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To acknowledge the generosity of James and Mary Oswald, whose love of the written word has inspired innumerable others to a deeper appreciation of the complexity and richness of the English language and its literatures, The Oswald Review is named in their honor.
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of Undergraduate Criticism and Research
in the Discipline of English

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“Heartbreaking to me”:
Adapting Dickens’s Novels for the Stage—
Great Expectations and David Copperfield

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From the moment that they were written, and in many cases while they were still being written and publication was not complete, the novels of Charles Dickens were adapted for the stage. Dickens’s opinion of this transformation of his stories into stage plays was almost universally negative and, although occasionally “more or less satisfied [...] with individual performances” (Forster), he loathed these adaptations, which were “the subject of complaint with him incessantly” (Forster). A large part of his objections rested on the lack of reasonable copyright protection for his work (he had no control over
the number or type of adaptations and gained no share in their profits), but he also objected to the way in which his work was transformed. He declared a particular *Christmas Carol* to be "heart-breaking to me" (Forster) and took his revenge upon one theatrical adaptor by caricaturing and maligning him as the "literary gentleman" in a section of *Nicholas Nickleby* (Pemberton 142). In Dickens's opinion, at least, the vast majority of the contemporary dramatisations of his novels seem to have been both literary and theatrical failures.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, stage adaptations of Dickens's novels remain popular and numerous, and while few have achieved long runs on prestigious stages or great critical acclaim—with exceptions, such as Patrick Stewart's one man Broadway *Christmas Carol* and, more distantly, West End musicals of *Oliver!* and *Pickwick*—many have been very popular with the audiences for which they have been designed. This essay will examine a number of theatrical adaptations of Dickens's *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* and will suggest that modern dramatisations of these novels are often more
successful than the adaptations that Dickens himself knew, as a result of major changes in theatrical techniques that allow a more accurate reproduction of novelistic conventions than was possible in Victorian theatre.

One of the major motivations for adapting Dickens's works for the stage is the author's iconic status, and this has an important influence on the way in which Dickens's works are presented theatrically. In the same way that Shakespeare is considered the most important English dramatist (and general writer) and a national icon, Dickens is regarded as "(t)he most popular and internationally known of English novelists" (Wynne-Davies 459). The attraction of dramatisations of Dickens's famous novels is similar to the attraction offered by Shakespeare's plays. Dickens's literary reputation seems to offer a guarantee of 'Classic' entertainment with a story of high literary quality, and this tends to attract larger audiences than unknown new plays or adaptations of less well known novels. Despite their sharing an iconic status as 'Classic' writers, however, there are important differences in the way that Dickens's and Shakespeare's works are presented
theatrically, and these contrasts— not entirely based on the contrasting genres of the original works— provide a useful starting point for considering the way in which Dickens’s novels are usually adapted for the stage.

The most obvious difference between modern adaptations of Dickens’s novels and performances of Shakespeare’s plays is the relative faithfulness to the period and setting of the original work. All of the theatrical adaptations of Dickens’s novels that I have looked at are firmly set in the period of the original story, with such great attention to historical detail that one writer feels the need to apologise in the published script for using the word “snob” (Leonard ii) when the word was first used ten years after the story supposedly took place. Shakespearean performances over the past forty years, on the other hand, have tended to set the productions in modern dress or in a historical period completely different from that in which the play was written or in which the story was originally set.

Theorists, seeking to explain and encourage these
historical adaptations, have described them as an expression of the universality of Shakespeare's stories; "(s)uddenly contemporary events relate absolutely to the matters with which the play is concerned" (Elsom 19) and this can be expressed by, for example, drawing links between Hamlet's speech about the battle for "a barren piece of ground" and the Falklands War (Elsom 18), or by putting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a Second World War setting, using Shakespeare's works as a lens through which to see the present day or an alternate historical period (Larque 21). There have been modernised transformations of Dickens's novels of this kind—including a theatrical *Nicholas Nickleby* set in the 1950s, which was touring Kent in England when this essay was written, and film adaptations based on *Great Expectations* and *Christmas Carol* set in the modern day—but such adaptations of Dickens are very rare, while for Shakespeare they are now almost the norm.

Why are theatrical adaptations of Dickens's novels so firmly fixed in the Dickensian period? One answer might be that Dickens's original works, being novels,
present much more detailed and therefore more fixed descriptions of people and places. Shakespeare's plays, by contrast, offer a famously flexible background and environment (less prescriptive than the vast majority of novels and even than many stage plays). A person familiar with the text of *Macbeth* knows little more than that the action is set in a barely defined castle near a wood and knows next to nothing about the appearance of the characters since Shakespeare as a dramatist leaves such issues to be defined by the actors, costumes, and settings of a particular production. Persons familiar with *David Copperfield*, on the other hand, are given intimate physical descriptions of places and people and are therefore more likely to be disappointed if the theatrical presentation of these places and characters is markedly different from their own mental image drawn from the text. In the most conservative Dickensian adaptations, such as Reg Mitchell's *Great Expectations*, the stage directions are frequently drawn verbatim from the novel, forcing the director and actors to base their production exactly upon Dickens's original text (Magwitch is "(a) fearful man, all in coarse grey,
with a great iron on his leg’ ”[Mitchell 3] and “Pip ‘raised the latch of the door and peeped in’ ” [Mitchell 4]) offering virtually no leeway at all for inventive or original directorial decisions that might alter the spirit or atmosphere of the original text. This attempt to reproduce exactly the traditional images associated with Dickens’s original works is still more obvious in Southworth’s usually more inventive adaptation of David Copperfield when one stage direction carefully details a scene as described by Dickens (“DANIEL PEGGOTTY, his arms held open for EMILY [. . . ] to run into” [Southworth 66]), setting out every gesture and facial expression, and concludes “See Phiz illustration” (Southworth 66)—encouraging the twentieth-century director to recreate exactly, in tableau, the illustration first attached to the text in the 1850s.

This impulse among Dickensian adaptors to try to recreate the original work rather than giving an inventive theatrical rereading of the work from a new perspective (as is more common with modern performances of Shakespeare) creates two major difficulties that any successful adaptation of this kind must avoid. On the one hand, the writer must not
concentrate on faithfully recreating the novel to such an extent that the necessary theatricality of a stage work is lost (any stage play must above all seek to offer an entertaining theatrical experience for its audience), but, on the other hand, if the author is attempting a reasonably faithful recreation of the novel, the stage play must offer at least the spirit, atmosphere, and a large part of the plot of the original work—allowing those who have read the novel to feel that they have seen its major elements recreated in the stage version. John Brougham’s nineteenth-century adaptation of *David Copperfield* (performed within a year of the book’s original publication) seems to offer good examples of both of these failings in what, to modern eyes at least, seems to be a remarkably unsuccessful attempt to transfer Dickens’s novel to the stage.

The first problem with Brougham’s adaptation is his failure to give any theatrical structure to the elements of the plot that he uses in his stage version. Ignoring David’s childhood and the stories of his marriages, he focuses on Emily’s seduction by Steerforth and Uriah Heep’s manipulation of the Wickfields and exposure by Micawber. Apparently
unable to find a way of recreating the long sweeps of narrative that lead up to these events in Dickens’s novel he begins *in medias res* with Uriah established as a villain by his behavior and asides in his first scene and with Steerforth showing clear signs of his “animal spirits” (Brougham 5) and amoral interest in young women from his first appearance. The context and suspense established in Dickens’s original work is almost all removed, and Brougham’s narrative advances in a number of unlikely leaps and revelations without any sense of a smoothly developing plot. Emily’s disappearance is forgotten about for a number of scenes and then suddenly reintroduced by David’s perfunctorily revealing to Peggotty—without any explanation of intervening events—that she has left Steerforth and will return home, a declaration that he concludes by revealing the presence of Emily herself as if from nowhere.

Brougham fails not only to present a satisfactory stage play but also to deliver any real sense of the novel he is adapting. The character of David Copperfield himself becomes almost entirely incidental to the plot of Brougham’s play. David’s own story—including his childhood and marriages—
is not referred to at all. His role as narrator and observer is reduced to brief declarations, asides, that Heep is a “serpent” that he would “like to strangle” (Brougham 9). Apart from his unexplained role in Emily’s reappearance, his bringing Steerforth into the Peggotty household, and brief explicatory conversations with Agnes and Micawber, David has no significant role in the play that bears his name (a fact that Brougham seeks to conceal by having the last words of the play a Micawber toast to David as if he had been the central character after all). Richard Fulkerson suggests that all Victorian adaptations of *David Copperfield* faced the same difficulties—being unable to cope with the “carefully unified Bildungsroman” (Fulkerson 263) basis of the novel, or the “complex and changing” nature of David’s “character and his growth” (Fulkerson 263), and so being forced to ignore the novel’s central themes and character in order to focus on subplots. Fulkerson concludes that “the only way to make an effective play from the novel [. . .] is to ignore David [. . .] the only way to stage *Copperfield* is not to stage *Copperfield*” (Fulkerson 263).
Fulkerson seems to believe that his conclusion on the impossibility of dealing with the character of David in stage adaptations of *David Copperfield* holds true for all plays based on the novel, but the modern adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* that I have looked at (all published after Fulkerson’s dissertation) seem to suggest that the problems that Fulkerson refers to were specifically attributable to the methods and traditions of Victorian Theatre and that modern authorial and theatrical techniques have allowed more recent writers to solve the problem of dramatising *Bildungsroman* novels — allowing them to restore the central characters to their proper place. The occasional theatrical aside apart, Brougham’s dramatisation follows the Victorian tradition of trying to appear entirely naturalistic (in the theatrical sense of realistic representation). Although gaps between scenes can last weeks, months, or years, the action seen on the stage takes place in real time and the play is dramatised in such a way that the audience seems to be watching and eavesdropping on real conversations. Conventions of this kind depend upon dialogue or physical
action and offer no way of staging the elements of a novel that cannot be physically performed on a stage. As a result there is no place for the novelistic narration, which is a major part of both *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*.

Modern dramatists, on the other hand, frequently make use of a convention of theatrical narration—allowing characters or narrators to speak directly to the audience in a non-naturalistic fashion—which is ideally suited to the dramatisation of novels such as *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*, which rely, in their original format, so heavily upon the narrative commentary of major characters (and equally well with novels like *Christmas Carol* which depend upon the narrative commentary of the author). Almost all of the dramatisations that I have examined make use of this convention, generally having the adult Pip or David comment upon the story of his younger self. This makes it possible, for example, for the audience of Hugh Leonard’s *Great Expectations* to understand Pip’s thoughts and feelings when he stands in the churchyard looking at his parents’ grave—a
scene that would have been all but impossible to stage with purely naturalistic speech since Pip has nobody to declare his feelings to and little motivation for a monologue. By retaining Pip and David’s narratorial voice, the authors of these adaptations ensure the primacy of the eponymous character and return him to his central position as observer and commentator upon his own life — bringing the adaptations closer to the text and spirit of the original novel than Brougham and his Victorian contemporaries found possible.

Modern theatrical conventions also allow a greater flexibility in staging and setting. While Brougham’s play was apparently performed in front of realistic scenery (probably a combination of painted backdrops and extensive props), restricting the action to a small number of fixed locations, modern productions usually use minimalist and flexible stagings, drawing extensively on the imagination of the audience and allowing smooth and rapid movement from place to place and time to time without the necessity for cumbersome breaks to change scenery. This means that, in Matthew Francis’s *David Copperfield*, for example, David can move
within seconds from Blunderstone Rookery to a journey by cart with Barkis to Salem House (represented by David and Barkis simply “jogging along” to a soundtrack of “(t)he trotting of hooves” [Francis 15]), reproducing the swift movement between these locations in Dickens’s novel, an effect that Brougham’s adaptation—hampered by naturalism—was unable to reproduce. Similarly while Brougham’s naturalism demands that each actor have only one role and each role be played by only one actor, the modern flexibility between actors and characters allows modern dramatists to begin with a young actor playing David’s childhood and adolescent self and move on to an adult actor to play him when he has grown up. This offers a simple theatrical solution to the problem that Fulkerson notices in portraying the “growth” of a “complex and changing” character (Fulkerson 263), allowing David physically to change and grow onstage. Together these modern theatrical conventions allow a more accurate reproduction of the sweeping Bildungsroman story of a life within the novel, making it possible to stage the many alterations of time and place that are essential to Dickens’s narratives.
Modern adaptors, then, are able to use current theatrical techniques to reproduce the complex flow of the plots of the original novels and the narrated spirit of their narrative structure, but how successful are these adaptations as works of theatre? Reg Mitchell's *Great Expectations* and Guy Williams's adaptation of the childhood section (up to David's adoption by Aunt Betsy) show that very effective stage plays can be created simply by abridging Dickens's novels, staging appropriate sections of dialogue and action from the original novel and adding only a few new bridging lines and stage actions invented by the adaptor. The skill involved in this type of adaptation is very much like that used to produce abridged readings of the novels, of kind commonly transmitted on radio or recorded on audio books. It is possible to transform Dickens's novels into plays this way simply because Dickens writes in a naturally theatrical manner, with a concentration upon the reader's mental image of the physical appearance of place and person, with detailed descriptions of posture and gesture, and with a dialogue designed to be read aloud,
encouraging the reader to imagine the action of the novel in his own mind as a sort of performance presented to his imagination. It is a relatively simple matter, therefore, physically to stage the scenes that Dickens plays out in his novels since the key scenes in his works depend upon an almost overtly theatrical dialogue between characters to drive the story forward. The cruxes and the climaxes of particular plots and subplots, including virtually all of the most memorable and important scenes in the novels, are almost invariably based around direct conversation and small-scale physical interaction between characters, in which all of the most important information is given through spoken words or descriptions of action. Although the linking material between these key scenes may cause greater difficulties to a straightforward stage adaptation—since Dickens uses more specifically genre-based techniques such as novelistic narration and swift movement between times and places—most of the difficulties created by these sections are smoothed out by the abstract techniques of modern theatre which, as described above, allow novelistic narration and swift movement between times and
places when these are demanded by the novel’s text.

As a result, therefore, once the problems with the linking material have been resolved, the key scenes of Dickens’s works are ideally suited to adaptation for stage performances, which similarly rely upon spoken dialogue and physical action. Reg Mitchell’s staging of Pip’s second visit to Miss Havisham, for example, is quite simply produced by taking all of the dialogue written by Dickens, snipping out any that is unnecessary for the progression of the scene (such as the reference to the “bride-cake” [Dickens, ed. Mitchell 74] and Pip’s willingness to play cards, which Miss Havisham does not actually make him do), moving small sections to make a clearer dramatic structure (Miss Havisham’s command to be walked is moved to an earlier section of the scene so that Pip and Miss Havisham will have something to do physically while onstage) and adding as theatrical narration some of the novel’s description of the room and feelings about it. Although a large section of Dickens’s original passage is removed — more physical description, and some physical actions, such as moving between rooms — none of this is actually necessary
to the audience's understanding of the scene, and some at least can be represented by the physical appearance of the stage setting and the costumes and physical actions of the actors. The resulting play, while almost entirely faithful to Dickens’s original work, also proves to be very effective theatre.

The main criticism which can be made of these deliberately faithful adaptations of the novels (effectively nothing more than abridgements) is that they do not take full advantage of the possibilities of the new medium, the theatre. The alternative, in the selection of plays that I have examined, is to write an adaptation with original and specifically theatrical elements added to the events of the novel, giving the text new shape and meaning but not going so far as to change the basic plot or setting of the original. This is often done by taking a theatrical convention (such as the doubling of parts or the use of songs and music) and making it an integral part of the play’s text. For example, Hugh Leonard — like most of the other adaptors — uses a child actor to play the young Pip and an adult actor to play him as a grown
man, but he dramatises the lasting influence that Pip's childhood has over him and the conflict between his old "country boy" self "and the young man he becomes" (Leonard ii) by having the two Pips interact throughout the play. Leonard begins the play with a prologue that shows the adult Pip settling into and enjoying the benefits of his new gentlemanly status, but he is confronted and shaken by the appearance of a mysterious figure who has apparently been following him repeatedly and who disappears back into the shadows before Herbert can see him — a young boy in "Sunday best, country style" (Leonard 1) who is later revealed to be Young Pip himself. Young Pip then enacts Pip's childhood, with narrative descriptions of his thoughts from the adult Pip. Pip's growth to adulthood is then represented by the adult Pip taking over the role from Young Pip in the middle of a sentence, during a conversation with Biddy. While most adaptors abandon Pip and David's roles when they reach adulthood, the actor playing the adult character having taken an onstage role, Leonard simply exchanges the roles of the two Pips with Young Pip becoming "the observer" (Leonard 26), altering the spirit of
Dickens's text. While Dickens has the adult Pip observe his childhood, looking back and writing out his experiences, Leonard also has the child Pip observe his adulthood, with some disapproval, hinting that the adult Pip has betrayed his childhood origins. Young Pip becomes a narrator himself at the point at which the adult Pip's childhood reaches out to touch him and the death of his sister forces him to return to his childhood home. When adult Pip decides to support Herbert, Young Pip helps him to list the gentlemanly qualities that Herbert has instilled in him, adding the reproof "I learned that all by myself" (Leonard 50) when Pip says that Herbert did not teach him snobbishness—a reproof that Leonard's staging suggests is tied up with Pip's memories of his more humble and innocent origins, which haunt him in the person of Young Pip. The night that Magwitch arrives is given added emphasis as the night that Pip really grows up. Young Pip establishes a gap between him and his older self by saying "I was—he was—[...] twenty-three" (Leonard 53). Finally, when Pip is reduced to poverty and comes to terms with his tainted background—deciding to stay with the formerly repellant
Magwitch—Young Pip appears "no longer scowling" (Leonard 64) to suggest that Pip has managed to reconcile himself to his humble and confused childhood and to lay his ghosts to rest. While devout purists might object to such additions as alterations of Dickens’s original text, in the theatre they offer a way of introducing modern ideas and relating critically to the text without altering the presentation of the text to the extent that modern dress productions of Shakespeare routinely do.

Modern theatrical techniques, therefore, seem much more firmly suited to the adaptation of Dickens’s novels than were the techniques used by Brougham and others writing during Dickens’s life. Thus, twentieth- and twenty-first-century adaptations of *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* seem most often to be very successful both as works of theatre and as representations of the original plot and spirit of Dickens’s novels, with some using additions to the text based on theatrical techniques to produce a more modern reading of the text in question and a specifically theatrical response to Dickens’s work.
Had Dickens lived to the present day, modern adaptors might have convinced him that his works *could* be represented on the stage without damaging their original spirit or literary integrity.
Works Cited


Eveline, the title character in the fourth story of James Joyce's *Dubliners*, finds herself in the middle of a world that is slowly closing in on her. Every place she looks, Eveline sees images of suffocation and the destruction of her life. Epifanio San Juan, Jr. says of Eveline that "[t]he description of her existence in time and place tallies with the recurring image of drowning or of being engulfed" (73). Though her thoughts have turned towards escaping this world that is slowly suffocating her, the sea that could be her freedom becomes just one more element of drowning and destruction. Brewster Ghiselin tells us that throughout *Dubliners*, "[n]ot even the predominant element of the sea, water itself, always implies
the sea or its vital freedom” (67). This is certainly true of Eveline; the sea that could give her freedom becomes death in her mind. Almost everything in Eveline’s world acts as a drowning force or is in some way related to water. Through the language he uses to describe events surrounding Eveline, the filth and decay that pervade her life, religious images that tie to water, the character of Frank the sailor, and general references to the sea itself, Joyce shows Eveline to be drowning both in her Dublin world and her attempt to escape it.

A great deal of the language that Joyce uses suggests the struggle for life against an angry sea. Rather than use beautiful images to describe the setting sun that Eveline watches through the window, for example, Joyce has “the evening invade the avenue” (29 my emphasis). Like rising water threatening to invade the lungs of one cast out to sea, the evening fills the avenue with darkness, and “the evening deepen[s] in the avenue” (32). Eveline is often described in terms that suggest a struggle to keep her head above the drowning forces of her life: “Eveline was tired” (29) and fights with her father “had begun to weary her unspeakably” (31).
The very names of the families Eveline remembers as she stares out the window suggest the aquatic theme of the story. One family “the Waters” (29) had returned to England, had braved the body of water that separates England from Ireland in order to seek a better life, something Eveline is unable to do. Another family “the Devines” (29) has a name that suggests water in two ways. The name evokes the divinity and its sacraments. Though it is spelled differently, the name also reminds readers of the ancient practice of divining, a means of searching for water beneath the earth’s surface. This indicates Eveline’s search for the water that will take her to freedom and a better life. The language of critics even reflects this water theme, as Epifanio San Juan, Jr. says that Eveline “remains moored to the firm core of her motherly self” (71), showing Eveline as trapped in her world by using aquatic language. San Juan also says that a nix “refers to a [mythological] Germanic . . . water sprite who sometimes appears as part fish” (73). This dual meaning of the word adds new meaning to Joyce’s language by referring to Eveline as a water sprite, a characterization that interacts violently
with Eveline’s fear of the ocean. At the same time, it suggests a similarity between Dublin and the sea. Just as the sea’s waters close around anything that falls into them, Dublin closes around Eveline.

Eveline’s tiny Dublin world is overrun with filth that closes in on her, filling her lungs and slowly draining her of life. She is unable to rid herself of the dust and dirt that surround her, drowning her in a sea of grime; no matter how much she cleans, the dust remains. The furniture and objects in the house are things “which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from” (Joyce 30). The more she cleans, the more dust appears. These old, broken objects covered with dust hold her closely to her home. They cling to her, demanding to be cleaned, rid of the dust that ebbs when she cleans and flows back once again as soon as Eveline turns her back. San Juan says that because of these trapping features, Eveline “can do nothing now but stay submerged in a double retreat of introspection and reminiscence” (72). All she can do is clean the objects and feel them holding her to the place. Even the “yellowing
photograph on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque”" (30) holds her home, demanding to be cleaned. As she looks out on the avenue, thinking about her childhood, the dust creeps closer and closer: She “leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne” (29). The dust covers the objects in the house and it covers Eveline too, sticking to her and invading her lungs as she stares out the window. She is drowning in the swirl of dust that surrounds her, covering her like waves.

The religious images related to water and Eveline’s struggle for freedom cannot be ignored because of their overwhelming presence in the story. “The coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque” (30) takes on great significance against the backdrop of Joyce’s theme of water and drowning. Promise number six states: “Sinners shall find in My Heart the source and infinite ocean of mercy” (McDonnell 1). This idea of the heart of God as the ocean sheds new light on Eveline’s quest for freedom and her eventual fear of the sea. This fear of the
ocean removes Eveline's chances for salvation, and her fear of being trapped forever in the drowning world of Dublin becomes something deeper. Her fear of the saving waters of the heart of Christ places her in danger of winding up in a place where there is no water at all. Ghiselin states that throughout *Dubliners*, "physically their goal must be another country; spiritually it has the aspect of a new life" (65), but Eveline is unable to pursue either. Promise number nine states: "I will bless the homes in which the image of My Sacred Heart shall be exposed and honored" (1), but Eveline's home does not seem to be blessed by the grace of God. Instead, her home seems to be excluded from those blessings, as Eveline is excluded from the fifth promise, "I will pour abundant blessings on all their undertakings" (1). She undertakes the quest for freedom but winds up turning back because of her lack of faith.

This connection of religion and water brings to mind other Biblical images. The idea of the life-giving practice of baptism is reflected in the image of the sea that could give Eveline freedom and a new life. Her rejection of the new life
offered by the sea can be tied to her rejection of the gift of eternal life through baptism. The Biblical story of Jesus’s walk on water can be seen in “Eveline” as well. Peter wants to walk out and meet Jesus on the water, and indeed he starts to, but his faith falters and he begins to sink. This is what happens to Eveline when she is trying to leave with Frank. “He holds her hand and she knows that he was speaking to her . . .” (Joyce 33) but her faith in Frank is beginning to waver. She begins to doubt that “[h]e would save her” (33), and her doubt causes her to rebel against the desire to leave with Frank, to walk across the sea to a new life in Buenos Aires. Like Peter of little faith, Eveline cannot trust in Frank to insure her safety and happiness once they leave Dublin. Peter gets another chance to prove his faith and trust, but Eveline just sinks down into the sea of her fear and goes back home alone.

Frank the sailor is himself the image of water and the sea personified. At first, Frank represents escape and the freedom of the open seas more than anything else in the story. Eveline feels that only he can free her from the rolling tide of
her life and pull her safely onto his ship and into his world: “He would give her life, perhaps love, too” (33). He holds the promise of a better future for Eveline, with more money and more opportunities because “he ha[s] fallen on his feet in Buenos Ayres” and is able to “come over to the old country just for holiday” (32). He is the representation of all the opportunities and promises held by the sea. He has the ability to bear her away from all the problems and suffocation of her old world, to take her out onto his sea and into freedom. Like the sea, Frank has touched the shores of foreign lands and “he [tells] tales of distant countries” (32) to Eveline, about “the Straits of Magellan” (32) and “the terrible Patagonians” (32). All she has to do is board that ship and she, too, can touch those distant shores and have tales to tell. She can become one with the sea, as Frank is. She can “explore another life with Frank” (31) and “he [will] take her in his arms” (33) and bear her away from the trap of Dublin.

A shift in Eveline’s feelings marks a shift in the imagery that surrounds Frank: a reversal of feelings towards him and
the sea. As Peter is afraid to walk upon the water with Jesus, to take that great step towards faith and a higher understanding, Eveline is afraid to step with Frank out of her old world. As Frank is the representation of the sea, it is easy to understand why Eveline balks at being with him. The strong arms of the sea that could carry her away from Dublin become the force that will pull her under and drown her. Frank has those strong arms, the arms that Eveline was certain “would save her” (33).

Ghiselin says that the inability to leave Dublin for new worlds shows the characters of Dubliners pointing “far westward, into death” (60) and he points out that “this pattern may show at most the frustration of Dubliners unable to escape eastward, out of the seaport and overseas, to a more living world” (61).

In Eveline’s case, though, she feels that she is turning away from death by avoiding the voyage across the sea. Her turn westward, away from Frank and the sea, is to her a turn towards life. Like the sea, instead of representing salvation, Frank has come to represent destruction: “All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her” (34). The sea and Frank, both of
which should represent life, freedom, and hope, become ominous, deadly forces to Eveline.

Eveline spends most of the story sinking further and further into the drowning waters of her small existence in Dublin, but just as she is about to be whisked away to an exotic land with the promise of a new life, Dublin becomes her life preserver. Even though everything in her Dublin world is dragging her down and suffocating her, nothing there is as bad as the unknown across the waters. Like Eveline, Ireland faced the choice of stagnating in a world that most likely would not change for the better or of being dragged along behind the innovations taking place in England. Brewster Ghiselin points out that “[Eveline] is the first of the characters in Dubliners to attempt . . . to escape from Ireland and cross the waters to a far country and a new life; and she is the last” (72). Eveline’s realization of the dangers of leaving her safe haven and crossing the waters pervades the rest of the stories, keeping the characters from making the move to free themselves.
Notes

1Margaret Mary Alacoque, a French nun canonized by the Catholic Church in 1920, was born in 1647. She believed that she had a vision from Christ in which he revealed his heart as the source of three endlessly flowing streams: mercy, charity, and love. The vision was based on the image of Christ as water pouring into the hearts of those devoted to him. The vision included 12 promises, blessings Christ would bestow on the faithful. The common representation of the Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque is that of a nun kneeling before Christ with the light of his heart pouring over her (Catholic Forum).

2The standard Catholic image of the Sacred Heart illustrates the heart of Christ wearing a crown of thorns that represents his sacrifices (Catholic Forum).
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What's in a Nickname? Christy as “Playboy” in J. M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*

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Nearly a hundred years ago, after an arduous labor, John Millington Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* burst onto the Irish stage, arousing considerable controversy. In spite of his and the play’s detractors, *Playboy* captured the position of masterpiece within the short-lived author’s canon. The title refers to Christy Mahon, a timid, feckless young man who is running from a dubious murder. Through exaggeration, role-playing, and unwitting exposure, Christy earns autonomy and manhood. During the past ninety years, critical scholars have debated Christy’s metaphorical function and his
resemblance to other characters in literature, drama, myth, and religion. Disagreement over these functions and semblances springs from the fact that Christy does redefine himself over the course of events as he plays at several roles, and he does resemble several fictional and mythic characters, often through Synge’s design. Most critics, however, have failed to correlate Christy’s multiple, successive façades with the fundamental character descriptor in the title: “playboy.” With likely intent, Synge entitles the play and nicknames Christy with a term that has various, disparate meanings and that has, not surprisingly, acquired other connotations since 1907. Through Christy’s role-playing, Synge redefines his title as his character redefines himself.

Despite its common usage in contemporary English, “playboy” is an ambiguous term with no single accepted definition. Defining it becomes complicated within the play’s context, in part because Synge exploits the ambiguity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] identifies playboy as a colloquialism that first appeared in literature in 1829 and has gained sexual connotations primarily in the last sixty years.
According to the OED, the term applies to "a man, [especially] a wealthy man, who sets out to enjoy himself; a selfish pleasure-seeker."

Maurice Bourgeois presents several interpretations of "playboy" and the term's possible derivations. Bourgeois explains that playboy, as Synge uses it, is a "Hibernian slang" term adapted from the Irish, which "literally [means] 'boy of the game'" in reference to "the Irish game of 'hurling'" (193, n. 1). Not all scholars concur, but several validate Bourgeois's account of Synge's source and the primacy of this explanation. According to Bourgeois, the definitions of "playboy" from Wright's English Dialect Dictionary, "the devil" and "a playful woman," are antiquated and inexact (193, n. 1). On the other hand, Wright's dictionary was published in 1903 and thus was accessible to Synge during Playboy's gestation (Swiontkowski 155). Bourgeois further defines the term as meaning a "hoaxer, humbugger, mystificator (not imposter), one who does sham things" and notes that "Synge's use [. . . contains] three implicit by-meanings:
(a) one who is played with; (b) one who plays like a player
(*i.e.* a comedian and also an athlete or champion [. . .]); (c)
one who is full of the play-spirit [. . .]” (193-4, n. 1). Bourgeois
develops his definition primarily from Synge’s script, together
with other corroborating works. As one of the most important
eyearly critical works on Synge, Bourgeois’s book provides the
likely source for the understanding of “playboy” in subsequent
criticism and modern scholarship (Casey 2).

To add further complications, the OED recognizes a
hyphenated form, “play-boy,” meaning “a school-boy actor.”
This definition seems particularly relevant to Synge’s *Playboy*
because the playboy becomes a poet, playwright, dramatist,
and actor through the course of the play. Despite the lack of
consensus over the term’s exact meaning or origins and the
continuing arguments among scholars over Synge’s implications
and sources, the play incorporates all of these definitions of
“playboy” in Christy’s transformation.

Others have recognized this composite, but only to a
limited extent. In fact, much like Bourgeois, Patricia Spacks
defines “playboy” by using the play’s action and Christy’s
various personifications of the term, rather than the term’s etymology (82). Spacks is on the right track, but to define the term she examines only the four scenes when Christy specifically is called a playboy or “the Playboy of the Western World.” Each instance implicitly functions as a distinct culmination. The first three announce others’ observations of Christy’s behavior; the last acknowledges Christy’s full metamorphosis. Spacks’s focus overlooks the major body of the play and consequently most of Christy’s defining moments, ignoring their cumulative effect.

Spacks misses the fact that Christy is a “play-boy” throughout the entire play, as he responds to others’ perceptions and experiments with new behaviors. In essence, he becomes an actor. Christy never fully embodies any of the roles until the end of the play when he realizes that he no longer needs to act a part. In her discussion of metadrama in *Playboy*, Mary C. King comments on Synge’s deliberate use of role-playing and Christy’s performance of several archetypes, such as hero and hero-victim. King is perhaps the only scholar who offers a full
treatment of the play’s metadramatic qualities, but even she fails to complete the connection between the title and all of Christy’s roles. These omissions also exclude the fact that Christy’s continuous play-acting involves experimentation, both with the various definitions of “playboy” and with unrelated roles. His minor transformations, along with Christy’s overall metamorphosis, offer successive, multiple meanings for Synge’s title and deepen its complexity, while reflecting the script’s intricacy. Several important incidents in the play illustrate the hyphenated “play-boy” as the central defining term that encompasses the numerous short-term “playboy” enactments.

Christy’s transformation begins before he physically enters the action. In the opening scene at the pub, the men’s discussion of the approaching stranger, who later is revealed to be Christy, initiates an expectation of peril that is destroyed as soon as Christy walks through the pub’s door. Shawn’s nervousness over the lone vulnerability of Pegeen, the pub owner’s daughter, and his fear for his own life create the anticipation of either a dangerous thief and threat to their safety
or a moaning robbery victim. Timid, diminutive, and mysterious Christy then enters and shatters these expectations. He seems neither menace nor victim.

The entrance provides Christy with his first role-playing opportunity and Synge with the first occasion to explore the play's title. Once the other characters have seen Christy and know that he's not what they were expecting, they try to determine his identity. Despite Christy's initial reluctance, the pub's occupants coax from him the shocking revelation that he has murdered his father and is on the run. The revelation carries multiple significance. Here, Christy gives the only honest account of the "murder" but tacks on a detail that must be a lie: the burial. At this interrogation, Christy begins to recognize that he is on stage and can exaggerate the story's details, thus taking the opportunity to play the role of "playboy" as actor and "playboy" as hoaxer. In this, he simply responds to the crowd's expectations (Henigan 95).

In the reaction to Christy's revelation, the other characters cast him in several new roles, such as hero and pot-boy. Once they are convinced of his deed, they treat
Christy with respect and admiration and deem him full of the "sense of Solomon," brave enough to "face a foxy devil with a pitchpike on the flags of hell" (Synge 81). This establishes Christy's ability and worthiness as Michael's employee in the pub and as Pegeen's protector. Christy's newfound work as pot-boy is loaded with significance and ironies, the most relevant of which is the likely deliberate play on both "playboy" and "play-boy." Either way, the significance of the other characters' actions lies in their accepting Christy at face value, replacing his notions of himself with their new perceptions to which he can respond.

Further on in the first act, Pegeen and the Widow Quin provide Christy with more potential roles. Pegeen praises Christy for his looks, apparent intelligence, and bravery, comments on his likely success with women, and equates him with the great bards and poets of Ireland's past. Despite the fact that her assessment completely contradicts Christy's prior experience, though perhaps because of that, Christy soaks in the flattery and begins to believe Pegeen. This opens several new role-playing possibilities for Christy, which he undertakes
in the next act. These additional roles include the poet, the
dramatist, and the selfish pleasure-seeker who exploits women.

The Widow Quin’s influence on Christy’s role-playing
lies in her womanliness and her meddling. The apparent rivalry
between Pegeen and the Widow Quin, begun by the latter’s
arrival at the pub, shows Christy his potential as a love interest.
Their fighting over his appropriate lodgings forces Christy to
further assume some of his new characteristics by acting on
them. He ends the fight, temporarily, by telling the Widow
Quin that he will stay at the pub that night, albeit timidly and at
Pegeen’s behest. In response to this rejection, the Widow
Quin mentions Pegeen’s impending marriage to Shawn,
revealing Christy’s role as philanderer. Christy, however,
seems unaware of the full ramifications suggested by the
widow’s statement. His remarks as “he settles [into] bed [. .
.] with immense satisfaction” reveal his naïve enjoyment of
their mutual fondness for him, of the developing rivalry, and of
his apotheosis to the center of their attentions (Synge 87).
Christy’s growing appeal to women and his budding
playboyish charm contrast distinctly with the disregard and
timidity of his former life. The change permits the emergence of a natural eagerness to enjoy women’s attention.

Act Two shows Christy becoming more comfortable with his recently acquired roles as he, literally and metaphorically, tries them on for size. Caught in the midst of playing pot-boy and lady-killer to a mirror, he reverts to his reticent nature when several curious young women arrive from town to ogle Christy and make his breakfast. Here, an interesting shift occurs when Christy finds the courage to meet them and agrees to answer the Widow Quin’s questions about his recent adventures. Encouraged by the attention lavished upon him by the townswomen and by the Widow Quin’s continuing interest, Christy not only repeats the murder story in greater and more embellished detail but also dramatizes it (Henigan 96, King 143). In trying on Pegeen’s suggested role as seanachie, or Irish bard, Christy becomes the story’s actor, director, and playwright, thus producing a mini-drama in the midst of the play within the play that is already underway (King 141).

The women’s astonishment and admiration first place
Christy in the role of courtly lover through their presence and attention and then, in essence, appoint him to the part with their praises and their suggestion that he marry the Widow Quin. Thus, in quick succession, and at times concurrently, Christy embodies many specific definitions of "playboy," such as hoaxer, schemer, philanderer, and actor as well as such non-related roles as a brave hero, a legitimate grown man, and a wise farmer's son set for inheritance. These sharply contrast with all roles of Christy's prior life, as he revealed during the first act, depicting himself as, "a quiet, simple poor fellow with no man [or woman] giving [him] heed" (Synge 83-4). Additionally, Quin's arrival foreshadows his third-act role of playboy as champion athlete when she announces her determination to enter Christy into the games.

An essential step in Christy's transformation develops in the final scenes of the second act as Christy receives costumes to supplement and enhance his new status. Hoping to rid himself of competition for Pegeen's hand, Shawn offers Christy several new articles of clothing in an attempt to bribe Christy to sail for the United States. To the farmer's dismay,
Christy rushes to try them on, eager for Pegeen to see him in his new clothes, but offers no signs of leaving. Shawn’s gift unintentionally provides more appropriate attire for Christy’s pretending and thereby becomes a costume, enhancing playboy, play-boy, and the play-within-a-play. Now, Christy looks the part and acts the part as he swaggers around the pub in Shawn’s clothes.

Ironically, this circumstance confers another role as Christy unknowingly threatens Shawn by assuming his appearance with the additional illusion of independence. He puts Shawn on both literally and metaphorically when he puts on Shawn’s clothes. Now, Christy is Shawn and everything Shawn wants to be. Each longs to be a self-made, self-employed man who answers to no one and claims Pegeen for wife, but neither yet is capable. Other offered costumes include Shawn’s wedding clothes, which he provides as part of a plot to marry Christy to the Widow Quin, and the jockey clothing which is given to Christy for the sporting events. These later gifts likewise function to augment the impression of playboy as athlete and playboy ladies’ man.
Christy’s first naming as “playboy” occurs when Old Mahon, his father, appears at the end of the second act. Old Mahon’s entrance reveals the intricacies of Christy’s inadvertent scheme to the Widow Quin and even to Christy himself. Until this point, Christy is unaware of the extent of his deceit; he truly believes that he has killed his father. Before Christy leaves for the games, however, Old Mahon arrives, most certainly still alive and searching for his wayward son. Subsequently, Quin names the shocked and panicked Christy “the Playboy of the Western World” in reference to his hoaxing (100). This revelation forces Christy to accept his designation as a hoaxer and to carry on with his current plot, thus making his play-acting deliberate for the first time.

The third act’s opening reveals Christy’s further embodiment of his new label and provides another instance of characters using the term in reference to Christy. Upon returning from a wake, several of the townsmen discuss Christy’s incredible success at the games, allowing him to satisfy the regional meaning of playboy as champion athlete. During their discussion, Old Mahon returns in his search for
Christy, supplying the Widow Quin with an especially ironic opportunity to refer to Christy as “the champion Playboy of the Western World” (105). Quin, now in league with Christy, uses the term in an attempt to convince Old Mahon that the successful lad definitely is not his inept son. Quin’s double-edged meaning provides a moment of dramatic irony since only Quin and the audience know of Christy’s other playboy incarnations. The men in the pub notice Quin’s overt denotation and apply the term to Christy.

The remainder of the act comprises a series of scenes that force Christy’s transition from role-playing to autonomy, first by stripping Christy of his gains. Exhilarated from his athletic success, Christy discovers his genuine capability as a poet in a touching love scene with Pegeen, the outcome of which is her blushing agreement to marry him. Her father’s initial disapproval of the match forces Christy to stop playing and act on his role as hero by threatening Shawn. Immediately after his success, the crowd leads Old Mahon and his son, thereby revealing Christy’s lies to all and stripping him of his roles. During this scene, the crowd hurs the word
"playboy" at him as an insult. Faced with Pegeen’s hatred and his father’s demands for his compliant return, Christy reenacts his attempted patricide, thus becoming an actual criminal and inciting the crowd’s fury.

A crucial advance in Christy’s metamorphosis occurs when the Widow Quin offers him a disguise to aid his escape. In a surprising reversal, Christy stubbornly rejects the costume and stays to win Pegeen. By refusing the offered costume and facing his dilemma, Christy discovers and seizes upon his own ability to define himself, even in the face of others’ perceptions. His realization expands moments later when Pegeen places a noose around his neck and the men attempt to drag Christy to the gallows. Christy violently resists by thrashing about, hurling threats, and biting Shawn’s leg. Here, noticing the townspeople’s incapacity to comprehend his inadvertent deception, Christy realizes their equal inability to accept anyone who overturns their perceptions. He likewise discovers the folly of trying to live according to their limited judgment. Christy realizes that his new ability to define himself empowers him to reject their judgment and to take control
of the situation. This enables Christy to alter his circumstances radically when his freshly reinjured yet living father returns. Old Mahon again orders Christy to leave with him, but Christy refuses and announceds that his father will leave in his company. Now Christy no longer plays any role but his own.; he exits, autonomous and triumphant.

In the play’s closing moment, Pegeen provides Christy’s final and preeminent naming as “the only Playboy of the Western World” (118). As Pegeen wails at her loss, she underscores Christy’s triumph and his embodiment of the title as she gains partial understanding of Christy’s transformation. She realizes, at least somewhat, that Christ has “won the right to the title” (Spacks 83). The skills as actor, poet, lover, hero, and champion that Christy discovers through the course of the play “previously undeveloped talents” which he possessed all along (Henigan 103). His new awareness of these attributes “gives him the confidence to assert himself,” and thereby he becomes the ultimate Playboy (104).

Prior criticism has tended to associate the playboy image’s metaphoric implications to Christy and has
developed Christy's likeness to literary, mythic, and religious characters and archetypes. Several prominent scholars, however, have noted that these correlations never sustain themselves throughout the play. In *The Writings of J. M. Synge*, Robin Skelton discusses Christy's arguably intentional likeness to Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan, Shylock, and Don Quixote. Skelton then points out each correlation's eventual collapse. Nicholas Grene criticizes scholars who reduce Christy to a mock Cuchulain, mock Oedipus, and mock or true Christ-figure, even as he notes the relationships to these and other characters. Neither Skelton nor Grene dispute the obvious significance of the title or its basic correlation with Christy's character. Even so, like Spacks and King, they fail to develop the title's full significance, perhaps because none of the likenesses extend through the entire play nor seem consecutive or connected to each other. The parallels can exist simultaneously without ambiguity, however, along with the many roles that Christy plays because the only continuous metaphor is that of play-boy. During the course of his play-acting, Christy "transforms" from a stuttering lout into the
playboy poet who is finally the master of his da and of himself [...]” (Deane 152). Consequently, Christy becomes worthy of Pegeen’s lamenting appellation, worthy of being called the only playboy.
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Nature and the Metropolis: Naturalism in
Stephen Crane's City and Jack London's Wilderness

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The landscapes of the wilderness and the city are polar opposites. The wilderness consists of broad, open space that has not been altered by humanity. The city, conversely, is a place completely dominated by humanity and its machines. Despite these seemingly irreconcilable differences, Jack London's short story "In a Far Country" and Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets similarly portray the specific space allotted to the characters within the larger framework of their respective environments. Both works, set in the first years of the twentieth century and enveloped in the idealism of manifest destiny, portray characters that are confined to
severely limited spaces amid vast, rich landscapes. Their imprisonment is most obvious in their literal confinement within the physical space of their environment; however, the characters are also confined by social and ideological factors. Their confinement within particular spaces in their landscapes demonstrates a basic tenet of Naturalism, which is that the indifferent natural environment controls the characters.

The wilderness and the city are landscapes distinctive in form and structure. The landscape Jack London creates in his short story “In a Far Country” is a world in the extreme wilderness of arctic Alaska, a world often devoid of life, light, and movement. The high plateau of the interior Alaskan wilderness is open space, literally miles of untouched terrain where countless acres of barren tundra are preponderantly covered with snow and ice. New York City, on the other hand, as portrayed by Steven Crane in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, was a space dense with human and mechanical motion where urban growth, due to immigration, “reflected the new spatial order of the industrial city” (Mohl 36). The landscapes of the wilderness and the city are different in form
and structure; however, they share similar characteristics in the way they represent possibilities and potential for the characters. Although London's and Crane's characters are confined to limited spaces, the characters find themselves in the context of immense landscapes, which are attractive because they represent the possibility of escalating physical, social, and economic mobility.

Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* revolves around the Johnsons, a family living in New York City in the late nineteenth century. It is a tale of survival in the city's slums, which stand in contrast to the profusion of cultural, architectural, industrial, and economic wealth also to be found in the city. Even though Crane's narrator focuses primarily on tenement neighborhoods, he is conscious of the potential opportunities in the city. Alluding to this wide, prosperous landscape, Crane's narrator observes "an atmosphere of pleasure and prosperity" (51) as "(a)n endless procession wended toward the elevated stations" (51). With the tremendous flow of immigrants into
New York City in the late nineteenth century, a unique multicultural conglomeration emerged, creating an atmosphere rich in diverse customs, traditions, and cultures. With architectural creations and innovations emerging in New York City in the nineteenth century, architectural landmarks added to the wealth of the city through the aesthetic qualities of the constructed landscape. Additionally, and more directly poignant to Crane's characters, New York City was a place of industrial and economic prosperity.

In a similar fashion, the expansive setting for London's short story "In A Far Country" represents the possibility of upward mobility. The wilderness is a broad, boundless arena, abundant in aesthetic beauty, but attractive to the characters primarily because of its wealth of natural resources. London's story concerns Cuthfert and Weatherbee, two men who submit themselves to the harsh realities of the arctic in hopes of finding gold, but as "the lure of the north gripped the heartstrings of men" (374), Cuthfert and Weatherbee come to realize they are incapable of enduring such hardships. They join a mining party headed for the Yukon and when winter envelops them,
they are left at an abandoned cabin to wait out the winter. Although London’s narrator focuses primarily on their imprisonment within the diminutive cabin, he is aware of the enormity of the northern landscape when he mentions “the magnitude of all things” and “the immensity of the snow-covered wilderness” (384). North of Edmonton, Alberta, the starting point of the characters’ expedition to the Yukon, lie thousands of miles of uninhabited land, full of untouched natural resources; gold, the most prominent of these resources, is the driving force behind Cuthbert’s and Weatherbee’s willingness to leave their comfortable homes and endure the asperity of the arctic wilderness.

Both the city and the wilderness are large landscapes, attractive to the characters because of the potential for freedom and success; however, by clearly displaying nature’s control over the characters, London and Crane place their characters in situations where they are imprisoned by their environments. When commenting on Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Stephen Crane said, “The purpose was to show that environment is a tremendous thing in this world, and often shapes lives
regardlessly” (Fitelson 108). Likewise, Jack London describes his adherence to Naturalism in “In A Far Country” when he said that his tales of the Alaskan Gold Rush “involved people in fundamental struggles with nature’s indifference and cruel power” (Huntington Library Online). The control of the environment and the characters’ subsequent imprisonment is manifested through their predetermined roles in society. As the stories progress and reality sets in, both sets of characters learn of their entrapment. Whether it be the wilderness or the city, the socially imposed limitations of the characters’ environments directly control them, resulting in an incarceration that limits movement within their socio-economic sphere, directly effecting the events and consequences of their lives.

Nature acts as an imprisoning force in “In a Far Country” by catalytically determining the societal roles of Cuthfert and Weatherbee. The winter climate in the Yukon River basin is one of the harshest in the world, and it is these severe conditions that bring to the surface the innate weaknesses of Cuthfert and Weatherbee, creating a rift between them and the other members of the mining party
which leads to the expatriation of Cuthfert and Weatherbee from the group and eventually to their deaths. When “the world rang with the tale of arctic gold” (374), Cuthfert and Weatherbee left their homes in the continental United States and joined a party of men who traveled to the Yukon in search of a claim. As the conditions grew worse and travel became tiresome, nature’s harshness acted as a mechanism that separated the two from the rest of the group.³ Cuthfert and Weatherbee’s intrinsic inability to cope with these difficult environmental conditions makes them outcasts in their society; “their comrades swore under their breaths and grew to hate them” as they were “shirks and chronic grumblers” (375). London’s narrator dubs them “the Incapables” (378) and warns about the lazily weak and uncooperative attitudes of Cuthfert and Weatherbee in the face of environmentally induced hardship when he says, “When a man journeys into a far country, he must be prepared to forget many of the things he has learned . . . and often times he must reverse the very codes by which his conduct has hitherto been shaped” (374).
Through their placement in a social hierarchy, Cuthfert and Weatherbee find themselves trapped by their surroundings, a placement that contributes to their fate. Likewise, the characters in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* experience the same confinement as they too occupy a predetermined societal role. Within the context of Naturalism, this confinement is symbolic, the characters can conceivably move within the larger landscape of the city, but forces outside of their control influence them, ensuring their confinement to the tenement neighborhoods. Crane deliberately places Maggie, her family, and the other characters in his novella in a neighborhood dominated by large, densely populated tenement houses. The overpopulation of the ill-structured buildings produced a situation of spatial imprisonment for Maggie and her family, creating an environmentally induced cage for the characters within a specific societal role.

At one point, Nellie, a young resident of Maggie's tenement neighborhood, tries to escape her environment, but is forced to return as the man she left with “didn’t have as many stamps [money] as he made out” (43). This demonstrates
the inability of the characters to escape their spatial allotment because they cannot attain the necessary means to leave. This "class-stratified, industrialized city" (Rothschild 108) created a prison-like situation in the tenements, guaranteeing the ever-widening gap between the wealthy and the poor; despite any hope for social mobility, the Johnsons could be assured a stagnant economic position among the social degenerate.

Although they suffer confinement to a specific space, the characters of both works are drawn to their respective landscapes of the wilderness and the city because of the possibility for social and economic mobility, the illusory possibility that they can control their lives. Both London and Crane present these two landscapes as large, prosperous areas that suggest the potential for physical movement. The wilderness offers the enticement of space on which humanity has not yet inscribed its presence. New York City, in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, provided a system of public transportation that offered unprecedented convenience and ease of physical movement for much of the city's population.\(^5\)
The arctic wilderness of the Yukon is also an area with potential for freedom of physical movement. The 964 miles from Edmonton, Alberta to the junction between the Porcupine and Yukon rivers, the approximate location of Cuthfert and Weatherbee’s cabin, consists of boundless, untouched terrain. Movement within that area is virtually unrestricted as travel by dog sled is possible wherever there is snow. More than merely corporal, however, the symbolic nature of the wild as an open limitless arena leads to an ideological sense of uninhibited mobility, a feeling of the absolute emptiness and vastness of the wilderness and the freedom with which it is associated. London’s narrator explains the characters’ feelings of insignificance while enveloped in the virtually illimitable wilderness by affirming that Cuthfert felt “the infinite peace of the brooding land” (383) and the “vast solitudes” (383) beyond which linger “still vaster solitudes” (383).

The city and the wilderness are both settings that provide ample opportunities for physical movement. A basic theme in Naturalism, however, is that “free will is an
illusion,” and in “In A Far Country” and Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, London’s and Crane’s characters fall victim to the indifferent “affecting and afflicting forces of nature” (Pizer 7) as they are not able to move freely within their broad landscapes. They are confined to specific spaces within the immense areas that surround them.

The characters in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets are physically imprisoned in three specifically limiting spaces; they are confined by the tenement houses, the tenement neighborhoods, and the industrial sites similar to the factory Maggie briefly works in. All of these areas are exceedingly small and crowded, restricting the characters from freedom of physical movement. Maggie describes the crowds of denizens as “vast” (22), saying that, “the great body of the crowd was composed of people who showed that all day they strove with their hands” (22). Additionally, Maggie expresses her vision of the tenement interior when she observes that her apartment consisted of a “small room . . . which seemed to grow even smaller” (19). Later, Maggie reflects on the factory as a “dreary place of endless grinding” (250). She felt
that "(t)he air in the collar and cuff establishment strangled her," and she knew that "she was gradually and surely shriveling in the hot, stuffy room" (25).

Just as the characters in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* are incapable of meaningful physical movement within their respective spaces, Cuthfert and Weatherbee are trapped in a spatial prison when they are forced to spend a winter in an abandoned miner's cabin. The other men in the mining expedition left the two of them when, because of their innate mental and physical weaknesses, they refused to travel any further. The cabin is a limiting space of "ten by twelve" (381),\(^6\) in which Cuthfert and Weatherbee are imprisoned by the harshness of the arctic Alaskan winter. With no means of escape, as they are left without a dog sled team, they are forced to wait out the winter within the confines of the cabin. At times they tried to escape as they "fled into the outer cold. But there was no escape. The intense frost could not be endured for a long time" (381).

In addition to the extreme temperatures, the crushing effect of perpetual darkness limits and controls Cuthfert and
Weatherbee even further. They receive their first taste of sunlight when “January had been born but a few days” (386); it lasted for a brief few seconds, however, and the “half-sobs” (384) of Cuthfert and Weatherbee demonstrate their emotional weakness when faced by the arctic darkness. As a result of their fear and inability to leave the cabin for the “snow-covered wilderness” that is “cold and dead and dark” (384), Cuthfert and Weatherbee are controlled by their landscape; they are forced into the “little cabin that crowded them” (381). Eventually, as the winter slowly wears on, their imprisonment maddens them and they kill each other in a fit of rage.

As Cuthfert and Weatherbee are imprisoned within a diminutive space amid a vast and boundless landscape, the characters in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets are confined in specific spaces in their tenement neighborhoods, which are surrounded by the larger landscape of New York City. By showing the immensity of the wilderness and the city and then paradoxically demonstrating their characters’ imprisonment within their respective spaces, London and Crane debunk the ideals of manifest destiny as they present images of the
characters’ incapacity to dominate or control their natural surroundings.

Although the landscapes represented in the two works are opposites in terms of form and structure, they are both expansive areas that hold the potential for freedom, but as London and Crane construct their narratives, the characters find themselves confined in small, oppressive spaces. Their environments control them as they are denied access to the larger, potentially advantageous landscapes and are forced to live out the remainder of their lives in a state of oppressed imprisonment.
Notes

1 In 1890, New York City was the largest city in the United States with over 1.5 million people; of those, 42 percent were foreign born (Mohl 15, 20).

2 In 1890 New York City’s World Tower became the world’s tallest building, surpassing the second tallest building at the time, the Trinity Church (Burrows 1051). Additionally, Grand Central Terminal became an important architectural symbol in the city as it is often called, both literally and figuratively, “the gateway to the city” as over 400,000 people pass through it every day (Goldstone 223).

3 Winter temperatures in the Yukon River basin of eastern Alaska, the approximate location of the mining party, can average one hundred and forty degrees below zero, where “(f)lesh may freeze within 30 seconds.” Additionally, average winter temperatures in the region range from forty-five to seventy-five degrees below zero while the annual total snowfall can exceed one hundred and thirty inches (Alaska State Climate Center Online).
The physical growth and expansion of the city promoted social fragmentation and differentiation as people sorted themselves out by class, ethnicity, and race; with the working class and the poor, such as Maggie and her family, concentrated in the urban center (Mohl 37).

In 1878 the New York Elevated Railroad Company, centralized in Manhattan, connected the other four boroughs together by expanding tracks, cars, and the frequency of departures. By 1882, the mileage of track was over five times greater than it was only four years earlier (Burrows 1054). Additionally, in 1883, Manhattan became progressively more connected with the rest of the city as it was linked with Brooklyn by means of the Brooklyn Bridge (Goldstone 106). Furthermore, Nan A. Rothschild notes that urban developers during this time crystallized the layout of the city streets in an attempt to “promote social and commercial progress through spatial organization” (4).

These are the exact dimensions of the living space within a tenement house apartment, as described by Jacob A. Riis in *How the Other Half Lives* (19).
According to the National Weather Service, on November 18, at this approximate latitude, the sun dips below the horizon and does not shine again until January 24 (Alaska State Climate Center Online).
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Unsinkable Edna: 
Critical Evolution and Cultural Revolution

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Modern scholars can better understand the negative reviews of Kate Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening* by excavating the cultural substrata of America before the dawn of the twentieth century. Charles Bressler attributes to Michel Foucault the belief that literary analysis should mirror an archaeological dig, aimed at uncovering "each layer of discourse" and the "set of inconsistent, irregular, and often contradictory discourses" that form the episteme of accepted truths in a time period (Bressler 186). *The Awakening* introduces Edna Pontellier, a woman who discovers she must navigate rough waters of feminine discourse surrounding the isle of selfhood 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” (34).

Chopin’s reputation as a writer grew from her
stories of life in the bayous of Louisiana. Her audience was
accustomed to texts full of charm and wholesomeness whose
happy endings created “an agreeable impression – things come
out right” (Toth 227). These factors led some reviewers to
condemn the novel, dismissing Chopin as “one more clever
author gone wrong” and mourning Edna’s destruction,
suggesting her salvation if she had “flirted less and looked
after her children more, or even assisted at more
accouchements” (“From Recent Novels” 96). *The Awakening*
was interpreted in late-nineteenth- century America as a
rejection of assumptions governing women’s literature and
societal views regarding the roles and rights of women. The
solitary artist Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle, the
“faultless Madonna,” reflect polarized cultural views of women
and the absence of an acceptable middle ground in the feminine
discourse of the period (32). The novel was considered by
some to represent a reversal of Chopin’s “horizon of expectation” as a regional author (Bressler 64).

Despite the negative reception of her novel, Chopin’s literary career continued although *The Awakening* was largely excluded from literary pedagogy for nearly fifty years. While the social upheaval of the late 1960’s was opening doors for women, scholars were rebelling against the “text and text alone” stance that had dominated literary criticism for nearly thirty years (Bressler 40). In the wake of changing interpretive strategies, feminist criticism arose to “review, reimagine, rethink, rewrite, and reinterpret the events and documents of the Western canon” (Gilbert 32). Rejected in some late-nineteenth-century literary circles as “gilded dirt,” *The Awakening* is now heralded by feminist critics as “the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 65). The novel is an example of how societal beliefs affect judgments about literature, and also demonstrates that cultural objects are more likely to be rediscovered when their social themes echo concerns central to society.
By examining layers of literary discourse, a reader can find portrayals of women in *The Awakening* that reflect the dichotomies of female experience in late-nineteenth-century America. During a summer on Grand Isle, the openness of the Creole culture draws Edna into a *camaraderie* of Creole women who “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves” (29). Adele Ratignolle, the chief of these “ministering angels,” (41) personifies the “Feminine Principle” of American fiction in Chopin’s day which claimed “Refinement, Delicacy, and Grace” as essential elements (Allen 164). These values were evidenced in the works of the “literary domestics” (Dyer 7), a group of women’s writers who were “expected to write specifically for their own sex” and not aspire to equanimity with Masters of Western literature (Baym, qtd. in Kolodny 49). In 1899, the premise that literature should provide “moral instruction” and depict women as “selfless nurturers” was the most prominent assumption in women’s literature (Corse 141). When Edna confides to Adele her unwillingness to sacrifice her life for her children, Adele scolds, “(A) woman who would
give her life for her children could do no more than that – your Bible tells you so. I’m sure I couldn’t do more than that” (70).

The antithesis of Adele Ratignolle is found in Mademoiselle Reisz, who models the life of the solitary artist. Mademoiselle Reisz is an unattractive oddity coerced to perform piano concerts for the throng on Grand Isle, then confined to her room until inspiration is needed again. A growing number of “odd women” who were choosing not to marry confounded Victorian sensibilities and were viewed as dwelling in “an unwholesome social state” (Showalter, Sexual Anarchy 19). Such women were the most obvious beneficiaries of the early women’s suffrage movement and were viewed by some men as a threat because of their potential to compete in the workforce. When such women denied their “‘natural duties and labours’” as mother and wife they were forced to “‘carve out artificial occupations’” and interests (Showalter, Sexual Anarchy 19).

Chopin portrays Mademoiselle Reisz as a “homely” spinster who “had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a
batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair" (47). She embodies the stereotype of the female artist as a counterfeit creation who must be “content with her rich shadows” as only an “unnatural woman” would value art above the “strange, unspeakable joys of wifehood” (Moody 160). In Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna finds a confidante to whom she declares her intention to become a painter. “I am becoming an artist. Think of it!” (86). In their final meeting, Mademoiselle Reisz foreshadows Edna’s doom saying, “‘The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings’” (106).

Though such recognizable characters were palatable to a nineteenth-century audience, Edna Pontellier’s transgressions provoke strident reactions. One contemporary critic decries that Edna “fails to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion” (Railton 3). At century’s end, many doctors (including Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s personal physician) had pronounced that “the anatomy and temperament of women” were “perfectly suited to motherhood; thus
equilibrium and health could be gained only through its pursuit” (Dyer 10). Despite their belief in the “curative value of domesticity” (Dyer 10), physicians were diagnosing growing numbers of women with “nervous maladies”—a blanket term which covered sexual dysfunction or “domestic unhappiness” (Dyer 10). Leonce Pontellier laments his wife’s imbalance, confessing to Dr. Mandelet, “She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and — you understand — we meet in the morning at the breakfast table” (88).

Edna Pontellier is a woman whose marriage and children are a “responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (40). Edna does not possess the “protecting wings” of Adele and is “not a mother-woman” (29). The frequent dispatch of her children “seemed to free” Edna from the undesirable “realities” of her “uneven, impulsive” affections (40). Edna’s suicide garnered harsh criticism and led one reviewer to gloat, “We are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death” (Railton 5).
Other more sympathetic readings credit Edna with more heroic motivation for suicide suggesting that she chose “not [to] forget her motherhood, and to save the remnants of it she swam out into the sunkissed gulf and did not come back” (Railton 3). In other words, she honors motherhood with the obliteration of her life. Kate Chopin publicly responded to critics’ condemnation of Edna’s suicide in sarcastic deference, expressing regret at “Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did” (Chopin, qtd. in Dyer 18); however, Edna’s clarity of mind as she approaches the water frames the suicide as her final defiance of “antagonists” who had “overpowered her and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery” (138).

The narrative placement of Madame Ratignolle’s *accouchement* immediately before Edna’s suicide mirrors Edna’s “awful” and “delicious” sense that she has become “some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (138). Adele implores her friend to “think of the children! Remember them!” (134). As she walks on the beach, Edna does indeed remember the
children, but they emerge as “antagonists” in the struggle between the inward and outward existence she seeks to reconcile (138). Edna sees “what she meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice her self for her children” (138). Edna’s fatal sacrifice is the only way “to elude them” (138). In her death, Edna dares to reject the societal “notion that a woman’s duty and reward are found in motherhood” (Dyer 103).

In twenty-six percent of the contemporary reviews, critics speculate that Edna’s awakening derives from “her exposure to morally inappropriate love” (Corse 141). As a testament to the sexual norms of the era, the earliest signs of Edna’s awakening are rarely mentioned in reviews of the novel. In her “sensuous susceptibility” (35), Edna is infatuated with the “flaming and apparent” (29) beauty of Adele Ratignolle. The two share a seductive encounter by the sea when a touch from Adele’s hand begins to “loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (35). Their interaction is mirrored in the “(t)wo young lovers [...]
exchanging their hearts' yearnings beneath the children's tent" nearby (37). The novel reveals that "(t)he very passions themselves were aroused" in Edna's soul as she listened to the music of Mademoiselle Reisz (47). In a moment of self-discovery, Edna sees "for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh" (58). Such sensual language was typically censored in genteel women's fiction of the day. Chopin's elaboration on Edna's conquest of the rogue Alcee Arobin "deviated radically from accepted norms of women's fiction out of which her audience so largely derived its expectations" (Kolodny 50).

Kate Chopin's reputation as a regional author contributed to the negative reception of The Awakening. Following her unexpected death in 1904, Chopin was referenced in profiles of Southern writers for her depictions of the Cane River region of Louisiana. The Awakening and Chopin's other novels were rarely included in discussion of her works; emphasized instead were portrayals of "Creole bucolic life" as her major literary achievements (Toth 299). Chopin's collection of regionally inspired short
stories *Bayou Folk* was hailed as “altogether worthy of description and literary preservation” in *Publishers Weekly* of 17 March 1894 (Toth 223). The similar work *A Night in Acadie* was lauded as “exquisitely told” though *The Critic* determined the volume was “marred by one or two slight and unnecessary coarsenesses” (Toth 299). Like Edna Pontellier, Chopin’s local color heroines were awakening to “forbidden thoughts” including extramarital dalliances (Toth 298).

“Kate Chopin’s literary evolution took her progressively through phases of nineteenth-century women’s culture and women’s writing” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 69). By circumstance of her birth, Chopin would first encounter the sentimentalist works of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner whose writings served as their “pulpit” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 11). Since men dominated the tradition of fiery oratory, fiction, especially the novel, was the means by which women could participate in the literary discourse of the day. “Female local color authors were also attracted to male worlds of art and prestige opening up to women,” but their success generally stemmed from adherence to acceptable
literary conventions (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 67). Large numbers of women who began to view writing as a profession in the mid-nineteenth century were “fondly imagined” by Nathaniel Hawthorne to be a “damned mob of scribbling women” encroaching on his market (Baym 64).

“‘Local colorists’ provided Chopin a transitional model for her own writing although she did not embrace the “desperate nostalgia” typified in local color heroines (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 71). *The Awakening* demonstrates her turn from the milktoast women of nineteenth-century novels through Edna Pontellier’s abandonment of the marriage bed and renewed interest in painting as an attempt to spurn all things domestic. As the narrative advances, Edna surrenders to “the animalism that stirred impatiently within her” (101).

Daniel Rankin, Chopin’s first biographer, classified *The Awakening* as a novel possessing a “current of erotic morbidity” (qtd. in Corse 148), which others identified as a characteristic of the *fin de siecle* (Corse 148). Formalists praised the novel as “an excellent example of fiction” that
“anticipates in many respects the modern novel” (Corse 152). Despite this praise, critical theories and traditions of American literature have “led to the exclusion of women authors from the canon” (Baym 63). Feminist critic Elaine Showalter asserts “radical departures from literary convention are especially likely to be censured and suppressed by the dominant culture within a minority tradition, because they violate social as well as aesthetic expectations and stereotypes” (Sister’s Choice 83).

Changing expectations for literature written by and about women expanded in the twentieth century as women began to look beyond traditional domestic roles for fulfillment. The women’s movement in America changed perceptions of literature written by women and asserted that “women have also told the important stories of our culture” (Showalter, New Feminist 3). Increasing numbers of female scholars in the 1960’s questioned patriarchal traditions—including patriarchal literary traditions—and recognized early rejection of the novel as emblematic of larger opportunities denied women. Kate Chopin’s forgotten novel
was resurrected through the evolution of feminine discourse in post-modern America and the growth of feminist criticism.

Feminist criticism challenges patriarchal literary assumptions, utilizing many theoretical lenses including Marxism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. This critical approach speaks with many voices and cannot be seen as a monolithic critical perspective, as though a "revisionary sense of transformation" lies at its center (Showalter, *New Feminist* 5). The dominant ambitions of feminist criticism are to reexamine the Western canon of literature, assess the impact of gender on its formation, and revise literary theory to incorporate "gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis" (Showalter, *New Feminist* 3). Another goal of this perspective is to reconstruct a more accurate representation of Western literature by rediscovering texts written by women which have been buried under layers of misogyny. *The Awakening* can be viewed as a text uniquely qualified to fulfill the mission of feminist criticism, and feminist criticism is largely responsible for the reexamination—the reawakening—of the novel.
The Awakening benefited from this critical reassessment and the feminist critics’ acknowledgement that the Western literary canon had been a “grand ancestral property” (Gilbert 33) where women authors “were relegated to modest dower houses on the edge of the estate” (Gilbert 33). Nina Baym expands upon this acknowledgement when she suggests that theories of literary criticism have done much to contribute to the “invisibility” of women authors in the Western canon (Baym 64). She also contends that male-dominated literary institutions are prevented from “recognizing women authors as serious writers” due to “simple bias” (Baym 64). Because women have not historically received “formal classical education,” they “would not have written excellent literature because social constraints hindered them” (Baym 65). Consequently, assessing literature on standards from the body of early American texts, one could assume Western literature is an “essentially male” tradition (Baym 65). Baym asserts that while gender itself does not prohibit texts written by women from achieving canonical status, underlying causes of the exclusion may be “gender-connected” (65).
Kate Chopin seems to anticipate this critique of subjugated women artists and writers when Edna determines she must throw off the smothering draperies of *Chez Pontellier* and inhabit her “pigeon house” (114) to gain a “room of her own” (Bressler 145) in which to create herself and her art. Initial strategies of feminist criticism focused on confronting stereotypical female depictions. The use of feminine imagery provides a satirical subtext which belies conventional feminine heroines of Chopin’s era. Characterizations of Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz convey “stereotyped images in literature of women as angels or monsters” (Showalter, *New Feminist* 5). The “pure white” of Adele’s “drapery and fluttering things which she wore” portray her as a heavenly messenger of redemption for Edna (36). Adele’s obsession with clothing symbolizes her confinement to the domestic sphere and the “hopeless ennui” of her “colorless existence” (78). The industrious Adele is pictured throughout the novel with needle and thread in her “exquisite” hand, busily fashioning garments for her family (29). Edna is only able to convince the “mother-woman” to venture to the beach without
her children after Adele insists on bringing her “diminutive roll of needle-work” (35). Adele Ratignolle reveals Edna’s destiny if she “would give her life for her children” (70).

From her apartment perch, Mademoiselle Reisz, the musical virtuoso, mirrors Sandra Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s analysis of the “situation of the nineteenth century woman writer, her anxieties about authorship as a monstrous and unwomanly activity” (Showalter, New Feminist 6). Mademoiselle Reisz is considered a “disagreeable little woman” (46), known by many people as the most “unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street” (81). Edna’s unexpressed desires are voiced through Mademoiselle Reisz, who “seemed to echo the thought which was ever in Edna’s mind; or better, the feeling which constantly possessed her” (68). Inspired by the plaintive melodies of Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna determines “to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (49). In Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna identifies a representation of what she might become if only she could throw off the shackles of societal repression.

Nearly fifty years of obscurity befell Edna Pontellier
“for transgressing normative gender roles” (Corse 153). Chopin’s complex heroine “dares and defies” the narrow avenues of existence she is afforded” (86). Edna “chooses not to live in a world that forces her to value herself first as a mother and second as a human being” (Dyer 17). Instead, she reaches out for “that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded” (67). “Intoxicated with her newly conquered power” (131), Edna begins a transformation from “one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions” (131) to a woman who would “do as she liked and [...] feel as she liked” (79). Edna attempts to “soar above the level plain of tradition” (106) by embracing “a male definition of selfhood” (Dyer 27). Despite nineteenth-century critics’ satisfaction with Edna’s suicide and classification of the novel by some as “sex fiction” (Chicago Times-Herald qtd. in Corse 139), Edna Pontellier would later impact feminist critics “through feminist re-readings” (Corse 148). Her “courageous soul” (86) has been hailed as an “embodiment of nineteenth-century feminist criticism” (Dyer 26). As a popular “rediscovered novel” in the early days of feminist criticism, *The Awakening* provoked a rallying cry to
rescue the novel from the ash heap and revive the reputation of Edna Pontellier. “Exposure to morally inappropriate love” (Corse 142), which was deemed by Chopin’s original audience to have precipitated Edna’s downfall, is interpreted by twentieth-century feminist readers as Edna’s awakening to “her natural sense of her natural self” (Corse 149). While the nature of the literary canon accounts for individual preferences, its creation remains largely a “social process” (Corse 141) that can designate a text “as more or less valuable at different times” (Corse 141). This revision of Edna’s awakening is fabricated “primarily through feminist interpretation strategies that focus on issues of female sexuality, selfhood, and social constraints on women” (Corse 149). The literary discourse of Chopin’s time might recognize the voluptuous Adele Ratignolle as a Romantic heroine. A feminist interpretation might champion Edna Pontellier for finding “a way to elude them” (138), or perhaps Mademoiselle Reisz, the solitary artist, would emerge as the one who “seemed to prevail that summer” (29). It seems, then, that the history of the book’s reception is worth reviewing.
Based on these historical responses to *The Awakening*—its initial rejection and later revival—it is certain that texts being overlooked today may emerge as the canonical works of the twenty-first century. After all, *The Awakening* has withstood angry waves of judgment, drifted unnoticed in a sea of social indifference, and reached the calmer waters of the post-feminist biases of the late twentieth century. However the twenty-first century’s winds of social change may affect her course, unsinkable Edna will continue to swim against the tide.
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