as a series between 1892 and 1893. The Century Company later published the stories together in the collection, *Balcony Stories* at the end of 1893. Bush calls the collection "relatively popular," which lead to reprintings of the collection in 1914 and 1925 (*Grace King*

142). *Balcony Stories* remains King's most popular work among literary critics. The sketches in *Balcony Stories* are among King's most anthologized and discussed work. Many critics consider the collection King's best work.³ In comparison to other stories in the collection, such as "The Little Convent Girl," "A Crippled Hope" receives relatively little attention among scholars. "A Crippled Hope" recounts the life of little Mammy, a black woman enslaved by a slave trader. She nurses other enslaved people to prepare them for the auction block and dreams of being sold to a white family with children to love and nurture. Following emancipation, little Mammy has no one to care for and loses her sense of purpose. She eventually finds herself staying at a rural parish deeply affected by the Civil War, moving between the numerous white households in need of her care and assistance. In this story, King's use of the mammy stereotype becomes more obvious than in "Monsieur Motte" because she names the protagonist "little Mammy." After revealing the protagonist's name, King adds, "that was the name of her nature" ("A Crippled Hope" 106). King references the association between the mammy figure and a nurturing disposition. She places little Mammy within this tradition, making her proclivity to care for other people her defining characteristic.

King immediately introduces little Mammy as a caregiver of white women and children. The narrator, a white woman from the balcony, begins by asking her audience to imagine a bleak room of a sleeping baby and their restless mother, kept awake by their uncertain circumstances. She describes the comfort this woman feels of meeting "those little black, steadfast, all-seeing eyes; to feel those smooth, soft, all-soothing hands; to hear, across one's sleep, that three-footed step - the flat-soled left foot, the tiptoe right, and the padded end of the broomstick; and when

³ David Kirby and James Nagel are especially laudatory. Both consider *Balcony Stories* an artistic achievement.

one is so wakeful and restless and thought-driven, to have another's story given" (King "A Crippled Hope" 105-6). This initial description of little Mammy identifies her as the disabled person referenced in the story's title and the ideal caregiver. She appears to intuitively know when people require her services and comes without being called. She offers physical comfort with her gentle hands and mental consolation through the emotional labor of sharing her life story. This early description of little Mammy seems initially vague. It focuses solely on the physical attributes associated with actions that provide other people with care. Thus, King presents little Mammy as a one-dimensional character with her ability to nurture people and her relationship with the people in her care forming the basis of her identity.

Due to her caring nature, King considers little Mammy an atypical black person. As Coleman explicates, "Little Mammy's goodness is defined largely in contrast to the negatively portrayed blacks around her" (37-8). King portrays black people negatively by making multiple racist generalizations about them. For example, she explains "negroes always would steal medicines" (King "A Crippled Hope" 114), implying that all black people are thieves. King reserves her most staunch and racist criticism for black mothers, calling them "careless" ("A Crippled Hope" 113). King goes on to explain black infants risk being smothered by sleeping "heavy, inert impending mother forms" at night ("A Crippled Hope" 113). This passage exemplifies her characterization of black mothers as lazy, selfish, and unfeeling. Robison points out the image of black children endangered by their mothers starkly contrasts with the scenes from "The Balcony" of white children sleeping peacefully near their conversing mothers (67). Through depicting black people as incapable of demonstrating love or responsibility for their children, King implies they are emotionally and morally inferior to white people. Little Mammy remains the exception to the generalizations King makes. Little Mammy cares for the sick and

injured enslaved people, applying appropriate portions of medicine to the enslaved peoples' ills. Little Mammy also protects the black children from their sleeping mothers, pacing the room all night to reposition any child in danger (King "A Crippled Hope" 113-4). King reveals little Mammy's caring disposition stems from her own mother's mistreatment of her. Little Mammy's mother dropped her and caused her disability, which made little Mammy undesirable on the slave market. King says, "All the animosity of which little Mammy was capable centered upon this unknown but never-to-be-forgotten mother of hers; out of this hatred had grown her love—that is, her destiny, a woman's love being her destiny. Little Mammy's love was for children" ("A Crippled Hope" 106). King identifies little Mammy's capacity to love and care for other people, particularly children, as the characteristic that redeems her from the negative qualities King associates with blackness. She views little Mammy's nurturing disposition as a feminine trait other black women lack. King gives little Mammy these feminine virtues to make her a heroic and sympathetic character.

While King shows little Mammy sympathy, she reiterates that little Mammy occupies an inferior social position as a black woman and caregiver. For instance, Stéphanie Durrans points out King makes some sympathetic statements about little Mammy that connect her circumstances to all women's struggles. She claims, "Despite a number of invidious thrusts directed against blacks, King's treatment of Little Mammy cuts across racial barriers to emphasize a sense of sisterhood between all women" and "suggests King's ambition to address the plight of all Southern women, irrespective of their race, class, age, or ethnic origin" (Durrans 193).⁴ However, Durrans neglects to discuss the context within which King expresses sympathy for

⁴ Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse make a similar claim in *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*. See Chapter 9. Pages 290-4.

little Mammy. Directly before the passage Durrans cites, King suggests little Mammy experiences loneliness and disappointment because of her undesirability on the slave market. She explains “All [the other enslaved people] were marketable, all were bought and sold, all passed in one door and out the other - all except her, little Mammy” (King “A Crippled Hope” 115). When King connects little Mammy’s experience to the oppression of all women, she expresses pity for her disability and inability to be sold to a “good” white family. Significantly, King’s pity does not stem from little Mammy’s status as an enslaved person. She only laments little Mammy does not have a position serving white people. King’s limited sympathy suggests she views little Mammy’s enslavement as an appropriate position for her.

King also uses physical markers to emphasize little Mammy’s role as a caregiver. As with *Marcélite*, little Mammy’s physical appearance adheres to many of the traditional features associated with the mammy stereotype. Wallace-Sanders considers exaggerated physical features among the most recognizable characteristics of the mammy figure (5). King relies on exaggerated physical traits in her production of little Mammy’s appearance. She describes little Mammy as “full-sized only in width, her growth having been hampered as to height by an injury to her hip, which had lamed her, pulling her figure awry, and burdening her with a protuberance of the joint” (King “A Crippled Hope” 106). In short, little Mammy is overweight, short, and unattractive. She also suffers from a noticeable disfigurement. Each characteristic exemplifies how King overly dramatizes little Mammy’s physical features. She also stresses little Mammy’s African ancestry and blackness. King calls little Mammy “pure African,” but she points out little Mammy’s skin color is “bronze rather than pure black” (“A Crippled Hope” 106). While the lighter skin color diverges from the usual image of the mammy, the emphasis on little Mammy’s parentage suggests King believes most black women look alike. In other words, King

inadvertently admits she uses generalizations and stereotypes to create her black characters. Little Mammy's clothing adheres to the typical appearance of the mammy stereotype as well. Like Marcélite, little Mammy ties a kerchief around her head and wears an apron. However, unlike Marcélite, little Mammy's clothing comes from burlap and linsey-woolsey rags (King "A Crippled Hope" 112). While the kerchief and apron indicate little Mammy's role as a caregiver, the used material of her clothes indicate her poverty and poor relationship with the slave trader.

King greatly criticizes the slave trader's treatment of little Mammy and his rejection of the maternalist/paternalist principles she associates with slave owning. She presents the slave trader as a man without morals. Describing his early attempts to sell little Mammy, King states, "Nothing equaled a negro-trader's will and power for fraud, except the hereditary distrust and watchfulness which it bred" ("A Crippled Hope" 109). The slave trader's attempts to pass little Mammy as the child or sibling of another enslaved person demonstrates his greed and selfishness. Through her criticism of the slave trader, King also condemns the entire slave trade as immoral, suggesting his involvement with the slave trade causes him to develop dubious morals. After the slave trader realizes the high value of little Mammy's skills as a caretaker and refuses to sell her, King's condemnation of him and the slave trade becomes more direct. She later comments "The negro-trader - like hangmen, negro-traders are fitted by nature for their profession - it came into his head - he had no heart, not even a negro-trader's heart - that it would be more judicious to seclude her during these shopping visits" (King "A Crippled Hope" 118-9). King describes the slave trader as heartless, only caring about his own money and power. Since she considers this disposition as appropriate for someone involved in the slave trade, King acknowledges the cruelty of the practice. Furthermore, unlike the idealized relationship between Marie and Marcélite in "Monsieur Motte," the slave trader holds no affection for little Mammy.

By not treating little Mammy well, the slave trader diverges from King's notion of the idealized, benevolent slave owner. While he profits from the care little Mammy provides other enslaved people, the slave trader gives little Mammy nothing in return. He simply abandons her when Union soldiers and Emancipation arrives. King describes little Mammy's distress, "Free, she was free! But she had not hoped for freedom... More than ever she grieved, as she crept down the street, that she had never mounted the auctioneer's block. An ownerless free negro! She knew no one whose duty it was to help her" ("A Crippled Hope" 121-2). Through the perspective of little Mammy, King crafts the image of a slave owner as duty bound to provide the people they enslave with guidance and assistance. She suggests a benevolent slave owner develops an emotional connection with the people they enslave. Clearly, the slave trader does not meet this expectation, leaving little Mammy to dream of a respectable white family purchasing her.

Through little Mammy's desire to belong to a white family, King emphasizes maternalism in the romanticized image she constructs of the Antebellum South. She portrays little Mammy's enslavement to the slave trader as diverging from the usual conditions of slavery, describing the plantation as a place of leisure and excitement with a benevolent slave owner. King explains, "Remember that she could hear of the outside world daily from the passing chattels - of the plantations, farms, families; the green fields, Sunday woods, running streams; the camp-meetings, corn-shuckings, cotton-pickings, sugar-grindings; the baptisms, marriages, funerals, prayer-meetings; the holidays and holy days" ("A Crippled Hope" 117). Since little Mammy hears about these events from other enslaved people, King implies enslaved people are regularly active participants in these festivities with extensive time for entertainment and rest. King's representation of an Antebellum plantation minimizes the violence of slavery and the enslaved peoples' labor that made these events possible. By including enslaved people in the

activities of white families, King also suggests most enslavers form close bonds with the people they enslave. She shows little Mammy craving this relationship with potential owners. Little Mammy feels particularly drawn to the frail white women with children, envisioning herself nursing the sick women and rearing their children (King "A Crippled Hope" 117-8). Little Mammy's dream of belonging to a white family stems from her seemingly innate nurturing personality. Her skills as a caregiver makes her an ideal enslaved servant. King adds, "Not a lady of that kind saw her face but wanted her, yearned for her, pleaded for her, coming back secretly to slip silver, and sometimes gold pieces into her hand, patting her turbaned head, calling her 'little Mammy' too" ("A Crippled Hope" 118). In addition to reinforcing little Mammy's worth as a servant, King again shows an enslaved person's service and devotion rewarded with praise and affection. She continues to present close, reciprocal bonds between an enslaved woman and her "mistress" as normal and valuable.

However, King's shift at the end from little Mammy's perspective to the perspective of the white women she cares for shows this close maternal bond remains hierarchal. After Union soldiers drive Little Mammy away from the slave trader's pen, she wanders aimlessly until stumbling upon a sick white woman. She begins "progressing from patient to patient" eventually stopping at "a little town, a kind of refuge for soldiers' wives and widows" because "always, as in the pen, some emergency of pain and illness held her" (King "A Crippled Hope" 123). Significantly, little Mammy finally has the opportunity to use her skills and devote herself to caring for white women. However, the white women's needs appear to take precedence over little Mammy's wellbeing. King even likens little Mammy's new situation to the slave trader's pen, implying little Mammy becomes enslaved to the needs of white women. King also never states little Mammy's feelings or opinions about her life after emancipation, leaving the audience

to infer little Mammy experiences contentment based on her previous desires. Instead, King focuses on the feelings of comfort little Mammy brings the white women. King says, “The poor, poor women of that stricken region say that little Mammy was the only alleviation God left them after Sheridan passed through” (“A Crippled Hope” 123). King’s sympathy shifts to the white women, making the relief and care little Mammy provides them the focus. In a story about little Mammy, her emotions and desires become insignificant at the end. By changing the focus from little Mammy to white women’s hardships and emotions, King reiterates little Mammy’s subordinate social position to white women.

In “Monsieur Motte” and “A Crippled Hope,” King protests the social changes of Emancipation and reinscribes black women into inferior social positions reflective of slavery through maternalism. Maternalism encompasses King’s concern for women, the feminine virtues she values, and her belief in black women’s inferiority. King engages in maternalism by using the mammy stereotype to construct black women characters. Both Marcélite and little Mammy share the fundamental characteristics of the mammy figure, including the recognizable appearance, caregiving skills, and devotion to white women and children. Through the use of this stereotype, King continues to espouse maternalist ideology in her romanticized portrayal of the relationship between black domestic workers and the white women they serve. She depicts black and white women as having a close emotional and reciprocal bond during and after slavery. Since being a servant creates affectionate relationships with white women and makes black women productive members of society, King presents this subservient social position as beneficial and desirable for black women.

The premise of King’s stories is deeply racist. Her use of stock characters dehumanizes black people, depicting them as one-dimensional and reliant on the benevolence of white people.

Similarly, her idealized portrayal of the relationship between black and white women distorts the racial violence of slavery and Reconstruction. These themes serve as distinctive attributes of the Lost Cause. When scholars venerate King's work for creating interracial communities between women, they overlook King's racism and misrepresent her work. Most importantly, they perpetuate her racism and the harm it causes people of color. These problems with King scholarship exemplify a larger pattern of overemphasizing gender and ignoring uncomfortable subjects within the scholarship of women writers. In order to construct a more thorough interpretation of women writers and their works, scholars must address difficult subject matter in relation to gender issues. For King, scholars must acknowledge her racism and further explore the significant role it plays in her work. On a larger scale, literary critics need to create and adopt an intersectional feminist methodology. Scholars will only be able to develop a complex and accurate study of women's literature by stopping their glorification of particular writers and exploring multiple dimensions of a writer's work together.

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EDNA PONTELLIER'S HIDDEN SELF: THE QUEER POSSIBILITIES OF *THE*
AWAKENING

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is widely understood as a feminist classic due to the protagonist, Edna Pontellier's defiance of gender roles through her search for sexual and spiritual fulfilment outside of her responsibilities as a wife and mother. However, a solely feminist approach to the novel risks overlooking heterosexuality as an oppressing institution. Since heterosexuality and gender are related institutions, I propose expanding upon feminist interpretations of *The Awakening* with a queer analysis. A queer approach to *The Awakening* reveals Edna's resistance to heterosexuality through untraditional sexual interactions. The pleasure Edna experiences from her non-normative sexual engagements with women and the ocean cause her to develop an awareness of her own desires and subsequently a queer subjectivity. As a queer subject, Edna repeatedly challenges heteronormative expectations and rejects heteronormativity altogether with her suicide.

By using queer theory to analyze *The Awakening*, I do not intend to suggest feminist interpretations of the novel are incorrect. I simply want to add a queer perspective to provide another layer to feminist interpretations of the novel. While queer theory emerges, in part, from feminist theory, feminism does not emphasize sexuality as a category for interrogation like queer theory. Since Edna's growing awareness of her sexuality is central to the plot of *The Awakening* and some of her desires are non-normative, I contend the application of queer theory can add a new perspective to Edna's character development by focusing on her evolving sexual and spiritual desires. However, my approach to queer theory remains heavily influenced by feminism. A thorough analysis of sexuality must include gender because an individual's gender

impacts the way society interprets their sexuality and vice versa. Therefore, I discuss the constraints Edna's sexuality and gender creates for her while, at times, critiquing scholars' tendency to approach *The Awakening* through a singular framework at the detriment of constructing a multi-faceted interpretation of the novel.

The term "queer" has a long and tumultuous history. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies the earliest use of "queer" as an adjective, meaning "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric" and "of questionable character; suspicious, dubious" ("Queer, adj.1). The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows over time the meaning of "queer" expanded. In the nineteenth century, people also used "queer" as a transitive verb with the definition becoming "to cause (a person) to feel queer; to disconcert, perturb, unsettle" ("Queer, v.2). By the end of the nineteenth century, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records "queer" as referring to a homosexual, especially in a derogatory way ("Queer, n.2). All these definitions of "queer" were in circulation at the time of *The Awakening*'s publication in 1899. Meg-John Barker and Jules Scheele explains the term "queer" evolved again in the 1980s when people in the LGBTQ+ community began reclaiming the word to positively identify themselves based on their non-normative sexualities or genders. Now "queer" often operates as an umbrella term to describe anyone that is not heterosexual or cisgender. Barker and Scheele point out this use of "queer" directly contrasts with queer theory, which aims to challenge stable identity categories and the binaries that create such categories (10-3). Annamarie Jagose explains queer theory emerged in the early 1990s, developing from a lesbian and gay studies' reconfiguration of identity as an assemblage of multiple, unstable positions. In this context, "queer" refers to the analytical approaches and methods that actively demonstrates the instability and destabilizes the relationship between sex, gender, and sexual desire (2-3). Jagose later summarizes "queer" as a "resistance to whatever constitutes the

normal” (99). This definition matches Barker and Scheele’s conceptualization of “queer” as a verb, describing it as an act of resistance against the normal (14).

The interpretation of “queer” as a verb serves as the premise for my use of the term throughout this paper. While I understand “queer” as a verb, its relationship as a descriptor of sexual and gender identity also heavily informs my use of the term because I focus on resistance to heterosexuality as an institution. I also rely heavily on queer theory in my analysis of *The Awakening*. Following queer theory’s rejection of stable categories, I do not use queer to delineate Edna’s or any other characters’ identity. However, I will, at times, use “queer” as an adjective to characterize Edna’s and other characters’ behavior as subversive to heteronormativity or as odd and scandalous in the context of the nineteenth century. Michael Warner defines heteronormativity as “heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society” (8). Stevi Jackson explains heterosexuality is a gender relationship that impacts every sphere of life, including the sexual, domestic, and extradomestic (44). Thus, heteronormativity presents the basic assumptions of heterosexuality, such as the male/female gender binary and each gender’s attraction to the opposition sex, as the organizing principles of society. Heteronormativity also describes these principles in practice. By using “queer” to describe Edna (or any other character), I simply and concisely emphasize that her behavior deviates from both the heterosexual and sometimes homosexual standards. Rather than assign a label to describe Edna’s identity, I want to understand how her resistance to heteronormativity and her subversive actions contribute to her personal development.

While multiple critics identify moments or characters in *The Awakening* as queer, the relationship between queerness and Edna’s evolving subjectivity remains largely unexamined. Kathryn Lee Seidel is among the earliest critics to comment on queerness in *The Awakening*. She

argues that Mademoiselle Reisz embodies the stereotypical characteristics of a nineteenth century lesbian (Seidel 200). While Seidel explains how reading Mademoiselle Reisz as a lesbian undermines Edna's heterosexual relationships, she ultimately concludes "Edna manifests her sexuality heterosexually" (214). Mary Biggs also views *The Awakening* as disruptive to heterosexuality and cisgenderism. She argues Chopin "writes from a subtle, sensitive, integrative, radical perspective on gender and sexuality that I have termed a 'gay/transgendered sensibility'" (173). While she contends Robert Lebrun, Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna, and some minor characters exhibit qualities that question "traditional assumptions about gender and especially about sexuality" (Biggs 145), she fails to consistently demonstrate how reconceptualizing these characters through a gay/transgendered sensibility significantly impacts and changes interpretations of the novel. For example, Biggs considers Edna "capable of responding physically to a woman and of loving women" (171), but she stops short of connecting this characteristic to the novel's plot. In other words, Biggs does not connect Edna's non-normative sexual desires and later the expressions of her desires to her personal growth.

Elizabeth LeBlanc comes the closest to exploring queerness and Edna's developing subjectivity. She examines "the presence of lesbian motifs and manifestations" in relation to Edna's "attempts to establish a subjective identity" (289). However, LeBlanc does not view Edna as queer, considering her a metaphorical lesbian that "engages in a variety of woman-identified practices that suggest but stop short of sexual encounters" (290). LeBlanc contends Edna's non-normative actions "anticipate methods of subjective reconstruction advocated" by later lesbian theorists, including Audre Lorde, Bonnie Zimmerman, Adrienne Rich, Teresa de Lauretis, and Monique Wittig (293). By focusing on how Edna exemplifies theoretical concepts, LeBlanc, like Biggs, sometimes neglects to elucidate what understanding Edna as a lesbian adds to the novel.

For instance, LeBlanc connects Lorde's configuration of the erotic to Edna swimming, painting, and listening to music (303), but she does not explain how these actions contribute to Edna's character development. Furthermore, since LeBlanc categorizes Edna as a lesbian, she limits her scope of analysis to Edna's erotic experiences between women. LeBlanc's focus on Edna as a lesbian causes her to overlook other queer instances of the erotic, such as Edna's steadily increasing regard for her bodily pleasure and autonomy alongside the sexual stimulation caused by music and the ocean.

Contemporary reviews of *The Awakening* identify multiple elements outside the realm of social acceptability that cause its audience discomfort, suggesting late nineteenth century American society also found the novel and its protagonist queer. While the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* calls the novel "flawless art," the author concedes the subject matter is indecent. The review says, "there is much that is very improper in it, not to say positively unseemly" (from The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*). The review goes on to focus on Edna's actions and state of mind, implying the novel's impropriety stems from her. The reviewer views Edna as "discontented" with her life and unable to find comfort in her children "for she was not a mother woman and didn't feel that loving babies was the whole duty of a woman" (from The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*). Instead, Edna "let sensation occupy a vacant life" (from The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*). Sensation delicately refers to Edna's expression of her sexuality outside of her marriage and social norms. While the reviewer is not unsympathetic toward Edna, they still view Edna's behavior as disgraceful. The reviewer also sees a connection between Edna's sexual expression and her rejection of gender roles. Through an analysis of early sexologists' works, Nikki Sullivan demonstrates people in the late nineteenth century believed women with deviant sexualities had masculine characteristics (11). By dissolving herself of the responsibility of her children's

welfare and asserting control of her sexuality, Edna displays personality traits associated with masculinity, which contemporary readers found appalling. Given the association between non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, some contemporary readers possibly thought Edna resists both. The *New Orleans Times-Democrat* also condemns Edna for failing “to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion.” In other words, Edna’s disregard for gender roles and open sexual expression disturbs Chopin’s contemporary audiences.

Chopin uses “queer” three times in *The Awakening* as an adjective to subtly characterize people as strange and possibly deviant. Contending that “queer” was oral slang in the late nineteenth century and Chopin knew multiple people that would be considered queer today, Biggs suggests Chopin saw a relationship between “queer,” sex, and sexuality. Biggs also finds Chopin’s sole use of “queer” in association with Madame Lebrun, Robert, and Mademoiselle Reisz significance because she believes those characters live on the margins of respectable Creole society (150). Chopin first uses “queer” to describe the bedroom of Madame Lebrun, the owner of the Grande Isle resort and mother of Robert: “It was situated at the top of the house, made up of odd angles and a queer, sloping ceiling” (66). While this deployment of “queer” appears straightforward and mundane, Biggs suggests Chopin uses the term to emphasize Madame Lebrun’s separation from the other summer residents at Grand Isle. Biggs points out Madame Lebrun spends all of her free time in her bedroom (165). In other words, Madame Lebrun literally spends her time in a queer space. Biggs believes the physical space Madame Lebrun inhabits reflects the social position she inhabits. She emphasizes Madame Lebrun’s refusal to remarry and economic independence, which sets her apart from most of the women on Grand Isle (Biggs 165). Therefore, Madame Lebrun deviates from the typical position of women

in the novel. Chopin's second use of "queer" refers to Mexico in a summarization of a conversation between Mr. Pontellier and Edna. She says, "Mr. Pontellier found altogether natural [Robert's attitude] in a young fellow about to seek fortune and adventure in a strange, queer country" (Chopin 96). In this instance, "queer" describes Mexico as a strange, foreign, and exotic place. Shana M. Salinas explains Mexico's association with the foreign and exotic causes the country to serve as a physical and imaginative space of alternative possibilities beyond the racial and gender boundaries of Creole society for Robert and Edna (41; 45). Appearing to view a connection between "queer," Mexico, and Robert, Biggs suggests Chopin uses "queer" to imply Robert is gay (150).

The last appearance of "queer" in *The Awakening* has a clear sexual connotation. Chopin's final use of "queer" comes from Edna discussing Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna says, "She says queer things sometimes" (Chopin 138). The queer instance Edna refers to occurs when Mademoiselle Reisz wraps her arms around Edna and feels her shoulder blades to determine if Edna's wings are strong enough "to soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice" (Chopin 138). Seidel believes this moment contains homosexual undertones similar to the sexual interaction Edna shares with Alcée Arobin, the man she has a sexual affair with, when she interrupts his attempts to seduce her to talk about Mademoiselle Reisz. Seidel implies these exchanges demonstrate Edna's openness to receiving hetero- and homosexual advances (212). Furthermore, Chopin indicates Mademoiselle Reisz views Edna as a kindred soul for her defiance of social norms. By using the word queer to describe Mademoiselle Reisz's contemplation about Edna's ability to withstand social pressure and isolation, Chopin appears to share Mademoiselle Reisz's assessment of Edna as queer.

Chopin depicts women as active participants in heteronormativity's construction and preservation. Chopin implies Edna learns the heteronormative expectations of women from her older sister, Margaret. Due to their mother's death, Margaret "assumed matronly and housewifely responsibilities" young (Chopin 61). Therefore, Margaret serves as Edna's earliest model for idealized womanhood and impresses upon Edna the importance of conforming to heteronormativity. Social pressure also causes Edna to internalize and submit to heteronormative expectations. Chopin's "mother-women" fill Grand Isle the summer Edna visits. They exemplify heteronormativity's influence on gender roles, and Edna constantly compares herself to them at the beginning of the novel. Mother-women "idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 51). The ideal woman's identity stems from her role as mother and wife. "Ministering angels" emphasize women's role as caregivers and indicate mother-women encourage other women to follow their example.

Chopin uses Edna's close friend, Adèle Ratignolle, to demonstrate normative heterosexual practices and the relationship of heterosexuality to the configuration of the mother-woman. While Chopin develops Adèle's character as the novel progresses, she introduces Adèle as "the embodiment" of the mother-woman (51). Chopin quickly adds that Adèle frequently gets pregnant and experiences her fourth pregnancy during the novel's events (52), which emphasizes the importance of reproduction to the role of mother-woman. Adèle's constant pregnancies also indicates she regularly has heterosexual sex. Thomas Piontek explains Western societies appraise heterosexual sex practices, especially if monogamous, reproductive, coupled, and domestic, as good and natural (82). By disclosing Adèle's sexual practices through a description of her pregnancies, Chopin indicates Adèle practices natural and normative sex. Since Chopin describes

Adèle as an ideal woman, she uses Adèle to show a heteronormative society limits women's sexual activity to reproductive purposes. Women should not engage in sexual intercourse for pleasure or pursue sexual activity outside of their marriage. In this respect, Adèle's normative sexual activities largely serve as a foil to the deviant sexual practices Edna develops.

The opening chapter of *The Awakening* shows Edna's entrapment in heteronormativity through the objectifying gaze of her husband. Chopin focalizes most of the novel through Edna's perspective, calling attention to the few instances Chopin chooses to focalize information through other characters. By focalizing information through Mr. Pontellier, Chopin emphasizes his critical attitude toward his wife. For example, he denounces Edna's decision to visit the beach during the day. Complaining about Edna's sunburn, Mr. Pontellier looks "at his wife as one looks at a value piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 44). Mr. Pontellier views his wife as a possession that contributes to his high status. Therefore, he treats her as an object to control, expressing annoyance at Edna's display of personal autonomy. Edna's engagement and wedding rings symbolize her husband's power and control over her life. As Edna enjoys the beach with Robert, Mr. Pontellier keeps her wedding ring in his pocket (Chopin 45). The short time without her rings represent the freedom available to Edna outside of heteronormativity. During this brief reprieve from her husband's authority and the pressure to conform to his desires, Edna acts without her husband's approval and enjoys herself. Upon her return, Edna slips the rings back on her fingers (Chopin 45), signaling her adherence to her husband's authority and heteronormativity.

While Edna originally accepts women's traditional roles, she still feels stifled by the heteronormative expectations for women. Mr. Pontellier often produces Edna's unhappiness by suggesting women exist for the pleasure and comfort of other people. Returning late from an

evening of drinking and gambling, Mr. Pontellier wakes his wife and children. He also convinces himself their son, Raoul, needs tending and demands Edna sees to Raoul's needs. When Edna insists Raoul is fine, Mr. Pontellier reproaches her for "her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" (Chopin 48). Mr. Pontellier shows again he expects immediate obedience from Edna and considers the children's welfare her sole responsibility at the expense of her own welfare. Mr. Pontellier's attitudes reinforce the heteronormative power relations between genders and the gendered division of labor, limiting Edna's ability to prioritize her needs and conceptualize herself as a subject. After checking on Raoul, Edna cannot sleep and cries on the cottage's front porch for reasons "she could not have told" (Chopin 49). Chopin adds Mr. Pontellier's tirades "were not uncommon in her married life" (49). The regularity of these interactions in their marriage delineates Mr. Pontellier as a common enforcer of the heteronormative social order. More importantly, the frequency of Mr. Pontellier's outbursts prevent Edna from conceptualizing his actions as harmful or imagining an alternative to heteronormativity. Furthermore, Edna cannot comprehend her own emotions and responses to Mr. Pontellier's hostility because she is so accustomed to her husband berating her. Chopin elaborates "An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her [Edna's] consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish... It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting fate... She was just having a good cry all to herself" (49). Edna's growing awareness of herself, her emotions, and her desires allows her to fully experience the hurt and sadness Mr. Pontellier's actions cause. While she remains unable to completely comprehend or articulate her thoughts, she begins to realize marriage and motherhood circumscribe her happiness and individual self.

Built on a mutual respect and feminine love, the close friendship Edna develops with Adèle Ratignolle constitutes an alternative to heteronormative relationships. Chopin describes their friendship as “the subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love” (58). She implies the sympathy underlying Edna and Adèle’s friendship stem from their shared experiences as women. Describing a morning together on the beach, Chopin says, “they had escaped from Robert,” the man Edna later has a romantic affair with (58). The word “escape” suggests both women want a reprieve from men’s company, authority, and the gendered duties they undertake in men’s presence. Thus, Edna and Adèle value female companionship, finding support and empowerment not necessarily available in their relationships with men. Their friendship reflects Adrienne Rich’s lesbian continuum. Rich coins the term to discuss women-identified experiences beyond the desire for or experience of sexual interactions with another woman. She defines the lesbian continuum as “the primary intensity between and among women” that includes “the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, [and] the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (51). With the lesbian continuum, Rich emphasizes some homosocial relationships between women resist heteronormativity by providing women opportunities for fulfillment outside of the limited roles heteronormativity requires for women. The intimacy, sympathy, and support in these relationships extend beyond traditional friendships without necessarily becoming romantic or sexual while generating an inner feminine strength and contributing to personal growth. Apart from offering political support, Adèle contributes to Edna’s personal growth in all these ways.

By serving as a feminine confidante for Edna to share and process her thoughts and emotions with, Adèle encourages Edna to recognize her desires and build her conception of self. Significantly, Edna realizes the pull the ocean holds over her in Adèle’s company. When Adèle

asks Edna what she thinks about while staring at the ocean, Adèle forces Edna to organize and articulate her thoughts. Edna says, “made me think... of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass... She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now” (Chopin 60). The ocean symbolizes freedom for Edna. It reminds her of a moment in her childhood when she simply existed outside of anyone’s control. In that moment, Edna focuses only on the joy running through the tall grass brought her. Thus, the ocean reminds Edna of her desire to dismiss authority and focus on her own pleasure. Edna also recognizes voicing her thoughts about the ocean to Adèle causes her to understand her fascination with the ocean. She needs Adèle’s query to make sense of the thoughts and emotions that previously confused her alone on the beach. At Adèle’s prompting, Edna elaborates, “Likely as not it was Sunday... and I was running away from prayers, from the Presbyterian service, read in a spirit of gloom by my father that chills me yet to think of” (Chopin 60). By mentioning the Presbyterian Church and her father, Edna implies the societal expectations and roles she wants to escape from. Both the Presbyterian Church and her father teach Edna that women serve society through obedience to husbands and caregiving to children, confining her to heteronormative roles. While conversing with Adèle, Edna remembers her desire to find alternatives to heteronormativity. This rediscovery allows Edna to admit to herself that marriage and motherhood cause her dissatisfaction (Chopin 63). She becomes able to understand the heteronormative lifestyle she follows as the source of her discontentment.

The sexual undertones in Edna and Adèle’s relationship shows Edna beginning to discard heteronormative expectations. Chopin explains Adèle’s “excessive physical charm” originally attracted Edna to her because Edna has “a sensuous susceptibility to beauty” (57). Edna’s

physical attraction to Adèle shows heteronormative expectations do not confine Edna's desire to men. The heat Edna and Adèle experience one morning together suggests this physical attraction extends to sexual desire. Despite a cool breeze coming from the ocean, Edna and Adèle feel "very warm" and can only "exchange remarks about the heat" for a period (Chopin 59). Since Chopin describes many other scenes on the beach without emphasizing the heat, the warmth Edna and Adèle feel potentially stems from each other's presence. The heat Edna and Adèle experience also causes them to remove some layers of clothing. Adèle takes off her veil. Edna takes off her collar, opens her dress at her throat, and fans both of them with Adèle's fan (Chopin 59). The removal of the clothing accessories further emphasizes the intimacy the women share and hints at the underlying sexual tension in their relationship.

The physicality of their relationship also contributes to the growth of Edna's subjectivity by making her comfortable with physical affection. As Anne Goodwyn Jones points out, Adèle "first 'awakens' Edna's sense of her body" (161). However, Jones completely overlooks the sensuous language I point out above that indicates a sexual attraction between them. Edna and Adèle express their sexual desire through intimate touches. For instance, Adèle lays her hand over Edna's, strokes it fondly, and murmurs comfortingly to smooth Edna's troubled thoughts. Adèle's tenderness confuses Edna "but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole's gentle caress. She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection either in herself or in others" (Chopin 61). The physicality of Edna's relationship with Adèle teaches Edna to enjoy physical contact. Most importantly, Adèle shows Edna bodily pleasure exists outside of heteronormative constraints. Women can experience physical satisfaction with other women and in muted forms. While Jones recognizes *The Awakening* envisions growth as moving "from ignorance to awareness to expression of feelings, thoughts, and body" (162), she spends almost

no time analyzing Edna's bodily expressions of her feelings or thoughts. By largely ignoring Edna's physical reactions, Jones misses the immediate impact of physical contact with Adèle on Edna and diminishes the role Adèle plays in constructing Edna's evolving subjectivity altogether. Through her desire and acceptance of Adèle's intimate touch, Edna learns to recognize the sensations her body craves and act upon her desires, even if those desires are non-normative. Feeling "flushed" and "intoxicated" from confiding in Adèle, Edna lays her head on Adèle's shoulder. The intimate touches Edna shares with Adèle elicits her emotional and bodily pleasure. Her vulnerability "muddled her like wine, or like a first breath of freedom" (Chopin 63). With the initiation of physical intimacy with Adèle, Edna outwardly resists heteronormativity for the first time. She succumbs to her non-normative desires and feels overwhelmed by her new sense of power.

Through her music, Mademoiselle Reisz, a social recluse and pianist, becomes the second person to evoke non-normative desires in Edna. During a party at the Grand Isle resort, Robert convinces Mademoiselle Reisz to leave her cottage and play music for Edna. Maria Anastasopoulou correctly asserts Edna's earlier intimacy with Adèle makes Edna open to a "more violent response to Mademoiselle Reisz's music" and her confrontation with "her own inner truth" (22). While Edna has listened to artists before, these previous concerts cannot compare to the impact of Mademoiselle Reisz's performance on her. Chopin says, "the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (72). LeBlanc explains the erotic power of Mademoiselle Reisz's music kindle Edna's creative energy (303). In other words, Edna discovers the erotic in herself listening to Mademoiselle Reisz's performance. Audre Lorde calls the erotic "the life force of women, of that creative energy empowered" (55).

Lorde explains society limits the erotic to sex, leaving women unaware of their own inner strength (55). Edna certainly feels the internal power of the erotic, becoming more aware of her physical and emotional desires. Therefore, Edna's reaction to Mademoiselle Reisz's music also involves a sexual connotation both Anastasopoulou and LeBlanc overlook. Edna imagines and feels the bodily responses of her desires fulfilled. The first chords Mademoiselle Reisz plays send "a tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column" (Chopin 71). This reaction appears homoerotic and reminiscent of the pleasurable sensations Edna feels earlier with Adèle. Mademoiselle Reisz's music also contributes to the arousal Edna experiences with Robert after swimming for the first time (Chopin 77). She tells him, "A thousand emotions have swept through me to-night... I wonder if I shall ever be stirred again as Mademoiselle Reisz's playing moved me tonight" (Chopin 75). She admits that another woman is partly responsible for the multitude of emotions and desires Edna experiences, including her sexual desires. As I will explain shortly, Edna's first swim represents the formation of Edna's queer subjectivity. Edna acknowledges to Robert that Mademoiselle Reisz causes the physical and emotional desires that make the creation of Edna's queer subjectivity possible.

The ocean plays a pivotal role in developing Edna's subjectivity. Chopin deliberately chooses the summer at Grand Isle as the setting for Edna's awakening, placing Edna within close proximity of the ocean's influence. Edna only starts to conceptualize herself as a subject in the ocean's presence. Chopin says, "Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (57). During her vacation at the beach, Edna begins to think of herself beyond the heteronormative roles of wife and mother. She slowly becomes more focused on her personal welfare and pleasure, which causes her to reevaluate her relationships with other people and

within social institutions. A few lines after this declaration, Chopin describes the ocean's powerful magnetism for the first time. The closeness of Chopin's statement about Edna's state of mind to the description of the ocean reflects Edna's physical proximity to the ocean as her subjectivity starts to develop, indicating the ocean impacts Edna's conception of herself. Sandra M. Gilbert argues Edna throws off the restrictive culture of the nineteenth century and reconstructs herself through the sea, becoming "as free as the mythic Aphrodite" (32). She views the ocean as a distinctly female space "outside the patriarchal culture" and "beyond the limits and limitations" of the masculine American city (25). Building upon Gilbert's argument, LeBlanc contends the ocean serves as Edna's metaphorical lesbian lover (302). However, Chopin does not ascribe any gender to the ocean. She states, "The voice of the sea is seductive... The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the seas is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 57). While Chopin does not gender the ocean, she presents the ocean as a source of knowledge. The ocean reminds Edna of the significance of her body autonomy and bodily pleasure. The ocean also introduces Edna to the possibilities of non-normative lifestyles, positioning itself as a potential alternative and relief from the constraints of heteronormative society.

Edna's first swim in the ocean marks her transformation into a queer subject. After Mademoiselle Reisz's performance, Robert suggests the vacationers enjoy a late-night swim. For the first time, Edna walks straight into the ocean and makes sweeping strokes to lift her body above the water's surface. Previously, Edna felt an "ungovernable dread" in the water, wanting "a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her" (Chopin 73). She used to fear the unknown and needed the comfort of normative society. Seeking the approval and support from the people around her, Edna conformed to heteronormative women's roles. Now Edna wants "to

swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin 73). She recognizes and ignores the limitations society confers upon her through patriarchy and heterosexuality. Katherine Johnson suggests subjectivity involves the individual having some awareness of their relation to the practices and discourses that produce them as a subject (6). Edna’s desire to exist outside of society’s constraints shows an understanding of the impact heteronormative discourses and practices have on her personhood and life. Embracing the deviancy of her desires, Edna moves away from the heteronormative expectations of society and towards autonomous self-expression. She openly seeks to control her life and fulfill her desires whether evoked by men, women, or non-human entities. In the ocean, Edna basks in the pleasure and freedom self-expression brings her. She elects to ignore the games and antics of the people around her, “feeling intoxicated with her newly conquered power” (Chopin 74). By gaining the ability to swim, Edna uses the inner strength and energy Mademoiselle Reisz’s performance awoke. She becomes fully capable of enacting her desires and yielding her power. Johnson, drawing from the work of Margaret Wetherell, considers an individual’s ability to navigate and act within power structures an important and sometimes overlooked aspect of subjectivity (7). When she goes swimming, Edna begins to pursue her desires and knowingly engage in non-normative acts in spite of the social structures she inhabits. However, Edna is still not ready to completely remove herself from heteronormativity. After “a quick vision of death smote her soul,” Edna returns to land and society (Chopin 74). She cannot yet envision comfort or pleasure in isolation.

While Edna returns to the beach and a heteronormative society, her continued display of deviant behavior amplifies and reinforces her transformation into a queer subject. The morning following her midnight swim, Edna starts to actively pursue her attraction to Robert. She seeks out his company for the first time, demanding he join her for Sunday mass (Chopin 79-80).

Chopin explains Edna “was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she and placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility” (79). Edna completely disregards monogamy, the institution of marriage, and any appearance of social respectability in her attraction to Robert. She focuses solely on her desires, ignoring any potential consequences. Additionally, she begins to exert masculine characteristics by asserting and pursuing her desire for Robert. Through her challenge to traditional gender roles in heterosexual relationships, Edna destabilizes heteronormativity. She also challenges heteronormative authority by leaving the church service early. During the service, “a feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna” (Chopin 82). Edna recognizes the Christian Church as a heteronormative institution and feels uncomfortable in a space hostile to her existence. She chooses to leave, refusing to give the Christian Church any power over her. After exiting the church, Robert escorts her to a nearby friend’s house to rest, wherein Edna engages in a sensuous exploration of her body. Removing most of her clothes, Edna lays on the bed, rubbing and closely observing her arms as if seeing “for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh” (Chopin 84). Edna’s new awareness and appreciation of her body borders on sexual gratification, which undermines the heteronormative assumption that penetrative sex is the only way to receive bodily pleasure. Her repeated non-normative actions the day after her late-night swim demonstrates the extent of her personal growth. Edna’s defiance of heteronormativity becomes frequent, intentional, and part of her conception of self.

The other characters also perceive a change in Edna and consider her new behavior queer. Edna continues to engage in non-normative behavior after Robert departs for Mexico and she returns to New Orleans with her family. Edna’s behavior disturbs her father. Only referred to as the Colonel, Edna’s father serves as another figure of heteronormative authority in her life.

The Colonel expects the women in his life to devote themselves to familial responsibilities and repress any contrary impulses. Condemning Edna's decision to skip her sister's upcoming wedding, he tells Edna as much. Chopin states, "The Colonel reproached his daughter for her lack of filial kindness and respect, her want of sisterly affection and womanly consideration" (124). The Colonel finds Edna's behavior selfish and unwomanly for her renunciation of familial and social obligations. Edna's behavior also causes her husband concern and confusion. Mr. Pontellier tells their family physician, "She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in street-cars, getting in after dark. I tell you she's peculiar. I don't like it; I feel a little worried over it" (Chopin 118). Like the Colonel, Mr. Pontellier finds Edna's disinterest of social standing and disregard for her wifely responsibilities as a hostess unwomanly. Her newfound independence completely disconcerts Mr. Pontellier. He simply cannot comprehend Edna's need to focus on her well-being and joy because neither aspect is important in his conception of woman. Jagose points out unwomanly behavior and women's non-normative sexuality became associated at the turn of the twentieth century (14). This context makes Mr. Pontellier's use of "peculiar" significant. As I previously mentioned, one definition of "queer" in circulation during the nineteenth century meant abnormal. Therefore, "odd" and "peculiar" serve as synonyms for "queer." Given the association between gender and sexual deviance at the time of *The Awakening's* publication, Mr. Pontellier's description of Edna as "odd" and "peculiar" has potential sexual connotations.

Edna's rejection of heteronormative relationships also disturbs Robert. When Robert returns from Mexico, Edna believes all her fantasies about a relationship with Robert will finally come true. However, Robert cannot imagine defiling the institution of marriage. He confesses to Edna that he dreams of Mr. Pontellier divorcing her so they could get married (Chopin 167).

Heteronormative expectations limit Robert's ability to imagine a scenario where he and Edna could be together. His only solution reinscribes Edna into the stifling position of wife she just escaped. Edna realizes Robert's fantasy does not account for her independence and she says, "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming about impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (Chopin 167). Edna unequivocally rejects a normative heterosexual relationship, understanding the gendered power dynamics repress her individuality and restrict her choices. Instead, she asserts her strength and freedom. Robert's "face grew a little white" and questions Edna's declaration (Chopin 167). Robert fears Edna's willingness to ignore social propriety, practice non-normative sex, and place her desires above all else. He fears the person Edna becomes. Before Edna can respond, a messenger comes and informs her that Adèle has gone into labor. Leaving to attend to her friend, Edna promises Robert she will return shortly and consummate their desires. However, Edna returns to find Robert gone and a note professing he left because he loves her (Chopin 172). Unable to conceptualize a life or relationship outside of the bounds of heteronormativity, Robert considers Edna's judgement flawed and makes a decision about their future for her. Thus, like almost every authoritative figure in her life, Robert tries to confine Edna to a heteronormative lifestyle.

Robert's abandonment and Adèle's labor cause Edna to realize she cannot have a heterosexual relationship outside of heteronormative constraints. Robert's inability to conceptualize a relationship with Edna outside of heteronormative boundaries shows her gendered power dynamics will impact any potential relationship she has with a man. The men in Edna's life, such as Mr. Pontellier and Robert, only conceive of a relationship with her wherein

they possess her in entirety. While Edna feels despondent and disappointed at the loss of Robert, she refuses to sacrifice herself for a relationship with anyone. Chopin explains, “There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (175). Edna recognizes her attraction to Robert is temporary and not worth losing herself. Not only does Edna become forced to admit to herself that Robert could never live up to her standards or the image of him she created, but she also acknowledges the transitory nature of desires. She realizes her sexual relationships with men are fleeting, too, leaving her unsatisfied. She thinks, “To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn’t matter about Léonce Pontellier – but Raoul and Etienne!” (Chopin 175). Edna acknowledges her sexual attraction to Arobin will soon pass as well, and she will experience sexual desire for someone else. She knows any expression of her sexuality will lead to social ostracization. While the possibility of social ire does not bother her, for the first time she worries about the impact of her actions on her sons. Edna’s thoughts about her children demonstrate the impact of Adèle’s last refrain to her: “Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (Chopin 170). The trauma of watching Adèle give birth coupled with her request to remember the children remind Edna of the physical consequences of heterosexual intercourse. By thinking of the children, Edna remembers heterosexual sex risks pregnancy and recasting her into the suppressing role of motherhood.

Edna turns to the ocean as an alternative source of pleasure, completely rejecting heteronormativity. As her strength dissipates in the water, Edna thinks of her husband, children, Mademoiselle Reisz, Robert, and her childhood (Chopin 176). Helen Taylor contends Edna’s last thoughts reflect the oppressive demands of the patriarchal authority she wishes to escape (194).

However, Edna's last thoughts reflect not just patriarchal authority, but heteronormative authority. In addition to the power the men in her life hold over her, Edna recalls the pressure to conform to heteronormativity through domesticity, heterosexual relationships, and motherhood. She thinks about the voice of her sister, Margaret (Chopin 176), the earliest woman to teach Edna about women's role as caregivers. She imagines, too, the sneering face of Mademoiselle Reisz (Chopin 176). Despite Mademoiselle Reisz's support of Edna's defiance of social norms and the sexual interactions between them, Mademoiselle Reisz encourages Edna's attraction to Robert and her romanticization of this potential heterosexual relationship. Perhaps most importantly, Edna thinks of her children and the demands of motherhood. Chopin says, "She [Edna] knew a way to elude them" (175). "Them" directly refers to Edna's children and the control their existence has over her life, but it also refers to the heteronormative pressures that limit women's possibilities. When Edna walks naked into the ocean's embrace, she escapes from the heteronormative society that constantly attempts to stifle her agency and sense of self. As she swims away from society, Edna focuses solely on herself and her pleasure. Chopin repeats, "The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (176). The ocean's embrace stimulates and comforts Edna. Giving into the ocean's embrace, Edna fully embraces her true self and throws off any vestige of heteronormative authority.

Edna develops a queer subjectivity through her non-normative sexual encounters with the ocean and women. These interactions teach Edna to focus on her desires and lead to her ultimate rejection of heteronormativity through suicide. By drowning herself in the ocean's embrace, Edna breaks away from the social constraints of marriage and motherhood, and she experiences bodily pleasure outside of heteronormative sex. Edna's actions correspond with current and nineteenth-century definitions of queer. Not only does Edna diverge from societal constructions

of normal, she challenges the most basic assumptions about gender and sexuality. Through her resistance to heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality, she displays deviant behavior that Chopin's contemporary audiences and modern audiences could recognize as homosexual, gay, or queer.

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