Speaking the Unspeakable: Subversive Eroticism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *Summer*

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We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body

Adrienne Rich

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Abstract

This research analyzes and compares the use of eroticism as a means of subversion in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *Summer*. Being published in a notably repressive period, especially concerning female sexuality, these two novels, by putting their focus in their heroines' sexual awakening, transgressed the social norms of their time. Chopin and Wharton erotize their heroines in order to question the established order, which, a part from subjugating female desire, made of women completely dependent beings without intellectual aspirations. By erotizing their heroines, they empower them and provide them with both personal and sexual agency.

1. Introduction

Nobody would doubt today that Edna Pontellier, the heroine of Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), is an –at least incipient– example of a feminist character. However, the heroine Wharton brought to life in *Summer* (1917), Charity Royall, has often been underestimated. When I first read the novel, I myself thought there was not much to say about it, but now I strongly believe that Wharton's heroine has indeed a daring and courageous spirit comparable to that of Edna Pontellier, a fact that has frequently gone unnoticed. Charity, as much as Edna, *dares* to be sexual, as well as she dares to question the established order.

Since *Summer* has not been as read and studied as *The Awakening* has, I found it interesting to compare both novels and see what elements they had in common, in order to somehow place them in an equal footing. Although the two novels are in many respects very different, they share an aspect I consider to be especially relevant, which is their main focus on female sexuality. As I will try to argue in the present study, their focus on female sexuality will have larger implications, all of them regarding women's self-ownership and self-determination.

The main purpose of this research project is to analyze Chopin and Wharton's use of eroticism in their respective novels and to establish a dialogue between them. More specifically, I will analyze how the two authors erotize their heroines in order to empower them, mainly by reversing the traditional role women have usually been given in erotic literature as well as in real life. By making of their heroines erotic subjects in a period where women could hardly control any aspect of their lives, Chopin and Wharton can be said to be using literary eroticism as a means of subversion.

The first two first sections of this project will inscribe both the novels and their authors in their historical and social context, especially in what concerns female sexuality. A third one will deal with literary eroticism, in order to see how eroticism has historically been used in literature. Straightaway, the fourth section will compare the use of eroticism as a subversive tool in both novels, principally by contrasting and commenting relevant passages. This section is divided into four subsections which discuss, respectively, the oppressive symbols and feelings that serve to contrast the liberating erotic imagery; the eroticization of Nature as a means to confront the sexual constriction imposed by the established order; the sexual and personal agency the two heroines are provided with; the use of erotic language; and finally the implications of the two endings.

2. General Context

The Victorian era is known to have been a very repressive one, especially concerning sexuality. As Foucault puts it, with the arrival of the Victorian bourgeoisie, "sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule." (1990: 3) Thus, as Foucault tells us, sexuality was restricted to the domestic sphere; considered exclusively by its reproductive function:

> A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parent's bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague; proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one's speech. (1990: 3)

There were only two spaces of tolerance for illegitimate sexualities and sexual relations according to Foucault: the brothel and the mental hospital. Everywhere else, "modern puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence." (1990: 4-5)

However, as the historian states, this repression exerted over sexuality, coupled with what he calls the "will to knowledge," paradoxically awakened a growing interest on everything related to it. Sex was progressively and increasingly "put into discourse," and all these instances of discursive production on sex constituted a "science of sexuality". This "science of sexuality" acted as a form of power through which everyday pleasure was regulated and controlled; but at the same time, by talking about it, it also produced an obvious incitement to know and talk more about it (1990: 6-13). The production of discourses about sex was especially notable by the end of the nineteenth century, "a period of intense legal and medical theorizing on sexuality." (Kaye, 2007: 62)

The end of the nineteenth century supposed a big change in people's mentality, especially with regards to moral issues. It was, as reported by Marshal, "an era of new beginnings, […] whose movements are defined by the extent to which they developed away from their Victorian roots." (2007: 5) He talks of a period of "tremendous vitality," especially of language and creativity, a period characterized by "debate and controversy." On the other hand, it seems that with the emergence of the "bourgeonic science of sexology," sexuality, among which there was also the sexuality of women, was talked of as it had never before. In line with Foucault, Marshall states that the end of the nineteenth century was a period "intensely involved in questions of sex and its articulation, its political realization, and its communal implications." (2007: 7)

By the end of the nineteenth century, an eagerness to separate sexuality from its reproductive function has been speculated to have taken place among young adults (Freedman, 1982: 198). There was among the youth an apparent increase of engagement in premarital sex and use of contraceptive devices. Furthermore, according to Freedman, the fact that "many doctors condemned the widespread practice of masturbation by

women of all classes" indicates women *did* engage in these practices and that they were perceived as a problem in the late nineteenth century (1982: 200). Even though the evidence is not sufficient, it seems that by the end of the century sexuality was somehow – at least in discourse – more present than it had been before, and a conception of erotic sexuality separated from the procreative began to extend among people (Freedman, 1982: 201; Kaye, 2007: 69). Indeed, during that period there were "fervent debates about birth control, monogamy, Free Love and Free Unions," and "social activists […] offered spirited critiques of the era's constructed sexual mores along with utopian prophecies of sexual freedom." (Kaye, 2007: 66-69)

However, although there was a seemingly progressive change of perception regarding sexuality, the legal and medical policies continued to condemn sexual behaviors outside the reproductive sphere, for they obviously threatened the established order. As stated by Kaye:

> [T]he epoch's visionary prophets of collective erotic consciousness, however much they sought to disconnect sexuality from procreation and insisted on the pleasures of sex, competed with vivid myths of sexuality which, in their anticipation of Freud's sense of the erotic as troublingly ungovernable force, in many ways proved far more enduring. (2007: 70)

According to Wolff, the messages conveyed by the books written by the "experts" on the nature of women's sexuality during that period defined the attitudes of the time (1996: 4). Regarding feminine sexuality, she says that "the medical establishment in America began to promulgate the view that normal females possessed no erotic inclinations whatsoever." (1996: 3) But in this context, and probably in response to it, several women started reclaiming sexual freedom for their sex.

If one is to refer to sexual freedom for women at this period, it is necessary to talk about the New Woman, one of the "New" movements "developed away from their Victorian roots" that Marshall speaks of when characterizing the late nineteenth century. Rather

than a movement, the New Woman is usually conceived as an ideal or a "collective self-consciousness." (Marshall, 2007: 5) *Grosso modo*, the New Women "rejected conventional female roles, redefined female sexuality, and asserted their rights to higher education and the professions." (Showalter, 2009: 210) However, even though they had a considerable number of shared preoccupations concerning the social position of women, not all of them were actually in favor of sexual freedom. Ledger distinguishes two different tendencies in the New Woman: "social purity" and "sexual liberationism" (2007: 160-1). While social purity New Women demanded chastity in both men and women, sexual liberationists envisioned a world of sexual parity where women could "enjoy the same sexual freedoms as men".

Both tendencies were considerably controversial by the end of the nineteenth century, for whether they were more or less radical, the New Women were asking for political rights and questioning their traditional roles, which was obviously not very well received in a late Victorian society. A negative image was thus associated with the New Woman, and a set of "pseudo-scientific biological discourses" was deployed, "warning that women's reproductive capacities would be damaged by traditionally masculine academic pursuits." (Ledger, 2007: 156) There were even some "cures" developed in order to "treat" the New Women:

> Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell (1829-1914) […] was the leading American specialist on female depression and neurasthenia, and had developed a famous 'rest cure' for its treatment. Believing that neurasthenic New Women were suffering from a deep resistance to the female role, he attempted to induce a therapeutic state of dependence, weight gain and inertia […]. [The patients] were forbidden to do any intellectual work. (Showalter, 2009: 222)[1]

Most of the New Woman ideal was conveyed through literature. As reported by Showalter, "literature at the ends of the centuries tend to have special preoccupations

[1] It seems that Wharton –just as Charlotte Perkins Gilman– was treated by Dr S. Weir Mitchell in 1898, and went to Philadelphia to take the famous "rest cure." (Lee, 2007: 79)

with the past and the future." (2009: 119) These preoccupations can lead, according to the author, to either pessimistic tendencies or utopian ones, and it seems that by the end of the nineteenth century, a great number of utopian novels were published, most of them "by and about women," and dealing mainly with sex inequalities and reproduction. In the words of Showalter, "[i]f women's dreams of sexual and intellectual freedom could not be realized in the real world, they could at least be imagined in utopian fiction." (2009: 119)

3. Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton[2]

It was precisely in this social and literary context that Kate Chopin (1850-1904) and Edith Wharton (1862-1937) wrote. Even though none of them considered themselves as feminists or New Woman writers, they both dealt in their writings with many of the questions that were being discussed by these movements. As stated by Papke:

> Chopin and Wharton were two of the first major American women writers to react against both the established dicta of 'feminine' or sentimental fiction as well as the strictures of genteel and regionalist fiction. They reappropriated and transformed old forms in order to conceptualize the new content of their socially and morally responsive concerns. This is seen in their general themes: the individual's revolt against the inequalities manifest in genteel or bourgeois society.
>
> […] their work stand as a clear link between nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary and cultural sensibilities as well as a critique of social theories and practices. (1990: 3)

[2] It should be taken into account that the fact that both authors had a considerable contact with French culture and literature might not be coincidental, for French women were supposed to be –in certain aspects– more liberated than American women. As reported by Wharton herself, "the Frenchwoman," contrarily to the American woman, "is *grown up*." (Wharton, 2002: 289) "Compared to the women of France" –she adds– "the average American woman is still in kindergarten". According to Wharton, the Frenchwoman was freer and franker in her thinking and literature than the American woman, and had, as opposed to the latter, developed "the child's individuality." (Wharton, 2002: 289) Just as Wharton, who by the time she wrote *Summer* had already lived in France for nearly 10 years, Chopin equally had an important French background. As stated by Gilbert, Chopin had been strongly influenced by French literature and culture, and "she had come to […] the antipuritanical tradition of French literature." (1986: 17-18)

It seems that one of the main features that characterizes the work of both authors as "part of the first modern female literary discourse in America" is the centrality and expression given to women's experience (Papke, 1990: 4). Most of their protagonists are indeed women, and there is usually a conflict between individual pursuits and social conventions. "Their characters" – says Papke – "predominantly female, search for states of liminality in which they might achieve, however momentarily, autonomy." (1990: 7)

As stated above, society was undergoing a change of mind regarding several aspects, including sexuality. At the same time, though, efforts were being made to maintain and reinforce the traditional conventions. Indeed, according to Papke (1990: 9), there was a tension between predicated morality and real social practices, and this tension is actually to be found in Chopin's and Wharton's fiction:

> [T]he majority of sentimental or domestic novelists that offered romantic, conservative responses to ideological self-constitution and social expectations […] did so, in part, to remain marketable. It is not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that readers were confronted with the clearly dangerous works of the new social realists and critics who defied social givens, received ideas, and reactionary belief in magically happy endings. In these works […] women writers first killed the Angel in the House in themselves and then leveled a continual barrage of words against the ideological angels of their fiction.
>
> Just so do Chopin's and Wharton's books, for their major works center on women within their societies doing battle with both ideological theory and practice, women who envision, however vaguely, another way of being." (Papke, 1990: 19)

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *Summer*, the two novels this study is going to deal with, reflect very well this tension or conflict. We find in the two novels a female character progressively becoming aware of her own desires, and fighting in her attempt to attain them in a still very rigid traditionalist society. In both heroines there is a growing sexual desire and a resulting awareness of it, and none of them show a real sense of guilt or shame. There is an emphasis on the sexual nature of woman and an intense eroticization of their sexuality, consciously highlighting the erotic nature of sex

rather than the procreative. This dealing with an eroticized feminine sexuality, which at the time was considered a taboo, is the main reason why they aroused a certain polemic.

"*The Awakening* broke new thematic and stylistic ground as Chopin went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women's longing for sexual and personal emancipation," Showalter stated (1991: 65). In effect, most contemporaries were shocked by the novel and condemned it as "'morbid', 'essentially vulgar' and 'gilded dirt'". Although Wharton's short novel has been far less read and studied than Chopin's *magnum opus*, it was also highly criticized and, as Bell reported, "it had almost no real precedent in its boldness in treating sexual passion." (1999: 16) Here lays thus the subversivity of both Chopin and Wharton in their respective novels. In the words of Foucault:

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (1990: 6)

It can thus be argued that the two authors ventured to "spoke the unspeakable" or, as Papke –taking up the expression used by Madmoiselle Reitz– puts it, they "dared and defied." (1990: 34)

4. Eroticism in Literature

Although *a priori* one would probably not consider neither *The Awakening* nor *Summer* as belonging to the literary genre which has been commonly called "erotic literature", Brulotte and Phillips define erotic literature simply as "works in which sexuality and/or sexual desire has a dominant presence." (2006: x) Thus, according to this definition, we can undoubtedly talk about erotic literature when referring to the two novels, for it is undeniable that both do contain a great deal of eroticism, which besides plays a central

role in their plots. Nevertheless, in the present study I would rather talk about *eroticism in literature* or *literary eroticism*, for these designations do not refer to a specific literary genre as I think *erotic literature* does.

Before proceeding to analyze the eroticism in the novels that concern us here, we should clarify a few aspects. First of all, what do we mean by eroticism? Eroticism has often been defined by its capacity or intention to arouse the reader sexually. But, is there a single sexual appetite? Is there even a universal sexual appetite? What will sexually arouse someone will perhaps not have any effect whatsoever on someone else. As reported by Brulotte and Phillips, it appears that "[t]he consensus of scholarship during the last quarter century is that such a literary genre cannot be defined according to the individual reader's desire, since each person has his/her own 'sexual template' as modern psychology calls it." (2006: x) It seems then that eroticism should be defined otherwise.

As many authors have noted, eroticism has been frequently confused with pornography (Évrard, 2003; Brulotte and Phillips, 2006; Quevedo García, 2002). Even though both terms do have something in common, i.e. their relation to sex and/or sexuality, they have usually been conceived differently. While pornography has often had degrading connotations, eroticism has not necessarily been considered in a negative way. Additionally, erotic has been more frequently contemplated by its artistic qualities than pornography (Évrard, 2003: 10). However, both the conception of eroticism and pornography have always been subject to their temporal and cultural context, and thus it is extremely difficult –if not impossible– to give an accurate and objective definition of these terms. According to Brulotte and Phillips,

> [n]either of the existing terms, erotic or pornographic, is neutral. But generally speaking the former is usually taken to refer to an acceptable form of sexual representation, while the latter designates a form that is socially or politically

> unacceptable. Both terms are therefore infected with judgmentalism […]. The distinction between the erotic and the pornographic depends on arguments and stereotypes that are fundamentally subjective […]. Legal rulings are themselves influenced and determined by such arguments which are always culturally and temporally relative. (Brulotte and Phillips, 2006: x)

Hence, it should always be taken into account that the blurred borders between these terms depend completely on social conventions, and can therefore vary depending on their time and context. This explains why novels that were considered pornographic when they were published do not appear to us as such today, and some of them are even studied in school. Such is the case of *The Awakening* and *Summer*, both causing a certain polemic when they appeared. These are some samples of contemporary reviews concerning *The Awakening*:

"it was not necessary for a writer of so great refinement and poetic grace to enter the overworked field of sex fiction." (from the *Chicago Times Herald*, in Margo Culley, 1994: 166)

"the story was not worth telling, and its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent." (from *The Outlook*, in Margo Culley, 1994: 166)

"The worst of such stories is that they will fall into the hands of youth, […] prompting unholy imaginations and unclean desires." (from the *Providence Sunday Journal*, in Margo Culley, 1994: 167)

"it leaves one sick of human nature" (from *The Mirror*, in Margo Culley, 1994: 162)

"It is not a healthy book" (from the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, in Margo Culley, 1994: 163)

According to Berg, Chopin's "frank depiction of Edna's awakening was matched, in the literature of this period, only by Edith Wharton's *Summer*, published nineteen years later." (Berg, 1993: 75) Wharton herself confessed that readers had been scandalized by the novel, and it seems that it had been "banned in her old haunt of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a decision that only amused its author." (Rattray, 2015: xvi). Marilyn French, in her introduction to *Summer*, assures indeed that most Americans had been shocked by the novel's main topic (French, 1998: 41).

A part from its strong relation to its historical and cultural context, eroticism, in its depiction and emphasis on sexuality, is also intimately linked to taboos. The word taboo is supposed to have come from an Oceanic language, the original term describing "a complex system of ritual, superstition, and social restriction." (Jacob, 2006: 1273) In Western cultures it refers to those things or acts that are socially or religiously prohibited under the threat of punishment (Jacob, 2006: 1273). This is therefore the main reason why taboos are so powerful, for they are intrinsically tight to a strong sense of fear. Their main function is to regulate social behavior and, more generally, to maintain the social order. However, as stated by Jacob,

> if taboos represent prohibition and fear, then it is also important to note that these feared acts are often accompanied by desire for that which is forbidden –after all, there is no need to forbid acts which no one wishes to perform, only those which are somehow desired. As domains where the feared and/or socially unacceptable often meet desire and fascination, sexual behavior and eroticism are principal sites where the interplay between taboo and transgression occurs. (Jacob, 2006: 1273)

Eroticism in literature, for the mere reason of writing about a taboo –in this case, sex– always has an implicit sense of transgression. At this point it would be appropriate to make reference to the two novels we are studying. Both *The Awakening* and *Summer* deal with an obvious taboo, for they put female sexuality in scene, which was not something to talk about in a novel. By expressing taboos and their transgression at the same time, thus, the two novels aim to free sexuality from the heavily charged and repressed social imaginary of their time, a characteristic that Évrard attributes to literary eroticism in general (2003: 7).

When talking about transgression in these terms, one is not to obviate Bataille's work on eroticism, partly exposed in his essay *L'Érotisme*, published in 1957. As reported by this author, "l'interdit est là pour être violé."[3] (Bataille, 1957 : 72) According to him,

[3] The prohibition is there to be violated (my own translation)

eroticism is, as we have already suggested, a way of violating these prohibitions or taboos. "L'érotisme" –he states– "est infraction à la règle des interdits."[4]

Evidently, the fewer taboos and prohibitions there are in a society, the less transgression is found. In this way, libertinage in France is by far more present under the Ancient Regime, a very repressed period, than during the Revolution, "which tends to destroy the prohibitions" (Évrard, 2003: 6). Évrard talks about a need of defying power, and considers the use of eroticism as a means of transgression "au nom de la liberté sexuelle."[5] (2006: 7) It is clear that *The Awakening* and *Summer* were written and published in a quite repressive period, as we have already seen, where still many taboos operated around everything related to sexuality, and especially female sexuality. Thus, by erotizing their novels and heroines, Chopin and Wharton were obviously –and to a certain extent– demanding the sexual freedom that women did not have at their period.

Far from being exclusively aimed to sexual arousal, eroticism has often been used as a means for social criticism. Brulotte and Phillips recognize that eroticism has a tenacious ability of subversion, and state that, in fact, "[t]hroughout history […] erotic writings generally can be said to have had a socially leveling influence." (2006: x-xi) According to Quevedo García, erotic writing has been used as a "form of protest" threatening social conventions, and therefore as a "grito liberador que trata de derribar las murallas que siglos de represión han levantado en torno a Eros."[6] (2002: 187) Social criticism is undoubtedly present both in *The Awakening* and in *Summer*, for there is a clear questioning of social conventions and a quest for women's emancipation, which, as I will attempt to argue, has to be achieved by first gaining power over the female body.

[4] eroticism […] is infringement to the rules of prohibitions (my own translation)
[5] in the name of sexual freedom (my own translation)
[6] liberating shout attempting to demolish the walls that centuries of repression have raised around Eros (my own translation)

Therefore eroticism, with its unquestionable capacity of exalting the body and everything that comes from and with it, can be claimed to be a magnificent tool of subversion when it comes to the Woman Question.

The vast majority of erotic literature has historically been reserved to men. Although literary eroticism can already be found in Ancient Greek women writers such as Sappho, Évrard considers that it was not until women were sexually liberated that they really started writing erotic works (2003: 51). On the one hand, it should be taken into account that, throughout history, women have written by far less than men (and the few women who wrote have been –and some still are– silenced), for what it is expectable that erotic writing, as well as writing in general, was mostly restricted to the masculine sex. On the other hand, though, and also in response to Évrards statement, I find it important to equally take into account the women who started writing erotic works before they were sexually liberated, that is to say, the women who did it precisely aiming to contribute to their own sexual liberation.

As reported by Wisker, "[w]omen's erotic writing in the twentieth century is a rich and varied phenomenon which is fundamentally engaged with the active challenging of women's social and political positions throughout the century." (2006: 1399) Even though *The Awakening* and *Summer* are probably previous to the period this author is making reference to, they can definitely be taken as early and incipient instances of such tendency. In fact, Wisker states that this tendency in erotic writing starts "early in the century", and she includes the ideal of the New Woman, which, as we have already mentioned, was developed by the end of the nineteenth century.

"The historical changes of the twentieth century" –reports Wisker– "saw women gaining the vote, debates about the right to control their own sexual activity and

reproduction, and a more general liberation of women's opportunities to write about their sexual desires, needs, and activities using language and forms of erotic writing." (2006: 1399) This –partial– liberation of women was already being demanded by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, as we have already seen when discussing the New Woman. Chopin and Wharton, conscious of the situation of women as they were, contributed to the –partial– liberation of women that was going to be achieved, mainly by daring to use "language and forms of erotic writing" that were not tolerated at their time, and especially by using it to celebrate the female body and sexuality, which was to be freed from social repression. As reported by Wisker, "[e]qual citizenship […] includes the recognition and expression of sexuality and the erotic." (2006: 1400) On the other hand, women's erotic writing can be a powerful tool "to explore the potential for intellectual and individual liberation and demythologizing of constraining myths." (Wisker, 2006: 1419)

Most of the times, the eroticization of women in literature, as well as in other art forms, has entailed women objectification. Thus in erotic literature, the woman has practically always been presented as an erotic object, meant to awake the desire of men. In *Les Châteaux de la subversion* (1982), for exemple, Annie Le Brun describes the objectification of women the following way: "Dociles, soumises, seules au monde, insupportablement vertueuses, elles s'imposent ou plus exactement s'exposent, comme objets érotiques privilégiés."[7] (Le Brun in Évrard, 1003 : 18) As opposed to men, who are frequently active and independent characters in erotic novels, women are mostly pictured and offered as objects of desire.

[7] docile, submissive, alone in the world, insufferably virtuous, they impose themselves, or rather expose themselves, as privileged erotic objects (my own translation)

Brulotte and Phillips argue that eroticism is aimed at –or at least can reach– both men and women (2006: xii). According to them, eroticism "is more likely to undermine than to reinforce conventional thinking and social stereotypes" (2006: xii). Indeed, the use of eroticism in literature opens to a wide range of possibilities, and so it can, in my opinion, reinforce as well as undermine social stereotypes. Wisker agrees that eroticism does not necessarily imply objectification or degradation of women, and she equally argues that it can instead be "a liberated exploration of sensuality, fantasy, experience, and pleasure." (2006: 1400) Évrard considers that erotic literature has historically been subject to "masculine domination," and he talks about a "renewal" of the genre, where women would stop being objects of desire to become subjects claiming their own desire (2003: 51). This new way of writing the Erotic should, as reported by Wisker, avoid "falling into the trap of merely reproducing discourses and texts which fix women as someone else's object" and at the same time "empower and enable women's erotic expression." (2006: 1400)

In this sense, we can clearly argue that neither *The Awakening* nor *Summer* are examples of women objectification. On the contrary, neither Edna nor Charity are depicted erotically in order to be offered to a male gaze, and they even dare to take sexual and erotic initiatives. In fact, both novels seek to empower their heroines, who, being provided with sexual agency, refuse their position as objects to become erotic subjects. As I have already mentioned, the reappropriation of the female body can be considered as an essential key to achieve the emancipation of women. In this line, Wisker reports:

> [w]riting the body has […] enabled women to express and feel themselves in the world as subjects, rather than objects, because they are speaking from the inside, from the interface between the body and the world, rather than perceiving ways in which they are represented in writing and art aimed more obviously at a male readership and gaze. (2006: 1412-3)

The body, being the main locus of eroticism, appears as an important element to women's emancipation, for it implies the repossession of the most obvious part of their being.

This body, however, is not always expressed explicitly. In fact, erotic language uses very frequently all sorts of stylistic figures such as metaphors, metonyms, and all kinds of symbolism and imagery, for it seeks to somehow hide its main subject matter. As stated by Évrard, erotic writing seeks to find a "pleasant language to name the unnamable", which in this case is, obviously, sexuality (2003: 17). Curious as it may appear, the censure that has been imposed to eroticism in literature has, according to this author, "forced" the writers to "devulgarize" their subject matter, mainly by employing an elaborate and non-explicit language (2003: 16).

As we have seen, the main features accompanying eroticism in literature are the exposure of a taboo, the transgression of it by the mere fact of putting it into discourse, an implicit social criticism and the use of erotic language, which tends to be non-explicit. All these elements are to be found in Chopin's *The Awakening* as well as in Wharton's *Summer*. The taboo dealt in both novels is, needless to say, sexuality, and more specifically female sexuality. A part from the fact that both heroines claim throughout the novels their own sexual desire, in the case of Edna there is a willingness to engage in extra-marital sex, while Charity sets out on a pre-marital affair. According to Évrard:

> Le fait que la sexualité ne pouvait s'appuyer que sur la force institutionnelle du mariage qui la légitimait, a consacré la distance entre passion amoureuse et mariage. Les romans réalistes du XIXe siècle [...] décrivent l'échec du mariage 'arrangé', mettant en scène l'ennui conjugal, la haine mutuelle ou l'adultère. La récurrence de la figure de l'amant dans la littérature romanesque révèle que

> l'effusion sentimentale et sexuelle ne pouvait se vivre que hors du couple.[8] (Évrard, 2003 : 4)

In both novels there is a clear criticism to the implications of marriage, which, arranged or not, made of the woman a completely dependent being, not to mention that she literally became property of her husband. In *The Awakening*, Edna says a wedding is "one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (Chopin, 1994: 63), while in *Summer*, Charity finds that the words uttered by the minister on her marriage have "the same dread sound of finality" (Wharton, 2015: 146) as those pronounced at her mother's funeral. On the other hand, motherhood is also questioned in both novels, abortion being considered as an option in Wharton's novel by its pregnant heroine. As for Chopin's heroine, she says to Adèle Ratignolle: "I would give up the unessential […] for my children; but I wouldn't give myself;" (46) and she ends up "neglecting" her children, as it would have been put at the time, and probably also today.

5. Comparative Analysis on the Use of Eroticism in Chopin's *The Awakening* and Wharton's *Summer*

Although Chopin's *The Awakening* and Wharton's *Summer* are two quite different novels, they have several elements in common. At first sight, they appear as radically distant for, while the main character of the former is an upper-class married woman nearly in her thirties, in the latter the protagonist is a seventeen-year-old librarian from humble origins. However, the two heroines undergo an intense sexual awakening, which is, in fact, the main theme of both novels. Both in Edna Pontellier and in Charity Royall there is a growing sexual desire and an open recognition of it; and not only are

[8] The fact that sexuality could not lean but on the institutional strength of marriage which legitimated it, consecrated the distance between love passion and marriage. The realist novels of the 19th C […] described the failure of 'arranged' marriage, depicting conjugal boredom, mutual hatred or adultery. The recurrence of the lover figure in fictional literature reveals that sentimental and sexual effusion could only be experienced outside marriage. (my own translation)

they aware of their sexuality but, far from being ashamed by it, they actually look for it and celebrate it. Both heroines are extremely erotic and corporal, and they engage themselves in extramarital –in the case of Edna– and premarital –in the case of Charity– affairs, for which they can be considered sexual transgressors. Additionally, both sexual awakenings take place during summer, a season which has metaphorically been associated to passion.

Nevertheless, the awakenings undergone by the two heroines are in neither case simply *sexual* awakenings but, on the contrary, they have larger implications. By recognizing their sexual desire and exploring their body and its possibilities –regardless of what others might say–, the two heroines are claiming self-ownership. They start to be conscious of their physical reality, of its potentialities, and also their consequences. By celebrating their erotic bodies, they are also asking for self-determination. They are claiming their independence, both physical and spiritual; in short, sexual and personal freedom.

5.1. Oppressive Symbols and Feelings Contrasting with Liberating Erotic Imagery: Patriarchal Ideology vs. the Free Woman

Both Edna and Charity start their stories being trapped, with a dreadful feeling of oppression. They are of course trapped in a rigid patriarchal society which operates with all sorts of constrictions, especially concerning sexuality, and more specifically female sexuality. This sense of oppression, conveyed especially –but not exclusively– through geographical and physical symbolism, is constantly being contrasted by a sense of freedom expressed through Nature and –other– erotic imagery.

"A girl came out of Lawyer Royall's house, at the end of the one street of North Dormer, and stood on the doorstep." (3) This is the incipit of Wharton's *Summer*, which, far from what it may seem at first sight, is more than a simple introduction to its heroine. This *coming out* of Royall's house is very meaningful, for it constitutes the first symbolical step of her awakening, and has an evident symbolical connection with the ending of the novel. She *comes out* of what represents in a smaller scale the patriarchal society, ruled by Lawyer Royall, who is the symbolic figure of the Patriarch *par excellence*. The fact that he is a lawyer is of course significant, for the legal system plays an essential role in the regulation of social and sexual behavior. We must not forget either that, while Royall's house is at one side of North Dormer, "at the other end of the village, the road rises above the church," (3) which represents the other main system of social and sexual regulation, that is to say, religion. Thus North Dormer, by its geographical position, is symbolically being watched by the Law from the one side, and by Religion from the other. In *The Awakening*, a part from the reference to religion, we will also find a clear allusion to the medical system –represented by Dr. Mandelet–, which is still another means of social and sexual regulation.

North Dormer is indeed presented from the beginning as an oppressive society for women, for while "citizens" –referring to men only– are outdoors, "the women [are] indoors, engaged in languid household drudgery." (4) However, Charity is not a regular woman, for she insists throughout the novel on being outdoors, as for instance when she leaves the library for the first time: "she began to walk toward the house. But *instead of entering* she passed on, turned into a field-path and mounted to a pasture on the hillside." (10, my italics) Indeed, she feels really oppressed whenever she is inside, like the time when she gets home after an "evening escape" with Harney: "She felt like a night-bird suddenly caught and caged." (96)

The main character of Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna, is also compared to a caged bird, and she equally keeps on attempting to set herself free. The novel's incipit says what follows: "A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: / 'Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That's all right!' / He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood." (3) While Wharton chooses to start her novel by directly presenting its heroine "in flesh and blood", Chopin opts for introducing us to a "green and yellow parrot", which clearly symbolizes the novel's main character Edna. Thus Edna, although she is "outside the door", starts the novel in a cage. She feels indeed completely trapped in her role as a wife and mother, and insists –as Charity– on staying outdoors, which implies escaping from the "woman sphere".

Just as North Dormer symbolically oppresses Charity, so does New Orleans to a certain extent oppress Edna in *The Awakening*. The city of New Orleans represents Society and everything that it implies, while Grand Isle is closer to the sea and Nature. According to Gilbert, "the colony where she comes to consciousness is situated […] outside patriarchal culture, beyond the limits and limitations of the city where men make history, on the shore that marks the margin where nature intersects with culture. Here the sea can speak in a seductive voice" (1986: 25-6) Thus, in the line of Gilbert, we can say that New Orleans represents the "male city", where husbands go to work every week, whereas Grand Isle –at least during the week– is a "man-free" place, a more liberated area which allows Edna to explore new possibilities.

In a similar way, Charity's exploration of "her new self" takes always place outside North Dormer, either on the hillside or in the cabin. Significantly, both the hillside and the cabin are placed somewhere between North Dormer and the Mountain, the latter symbolizing precisely the opposite of a "civilized" society. Indeed, the Mountain is

where “the outlaws” live, “outside of civilization, a place where order and law as the civilized West construct them do not exist.” (Ammons, 1993: xxii) The Mountain is symbolically used to contrast with the rigidity and strong repression of North Dormer, for while in North Dormer sexuality is not conceivable outside marriage, people in the Mountain engage freely in sexual intercourse. In fact, “[t]he only man that ever goes up [to the Mountain] is the minister, and he goes because they send down and get him whenever there's any of them dies […] but I never heard of their having the minister up to marry them” (36). Therefore, it is significant that, just as Edna’s, Charity’s sexual awakening also takes place symbolically outside the social order.

It is important to bear in mind that both Edna and Charity are outsiders to their societies: Edna is “not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles” (10), and Charity does not appear to feel comfortable with anyone in North Dormer. In Grand Isle, Edna is surrounded by Creoles, who speak a language that she understands “imperfectly”, and Charity is constantly reminded by her fellow villagers that she “was brought down from the Mountain” (12), which means she is not really one of them. According to Berg, “this marginal status allows them to define themselves outside of the boundaries of traditional femininity, perhaps facilitating their sexual daring,” but “it also means that they must undertake this self-definition alone.” (1993: 100)

Another oppressive symbol in both novels is language, for it represents the language of social order; the language of patriarchy. Edna speaks “a language that nobody understands” and so does Charity, the latter feeling “imprisoned” in the library –referred to as a “prison house”– where she works, symbol of the patriarchal language, as stated by some authors (Berg, 1993: 107; Kopcik Rhyner: 110). As reported by Berg, the patriarchal “discourses –of law, culture, and religion– inhibit Charity, who is comfortable only in Nature” (1993: 107). Edna is also more comfortable in Nature, by

the sea, whose language, as opposed to the one spoken by others, she *does* understand. Berg argues that Charity and Edna, as defying women, cannot express themselves through language, for the only available language is the language of patriarchy, a "man-made language." (1993: 91-107) Thus the two heroines find their way to express themselves through their –sexual– bodies, and mainly by their erotic connection to Nature.

5.2. Eroticized Nature: Librating Women from Sexual Constriction

The two heroines are intimately linked to –and practically melted into– Nature. In fact, their whole sexual awakening keeps in step with their connection to it. I would venture to say that their relation to Nature is the only real one, the only in which they are actually engaged, which reinforces their status as outsiders. Their special sensitivity to Nature is of course significant, for Nature has traditionally been used in literature as a means to contrast and question the artificiality of social conventions. In *The Awakening* and *Summer*, where the main theme is female sexuality, Nature is eroticized in order to contrast the rigid sexual regulations of the period, which were especially oppressive for women.

In *The Awakening*, the heroine is constantly related to the sea, which plays an essential role in her sexual awakening. The sea is a symbol of freedom, with no limits, open to all possibilities; but initially Edna has no access to it, for she does not know how to swim. Although she is from the beginning attracted to the immensity of the ocean, it is not until she learns to swim that the sea appears to the reader as an extremely powerful element. All of a sudden, Edna "realizes [her] powers", and as a child who has just learnt to walk, she "walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (27). This is an intense metaphorical moment, where she comes to realize that she can

indeed control her own body and person: "[a] feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul." (27) Once she starts being aware of "her powers", that is, the possibility of determining her own being, of escaping the constrictions that have retained her so far –that have kept her "asleep"–, she is resolved "to swim far out, where no woman had swum before." (27)

The sea –"site of her awakening" (Gray, 2004: 54) and "of her erotic adventure" (Wright, 2006: 240)–, is extremely eroticized from the very beginning; it is constantly being described by its erotic and sensuous features. It has a "seductive odor" and a "seductive" voice; it is "never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation;" (14) and its touch is "sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace." (14) In fact, the whole natural surroundings of such "magical" scenes in the sea become very erotic: "There were strange, rare odors abroad—a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and damp, new-plowed earth, mingled with heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near." (27) This poetic eroticism shocks radically with the oppressive passages mentioned in the previous section. Whereas Society is limiting and oppressing, eroticized Nature seems to be limitless and open to all possibilities.

It is worth mentioning that at some point, before learning to swim, Edna is sitting in front of the sea when she is suddenly brought back to a childhood memory: "the hot wind beating" in her face reminds her "of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water." (17) This sea-like meadow has of course a parallelism with the symbolical meaning of the sea, which we have already discussed. It is significant that –

as she will later tell to Madame Ratignolle– she was running through the grass in order to escape from some prayers, who clearly represent the social order from which she will try to run away at the end of the novel.

As for Wharton's novel, grass is precisely its heroine's equivalent to Edna's sea. In fact, Nature in *Summer* includes, not only the grass, but also plants, flowers, trees, and even some birds and insects. Most of the sexually evocative passages of *Summer* are indeed directly or indirectly related to Nature. After having met Harney for the first time, for example, she sets out towards "the hillside," and there takes place the first erotic passage of *Summer*:

> There she lay down on the slope, tossed off her hat, and hid her face in the grass.
>
> She was blind and insensible to many things, and dimly knew it; but to all that was light and air, perfume and colour, every drop of blood in her responded. She loved the roughness of the dry mountain grass under her palms, the smell of the thyme into which she crushed her face, the fingering of the wind in her hair and through her cotton blouse, and the creak of the larches as they swayed to it.
>
> She often climbed up the hill and lay there alone for the mere pleasure of feeling the wind and of rubbing her cheeks in the grass. Generally at such times she did not think of anything, but lay immersed in an inarticulate well-being. (10)

This intensely erotic passage shows us how exceptionally sensitive to Nature Charity is. Here Nature is undeniably personified, as if someone was *actually* caressing her, running their fingers through her hair and blouse. Additionally, the author makes it clear that she is there "for the mere pleasure of feeling," to celebrate her body and experience its unlimited erotic potentialities.

Another evocative passage where Nature is eroticized takes place a few pages on, right after having fixed her "small argument" with Harney:

> On such an afternoon Charity Royall lay on a ridge above a sunlit valley, her face pressed to the earth and the warm currents of the grass running through her. Directly in her line of vision a blackberry branch laid its frail white flowers and blue-green leaves against the sky. Just beyond, a tuft of sweet-fern uncurled between the beaded shoots of the grass, and a small yellow butterfly vibrated over them like a fleck of sunshine. This was all she saw; but she felt, above her and about her, the strong growth of the beeches clothing the ridge, the rounding of pale

> green cones on countless spruce branches, the push of myriads of sweet-fern fronds in the cracks of the stony slope below the wood, and the crowding shoots of meadowsweet and yellow flags in the pasture beyond. All this bubbling of sap and slipping of sheaths and bursting of calyxes was carried to her on mingled currents of fragrance. Every leaf and bud and blade seemed to contribute its exhalation to the pervading sweetness in which the pungency of pine-sap prevailed over the spice of thyme and the subtle perfume of fern, and all were merged in a moist earth-smell that was like the breath of some huge sun-warmed animal. (27)

Here again we can see the special connection Charity has with Nature, which is able to awaken all her senses. The textures, the colors, the odors… everything seems to be in constant movement, and this movement is extraordinarily erotic: all this uncurling, this vibrating, and this pushing, bubbling, slipping, bursting… Charity's senses are being awakened by Nature, and we get the impression that her body is completely alive and empowered as when Edna enters this "*other* element" –to use Gilbert's expression (1986: 26)– which is the sea. Kopcik Rhyner argues that Wharton uses flower imagery in order to "discuss the young girl's sexual awakening in a veiled and poetic way," and believes that the flowers and plants represent Charity's body (2012: 120). Therefore, these passages where she is in intense physical contact –of touching and feeling– with flowers, plants, and shoots of grass, could be understood as if she were actually exploring her own body. Kopcik Rhyner also states that, while other characters of *Summer*, such as Annabel Balch, are related to "cultivated garden flowers", Charity is significantly associated with wildflowers, "since [they] reproduce actively, freely, and without human intervention." (2012: 120-1)

5.3. Sexual and Personal Agency: from (Erotic) Objects to Subjects

Even though in both novels, the two awakenings seem to have been initially prompted by men –Robert in the case of Edna and Harney in the case of Charity–, their sexual awakenings are completely *their own*, they are not tied to a masculine –or any– figure. There is an exaltation of female sexuality; and the two heroines are completely

eroticized, but not as erotic objects destined to a male gaze. Instead, they are presented as erotically active, and apart from being completely conscious of their acts, they equally show a clear willingness on everything they do.

In *Summer*, right by the end of one of the highly erotic passages where Charity can be said to be exploring her own body, "there came between her eyes and the dancing butterfly the vision of a man's foot in a large worn boot covered with red mud," to what she responds the following way: "'Oh don't' she exclaimed, raising herself on her elbow and stretching out a warning hand. […] 'Don't stamp on those bramble flowers, you dolt!'" (27-8) This male intrusion abruptly interrupts the erotic moment, for what we can be sure that her eroticized body was not to be seen by anyone, and especially –and symbolically– not by a man. This is a celebration of the female body, of female sexuality, and she is not going to let "a man's foot" step on it.

Significantly, Charity will later in the novel remember this threatening foot which almost stepped "on her body" when Lawyer Royall proposes her to marry her lover Harney: "As she listened, there flitted through her mind the vision of [the] muddy boot coming down on the white bramble-flowers. The same thing had happened now; something transient and exquisite had flowered in her, and she had stood by and seen it trampled to earth." (61) Just as before she had felt free to experience her body erotically, she has now also taken the liberty to freely explore her sexuality –this time with Harney. And just as her erotic moment was completely broken by a "man's foot", now this sexual experience with his lover is also interrupted –and put to an end– by Royall's proposal. Royall, the main patriarchal figure of the novel, is pushing her to marry Harney so that their sexual relations are covered within the framework of marriage. However, she does not want to marry Harney, and above all, she does not want to be told what to do.

Similarly, Edna also refuses Robert's marriage proposal. When he comes back from Mexico, he expects Mr. Pontellier to "set her wife free" so that they can finally marry. However, offended by Robert's words, Edna answers him:

> "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both." (102)

Edna is clearly asserting self-ownership and self-determination. Not only she does not want to marry him, but she is offended by the mere fact that he assumed she belonged to her husband. By stating that she does not belong to anyone, she is refusing her position as an object and claiming her own agency. It has to be taken into account that marriage at the time put women in a completely passive position, from which they were conceived as objects their husbands could enjoy whenever they pleased. As a rebellion against it, Edna refuses to go to bed with her husband when she gets home the night she has learnt to swim.

Apart from refusing to be an object, Edna also asserts herself as an erotic subject, something that can be seen especially when she takes sexual initiatives with Robert. According to Wright, "the phallic tropology is given to the woman while the man takes the female role. She bestows 'a soft, cool, delicate kiss, whose voluptuous sting *penetrated* his whole being' and looks into his face 'as if she would never *withdraw* her eyes more' (emphasis added)." (Wright, 2006: 240) This inversion of traditional roles, by which Edna passes from erotic object to subject, can also be seen in *Summer*, during a passage involving voyeurism. While traditional scenes of voyeurism depict men looking at and eroticizing women, Wharton reverses conventional roles by making –in a sort of metatheatrality– Charity look at her lover through the window. Thus, contradicting social norms, she is outside while he is inside, she is being active while he

is completely passive, she is looking while he is being looked at; in short, she is the erotic subject and he is the object.

Although Charity might seem somewhat submissive in her relation with Harney, and one might get the impression he finally lets her down, she is not really being fooled by him. She perfectly knows what the situation is, she knows she could never marry him and she does not even want to. Still, bearing all this in mind, she decides to undertake this "sexual adventure," to discover *her own* body and sexuality with him. Right after they meet a drunk Lawyer Royall surrounded by prostitutes in Nettleton, Harney tells her she should understand "that men… men sometimes…," to what she answers: "I know about men." (87) Charity "knows about men," she is perfectly aware that Harney might be probably just looking for a sexual adventure, but so does her, and so she decidedly undertakes it assuming its risks.

As for Edna, she *does* also celebrate sexuality by itself, completely detached from love. We can see this especially in her affair with Arobin, for whom she has no particularly special feelings. Furthermore, when she thinks about his feelings, she makes clear that she does not care about his intentions: "Edna did not care or think whether [his feelings] were genuine or not." (74) Edna's relation to Arobin is altogether sexual, and yet without loving him, their kiss "was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire." (80) It is not about love but female sexuality, and Edna –as a woman– is claiming her own desires, her own pleasure.

As we have seen, Edna and Charity are provided with erotic agency, but what is important to note is that it has larger implications than simply having sex with whoever they want. It also implies a personal agency, where they refuse to be "captured" and/or

"possessed" by anyone who might pretend to *have* them. By refusing marriage and insisting on celebrating their sexuality outside the institutional and moral framework, the two heroines are questioning the social order according to which they must –as women– passively depend on someone else.

As a contrast, we can find in both novels good examples of conventional women being described –contrarily to Edna and Charity– as (erotic) objects. Adèle Ratignolle, for instance, is the perfect woman according to social norms: she is practically always inside, devotedly taking care of her children, and everything she does seems to be done to please her husband: "[she] was keenly interested in everything he said." (54) In *Summer*, a figure contrasting with Charity's self-determination and agency would be Annabel Balch, who is passively waiting for Harney to propose to her so that they can legitimately marry each other. Additionally, in the novel she is almost exclusively described by her physical attributes –"extremely handsome," "her great beauty"– or the clothes she wears, which gives the impression she is not more than an erotic object offered to a male gaze. It is also significant that, while at some point Charity "tosses off" her hat –a symbol of artificiality and appearances–, in another passage of the novel Wharton subtly lets us know that Annabel Balch "straightens" it.

5.4. Erotic Language

As we have already mentioned in the previous section, erotic language is characterized by employing stylistic figures such as metaphors, metonyms and all sorts of symbolism and imagery, in order to subtly cover its daring content. With respect to the novels, so far we have mostly seen instances of such figures in terms of Natural imagery, but they are not the only ones. In fact, both Wharton and Chopin use all sorts of evocative images, from stylistic figures to partial suggestions and elusions.

An interesting erotic symbol present in both novels, for example, is the serpent. In *The Awakening*, this symbol appears in two significant moments that parallel each other: right before she learns to swim, and before entering the sea to be definitively enfolded in its "soft, close embrace:"

> The sea was quiet now, and swelled lazily in broad billows that melted into one another and did not break except upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents. (27)
>
> The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. (109)

The "foamy" serpents coiling back and about her naked ankles are a very suggestive symbol which appears precisely in two of the most erotic passages in the novel. The serpent has been a recurrent erotic symbol in literature, from the snake in the Bible to "la serpent qui danse" in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*.[9] Curiously, in *Summer* there is also an erotic passage where the author employs the symbol of the serpent:

> Twilight fell, and lights began to show along the shore. The trolleys roaring out from Nettleton became great luminous serpents coiling in and out among the trees. The wooden eating-houses at the Lake's edge danced with lanterns, and the dusk echoed with laughter and shouts and the clumsy splashing of oars. (74)

The motion of the trolleys is compared to "great luminous serpents coiling in and out," an evident erotic movement which can hardly be obviated. Additionally, the trains "coiling in and out" among the trees remind of the metaphor of a train penetrating a tunnel, which is also quite recurrent in art.[10]

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[9] To mention a contemporary example, there is a short story by Egerton titled "A Cross Line" (1893) where the heroine is also depicted with a "coiling serpent:" "Her arms are clasped by jeweled snakes, and one with quivering diamond fangs coils round her hips." (Egerton in Ledger, 2007: 157) According to Ledger, to whom the whole passage –missing here– is an "aestheticised rendering of female masturbation," the jeweled snakes suggest "a sexually predatory femininity." (Ledger, 2007: 157)

[10] In the cinema, for example, there are several instances, such as Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), where the kiss between the main actors is followed by an image of a train penetrating a tunnel, or Lars Von Trier's *Europa* (1991). To see more examples of erotic metaphors in the cinema: "Comment suggérer le sexe au cinéma?". *Blow up*. Arte. 8 Sept. 2015. Web-magazine. Retreived from: http://cinema.arte.tv/fr/article/comment-suggerer-le-sexe-au-cinema, 06/06/2016.

Another clear metaphor in Wharton's novel are the fireworks, which veil the most sexual passage of the novel:

> After a while the scattered fireworks ceased. A longer interval of darkness followed, and then the whole night broke into flower. From every point of the horizon, gold and silver arches sprang up and crossed each other, sky-orchards broke into blossom, shed their flaming petals and hung their branches with golden fruit […]
>
> Charity's heart throbbed with delight. It was as if all the latent beauty of things had been unveiled to her. She could not imagine that the world held anything more wonderful; but near her she heard someone say: "You wait till you see the set piece," and instantly her hopes took a fresh flight. […]
>
> "Now –now!" the same voice said excitedly; and Charity, grasping the hat on her knee, crushed it tight in the effort to restrain her rapture.
>
> For a moment the night seemed to grow more impenetrably black, then a great picture stood out against it like a constellation. It was surmounted by a golden scroll bearing the inscription: "Washington crossing Delaware"; and across a flood of motionless golden ripples the National Hero passed, erect, solemn, and gigantic, standing with folded arms in the stern of a slowly moving golden boat.
>
> A long "Oh-h-h" burst from the spectators: the stand creaked and shook with their blissful trepidations. "Oh-h-h," Charity gasped: she had forgotten where she was, had at last forgotten even Harney's nearness. She seemed to have been caught up into the stars. (76-7)

The night breaking into flower, colors springing up, sky-orchards breaking into blossom, the flaming petals, Charity's heart throbbing with delight, the "Now-now" and her crushing the hat tight; her rapture overtaking her… This all constitutes a powerful metaphor of a sexual congress, which reaches its end with the arrival of the "National Hero", who, "erect, solemn, and gigantic," *penetrates* "across a flood of motionless golden ripples," followed by the bursting of a reiterated "Oh-h-h," "Oh-h-h." What is especially interesting in this extremely sexual passage, though, is that it is centered on female passion. Charity is fully absorbed by her own pleasure, and she even forgets "Harney's nearness," who has been "seated" all this time right "above" her. I would venture to say that apart from a covered depiction of a sexual intercourse, this passage is especially an exceptional celebration of the female orgasm.

In *The Awakening*, there is also a remarkably erotic passage which could be said to be celebrating female pleasure as well:

> Edna, left alone in the little side room, loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them. She bathed her face, her neck and arms in the basin that stood between the windows. She took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very center of the high, white bed. How luxurious it felt to rest thus in a strange, quaint bed, with its sweet country odor of laurel lingering about the sheets and mattress! She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh. She clasped her hands easily above her head, and it was thus she fell asleep. (35-6)

This scene where Edna is lying alone and practically naked in the center of the bed is indeed very suggestive. Erotically playing with colors and textures, Chopin makes her heroine touch herself in order to discover her own body. This scene of *touching*, *fingering* and *rubbing*, has often been interpreted as a masturbation. Although some critics have not agreed, the fact is that the author did not want to be particularly explicit, for what she wrote a *very* suggestive passage, leaving to the reader the responsibility of imagining the rest.

5.5. Reflections on the Two Endings

Both endings can –at first sight– be considered as tragic closures. Nevertheless, while that of *Summer* can hardly be said to end in a positive way, *The Awakening*'s ending gives a completely different impression. Indeed, Chopin's closure is extremely poetic and erotic:

> […] when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.
>
> How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.

> The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.
>
> She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end. (108-109)

Completely naked before the sea, she feels now –for the first time– free. The garments she takes off have of course a symbolical meaning, for they represent the conventionality and artificiality of social norms. She has now got rid of her clothes, and by doing it she has also left behind everything that was socially imposed on her for the mere fact of being a woman. Right after, she enters and melts into the sea, this "*other* element" which has been the site of her awakening, which has, in short, set her free. I agree with Heilman (2008: 101) in that this ending has to be read as a symbolic death rather than as a realistic one. Although Edna's last act might appear like a suicide, the whole mysticism and symbolism surrounding it suggest there is something more profound than that. The fact that Edna ends "enfolded" in Nature is very significant, for, taking into account that –as we have previously stated– it represents her own means of communication –*her own* language–, with her final swim into the "vast ocean" she might be conveying the message that, when expressed through conventional language, had not been understood.

In *Summer*, the ending is by far more tragic. Indeed, Charity ends up *entering* again the Royall House where she had *come out* from at the very beginning of the novel: "Late that evening, in the cold autumn moonlight, they drove up to the door of the red house." (153) This *final* sentence parallels the incipit, and, while the incipit indicated the beginning of her awakening, this one clearly puts an end to it. It is equally significant the fact that it also announces that summer is over. The novel started with "the

beginning of a June afternoon," the start of the metaphorical season of passion, and it ends *fatally* "in the cold autumn moonlight."

What do these endings tell us? What are the authors attempting to transmit? When *Summer* opens, Charity leaves the Royall House "determined to assert her independence," her independence from the small-scale patriarchal society where she lives, with her adoptive father Lawyer Royall being the figure of the Patriarch *par excellence*. However, the story ends with her finally marrying him and returning home, to the same house. I suggest that the Royall House symbolizes the patriarchal society which makes of women vulnerable and depending beings. Lawyer Royall is simultaneously Charity's –adoptive– father and husband, which symbolically shows how society works for women: they depend on their father until they marry, simply to exchange one sort of dependence for another. Wharton highlights the impossibility for women to be independent in such societies. Charity ultimately fails in her attempt to assert herself as an erotic subject –and as a subject at all. As Wharton herself states in *Summer*, "in the established order of things as she knew them she saw no place for her individual adventure." (123) On the other hand, *The Awakening* also shows the impossibility for a woman to be an independent subject, for as Edna tries to fight against the social order, nobody seems to understand her. Society has no place for her adventure either, and the only site left for it seems to be the sea, this *other* element which might allow *other* ways of feeling and thinking.

Ultimately, neither Edna nor Charity can manage to overcome the social order, for it is too powerful. Both of them are finally interpellated as wives and mothers, with no other role left for their personal growth. Significantly, Edna does not manage to break her wedding ring: "taking off her wedding ring, [she] flung it upon the carpet […] stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture,

not a mark upon the little glittering circlet." (50-1) On the other hand, Charity marries because she has no other option to survive, and when she does she symbolically feels the ring is "too big for her." Concerning motherhood, Edna's children "appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days." (108); while Charity feels her pregnancy as a burden which holds her down: "In her […] mind only one sensation had the weight of reality; it was the bodily burden of her child. […] Her child was like a load that held her down." (139)

An interesting symbol that appears in both endings is the image of a broken wing. In *Summer*, Charity, right after marrying Royall and realizing the "sharp sense of the irretrievable," considers for an instant the option of "flying" away. However, "it was only the lift of a broken wing." (148) In Chopin's novel, right before Edna enters the sea *for good*, "[a] bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water." (108) I believe this image to represent very well the difficulties which going against the social order imply. The fact that there is only one broken wing and not both of them is equally be significant, for while one wing attempts to take off, the other is firmly tight to society. It might also imply that the heroines liberation is somehow partial, for they do not succeed to free themselves completely.

Wharton and Chopin use two different strategies. On the one hand, the former makes of her heroine an exceptional erotic being seeking for sexual and personal freedom to finally show the dreadful consequences of going against the social order. She magnificently depicts the oppression society exerts over women in order to question it. But, even though Charity can be said to end the novel practically *dead*, Charity has already awaken, and thus she is fully aware of her situation. According to Minot,

"[w]hile [her] awareness may deepen [her] tragedy, it also allows [her] to retain [her] dignity." (1993: xiv) According to this author, Wharton "does not offer solutions, nor does she announce her work as a vehicle of change. But, in delineating the foibles and exposing the tragedies in society, she composes a quite, subversive song." (1993: xiv)

On the other hand, although equally showing the limitations of women at her time, Chopin opts for an erotic, beautiful, dream-like ending which is, in my opinion, by far more positive, hopeful, and encouraging than *Summer*'s fatal closure. Seen by some as a sort of rebirth, *The Awakening*'s ending is –as opposed to the confinement that characterizes *Summer*'s ending– open to new possibilities, to new ways of thinking. Additionally, from a formal point of view, Wright states that "*The Awakening* is a masterpiece of condensed sensuous lyricism, abandoning chapter titles and employing surging oceanic imagery to maintain the impressionistic wave-like flow of Edna's reverie." (2006: 240) In this line, and also from a formal perspective, I would venture to suggest that, after the intense growth of eroticism throughout the novel, the ending –undoubtedly the climax of the story– is indeed extremely orgasmic. Just as in *Summer* we find the female orgasm half-way through the novel, in *The Awakening* it is to be found precisely at the end of it, with Edna's body completely enfolded by the sensuous touch of the sea in its "soft close embrace." (109)

6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to analyze and compare the use of eroticism as a means of subversion in Chopin's *The Awakening* and Wharton's *Summer*, as well as to inscribe them in their social and historical context. As we have seen in the first sections, both novels were written and published in a quite repressive period, where sexuality

was not supposed to be spoken of, neither in everyday life nor in literary fiction. However, there seems to have been a progressive change of mind regarding sexuality, which started to be conceived by its erotic nature rather than its reproductive function. Although legal and medical policies still tried to ensure and maintain the established order, Chopin and Wharton respond very well to this fervent new conception of sexuality, and they dare to portray it in *The Awakening* and *Summer* respectively.

By eroticizing their female heroines and claiming their sexual and personal agency, the two authors challenge the mother and wife imperative of their time, focusing on what Negro calls "the passion imperative," (2003: 73) which obviously threatened the existent social order. Eroticism has historically been used in literature as a means of transgression, especially in notably repressive periods, which is the case of the novels we have dealt with. Both Chopin's and Wharton's novels are incipient examples of a nascent literary tendency taking place at the turn of the century, which made use of eroticism in order to undermine the existent social norms that –a part form subjugating female desire– unfairly made of women completely dependent beings without intellectual aspirations. By recognizing and expressing their heroines' erotic nature, Chopin and Wharton were not only demanding sexual freedom for women, but also social and personal liberation. They insist on the reappropriation of the female body, which is to constitute the first step for women's self-determination.

We have analyzed the use of eroticized Nature and other erotic imagery, which contrast with the oppressive symbols and feelings throughout the novels. Indeed, there is a constant dialogue between the oppression dreadfully felt by the two heroines and their temporary moments of sexual and personal liberation, mainly conveyed –precisely– through the eroticization of Nature and other erotic imagery. We have also seen how the two authors empower their heroines and provide them with sexual and personal agency.

They refuse their traditional roles which position them as objects and claim their own aspirations and desires. In order to do it, both Chopin and Wharton serve themselves of erotic language, which subtly veils and "devulgarize" the crudity of their main subject matter. To end with, we can conclude that both novels attempt to show the terrible consequences that meant for a woman to question and fight against the social order. While Wharton uses a cruder strategy to expose it, Chopin chooses a more poetic and erotic way of ending her novel, which opens hopefully to limitless possibilities and other ways of feeling and thinking to come.

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