Escape as Motif and Theme in Modern American Fiction: Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway

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ESCAPE AS MOTIF AND THEME IN MODERN AMERICAN FICTION: KATE CHOPIN, EDITH WHARTON, F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, AND ERNEST HEMINGWAY.

By

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To all those who knew this day would come.
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the idea of escape in the lives and fiction of Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, addressing how these individuals embraced an ethos of escape that had continuously developed in Western society at least since the Enlightenment. Specifically, it explores the disassociation, displacement, and angst characterizing aesthetic modernism, feelings greatly affecting these authors and shaping their literary characters. As traditional life markers lost significance during the first quarter of the twentieth-century, authors (and their characters) found it more difficult to distinguish themselves in a world where previous value systems seemed dead and new beliefs powerless to be born.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We are born sensitive and from our birth onwards we are affected in various ways by our environment. As soon as we become conscious of our sensations we tend to seek or shun the things that cause them, at first because they are pleasant or unpleasant, then because they suit us or not, and at last because of judgments formed by means of the ideas of happiness and goodness which reason gives us. These tendencies gain strength and permanence with the growth of reason, but hindered by our habits they are more or less warped by our prejudices. Before this change, they are what I call Nature within us.

—Rousseau’s Emile

We have need of history in its entirety, not to fall back into it, but to see if we can escape from it.

—Jose Ortega y Gasset

Historically, writers and philosophers have demonstrated the importance of escape. The cultural history of Western society records demands for more and more freedom, even if such freedom is, as J. P. Sartre suggests, a source of anxiety and dread.¹ Freedom and the ability to escape one’s circumstances present possibilities and responsibilities, and we value these as much as we fear them. While the physical need to escape has always existed, the need to find psychological escape has been highlighted at least since the Reformation when Martin Luther questioned the assumptions people make based on the authority of the Church. His Ninety-Five Thesis in 1517 encourages individuals to take their religious identities into their own hands, to escape spiritual control. This inaugural event ushered in similar calls for economic, social, physical, artistic, and existential emancipation.

This study contends that understanding these influences helps define a modern literary aesthetic; indeed, escape often acts as a catalyst, inspiring and advancing much modern

¹ For discussion on J. P. Sartre’s philosophic exploration of freedom as a natural characteristic of consciousness and consequential to the being-for-itself, see Christina Howells’ The Necessity of Freedom (1988).
literature.  Fleeing or breaking away from one’s situation in life acts as “a counterpoint to, or even a part of, the structure of the main story” in many modern American works (Bluefarb 1). While modern literature’s concern with despair and anxiety is generally understood, a great part of the frustration the period’s protagonists feel corresponds directly to the amount of freedom and escape they achieve. Generally, a character free to exercise some amount of escape is fulfilled; however, too much freedom to escape also presents obstacles to fulfillment, identity, and happiness. At the turn of the century, other problems arise when social markers—political, economic, religious—lose their significance and no longer assist in defining a good life. Ernest Hemingway’s literary characters like Jake Barnes, for example, attempt to establish identities based on traditional male roles only to discover that those characteristics are no longer valued as they once were.

Writers rely on escape to define and motivate characters and to advance plots. Literature leading up to and during the modernist period shows individuals wishing to shed their familiar identities, to extricate themselves, one way or another, from their physical and psychological environments in order to distinguish their existence and give meaning to their lives. Throughout history, art and literature reflect individuals’ concerns with technological, political, religious, and existential possibilities for escape. As traditional indicators of what constituted a proper or respectable existence evolved, individuals often lost sight of the markers on which they could, or perhaps should, have predicated their identities.

The importance of Miguel de Cervantes’ seminal Don Quixote (1605) lies in its technique as well as its modern concerns. Alonso Quixano attempts to escape from one lifestyle as much as he attempts to enter a new one as “The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha.”

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2 For discussion exploring the importance of escape in American literature starting with Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, see Bluefarb, The Escape Motif in the Modern American Novel: Mark Twain to Carson McCullers.
Few books better illustrate a character’s attempts to separate or escape from one reality and enter into another of his making. Having seen what life offers him, this character decides to reinvent how he will live his life. The import of this escape is clear when Quixano dies soon after he is obligated to give up this ability.

Philosophically, the desire to escape continued. Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* (1637) “frees” individuals’ minds from the “confines” of the physical, material world. Historians often cite the establishment of Descartes’ dualism as a seminal moment in the development of modern thought. Descartes questions what we know and how we know it, challenging traditional beliefs and demanding individuals shed what they think they know of the world.

Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes considered themselves empiricists rather than rationalists and raised questions expanding the political options for individuals. Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651) establishes the idea of a social contract that questions the relationship between the individual and the state. Answers to questions about physical and psychological duality and the proper location of individuals within a political system touch upon psychological “escapes,” people juxtaposing their personal identities against older conceptions of physical, spiritual, political, and social structures.

Jean Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy relies on the longstanding desire for personal freedom. He articulates in his declaration in *The Social Contract* (1762) that “Man is born free and is everywhere in chains.” Western literary culture continued such commentary, and cravings for freedoms became ubiquitous in Western life. At the same time, defining escape became increasingly difficult. Formerly, what one wanted to escape—political suppression, Church dogma, and physical confinement—may have been clearly discernable. Over time, what one
wanted to escape became less defined, complicating peoples’ desire and ability to get away and to distinguish themselves as individuals.

In 1784, Immanuel Kant responded to the question “What is Enlightenment?” by asserting that man must escape dogma and the dictates of others: “An epoch cannot conclude a pact that will commit succeeding ages.” Centering his moral philosophy on freedom, Kant justifies those who feel the need to overturn traditional modes of thought.

In *The Philosophy of History* (1770–1831), G. W. F. Hegel discusses issues relevant to escape when he asserts that Socratic philosophy introduced Western culture to the idea of individual freedom. He contends that "World history... represents the development of the spirit's consciousness of its own freedom and of the consequent realization of this freedom" (138). While the Reformation may have been required for people to realize freedoms, Hegel believed that such liberties are necessary to understand history and to make informed decisions about one’s destiny. Understanding history, one can achieve self-awareness and position—first through religion, then the arts, and finally through philosophy.

The American and French Revolutions broke from the past and offered individuals greater opportunities to pursue personal goals. Continuous social changes emancipated individuals from feudal systems. People became freer to define their own spiritual and material prospects and were less tied to a particular social position or geographic location. Enlisting Enlightenment principles, the American and French Revolutions resulted from demands for liberty and hastened the great migrations to and within America, where freedom to escape included an immense physical space offering seemingly unlimited prospects.
Changing existential possibilities created the modern world. José Ortega y Gasset proclaims that we are not human beings but are “human becomings”; we perpetually strive for something beyond ourselves to alter life’s condition, materially and psychologically.

As people became more free, the desire to seek out and define greater escapes continued. Regarding what individuals wish to escape, Carl Jung finds impulses toward breaking social norms as an essential component in people’s nature. By the end of the nineteenth century, when social “escape” became more viable, philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche turned inward to define the worth and meaning of freedom. Centering much of his argument on a debate between good and evil, Nietzsche explains in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85) his definition of “good morality” as associated with “other-worldliness,” an idealized world of charity, restraint, and piety, an “escape” from cruelty, selfishness, and aggression. Although Nietzsche offers only a vague definition of the ideal, he stresses that individuals need to break free from their life’s condition and aspire to something greater, something beyond themselves. While he believed freedom to exist in the degree to which individuals allow forces to control their actions, exceptional people should not be ashamed of their “uniqueness,” he claims, disdaining as harmful a morality-for-all. Nietzsche notoriously claims in *The Gay Science* (1882) that “God is dead, and we all have killed him,” asserting that “the belief in God denies individual freedom and suppresses the freedom of man” (Austad 9), making individuals ultimately responsible for the value of their existence.

Even while we associate lack of freedom as detrimental, having too much freedom also creates difficulties. In the preface to his *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm explains:

[M]odern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not gained freedom in the
positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional, and sensuous potentialities. Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full retaliation of positive freedom, which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man. (Fromm x)

During the Modernist period, whether there were “real” threats to liberty or not, some individuals sought some form of physical or psychological escape. Allowed complete freedom to escape, however, many of these same individuals found themselves losing orientation with familiar existential markers, and their lives lost the meaning and significance they once may have had. The more viable individual escape became, the less meaningful it was: traditional paradigms, the objects on which people based their lives, lost value; with escape becoming the new norm, the worth of individual escapes lost distinctiveness and significance.

How individuals value personal escape is important to understanding the literature of this period. The despair and alienation in this period’s literature coexist with stories that exhibit protagonists seeking higher forms of existence and greater personal affirmations. Reconceptualizing their places in the world is complicated by their inability to define what exactly they wish to flee, how self-actualization moves them physically or psychologically from one condition in life to another, exchanging one paradigm for another.

Modernist literature, as Edith Wharton argues, “reflects a shift in the action from the street to the soul” (*The Writing* 7). Some writers and artists eschewed identification as some
“other,” as Peter Nicholls explains, when he addresses Baudelaire’s reluctance to be associated with the bourgeois, a “new aristocracy” (11). The same principle of escaping one’s immediate associations may well be applied to any number of authors and their characters, including Hemingway and the characters in his The Sun Also Rises. Even after freeing himself from the traditional surroundings of his native country, Jake Barnes looks for further escape from his circle of fellow expatriates and to new experiences bringing him closer to the simpler life he pursues.

Numerous manifestos, pamphlets, and documents produced during this time give voice to the Modernists’ desire to break away from the traditions of the past, the stories already written, the lives already lived. Everything must be new asserts Filippo Marinetti’s in his “Futurist Manifesto” (1913). Valuing speed, violence, youth, and machinery, he attacks the traditional and rejects anything having to do with the past. The Vorticists’ manifesto (1914) expressed in the short lived BLAST attempts to capture movement and rejects traditional landscapes and nudes in favor of geometric style and abstraction. Andre Breton's Surrealist Manifesto (1924) and the Dada movement reject the rational and logical and embrace exploration of the subconscious and dreams.

Neither realism nor naturalism captured the modern condition. New ways of creating art and literature were called for and abounded: Picasso began in 1906-07 working on the Demoiselles d'Avignon, depicting in an entirely new way a Barcelonan whorehouse; Ezra Pound published his first collection of poems, Personae, in 1909; Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist show at the Grafton Galleries, between 1910 and 1911, was followed in 1913 by the important New York Armory show that introduced Post-Impressionist art to American audiences. Later, Virginia Woolf referred to the changing mood of the period by claiming, “On or about December 1910
human character changed” (Woolf, *Mr. Bennett* 4). From 1910 onwards, Filippo Marinetti broadcast his abstract ideas and violent aesthetic program throughout Europe and gained adherents in France, England, Russia, and Italy. In 1911, D. H. Lawrence left teaching to devote time to writing poetry and novels. Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* had a riotous premiere in 1913. Joyce finished the *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1914 and began writing *Ulysses*. That same year, Wyndham Lewis published *Tarr*. In 1915, T. S. Eliot introduced J. Alfred Prufrock to the world. Some futurists called for a complete eclipse of anything from the past; others subscribed to quite another strain of Modernism that exploited traditional ideas.

While all these individuals helped to shape the aesthetic Modernist period, the first chapter of this study shows how the idea of escape developed within aesthetics and philosophy of the West and how this idea persisted historically, even as individual ability to act as independent, autonomous agents grew increasingly more possible. This dissertation follows “escape’s” influence on modernist authors and reveals how escape functions as motif and theme in the work of four of the most significant American authors during the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway.

Chapter 2 discusses Kate Chopin’s project to implore individuals, female and male, to escape their personal and socially prescribed roles in order to obtain personal agency and happiness. Chopin’s early life and education contributed with her belief that one must live an authentic existence, regardless of custom or the status-quo. Coming from a family of characters who consciously avoided living by convention and who had, on many levels, escaped their prescribed roles in society, Chopin continually defined for herself the life she would live, and her literary characters invariably require some form of escape. Edna Pontellier, in Chopin’s *The Awakening*, grasps for meaning while she realizes that she must escape from the traditional life
forced upon her by the social dictates of her time. Eschewing customary roles, Edna seeks an alternative existence and redefinition of identity. Unfortunately, as Edna awakens to her potential and comes to realize that she has spiritually and psychologically outgrown any acceptable social role, she finds herself alone, unable to return to her traditional life.

While critics view her writing as feminist, the value of Chopin’s work actually lies in her ability to give voice to individual agency. Her early education, the breadth of her reading, and her desire to be taken seriously in the literary world suggest that she sought more than simple didacticism. *The Awakening, At Fault, “A Pair of Silk Stockings,”* and many of her shorter works feature characters who circumvent or free themselves from the traditional roles demanded by society, family, lovers, and children. Louise Mallard in “The Story of an Hour” anticipates the benefits of escape when her latent desires manifest themselves when she receives word that her husband has died. The principle of escape is easily understood in Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening,* as she tries to free herself from personal and institutionalized limits placed on women of her time. Even more subtle escapes exist in these stories, and numerous critics apply feminist readings broadly to Chopin’s works. Taking exception, this study argues that escape in Chopin’s writing emanates from a more general desire for freedom derived from personal as well as social paradigms.

Chapter 3 investigates escape themes in Edith Wharton’s life and works. Wharton, herself, escaped the narrow attitudes of the elite society into which she was born. Setting many of her stories in the upper echelons of New York society, Edith Wharton intentionally constructs paradigms that challenge characters against the confinement and obligations of a secluded and selective world. Some of her characters are able, some unable, to escape their social situations. While freedom to escape from social dictates may seem preferable, some characters embrace a
world where rules take precedence over individuals’ choices and actions. Critic Anja Salmi likens Wharton’s use of escape to the Andromeda myth, where “the theme of entrapment occupies the writers’ mind novel after novel” (Salmi 15). Wharton's memoirs, diaries, and letters illustrate how the issue of entrapment within her novels correlates with Wharton's own life and psyche.

Chapter 4 considers how F. Scott Fitzgerald’s well-known desire to escape his socio-economic status became a vital element in his fiction. The narrative in his finest work, *The Great Gatsby*, centers on the protagonist’s desire to break free from reality and reinvent his life and past. Gatsby wants to escape the monetary concerns that afflict most Americans; however, in reinventing his past, he hopes to live as Daisy’s social equal, as if he had always shared her entitlements and freedom. As individuals demanded more autonomy and self-determination, they required ever more freedom and independence to define their life’s conditions. Such aspiration led, as with Fitzgerald, to disassociation from their surroundings and those around them, ultimately effecting loss of meaning in the existential markers that once defined their lives.

Characters wishing to escape their situations may seek only minimal changes or they may pursue a whole “new” world. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* provides an example of both types of fleeing. In his infidelity, Tom, and in her flights from the rational, Daisy, offer typical modes of escape grounded in hope and longing. On the other hand, in Gatsby’s pursuit of Daisy, he seeks to erase his past, a transcendent escape into a visionary new world that never was and never will be.

Chapter 5 explores in selected stories and *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway’s dictum to live an authentic existence, an attempt to escape nada—the absurdity touching both life and death. Hemingway’s characters seek to find authenticity in the experimental—in nature,
at war, through travel. Expatriates in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* seek escape by drinking and moving from one location to the next, seeking new experiences. Jake Barnes, sexually dysfunctional due to a war wound, moves throughout Paris and in Spain, hoping to reestablish normalcy, particularly regarding romantic love—even a wife and family. His hope for real escape depends upon his getting away from self-destructive characters lost in sex, alcohol, and restlessly trying to avoid what Hemingway termed the *Nada*. Most fail to find relief. Although Jake achieves some spiritual growth and enjoys genuine connection with some few among his peers, he does not find love and his emotional state at the end remains unclear.

The quest for escape displayed in these four writers reflects a prevailing sentiment in American life by the end of the 19th century, a mood evolving from individuals’ long-standing desire to escape bonds (particularly physical and psychological) associated with traditional religious, political, material, and personal beliefs.
CHAPTER 2

KATE CHOPIN AND PERSONAL ESCAPES

We live at a time when man believes himself fabulously capable of creation, but he does not know what to create.

—Jose Ortega y Gasset

This chapter reconsiders the widely accepted belief that Kate Chopin’s work constitutes a type of feminist manifesto. Moving attention from feminist concerns like those espoused by Emily Toth to broader issues of personal fulfillment, this study shows that personal agency lies at the core of Chopin’s literary project, where individuals seek and either find or fail to find their own escapes from social and personal directives.

Chopin lived and wrote about what it means for individuals to escape, at least psychologically, from socially prescribed positions in life. Although readers know her greatest novel, The Awakening, for Edna Pontellier’s grappling with patriarchal pressures, some critics contend that Edna attempts to work out more personal questions of agency, identity, and personal fulfillment. Since George Arms’ “Kate Chopin’s The Awakening in the Perspective of Her Literary Career” and Per Sayersted’s 1969 Complete Works of Kate Chopin resurrected her writings from obscurity, a number of critics have applied a more inclusive analysis. They seek to unshackle her work from a purely feminist reading and show that Chopin’s themes of personal freedom and emancipation apply to both genders.

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1 Marie Fletcher addresses Chopin as a regional colorist and a feminist (117-132); for Emily Toth’s belief that Chopin gave voice to early American feminists, see Toth, Unveiling Kate Chopin; and Kate Chopin.

2 For comments asserting that Chopin’s real subject is human nature, see Joyce Coyne Dyer, “Kate Chopin’s Sleeping Bruties” (10-15) and “Gouvernail, Kate Chopin’s Sensitive Bachelor” (46-55).

3 In “Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,” Cynthia Wolff supports Jules Charnetzky in dismissing the ideas that The Awakening anticipates Lawrence or that it is an American Madame Bovary (449). Charnetzky’s “Our Decentralized Literature” proposes that Edna’s plight speaks to the plight of all people (71).
Freedom found in Chopin’s characters coincides with the influences she received from her family who often chose to live outside of society’s conventions. Chopin lost her father when she was five and her brother in the Civil War. Strong women raised and continually instilled principles of personal strength in her. After spending 1865-1866 attending the Academy of the Visitation and studying music, she returned to the Sacred Heart Academy where the older girl’s curriculum sought to develop “intelligent, active, unselfish women, with minds and hands trained for the sphere in which God has placed them, whether it be home-life or some wider social field to think and judge” (Toth, *Unveiling* 36). Throughout her life, Chopin predicated her opinions of people in some relation to this paradigm.

Chopin believed that authentic existence “is less a matter of choice than of necessity, and this idea informs her fundamentally deterministic vision of human nature” (Ramos 156). Per Seyersted suggests that Chopin’s writing presents people and society “as forever ruled by the gospel of selfishness which makes basic improvement impossible” (*Critical Biography* 90). Allen Stein believes Chopin’s view of human selfishness emphasizes the futility of seeking human improvements by either restraining or rebelling; as a result, Chopin’s marriage stories rarely touch on social or moral implications of marriage (165). Instead, they deal with whether characters are able to find happiness within the institution, whether marriage constrains them or not. Rarely arguing against marriage, she centers her themes on personal dignity.

By seeking authentic existences, Chopin’s protagonists share these principles, whether their goals lie within or outside of society’s limitations. Peggy Skaggs asserts that Chopin’s “subject matter remains consistent throughout, with her primary concern usually being the conflicting nature of people's needs for a secure place or role in life, for love, and for autonomy” (54). In developing this theme, Chopin depicts characters striving to subvert typical definitions,
including female roles: “one might say that it is the woman against stifling sexual standards or that it is the woman against the tedium of a provincial marriage” (Wolf 449). However, Chopin’s mission goes further; too much attention to the “female” in “female emancipation” obscures the real force and focus of her literary efforts. Chopin’s tales repeatedly turn on whether or not characters lead authentic existences. Not only does her most recognized protagonist, Edna Pontellier, systematically transcend conventional social and personal boundaries, characters in her shorter works also seek to exert essential identities unencumbered by social prerogatives or personal limits.

While Chopin “tried to evade organizational responsibilities, and relished being an insider-outsider” (Toth, Unveiling 8), she was aware that marriage was the focus of female choice during the nineteenth century and accepted her social obligation to marry and have children. Marrying Oscar Chopin in 1869, she mothered six children over the next eight years and claimed that these all gave her the greatest joys of life: “If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to Earth, I feel I would unhesitatingly give up everything that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs” (Chopin qtd. in Seyersted, Kate Chopin 58-59). She would do this, even if she “would have to forget the past ten years of my [her] growth—my real growth,” and she would accept it “in the spirit of perfect acquiescence.” Her “acquiescence,” devoid of animosity toward her situation, is worth noting.

Despite her apparent dedication to her position in her family and her role as an equal partner within marriage, critics often construe Chopin’s writing as explicitly feminist: “[b]y far the largest body of scholarship that has developed around Chopin’s writing is that produced by feminist writers” (Caudle and Green 17). Critical viewpoints vary from Jacqueline Berke who argues that The Awakening serves as a manifesto for feminism to Joyce Landenson who thinks
that focusing on themes of female rebellion and sexuality ignores important questions about women’s roles.

Chopin wished her characters to transcend the narrow and simple; her characters often show that they recognize the customs of their society while they act according to idiosyncratic principles, searching towards self-fulfillment, respect, and love. Her vision “is not nearly as apparent in the non-marriage stories, for in them there is generally no institution against which her characters may push, always in the name of their own freedom” (Stein 166). Elaine Showalter describes Chopin as suspicious of ideology, and committed to personal freedom; she explains Chopin’s own struggles to free herself from conventional stereotypes. Stories like “Mrs. McEnders” make plain Chopin’s aversion to those who quickly judge or prescribe a way of life for anyone else. While there is little doubt that Chopin’s escapes exist within the backdrop of a monolithic patriarchy, as Ringe states it, “putting too much emphasis on this aspect of The Awakening [or her other works] will distort Chopin’s meaning and her accomplishment” (“Romantic Imagery” 580).

Chopin wished that individuals be allowed enough freedom to live authentic existences, lives that, if need be, escape the prevailing, stifling prejudices of their time: “Her beautifully crafted, ironic tales reflect the brilliance of a woman drawing upon her own life, as well as upon her era’s interest in realism, naturalism, and issues of selfhood, to probe timeless questions about identity and morality in the human sphere” (Petry 2). The Awakening and her short stories "A Pair of Silk Stockings” and "The Story of an Hour" show women who realize or search, in their own way, for spiritual emancipation. Stories like “Charlie” specifically address the contrast between social expectations and personal needs. Chopin’s conflicts most often center on personal

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4 For the positive and negative aspects of this social construct, see Nancy Cott’s Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850.
needs, rather than reactions to external forces. Barriers imposed by the existent patriarchy no doubt influence her women, but these are not the only impediments to their autonomous identities; some characters also contend with the difficulties of overcoming personally constructed obstacles to self-assertion. *The Awakening* implores readers to a more idealized conception of life and identity, especially for women, offering Chopin’s most significant plea for self-agency, dignity, and hope. She still does not prescribe what that life should be; rather, she intends to use her protagonists to chart their journey from passivity to a fully awakened consciousness, escaping lives of submissive acceptance.

Chopin’s marriage stories question society’s concept of marriage and the implicit lack of freedom within this institution. Her most happily married protagonists commit to their partners, giving them the respect and space each needs to grow. Rhetorically critiquing social norms, these unions allow participants the necessary freedom to satisfy their aspirations for personal contentment. As analyst Allen Stein sees it, Chopin often relies on society’s beliefs concerning marriage to inform her emancipation stories. Indeed, in her treatment of marriages, especially happy ones, she most clearly reacts to the moralism she witnesses in society and decides to write about innate compulsions to self-fulfillment. Chopin also characterizes headstrong, unmarried protagonists in a positive light, as being happy and self-sufficient. Further, this philosophy stressing individual development links her less with realism than with the romanticism espoused by Emerson in essays like “Experience,” “Fate,” and “Power.” It also broadcasts a doctrine that a great good can be attained through self-reliance and self-fulfillment, even in marriage.

Her second published story, “A Point at Issue! A Story of Love and Reason in Which Love Triumphs,” in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, October 27, 1889, argues that marriage need not limit freedom; rather, it can further equitable commitment made by two mutually respectful,
reasonable characters. Eleanor and Charles base their affection on each other through mutual respect. When Eleanor decides to live in Paris to further her study of the French language, Charles accepts the conditions because he bases his affection on a clear-minded respect for his wife’s autonomy rather than suspicion and sexual concerns. Later, being given every reason to suspect his wife’s infidelity, Charles finds that Eleanor has not only been faithful but is as fully committed to him as she could be. With this story, Chopin subverts the implicit rules for marital relations and conventions. Her narrator tells of society’s astonishment: “That two young people should presume to introduce such innovations into matrimony! It was uncalled for! It was improper! It was indecent! [. . .] And in Paris, of all places, to leave a young woman alone! Why not at once in Hades?” (51)

Chopin elevates females and males. Seeking to promote rather than diminish, she frowns on authors who tackle society’s problems rather than discuss individual virtue: "Human impulses do not change," and this is why Aeschylus and Shakespeare are true to-day, "and why Ibsen will not be true in some remote tomorrow . . . because he takes for his themes social problems which by their very nature are mutable” (Chopin qtd. in Howells 216). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese puts it this way:

Her [Chopin’s] lack of interest in feminism and suffrage does not reveal a lack of confidence in women, nor does it have to do with a lack of any desire for freedom. She simply had a different understanding of freedom. She saw freedom as much more a matter of spirit, soul, and character of living life within the constraints that the world makes [or] God offers, because all of us do live within constraints. There's no indication that, for example, she regretted her marriage, or regretted being a mother. Any of us can chafe at specific responsibilities and want
more time for our work or for ourselves. But there's no evidence that she wanted to throw all of that away, nor is there evidence that she wanted to restructure the world. I think she was much more interested in the excitement, the civilization that came in her circle of intellectual friends. That was freedom, the freedom to explore ideas. I don't think she was someone who believed you had to act out everything that you thought. And I suspect that she may even have believed you have greater freedom of thought if you did not believe that every thought leads to an action. Very European, very solidly of her class. (Fox-Genovese)

Recent critics agree. James Justice suggests, “[d]espite the recent popularity of The Awakening among feminist critics, the story of Edna Pontellier is not primarily a study of a woman victimized by an oppressive masculine society” (107). Donald Ringe contends that “Kate Chopin reserves neither the word nor the experience for women alone” (580). Gilma in "Dead Men's Shoes" preserves his independence by refusing a legacy that has come to him. The silent, misanthropic M'sieur Michel in “After the Winter” is retrieved from his hermit-like solitude on Easter morning because a "driving want for human sympathy and companionship . . . reawakened in his soul" (581).

Shortly after Chopin’s graduation from Sacred Heart in 1868, she wrote her earliest known short story, “Emancipation: A Life Fable” (circa 1869-1870). Here, she presents a cat-like protagonist confined by bars. The moment the cage door is left open and a cautious few moments pass, he races out in “mad flight,” eagerly “seeing, smelling, touching of all things . . . seeking, finding, joying and suffering?” Significantly, the story relies on a male protagonist, not some dove in a gilded cage representing the confined women in nineteenth-century America; for Chopin, males also seek emancipation from their own confinement, whether it is self or socially
inflicted. Chopin fosters this belief throughout her life. Later feminist critics shape this story to fit their agenda.\(^5\) By consciously choosing to make her protagonist male, Chopin avoids, at this early stage, making feminist arguments in favor of drawing attention to aspiration and, suggestively, the need for all people to find some form of escape. Throughout her writing career, she returned to this theme of freedom and escape, stressing her concern for personal agency rather than gender equality.

Although Chopin wrote during her adolescence, the later loss of her husband and mother led her to more serious efforts. Influenced in her formative years by a number of mostly European writers—Cervantes, Dante, Goethe, the English poets, Austen, the Brontës, and Coleridge—Chopin found Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant most appealing. Her essay, “Confidences,” explicitly invokes escape when she speaks of Maupassant: “Here was a man who had escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes; and who in a direct and simple way, told us what he saw” (Chopin, Private Papers 227). Without regard to gender or sexuality, Chopin believed that her intellectual capabilities allowed her to enter into a discourse with these authors about authenticity and individuality. Alice Hall Petry states that Chopin’s tales “probe timeless questions about identity and morality in the human sphere” (2).

Gregg Camfield stresses the influence philosophers had on Chopin. In 1867, Ralph Waldo Emerson visited the Philosophical Society in St. Louis.\(^6\) Whether Chopin met Emerson or not, it remains hard to believe that she avoided debates spurred by his visit. While Emily Toth

\(^5\) In her *Unveiling Kate Chopin*, Emily Toth says of “Emancipation” that Kate O’Flaherty may have resisted identifying with restrictions on women – but at the same time, she was “playing the most traditional of female roles” (51).

\(^6\) Kathleen Nigro’s “Mr. Emerson Comes to St. Louis” refers to Charles van Ravenswaay’s list of lecture titles delivered in St. Louis by Emerson at the Mercantile Library that hosted Henry Ward Beecher, Mark Twain, and Lucy Stone (323).
minimizes the influence of Emerson’s ideas on Chopin, evidence supports the contrary. Chopin’s engagement with the intellectual climate of St. Louis at the time coincides with everything else known about her character. To believe that she remained ignorant of this philosopher’s and Mark Twain’s St. Louis appearances, avoided reading the newspapers, and did not feel the need to engage in discussions about these matters is implausible when her themes rely on the same ideas espoused in Emerson’s philosophy. Camfield thinks Chopin’s writing stems from the ideas in German Idealistic philosophy, particularly Arthur Schopenhauer's idealistic aesthetic of renunciation (3). Regardless of the source of influence, her engagement with these ideas contributed to making her understand her authorial self as part of the literary and intellectual world. Whether she was successful or not, she attempted to write substantial stories tackling great personal issues.

Striving to go beyond momentary social issues, Chopin looked to more resilient themes. By looking past how one group exercised its power over another, she relied on the theme of personal agency to juxtapose her individuals against a multitude of external and personal forces, only one of which is the existent patriarchal establishment. Avoiding the social realism promoted by Zola, Norris, Dreiser, and Crane, her chronological proximity to the literary and philosophical trends of her era provided foundation to her writing.

While early critics believed that stories in Bayou Folk (1894) were colorful narratives of the primitive, rural South, Chopin believed her work spoke to more universal ideas about women, men, marriage, children, and loyalty. Edna interests us not because she is a woman, but "because she is human" (Howell 212). In “In Sabine,” for example, the protagonist leaves her home alone to find a new life. Regardless of Chopin’s intent, "not one reviewer noticed that Bayou Folk, as a whole, is an uncompromising critique of marriage” (151). “A Lady of Bayou
St. John” turns her back on marriage and finds contentment in being a widow. These stories testify to individuality just as much as they make statements critical of marriage.

While critics like C. J. Wershoven agree that Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* “do not attempt to create a feminist manifesto” (28), they avoid other salient points. Even among commentators who assert that Chopin’s thematic intent was not to position women against the existent patriarchal hegemony, most return to discussing Chopin’s protagonists as living in principal relation to men’s lives. While some characters, after having reinterpreted their places in the world, do find their way back to their respective traditional social situations, their returns take place because they choose and only in their own terms. Chopin's heroines defer to their husbands only because they decide to do so. One of her last stories, “The Going Away of Liza,” depicts a wife who leaves her husband in search for the ideal, materialistic life she reads about in novels. She ultimately chooses to return to him at Christmas, reestablishing the patriarchal order and her place in that world.

While critics argue that the principal message in “The Story of an Hour” is feminist, Chopin imparts enough uncertainty to question this interpretation. Critics like Xuding Wang read the story as an oppressed wife who finally gets her day of freedom while other critics like feminist Emily Toth concede the story’s ambiguity allows it to be read not only as the story of Chopin’s mother’s marriage and the submission of a woman to someone else’s will, but also as criticism of marriage itself as an institution that traps women (Toth *Unveiling* 10). Lawrence Berkove and others see “no hard evidence whatsoever of patriarchal blindness or suppression, constant or selfless sacrifice by Louise, or an ongoing struggle for selfhood” (153).

Pearl Brown contends that while Chopin’s defiant women garner much critical attention, Chopin’s defiant men have been given little focus. Some male characters grapple with escaping
social and personal pressures that parallel those of Chopin’s women who sometimes awaken an “inner self buried beneath a culturally sanctioned social one” (Brown 69). In the same way, men may discover their subjective self beneath their public persona. Stories like “Athenaise,” “A Respectable Woman,” “A Lady of Bayou St. John,” and “No Account Creole” all contrast traditional, conservative males against more liberal “outsiders” who interpret their roles differently from Creole stereotypes. Contrasting ideologically opposing values, Chopin shows that some traditionally conventional men, like Cazeau and Gaston Baroda, succeed by considering more liberal modes of life. Cazeau succeeds after he retreats from his rigid interpretation of social expectations and allows Athenaise the freedom to return to him of her own accord. The formal Gaston in “A Respectable Woman” contrasts with the unconventional Gouvernail, a man with “advanced opinion” who accompanies Mrs. Baroda on walks and reads Whitman to her. Importantly, he reads from section 21 of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* where the poet discusses men and women’s ability to search within themselves for knowledge while rejecting the negativity of society in hopes of balancing body and soul, and earth and spirit. Through this equilibrium, all is made right.

The Creole men guided by alternative values may act as catalysts for women reconsidering their roles. Born an aristocrat, the Creole Sepincourt, in “A Lady of Bayou St. John,” escapes his culture’s values by refusing to serve in the Southern cause and acts as a sort of outsider pursuing his own aims. Even while he reconsiders his relationship to a Creole lifestyle, he ultimately remains outside of it when Madame Delisle rejects him in order to live a life of mourning for her dead husband. Implicitly, Chopin questions stereotypes to make her point when she strips both characters of their once held ideals. In “Athenaise,” Cazeau has established himself as a customary Creole male with conventional beliefs about marriage and spousal roles.
His wife Athenaise gives him cause to exert his powers as a Creole husband when he must retrieve her from her parent’s house. Although her brother resents Cazeau, her parents accept this society’s values and fully support Cazeau’s actions to reclaim her. The young Athanaise still tries to define and accept her identity as someone’s wife and again attempts to escape her predicament by going to New Orleans, where she meets the antithesis of Cazeau, Gouvernail. By subverting or escaping the logic of these rigid customs, Gouvenail dreams about running away with Athanaise, even though she is already married. When she realizes life’s difficulties and the fact that she is pregnant, Athenaise submits to convention and returns to her husband. Just as Cazeau is unable to depend on the rigid inflexibility in his moral codes in order to account for all life’s contingencies, Gouvernail and Athenaise cannot escape all propriety in defining and obtaining their goals.

Some stories describe characters who so greatly rebel that they lose their connection with the things which once defined their lives. During his time with Mrs. Baroda, Gouvernail in “A Respectable Woman” realizes he has so greatly suppressed his feelings of loss and emptiness that his philosophy has made him lose connection with traditional values and leave him in “philosophic acquiescence to the existing order.” Edna Pontellier in The Awakening exemplifies someone so resolute to live an authentic life that she becomes unable to believe in any of the entities that traditionally define life’s value. Critic Peter Ramos “argues that Edna’s actions reveal the danger of withdrawing from all available social roles in favor of an identity-less, though ultimately elusive and destructive, freedom” (145).

Individual escape remains Chopin’s principal theme in “Beyond the Bayou” when the protagonist, La Folle, learns to overcome her personally imposed limitations. She has for all of her life been afraid to leave the comfort of her home on the bayou. Having become protective of
the neighbor’s child, she must leave her familiar surroundings in order to save the young boy’s life after he accidentally shoots himself. As the boy convalesces, she, on her own, returns many times to sit with him, awaiting his recuperation. Although he sleeps, she waits for him and reflects on how far she has come. La Folle emboldens herself and overcomes her self-imposed limitations in order to act upon what she feels is most important in her life. Social prerogatives and men imposing their “rights” over women remain absent here.

Chopin’s 1892 short story, “At the ’Cadian Ball,” deals with one woman’s inability to escape her social station so she can marry the true object of her desires. The story revolves around an evening party, a soirée, where the two ex-lovers Calixta and Alcée meet. Calixta’s social position precludes her from legitimately having a partner of Alcée’s elevated social status. Though they love each other, she realizes the impracticality of her desires, which induces her to accept someone of her class, Bobinôt. In the end, her inability to escape her social station means forfeiting any idea of marriage with the object of her real affection, Alcée.

When these three characters again appear in “The Storm,” the outcome is different. Calixta and Alcée act out their physical desires for one another and undermine social dictates of rank and morality. Analysis reveals the story to speak to more than the release of a long-standing desire. When Calixta and Alcée consummate their feelings, they subvert societal norms. Symbolically and literally, they resist social limits in order to satisfy their own ideas of life and what they want from it. In the end, all are happy as Chopin didactically questions the status quo in marriage customs and the uncritical acceptance of them.

“Juanita” (1895) departs from a number of short story conventions: the heroine is not conventionally beautiful, and the hero is not handsome, strong, or rich. The town’s speculation about whom Juanita will marry is the only conflict in the story. Having many who pursue her,
she “turned her broad back upon the whole race of masculine bipeds” (Complete Works 368). Juanita chooses a man she can provide for and escapes the traditional role of women by acting according to her own values. Hints that the two central characters are not married further subvert convention when in the last line the narrator states, “For my part I never expected Juanita to be more respectable than a squirrel; and I don’t see how anyone else could have expected it” (Complete Works 368). The story depicts women who make their own choices without male interference and how those decisions affect them and the men in their lives.

Little consensus exists about what the final act of Chopin’s greatest work, The Awakening means. Edmund Wilson understands the story as an anticipation of D. H. Lawrence in its treatment of infidelity, while Kenneth Eble follows the more popular track when he maintains, "the novel is an American Madame Bovary" (275). Some critics read the story as Edna’s lifelong enactment of a radical emancipation, a morality endorsed by philosophers from Nietzsche to Ayn Rand (Dawson 16). Emily Toth finds the novel as "the best kind of feminist criticism" because "Edna is a woman and what happens to her would not have happened to a man" (Toth, The Awakening as Feminist Criticism” 241). In January 1898, the month Chopin finished writing The Awakening, Billy Reedy wrote in The Mirror that, “women’s truest duties are those of wife and mother, but those duties do not demand that she shall sacrifice her individuality” (Toth, Unveiling 217).

Even the critics who come closest to making original comments about Edna’s attempts at self-assertion often revert to discussing her battle against a social patriarchy and gender roles. When Joseph Urgo suggests that Edna Pontellier achieves a “prologue” to an awakening by
learning to say “no” to the demands placed upon her, his criticism, again, limits the significance of Chopin’s themes. James Justice believes that the novel shows “self-knowledge is the threshold to psychic health, the instrument by which the trapped sensibility may be freed” (121). While most agree that the novel shows a woman choosing to work outside of nineteenth-century conventions, most critics fail to see that Edna’s motivation lies in her wish to function as an autonomous being rather than a reaction to external forces.

While numerous critics see *The Awakening* as Edna’s search for the self, a kind of paradigmatic quest for self-recognition ending in failure, defining exactly what Edna Pontellier awakens to poses problems. In the course of her development, she never realizes her roles as a “free woman,” her lovers fail her, and her familial obligations do not satisfy her. Her awakening is, in fact, an awakening to an awakening; she awakens to the idea that she needs to seek out, define, and live an escape from her former self and from each subsequent identity she creates during her existential growth.

Considering how escape functions in *The Awakening* explains much of the motivation behind the action and offers a reason why Chopin originally considered *A Solitary Soul* for its title. Edna’s awakening can be better understood as a process of revelation, not as a final result as she escapes her domestic obligations: her social role as mother, wife, and middle-class woman. Attempting to break free from her past self to find one more closely coinciding with her ultimate aspirations, she finds it difficult to define exactly what that life should be. Her growth and experimentation with various lifestyles establishes her as someone with “the soul that dares and defies,” but leaves her with few absolutes.

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7 For discussion about how Edna “fails” in her quest, see Otis Wheeler’s ”The Five Awakenings of Edna Pontellier” (118-128).
Chopin’s escape strategy for Edna begins by establishing from what it is Edna hopes to escape. Edna’s husband, Léonce Pontellier, accepts the rules by which Edna and all women of her social class function. As Edna and Robert make their way home from the beach, the narration makes clear that Léonce looks at her as something to be owned. The idea becomes less applicable to Edna (although her husband fails to see it) as the plot advances and she, by degrees, succeeds. She begins the novel as Mrs. Pontellier, develops into “Edna Pontellier,” and finally becomes “Edna.”

Edna, the same way her mother did, entered into marriage with an older man with a set routine and established beliefs. Léonce remains ignorant of Edna’s growth, signified by the newspapers he reads being always “a day old” by the time they reach Grand Isle. He wears eyeglasses, but his metaphorical vision suffers even more than his physical sight. He watches his wife with Robert and is so blinded by his own sense of propriety that he is unable to see past the superficial relationships between individuals and Edna’s need to make genuine connections with others. Although Edna is the “sole object of his existence,” Léonce reproaches his wife for her “inattention, her habitual neglect of the children,” for “[i]f it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth was it?” (885). He thinks in terms consistent with society’s codes for men and women; Léonce consider terms like “duty” and “failure,” but he is unable to consider her actions as anything other than a lack of fidelity to what he considers a mother’s responsibilities.

When Léonce confronts her about neglecting her “motherly” duties, Edna does not blame her husband for his feelings. Instead, at this early part in the novel, she cries a little and remains awake while her husband sleeps. Significantly, she does not “upbraid” her husband or rail against her position in a patriarchal society; there is no mention of how unfair the world is to women or
Edna herself: “She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood” (885).

Starting from a point of conventional understanding and personal passiveness, Edna begins her trajectory towards independence by living and fulfilling the role expected of her. As she slowly awakens to acquire her own voice, she questions how society’s rules influence her place in the world and restrict her from developing her own persona. Chopin creates Edna as someone who "lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (893). Initially, she is only marginally dissatisfied with the condition of her life, but she develops a need to escape focused on physiological and psychological freedom and growth. In essence, she finds a “certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams” (898). She resurrects her romantic dispositions by attempting to return to a moment of joy to achieve unity with her idealized version of life, first by redefining her sexual life and then by exploring her creative potential through music and art.

As Edna determines what and how she wishes to escape, she becomes more aware of her unwillingness to subscribe to beliefs she once held. Moreover, the people who attempt to assist her fail to realize the nature of her dilemma making her a “solitary soul,” psychologically leaving behind those that once helped define her place in the world. Chopin establishes Edna’s desire to change her restrictive situation by drawing out Edna’s desire to eschew the “mother-women” lifestyle others unquestioningly accept: “In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her
position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the
world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon
the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight….But the beginning of things, of a world especially,
is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing” (893).

Edna begins to assert herself in the world and dictate how others might use her. In the
midst of her painting, creating, Robert “quietly rested his head against Mrs. Pontellier's arm as
she gently repulsed him. Once again he repeats the offense. She believes it to be thoughtlessness
on his part; yet it is no reason she should submit to it” (891): “She did not remonstrate, except
again to repulse him quietly but firmly.” The painting she attempts symbolically represents her
small effort to express herself: “it was a fair enough piece of work, and in many respects
satisfying.”

Realizing that reaching her objectives requires her to work outside of convention, she
experiments with her sexuality, her domicile, and her vocation. While these play their part in her
development, she believes that only by establishing her own paradigms can she free herself.
Critic James Justus contends,

The evidence suggests that the powerful drive toward freedom, to that state
where her real identity can be released from the confines of social roles, is the
impetus behind Edna's sensual groping and blundering. Neither friends nor lovers
can release that identity, and the tragedy within the novel is that even Edna
Pontellier, despite her emotional changes, cannot release that identity. (110)

Considering one life situation after another, she systematically moves from one paradigm
to the next, experimenting with art, music, and her sexuality in order to find validating
experiences. As Edna learns about herself and her potential, she examines and extends personal
and social boundaries—searching, examining, and evaluating her relationships with men, her
evocation, where to live, and what she desires from life. She must also escape personal limits she
imposes upon herself just as much as the confines that traditionally hold women back: marriage,
children, and social obligations. Her escape leads her to a modernist dilemma of confusion and
angst resulting from her flight from the things that once validated her roles as mother and wife.

Edna’s learning to swim primarily represents her physical empowerment over herself and
the natural world. Moreover, the sea comforts: “the voice of the sea speaks to the soul” (893;
999), “[t]he touch of the sea is sensuous, enfoldin g the body in its soft, close embrace” (893).
Erotic imagery aside, the passage entices its protagonist to search inwardly as it juxtaposes the
“solitary soul” within a great sea of possibilities that exist. Bewildered awhile, Edna fully
engages in her escape after she learns that something is missing in her life, entreat ing her to
further development. In short, Edna begins “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.”

Her growing attraction to Robert signals her physical escape. Finally, “Edna felt as if she
were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been
loosening—had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to
drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails” (915). During this time, she escapes all duties and
begins to enjoy the pleasures offered by those around her.

When Edna and Robert are able to escape to the far side of Grande Isle, Chopin describes
a sense of domestic bliss illuminating Edna’s epiphany: “Every light in the hall was ablaze” […]
“Many of the children had been permitted to sit up beyond their usual bedtime” (903). In the
midst of the performances by the Farival twins, the recitations, among the shrieking parrot
making his illogical voice heard—“Allez vous-en! Sapristi!”—Edna sees and hears

30
Mademoiselle Reisz, whose playing catalyzes Edna’s realization: “Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth” (906). Mademoiselle Reisz, facilitates Edna’s insight by denominating her as “the only one worth playing for,” awakening Edna in earnest.

Edna tries to embrace the more liberal Creole society and leave behind her reserved identity. While “freedom” for Edna had always consisted of some amount of isolation and concealment, she now finds herself among people who live a different kind of freedom, which they openly and freely express without fear. Just as the sea beckons her to lose her fear of the water and to trust in her own powers, society, too, will challenge her to define and live her own life. When asked at a dinner party to share a “true anecdote,” she plays along in the fairy-tale atmosphere of Grand Isle and its people. She tells of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back: “They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this. It was pure invention. She said that Madame Antoine had related it to her. That, also, was an invention. Perhaps it was a dream she had had. But every glowing word seemed real to those who listened” (182-83).

Edna, born and raised in Kentucky, is foreign to the openness and traditions practiced by the natives of Grand Isle: “though she had married a Creole, never before had she been thrown so intimately among them.” The attitudes embraced by these Creoles require Edna to defend, reject, or escape the narrowly defined customs she had up until then lived. To Edna, “[t]heir freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible” (889). Juxtaposing these attitudes helps Edna draw distinctions and to choose one attitude over the other. The more she embraces this foreign attitude, the more she frees herself and the closer she comes to fulfilling her desires.

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8 Cynthia Griffin Wolff asserts in “Thanatos and Eros” that the importance of Chopin's work lies in its “ruthless fidelity” to the disintegration of Edna's character, not in its anticipation of "the woman question" (Wolff 450).
Robert, alternatively, has only the façade of one who participates in the great awakening. Enjoying the prerogatives afforded to young men within a patriarchy, he remains free from responsibilities and does not require genuine emotional or sexual commitments from the women he pursues. Robert’s collusion becomes significant when Edna relies on his presence in her anticipate life, free of obligations. Edna ultimately realizes that Robert cannot fully comprehend the spiritual and psychological vistas to which she aspires, and the revelation shows how she surpasses him: “there will be others.” Signaling that her escape does not derive from breaking from patriarchal restraints or the demands placed on her by her familiar ties, she eventually realizes how ill prepared Robert or any of the men or women near her are to comprehend the implications of her desires and actions: “He did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand” (1000).

With each progressive episode, Edna gains more independence along with the ability to speak of it. When she and Robert return to her house, she wishes to remain outside, and Robert must, eventually, surrender and go home to bed. When her husband admonishes her for remaining outside, he still understands her as an object to be dominated. Before her evolution, “She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us” (912). She now responds with, “No; I am going to stay out here.”

Edna leaves Léonce after confronting the idea that she is worthy and capable of personal development. Her escape grows clearer and motivates her to experiment further with various existential experiences. Robert initially assists in undermining her husband’s concerns, and
Mademoiselle Reisz assists by exemplifying independence. Reisz also encourages Edna by providing her a way to establish identity and expression through art and music.

    Edna becomes reckless: she “wanted to swim out, where no woman had swum before” (908). She “shouted for joy” and 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.” She wonders if she would have spent all the time splashing about had she known all this time how easy it would be. Her escape not yet complete, she looks back from where she has swum and sees it as “a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome. Her growth having not reached its final stage, her husband is ready to remind her of it: "‘You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you,’ he told her” (909). Robert, on the other hand, knows that she was not afraid.

    Edna’s escape continues: “she tried to discover wherein this summer had been different from any and every other summer of her life. She could only realize that she herself—her present self—was in some way different from the other self” (921).

    The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. The future was a mystery which she never attempted to penetrate. The present alone was significant; was hers, to torture her as it was doing then with the biting conviction that she had lost that which she had held, that she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded. (927)

    Even though she had never voiced her emotions, she now demands her rights to autonomy: “I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.” When Mademoiselle Reisz responds she could not do more than what the Bible tells her to
do, Edna reaching a state of personal enlightenment responds, “Oh, yes you could,” drawing the distinction between herself and this representative of womanhood. The more difficult question: what will Edna do with her freedom?

Edna’s attachment to Robert coincides with her need, ability, and understanding of escape. Whether he understands or not, he facilitates her seeking to experience life in alternative ways. When she begins to realize her new place in the world, she believes that she needs validation through him in order to justify her actions. Accepting this and her other affairs offer Edna some agency.

Her strengthening sense of self endures until the news of Robert’s departure to Mexico causes her to grow in different ways. His leaving hurts Edna in the loss of a companion to share her escape. While Robert once acted as a catalyst to her awakening, she learns that he will ultimately fail to satisfy her needs or contribute to her quest. Robert’s rejection helps her to see that "To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else" (999). Even though she finds someone to replace him, these men will, like her adolescent infatuations, recede from her life.

Once back in New Orleans, Edna’s domestic situation declines. Léonce continues to see Edna as one of his possessions: a material object to be owned rather than a person unto herself. In this way, she is to act for Léonce as means to an end, another symbol of his material success. When she gives up her usual programme of receiving visitors during her usual hours, he scolds her for not observing les convenances if they wish to “get on” and “keep up with the procession” (932). She wishes no part in standard conventions; at one point, she flings down her wedding band and stomps it.

Empowering herself, Edna explores her own house as “if inspecting it for the first time” (955), and she dines alone and falls asleep reading Emerson. Donald Ringe argues that Edna’s
reading of Emerson’s text alone at night constitutes a romantic concept of the self, and he sees Edna’s experience as a process of developing self-awareness as she reacts to what she perceives as not-herself, the physical world and the other people in it (“Romantic Imagery” 582). “Edna feels contradictory impulses impelling her” as she “thinks sentimentally about Léonce and the children” (956).

While Mademoiselle Reisz warns Edna that she may lack the artist’s soul, the one that dares and defies, Edna takes steps to show she indeed does dare to choose her own actions. When Edna refuses to attend her sister’s wedding in New York, her husband goes by himself. The children remain with his mother, and Edna—ecstatically alone—presides over a luxurious dinner party for moving herself to a little house around the corner (945).

In a later meeting with Robert, Edna establishes herself as her own person. Sometime after Robert had returned from Mexico to New Orleans, Edna meets him and makes clear her independence when she claims she is glad Robert never knew her in that home. She eschews association with Léonce, disassociating herself from her earlier identity. When Robert says that her husband will never let her go, she calls him a “foolish boy,” and claims that her husband does not matter: “I give myself where I choose” (992).

Chopin continues to reveal the discrepancy between how these two characters understand Edna’s growth: Edna focuses on her autonomy; Robert uses traditional bias to understand their existing possibilities. Robert’s inability to comprehend her development in a favorable way shows his inability to escape his socially-reinforced attitude. The further Edna escapes, the more she realizes Robert’s inability to function outside of those prescriptions.

Later, when Dr. Mandelet walks with Edna back to Mademoiselle Reisz’s house, he tells her, “Youth is given up to illusions…a decoy to secure mothers for their race” (996), showing his
knowledge of how women are kept in place to serve society. She returns to find Robert gone and his note: “Good-bye, because I love you.” Losing again the individual she expects to be with her when she achieves her goals intensifies her crisis; her dream of escape becomes less definable and attainable without the person she most associates with that vision.

It is not specifically Robert that Edna longs for; it is ‘the presence of the beloved one’—an indefinite perpetual image, existing ‘always’ in ‘her spiritual vision.’ The longing, so described, is an immortal one and, as she acknowledges, ‘unattainable’: the vision might be of Robert, but it might equally be of the cavalry officer, the engaged young man, the tragedian…. (Wolff 463)

Though she could, at one point, find comfort in the idea of Robert assisting her, she ultimately realizes that she must confront her spiritual development on her own—unable to reclaim any previous identities, knowing that accepting any of them would force her to accept their obligations.

Not finding comfort in her sexual relationships, the independence she establishes by selling her art, or in her ability to make music, she understands that these new experiences and lovers will, in their turn, recede in importance. Finding few solutions, Edna grasps for a real break from her former self, intending to find love, respect, and place. Edna becomes aware of one definite in her life and the only thing she is unwilling to abandon: "I would give up the un-essential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (929). Consequently, her search for freedom causes her to lose connection with the tangible components that gave her life foundation as she struggles to define alternative beliefs and existential possibilities. By becoming more herself and casting aside the fictitious personas,
she sheds her metaphorical veils until, at the end, she is naked, “[l]ike some newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (Complete Works, 1000).

Just as she systematically constructed her new personas, she sheds them to leave herself exposed and empty. She realizes that these lives will eventually fail to satisfy her and that other lovers will take Robert’s place; her aspirations, too, will “melt out of her existence” (999). Escaping the traditional parameters once governing her life, she falls into an existential abyss, never able to return to the unawakened life of servitude and obligation she once lived. Collapsing into a solipsistic spiral of meaninglessness and emptiness, she resorts to the only option she finds available to her. Edna’s awakening, then, is the realization that she needs to be awakened to her possibilities. She escapes, spiritually and psychologically, but she eventually realizes that the existential paradigms available to her can never match her potential; moreover, those around her are incapable or unwilling to comprehend or assist her growth. In the end, she commits herself to an awakened lifestyle, but her awakening “is an awakening to separation, to individual existence, to the hopelessness of ever satisfying the dream of total fusion” as it originates “in a sense of inner emptiness, not in some finite failure of love” (Wolff 469-70). Her final act shows that there is a price for enlightenment, from too completely escaping the validating markers that offer connection to the world.

For Edna Pontellier and many other Chopin characters, escape drives them to fulfill essential desires for place, love, and happiness. Whether critics dwell on the feminist dimension of Chopin’s characters or appreciate the more universal dimensions of her work, escape exists as an important element within her fiction. Her family fostered the need of the individual, regardless of gender, to act as an autonomous agent in the world and live with intellectual curiosity and authenticity. Chopin’s writing reflects such concerns about the importance of
personal worth and dignity. The influences around her and those she read, along with the seriousness she invested in her writing, worked together to assist her to enter a dialogue with other thinkers and writers. Chopin wished her narratives to center on personal agency within a larger theme of escape.
CHAPTER 3

EDITH WHARTON’S GLORIOUS REVOLT

Defining Edith Wharton’s fiction continues to be difficult. Critic Jennifer Haytock understands Wharton’s satirical novel *Twilight Sleep* (1927) as a discursive statement on changing attitudes toward marriage and divorce within society and modernist writing. Analyst Stuart Hutchinson explains the influence of George Eliot and uses her to gauge some of Wharton’s greatest novels like *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). While *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) explains Wharton’s dislike of the modernist esthetic, critics cite her and Henry James for their contribution to the psychological novel, a modern form. Whether classified within the more traditional, plot-driven literary method of the nineteenth-century or as part of the modernists’ canon, her writing often relies on ideas of escape: characters attempt to balance personal fulfillment with community obligations.

Whether it is Undine Spragg seeking to shed one material situation for another, Newland Archer desiring to free himself from confining conventions, or Lily Bart longing to escape a life she considers beneath her, characters attempting to avoid the implicit necessities of a particular section of society constitute Wharton’s principal subject. Characters who struggle to define their independent identities often seek escape while those comfortable with themselves show less need to leave their situations. Those beholden to society for their identities are least successful, having the greatest need to escape into or out of society. Lily Bart knows how to function at the edges of society, but she fails to understand herself and what she wants in life so her escape from her awkward position into her anticipated world fails. Lawrence Selden understands himself and has no need of escape. As a product of his environment, Newland Archer struggles between his
commitment to community and his desire for self-fulfillment outside social codes that have played a great part in creating his character.

Edith Wharton was born in 1862 into an exclusive New York society. Wharton knew and wrote about the conventions governing individuals within or wishing to enter into this social world. In the introduction to her autobiography, A Backward Glance (1934), Louis Auchincloss explains: “she loved it [privileged New York society] for the very completeness of her understanding of it and for the richness of the material with which it supplied her” (xi).

Certainly, she was acutely aware of the “smallness of its imagination” that those around her lived and how they eschewed everything in life that she believed important. Seen another way, however, she relied on the juxtaposition of individual aspirations with this culture’s demands to anchor her fiction.

Wharton lived on her own terms, rising above the confines imposed on women of her time and position. Conventions failed to impede her from learning, writing, and aspiring. Edgar Pelham claims Wharton is able "to transcend the limitation of her sex [...] she is at ease in a man's world" (196). In 1910, she escaped; she moved to France, becoming an expatriate like her friend Henry James and others like Pound, Stein, Eliot, and Plath.

The psychological longing for escape in Wharton’s writing shows that she wished writing not to change its method but rather its “vision.” Here she excelled—in her vivid descriptions and by her use of existing devices, modes, and themes. Not subscribing to the “Make it New” philosophy espoused by modernists like Ezra Pound, she wrote some of her greatest novels well after the modernist aesthetic had begun its influence and after Joyce’s serializing of Ulysses (1918-1922). Indeed, she loathed the “formlessness” and chaotic in these writers. Publishing The Age of Innocence the same year D. H. Lawrence’s Women in Love (1922) appeared and shortly
before Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), she strove to write stories in the old mode but in a manner matching the vitality of the newer styles.

Social dogma, matrimonial commitments, emotional ties, personal ambition, and moral conflicts in Wharton’s stories trap her characters. *The Age of Innocence* confines characters within a social code, while Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* (1913) feels trapped by any situation, regardless of its origin. Undine’s restlessness lies in her quest for external, material things, but she is without any real identity and remains both unfulfilled and oblivious to the suffering she causes others.

Personal agency, aspiration, and hope threatened by social responsibilities dominate in Wharton’s fiction. Conflicted characters in early stories choose between living lives determined by an outward world of superficiality or an inner world of self-fulfillment. Characters, most often orphans, like Charity in *Summer* (1917) and Lily in *The House of Mirth*, have little guidance regarding the antithetical forces affecting their lives. Lawrence Selden rebels, while others, like Lawrence Lefferts or Newland Archer, are too afraid to fight “the system.” Later, Wharton’s conflicts become exacerbated by the breakdown of that closed society and its moral code. Challenges leave women and men without an understanding of their essential beings, possible roles, or alternative choices because they predicate existences on compromised interpretations of their identities. These characters are at such a loss that their interactions with others, especially with the other gender, become tenacious and unfulfilling. More appealing life options develop as characters begin to locate their identities within themselves and come to definitive conclusions about their lives.

While characters deal with escape, some anticipate a time when they will be free of the social demands. Lily Bart seeks to escape her middle-class status but in a manner transcending
reproach. Countess Olenska wishes to free herself from society’s acceptance of philandering husbands while, at the same time, disallowing wives from escaping such relationships. At times, misinterpretation of society’s rules motivates characters like Lily to perform self-defeating acts of desperation; at other times, personalities like Ethan Frome clutch at an always elusive form of existence as they navigate their social responsibilities. Some narratives feature characters caught up in "the hopeless incurable passion of a sensitive man for a stupid uncomprehending woman" (Nevius, “Themes” 198). Critic Anja Salmi points out that few novelists succeed as does Wharton at exploiting the need for escape.

Critics often comment on Wharton’s ideas of escape. Salmi finds parallels in the “Andromeda and Pegasus” story: “Wharton repeatedly entraps her characters in their social roles, their marriages, their moral duties, or the circumstances surrounding them” (15). Escape offers one solution; another is to conform to prevailing conditions. Some characters gain emancipation by way of a Pegasus figure who can effect rescue. More often, characters do not receive the help they need to be saved.\(^1\)

Salmi argues that Wharton’s *The Fruit of The Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *The Reef* (1912) most fully exploit these ideas: . . .

all the conflicts in the novels—between the individual and society, husband and wife, lover and the loved ones, man and his morality, man and his environment, materialism and culture, reality and ideals, the artist and creativity—are understood better when we know that they echo the writer’s own concerns. The issues established in the novels are manifestations of the writer’s own problems as a wife, a member of her class, a writer, an expatriate, a rebel. Wharton even

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\(^1\) For discussion of how Wharton’s characters correspond to the Andromeda image and struggle against social repression symbolized by a monster threatening to swallow them, see Salmi’s *Andromeda and Pegasus*. 
tempts us to draw parallels between her life and her works, using autobiographical material in the novels so discernibly. (Salmi 17)

While society’s codes represent the threatening monster, a new rising bourgeoisie forces this privileged group to reinforce their defenses (15).

Convention chains Wharton's Andromedas by time and class. Characters attempting to break their marriage bonds, like Ellen Olenska, feel the full force of society’s restrictions. Protagonists in *The Reef*, like Anna Leath, hope to live life beyond the expectations for the prototypical middle-class woman. Ellen in *The Age of Innocence*, and Halo in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* escape in their small ways, but others like Ethan in *Ethan Frome*, Ralph in *The Custom of the Country*, and Newland in *The Age of Innocence* fail to realize their independence. They either commit suicide or retreat into their predetermined situations within society. Protagonists with artistic affinities sometimes escape to a world of creativity and self-expression. Arguably, her young or innocent, ill-prepared characters who deal with their difficulties in relation to society constitute Wharton’s most successful subjects.

Some characters contend with making correct marriages or with the confinement implicit in such unions. Blake Nevius argues that love affairs in Wharton's novels acquire interest or significance only after one or both partners marry. When Wharton characters become ensnared by their sentimental miscalculations, she often introduces a contingent theme. How, she asks, are morally obligated individuals to live within the framework of manners, mores, and taboos? The question occupies the center of Edith Wharton's moral consciousness (“Themes” 199).

An early modern psychological story, Madam de LaFayette’s novel, *La Princess de Clèves* (1678) presents a young woman who finds true love only after marrying. Critic Nir

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2 James Gargano argues in “Edith Wharton’s *The Reef*” that after the death of her husband, Anna Leath’s chance meeting with an old suitor releases her and offers her the possibility of an “emotional-spiritual renaissance.” Gargano believes that the story relies on Anna's second chance for a freer and more expansive life (40-48).
Evron believes that this protagonist helped Wharton establish what the novel should do (41). Not only do social mores keep individuals constrained, but a character’s desire to live by those standards, sometimes regardless of how society would act, dictate his or her actions. Having given her husband an oath of fidelity as a wife, the princess resists, even after her husband’s death, her desire to commit to true love; her perception of social obligation goes beyond realistic expectations. This meaninglessness provides the story’s pathos. Her understanding of her duties, Clèves’ mistreatment of her, and the unfair rubrics concerning women in marriage compound the princess’ inability to escape her personal situation.

Certainly, Wharton’s more significant novels, *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, but even her lesser analyzed titles, *Twilight Sleep* and *Custom of the Country*, expose how characters beholden to this class and its moral code become disassociated, whether by ignorance or by force of will, from themselves and their existential ideals. Even while they may understand where they are or wish to be, other conflicts like failures in language arise when they are unable to articulate their angst, further complicating their ability to establish genuine relationships with others.

Gary Lindberg argues that Wharton believes “subjective yearnings” are not as important as more objective patterns of behavior. Wharton is unwilling to give characters with desperate longings successful outcomes; even when characters’ spiritual yearnings are attractive, she dooms them: “The precision and extent of her social analysis, in contrast, reveal an orientation away from the possibilities of individual fulfillment and toward everything that limits it” (Lindberg 18).

While Wharton’s New York upper-class background may have enamored her, some critics like Q. D. Leavis contend that Wharton was "unfortunate in her environment" and “able to
only criticize it.” Both dependent upon and repulsed by old New York society, Wharton used that setting to show characters who are able to accept and function within that world, despite her depicting their existence as meager and empty. Others feel confined as they confront this implacable high society.

Growing up, Wharton claimed to have lived in an environment that commended the insincere and preferred to ignore spiritual depth; she felt that she had never interacted with an intelligent person until she was past twenty (Raphael 21). Her fictional environments show how individual attempts to escape and find legitimacy flounder because characters lack the desire or knowledge to examine themselves and their lives accurately; they cannot understand their essential nature, relate their concerns to others, or establish authentic lives. In this way, Wharton is able to critique a conservative New York collective, and, no less, the modern aesthetic. Biographers Janet Beer and Avril Horner contend that Wharton’s character Pauline Manford in Twilight Sleep tries to distinguish herself by joining any organization that would recognize her prominence. They see her as...

an intense and driven woman, fending off the knowledge of an empty and meaningless life by the application of high seriousness to often spurious moral, intellectual, or spiritual causes. The comedy—bitter though it is—derives from the expense of spirit in the pursuit of aims and ideals that could be attained so much more simply. (179)

Perhaps the most striking characteristic detail in the novel is Pauline Manford’s lack of self-knowledge epitomized by her belonging to the National Mothers’ Day Association at the same time she gives speeches supporting the Birth Control League.
Wharton critiques changes she found distasteful in society and the arts: eagerness to escape through drugs, alcohol, sex, employment, or social association, a society that squanders money attempting to avoid the pain of everyday life. The Manford family determines to escape the painful boredom and emptiness of modern life. Yet, Pauline’s rigid schedules, Lita’s adventures during the family vacation, and Manford’s affairs all result from desperation: “Every minute was crammed with passive activities; one never had this queer sense of inoccupation, never had to face an absolutely featureless expanse of time” (*Twilight* 117). Their sustained escapes, rooted in personal anxieties, keep these characters separated from reality, feeling only pain while they flounder to find relief; they fail to find themselves and grasp for alternatives.

Fear of public disgrace or of being exposed as a fraud hinders genuine relationships, and these failures lead characters to escape their lives with conflicting charitable endeavors, sexual quests, and dreams of fame. Pauline simultaneously engaging in contradictory endeavors—passing fads, philanthropic organizations, massages, and Eastern metaphysics—forfeits any claim to integrity and continually escapes through denial the real issues of her life: her husband and daughter.

Further ambiguities cause these characters to fail, particularly with the inadequacy of language. Communication, difficult between characters in general, is impossible between lovers, husbands, wives, mothers, and daughters. Jim and Lita fail to communicate as siblings; Mansford avoids speaking meaningfully to his wife. Difficulties appear in Jim and Lita’s relationship when Nona loses her boyfriend and again when Manford seeks connection during his sexual affairs. The final statement comes from home, the most personal place for most: Nona states that she wants to escape to a convent where, “nobody believes in anything” (315).
Other Wharton characters fail to escape anxiety or to make connections. Sarah Magin understands Ralph’s suicide in *The Custom of the Country* as an escape from Undine’s embodied presence (181). Alfred Kazin comments that Wharton’s characters demonstrate spiritual failures (98), and Jennifer Haytock discusses how some Wharton characters fail to communicate any understanding of selfhood to others because of their own conflicted sense of self (223). Synthesizing these difficulties, Wharton shows characters’ frustrations separating themselves from their disliked circumstances. Although language makes it possible to become part of a larger unified whole (especially for women), failure in this regard reveals disparities in society and gender relationships, and it can expose lack of unity within the individual.

Some of Wharton’s conflicted characters struggle between playing a part in this select social class and finding answers to deeper, more essential questions of self-worth. Some characters are able to live the way they wish, even if it is in some relation to the larger forces in society; others are never able to reconcile the two extremes. Characters like those in the short story “Souls Belated” flounder to define their desires clearly. Lydia struggles between living within the high society her husband affords her and the freedom she finds with Gannett. Gannett fails to understand that Lydia believes marriage to him (or any other man) is a self-imposed prison. Lydia and Gannett’s detachment from their personal wants keeps them from marrying each other, stifling their personal happiness. The inability to synthesize romantic natures with their affinity toward modern, liberal ideas about marriage precludes them from achieving the goals they seek and keeps them trapped.

Whether characters find a public or private persona, their inability to give voice to their concerns limits their ability to connect with other characters who are merely products of their environment. Living with her aunt after losing her parents, Lily in *The House of Mirth* lives in
an untenable domestic situation which keeps her alone and makes entering her preferred position in society more difficult; she recoils from who she is and never reaches what she wishes to become. By wearing a public façade, she separates herself from her basic identity. She and those she meets are aware of their false identities, yet they are unable or unwilling to address their difficulties genuinely with one another, making it harder to understand themselves in relation to their world and to what they really want. Thus affected, these characters are at a loss as to establish independent identities beyond frustrated attempts at selfhood and cannot escape to their desired situations.

“One of the broadest thematic tendencies in nineteenth-century fiction,” as Gary Lindberg believes, “is to pit an idealistic, yearning individual against a stifling or mean-spirited social order” (14). Continuing, Lindberg argues that the romantic fervor sympathizes with the hidden needs of the self, clarifying the other side of the division: “not only between self and society but also between private and public selves.” Characters like Charity Royal, in *Summer*, drop barriers to their authentic selves, leaving them unable to fend off a threatening world or to believe in anything such as the love that could validate and give their lives meaning. Some, like Ethan Frome, lose their distinctiveness by receding into environments where social demands draw them away from their fundamental characters. Lily represents characters compelled to understand themselves in relation to society rather than to their essential selves and their specific situations; if they fall from this elite sphere, their existential self matters little to themselves and not at all to this society.

Unprepared, Lily fails to commit to the romantic or practical forces within her character, resulting in her inability to determine validating goals for her life. Failing to understand her fundamental nature, Lily throws herself into an identity most fitting her conceptions of life.
within the highest levels of New York society. Since she misunderstands herself and the social paradigms she wishes to enter, Lily builds facades, lies about smoking, and refuses to allow anyone to pay her debt to Trenor.

Cultivating social graces rather than developing more essential qualities, Lily becomes spiritually vacuous. Thus affected, she does not commit to her romantic love, Lawrence, since, monetarily, he falls short of her materialistic ideal. Holding herself accountable to higher ideals beyond the practical to achieve goals, she declines Rosedale’s proposal of using against Bertha Dorset the letters Lily bought from Mrs. Haffen. She depends on her meager means while struggling to escape, unwilling to recognize herself, and by not concentrating on her inner nature, she undermines her goals and means of escape. By only reacting to her environment, she puts herself at a disadvantage, and those like Bertha Dorset exploit this weakness. Instead of empowering herself as Lawrence does, Lily obligates herself to the rules while having none of their power. She accepts her boundaries and tries to function according to them, instead of evaluating the need and worth of living within them. She limits herself, unable to constitute her own happiness on her own terms.

Early in the novel, Lawrence asks Lily to abandon her wealthy friends in order to seek a “republic of spirit,” but he has little idea how irrelevant such advice is to Lily given her precarious financial situation (McDowell 45). Lawrence recognizes his love for Lily, but he understands the necessity to navigate rules he asks Lily to leave off. Being hurt, he wishes to disassociate himself from scandal, and when he suspects Lily of having an affair with Trenor, abandoning her.

When feeling empowered, Lily acts against her nobler attributes; when feeling weak, she appeals to higher, often unreal, ideals. The narration likens her feelings for Lawrence to those
for an earlier love, Herbert Melson, whom Lily dismissed as a young infatuation because he possessed few “negotiable securities.” However, her feelings for Lawrence provide her the same sense of “lightness, of emancipation, which she remembered feeling, in the whirl of a waltz or the seclusion of a conservatory, during the brief course of her youthful romance” (65). She admires Lawrence because he is “able to convey as distinct a sense of superiority as the richest man she had ever met.”

Society shares in constructing Lily’s delusion and submission. Wharton characterizes this society’s inhabitants, each an “orchid basking in its artificially created atmosphere [that] could round the delicate curves of its petals undisturbed by the ice on the panes” (House 178). Margaret McDowell describes them as living “in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs” (101). Because the women of this culture most often were understood to anticipate becoming ornaments to their husbands, Lily values herself according to how others see her as a marriage prospect and the anticipation of being married to someone with money affects Lily as much as not having that prospect. When she anticipates marriage to a wealthy man, she flirts and acts more freely in choosing her engagements; dealing with men of nontraditional wealth, she becomes critical and scrutinizing, causing her to deny Lawrence because of his modest income and Trenor because of his social position. Anticipation of wealth and status effects only a potential psychological escape for Lily.

The object of Lily’s quest for marriage must meet her high standard. Although she attempts to live by ideals, she is forced to deal with real world debt, gossip, and narrowing marriage options. Her inability to reconcile these differences makes her unavailable as a
marriage prospect to anyone who wishes to marry her for anything other than contrived reasons, leaving her unavailable and unable to effect escape.

Lawrence, the most appropriate partner for Lily, goes through his own crisis. His position as an outsider results from his ability to understand himself and what will make him happy. Finding ways to transcend the politics of this society, Lawrence uses his intellect to help satisfy his more passionate elements. While his interaction with Lily draws him closer to society’s consequences, he looks inwardly to determine how much he will let his actions be guided by passion. If he is in control of his destiny as much as he believes himself to be, he should, he thinks, be able to fully commit to his passionate desires.

Lawrence lives between life without money and a society that concerns itself with the status material wealth provides. Having been raised to value things beyond the acquisition of wealth, he detaches himself from those who obsess over money and the status it provides, including Lily. Not concerning himself in this way provides him liberty, allowing him to escape (within limits) social concerns, affording him a careless, cavalier attitude. Although he criticizes society, he remains unwilling and unable to follow through on his interest that functions against it. He lacks vigor and resilience and prefers reading books and dining with other aristocrats to vigorously practicing law or engaging in pursuits: he fails to act on his passions in order to protect himself from the same society that judges Lily (Lawson 36). Lawson contends that Lawrence “declines to risk his passions, his emotions [for Lily]” and protects himself, not only from Lily but also from the same society that controls and destroys her.

While Lawrence is emblematic of one particular way Wharton treats male characters who confront attempt or need escape, some fashion themselves as sensitive men under the domination of unsympathetic women; they appear particularly in early novelettes: The Touchstone and
Sanctuary, The Fruit of The Tree, Ethan Frome, and The Reef. The Age of Innocence centers on Newland Archer’s failure to act on his desires. His inability to escape social norms leaves him questioning himself and his motives. Newland is aware of society’s hypocrisies but remains unwilling to challenge society effectively or to follow through in his personal development. He adheres to social demands risking neither intellectual stimulation nor social rejection. Similarly, understanding himself, Lawrence Selden navigates these same social codes with few consequences.

Escape is impossible for men who do not challenge their existential circumstances. Ethan Frome hardly has the tools to question his personal being or goals, given his wife and the brutal environment that determine his existence; Newland’s desires for something outside convention find him questioning the fundamentals of his character. While men may prove unable to define independent personalities or live authentically, they also provide little evidence that they could act on such would-be identities. Unlike the women, some males care little with whom they are seen, where they go, and, to some degree, what is said about them. Nevertheless, even with this “freedom,” they choose to pay homage to society by allowing certain fears to determine their actions—evidenced in both Newland Archer in Age of Innocence and Jim Wyant in Twilight Sleep.

Blake Nevius finds little doubt in Wharton’s mind regarding a sense of individual responsibility as the basis of social order and growth. Also, he believes that Wharton seeks “the most liberal interpretation of that axiom consistent with her inherited notions of fair play and respectability” and that all her novels show the limits of responsibility (Themes” 200). This sense of responsibility allows some morally superior characters to submit to inferior ones.
Ethan’s acceptance in Ethan Frome of what he understands to be his moral debts to his caustic wife entrap him. When his mother becomes sick, Zeena attends her in such a way that Ethan feels compelled to obey her. Doing so allows him to “go about his business again and talk with other men, [and] restores his shaken balance and magnifies his sense of what he owed her” (Ethan 41). Wharton describes this problem as “that immersion of the larger in the smaller nature which is one of the mysteries of the moral life” and “the hopeless incurable passion of a sensitive man for a stupid uncomprehending woman” (Wharton qtd. in Nevius, “Themes” 198). These female characters entrap men; Ethan’s romantic nature allows him to be dominated by the shrewish Zeena. The men must decide whether to follow their ideals or remain subject to women and others around them. Often, they predicate their anticipated escapes on overcoming psychological hindrances within themselves and the real world without.

Ethan’s vision of his existential ideals reveals the depths of his confinement. While he slaves to eke out existence in the brutal New England winters, he remembers how he “had always wanted to be an engineer and to live in towns, where there were lectures and big libraries and "fellows doing things” (42). Indeed, a “slight engineering job in Florida, put in his way during his period of study at Worcester, increased his faith in his ability as well as his eagerness to see the world,” and further insinuates the difference between his desires for free will and his current state.

Ethan’s powerlessness creates the narrative’s pathos by allowing flawed women to control and contain him; he finds himself trapped by his poverty and obligations as husband and provider (Salmi 73). He needs an Andromeda, and it comes in the form of Mattie, his wife’s cousin, when Zeena brings the young girl into their home:
But it was not only that the coming to his house of a bit of hopeful young life was like the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth. The girl was more than the bright serviceable creature he had thought her. She had an eye to see and an ear to hear: he could show her things and tell her things, and taste the bliss of feeling that all he imparted left long reverberations and echoes he could wake at will. (23)

Her arrival has such an effect that “Zeena herself, from an oppressive reality, had faded into an insubstantial shade” (26). Contrasted with his wife, Mattie gives Ethan “something of her own ease and freedom.”

Mattie instructs through example and distinguishes herself from Zeena when she displays a brazen nature that affects Ethan. She tells him she “ain't the kind to be afraid,” tossing back, almost indifferently, suddenly walking on with a “rapid step” (30). Rhetorically challenging Ethan to do the same, she constitutes the only real hope he has for assistance in fleeing his situation.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton draws on her most successful theme of individual struggle against society. Here, Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska find intricate and demanding the “genteel hypocrisies” and “clever evasions” within New York society. These protagonists struggle against their dependence on society in their search for fulfillment: Ellen begins a process to unshackle herself from society’s demands; Newland questions his ability to do the same.

Newland’s greatest problem is in choosing between a suppressed, safe existence represented by the innocent May and a more clandestine liberty offered by Ellen. Finding it difficult to circumvent rules others unquestioningly abide, Newland desires to live outside of these traditions, providing the novel’s parameters and central conflict. While anticipating marriage to May, his love for her cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska, represents for him the
intellectual and spiritual break from the suffocating environment of the New York aristocracy, “an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies” (12). In the end, he fulfills his obligations to May, his family, and social customs, despite a profound desire for the contrary.

While their outcomes differ, Lily and Newland both curb romantic inclinations to remain as participants in society. Although his social standing is less hazardous than Lily’s, Newland continues subject to the standards of conduct expected of him. He proves weak because he relinquishes too much power to a group of people who deliberately limit their experiences and imagination.³

Showing an initial fortitude by questioning comments made about Ellen, Newland resents living within a world dominated by duplicitous rules that criticize Ellen’s actions while allowing husbands’ to philander: “Who had the right to make her life over if she hadn’t? I’m sick of the hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots” (27). He understands these problems with society, yet he remains unfulfilled, unable to escape or ground his identity in either his personal desires or in the world of social materialism and status. The narrator describes his outcry as “a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern” (28).

Wharton establishes parameters for those needing escape. May anchors one extreme, a society devoid of spiritual depth and intellectual interest; she is the young girl whose “system of mystification remained the more inscrutable for her very frankness and assurance” (29). Her honesty stems from her being a “frank, poor darling, because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against; and with no better preparation than this, she was to be plunged overnight into what people evasively called ‘the facts of life’.”

³ Margret McDowell emphasizes changes that occur in Newland because of his love for Ellen Olenska. She sees him as dynamic, “not vital” but “pervasive” (96).
Ellen signifies the opposite extreme as someone who acts according to her personal goals and romantic inclinations. She is the most genuine, self-reflective character in the novel, but decorum forces her to forfeit her individuality, “to cast off all my [her] old life, to become just like everybody else here” (68). Though contradicting society’s conditions causes Ellen to suffer, she lives the most authentic existence among the central characters. Importantly, May’s grandmother, Mrs. Manson Mingott, also sets a precedent. She contradicts convention and embraces eccentricity while remaining in society, even controlling much of it.

These characters represent different modes of identity and different needs for escape. Once individuals commit to playing a part in their social world, their choices and actions become limited. May has no desire to escape her condition; she can fulfill her desires within it. While Ellen finds ways to subvert her social directives, Newland retains his social identity and forfeits his more idealized potential. Like May, whose ignorance allows her to escape these concerns altogether, he cannot articulate his desires: what he wants so greatly counters his sheltered life and a certain “narrowness of vision” that he forfeits what he knows himself to be.

Wharton differentiates between independence and submitting to a society bent on its mores and taboos. The matriarch of a family, Mrs. Manson Mingott exemplifies an eccentric “European” way, and Newland had always liked her. Her great fortune facilitates her ability to transcend social norms and emboldens Newland in cultivating ideas about women and agency. While Mrs. Mingott escapes in this way, Ellen’s and Newland’s escapes build off each other. Newland sees himself as more intellectual than those around him and identifies himself with Ellen’s independence. He “felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number” (6). Meeting Ellen again, he finds a kindred
spirit and is quick to defend her against the dogma of the New York social world. Their attraction to each other also emboldens Ellen’s continued separation from her husband.

Conditioned to act within that culture and unable to comprehend May’s courage at suggesting that he marry his former mistress, Newland abandons attempts to educate May. For him, “the worst of it was that May’s pressure was already bearing on the very angles whose sharpness he most wanted to keep” (124). In the end, Newland’s son Dallas tells him that it was May who understood that, “when she [May] asked you to, you'd given up the thing you most wanted” (214).

May’s desire to live within convention differs from Ellen’s determination to live by her own directives and represents the opposite social extreme. Having escaped her position with her husband, Ellen seeks to reinvent herself and find place within the world of which she was once a part. The idea that Ellen should want to become a member of society induces Newland to respond:

Why shouldn't she be conspicuous if she chooses? Why should she slink about as if it were she who had disgraced herself? She's 'poor Ellen' certainly, because she had the bad luck to make a wretched marriage; but I don't see that reason for hiding her head as if she were the culprit. (26)

Ellen embodies freedom and passion for Newland, even though obligations ultimately force her to submit to the same parameters as does May. No longer being able to accept her Polish count husband’s philandering, she returns to her New York family hoping to reintegrate into American life. Instead, she finds judgment and stifling social customs; a woman who separates herself from her living husband garners only scorn. To Newland, she is free and truly alive, her own person.
Describing Ellen in terms used for Henry James’ American characters Daisy Miller, Christopher Newman, and, to some extent, Isabel Archer, Wharton uses a European protagonist to illustrate characters’ unfamiliarity with society’s moral injunctions. Ellen does not “always remember that everything here [America] is good that was—that was bad where I’ve come from.” Ignorant of the social codes, her only requirement of life, as she tells Newland, is to feel “cared for and safe.” She sees no need to conform to rules that contradict logic: “Does no one want to know the truth here, Mr. Newland? The real loneliness is living among all these kind people who only ask one to pretend!” (50)

Newland desires that he and Ellen flee their situation together. He argues that he wants to “somehow to get away with you into a world where . . . we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter” (174); but she reminds him that no place offers this fictionalized life. Finally, he cannot escape society’s hold.

Newland’s early musings about May and Countess Ellen clearly establish the problems of autonomy. He first thinks that his fiancée, May, should not be exposed to the “influences of a young woman [Ellen] so careless of the dictates of taste” (11). Eventually, his defense of her actions become full-throated when he questions why she “shouldn’t.”

Chronicling Newland’s personal development from one who thinks critically about society to one who attempts to find ways to subvert its code, Wharton further illustrates the importance of escape as events contribute to developing Newland’s own desires to this end. Ellen living life through her philosophy causes Newland to reevaluate his social identity and his part in society. These moments more clearly expose the shortcomings of his community with its prejudices, dogma, and disdain for the intellectual pursuits he so highly values. At points, “[t]he
taste of the usual was like cinders in his mouth, and there were moments when he felt as if he were being buried alive under his future” (87).

Wharton distinguishes Newland idiosyncratic thinking. Believing he transcends his culture allows him to escape, at least in principle, the concerns others have. Thinking society ignores what it does not understand, he lives by restraint rather than by passion: he “dawdled over his cigar because he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization” (4). His contemplation rather than action foreshadows his future passiveness, merely considering ideas of self-determination and escape rather than acting upon them. Ellen and Rivière, the poor but intellect-fulfilled French tutor, provide Archer with the only intellectual conversation he is able to find; his social peers, like May, have neither need nor ability for such thinking.

Some of Newland’s few rewarding moments come when he speaks with characters who, by choice or circumstances, live outside of his social strata. Ned Winsett, an impoverished journalist and writer, is one with whom Newland has meaningful conversation and challenges Newland to think outside convention. M. Riviere, the private tutor, is another. Riviere explains, “it's worth everything, isn't it, to keep one's intellectual liberty, not to enslave one's powers of appreciation, one's critical independence? It was because of that I abandoned journalism, and took to so much duller work: tutoring and private secretaryship” (122). Newland holds the man in such esteem that when Riviere asks him about an “opening” in New York, Newland cringes at the idea that someone so well-read and intelligent would consider subjecting himself to the stifling social environment of that American city: “his very superiorities and advantages would be the surest hindrance to success” (123).
Newland understands how this culture homogenizes its participants. Responding to May’s comment that he is “so original,” he feels ashamed for finding it “singularly childish” that she simply echoes what she hears others say. He wonders “at what age ‘nice’ women began to speak for themselves,” and says, “We’re all as like each other as those dolls cut out of the same folded paper. We’re like patterns stenciled on a wall” (52). He contemplates trying to “take the bandage” from Isabel Chivers’ and, more importantly, May Welland’s eyes so they may “look forth on the world.” He argues that they should be allowed to speak for themselves: “‘we won’t let them, I suppose,’ he mused, and recalled his mad outburst to Mr. Sillerton Jackson: ‘Women ought to be—as free as we are’” (52) Inspired, Newland hopes to be “much better off” and try things like travel: “Can’t you and I strike out for ourselves, May?” She demolishes his hopes when she, conditioned by her upbringing, implies that “her mother would not understand their wanting to do things so differently” (53).

Newland’s critique of his social condition does not lend to escape. Once married, he feels the impact of his allegiance to moral obligations. He realizes his fears when he and his bride take a European honeymoon, where members of his class live in such a state of “impenetrable reserve” that they scarcely “exchanged a word with a ‘foreigner’ other than those employed in hotels and railway-stations.” With all his desire to see Ellen emancipated, he gives up hope that his wife seek and acquire any of those same freedoms. Her naïveté and conformity convince Newland that there would be no practical reason to convince May of her need to free herself: “There was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who had not the dimmest notion that she was not free; and he had long since discovered that May's only use of the liberty she supposed herself to possess would be to lay it on the altar of her wifely adoration” (119).
His subsequent musing on the topic reveals his change in thought. When reflecting on the idea, he reiterates, “Women ought to be free.” Not advocating a complete freedom, but a life of individual choices free of social dogma, he finds his friend’s marriages “lacking passion and commitment”: “He reviewed his friends' marriages—the supposedly happy ones—and saw none that answered, even remotely, to the passionate and tender comradeship which he pictured as his permanent relation with May Welland” (27).

Newland’s development continues until he loses a sense of himself. Because his environment plays such an intricate part in developing his character, systematically breaking down those institutions leaves him empty and without a sense of identity:

Outside it, in the scene of his actual life, he moved with a growing sense of unreality and insufficiency, blundering against familiar prejudices and traditional points of view as an absent-minded man goes on bumping into the furniture of his own room. Absent—that was what he was: so absent from everything most densely real and near to those about him that it sometimes startled him to find they still imagined he was there. (159)

May’s practical allegiance to the moral code she and Newland have been accustomed withstands his attempts to convince her to break convention and strike out on their own:

She looked a little bored by his insistence. She knew very well that they couldn't, but it was troublesome to have to produce a reason. "I'm not clever enough to argue with you. But that kind of thing is rather—vulgar, isn't it?" she suggested, relieved to have hit on a word that would assuredly extinguish the whole subject. (53)
Newland continues to argue with her about being vulgar and how afraid she is of being so. In her moment of insight, she responds, "‘Of course I should hate it—so would you,’ she rejoined, a trifle irritably” (53).

Ellen forces Newland to deal with the fact that there is no place to which she and Newland may escape. His desire to escape their restrictions loses all practical sense because, as she knows, he is incapable of committing to what their escaping entails. She asks him to sit beside her and “look, not at visions, but at realities” (174). Importantly, she is the one to hold him accountable to these “realities” that he, in part, created.

Newland’s commitment to remain within his social parameters results not from a flawed character; rather, his options are limited by convention, his fundamental nature, and obligations to his wife. Ellen also thwarts his advances toward breaking from his position in the world by forcing him to realize that if they have the relationship he seeks, she would become little more than his mistress. The best either can ask for, the situation they both settle for, is to allow their affection to play out at a distance, with knowledge of each other’s love limiting them acting on their affections.

Edith Wharton’s fiction focuses upon escape and touches the highest social strata of New York; characters attempt to enter, remain, or leave that world. Undine Spragg and Lily Bart both attempt to escape the material “dinginess” of less-than-eminent lives. Ethan Frome attempts to escape a meager existence but remains under the thumb of his demanding wife. Newland Archer is aware of the hypocrisies inherent within his elite society, but is unable to escape its domination. Lawrence Selden navigates society’s demands and lives, more or less, according to his personal dictates. In the end, however, he, too, will suffer the consequences society inflicts on those attempting to escape.
CHAPTER 4
FITZGERALD’S IMPOSSIBLE ESCAPES

Even as Francis Scott Fitzgerald wrote a number of extraordinary novels and stories, the idea that he might only be typical plagued his whole life. His perennial desire to break free from the common attracted him to women beyond his social class and to a lifestyle that, in many ways, transcended what might be expected by a middle class boy born in St. Paul, Minnesota, at the close of the Gilded Age. His life-long desire to break free of his middle-class roots and enter into the highest levels of material wealth, class, and prestige informs his greatest work, *The Great Gatsby*, as much as it does his penetrating short stories like “Ice Palace” and “Winter Dreams.”

Born to Edward and Molly McQuillan Fitzgerald on September 24, 1896, Scott Fitzgerald learned by observing his parents, particularly his mother, who worried about where the family belonged in “good” society. Biographer Scott Donaldson believes that Fitzgerald obtained his genius from “an energetic father, surely, and not from a mother whose taste in reading lent to the sentimental rubbish of the time” (18-19). As a boy, Scott dreamed that he had been born of royalty and left at the door of his unworthy parents.

His sense of superiority fostered by his mother seems to have compelled Fitzgerald to live up to those lofty standards. Throughout his childhood, Fitzgerald’s mother forgave her beautiful baby boy all his misbehavior; “no matter what Scott did, she wished him to be her ‘bad brownie’” (Donaldson 19). By teaching him to aspire, his mother ingrained in him what were unrealistic ambitions. Molly records his first spoken word—“up”—the trajectory the mother hoped he and his sister Annabel might go. While Edward Fitzgerald's failure in business and his grandfather McQuillan’s Irish Catholic roots worked against the mother’s social indoctrination,
Molly saw to it that Scott and Annabel mingled with those at the top of St. Paul hierarchy (Donaldson 19). He seems never to have shaken free of the drive to elevate his social standing, something his most successful stories reflect.

Fitzgerald’s stories portray the restless American middle and upper classes in the early decades of the twentieth-century. His young heroes are, like himself, fascinated by money and class. Yet, his characters often know that they can never fully belong to the secure and prosperous world, that the goal of joining this careless, dominant class is an illusion (Meyers 1). Fitzgerald’s dedication to that dream becomes the project of his life, and years later, he would write his daughter about it:

I lived with a great dream. The dream grew and I learned how to speak of it and make people listen. Then the dream divided one day when I decided to marry your mother after all, even though I knew she was spoiled and meant no good to me. I was sorry immediately I had married her but, being patient in those days, I made the best of it and got to love her in another way. You came along and for a long time we made quite a lot of happiness out of our lives. But I was a man divided—she wanted me to work too much for her and not enough for my dream. She realized too late that work was dignity and the only dignity and tried to atone for it by working herself, but it was too late, and she broke and is broken forever.

(Fitzgerald, Letters 32)

Fitzgerald’s romanticized vision of life meant an inability to fit in with his peers and a childhood fraught with difficulty. His youthful cockiness and propensity for showing off hardly sat well with other boys who told him to “go away” when he attended a potato roast. In his Ledger, Fitzgerald records a series of childhood humiliations, such as when no one came to one
of his birthday parties. Desperately unpopular at the Camp at Newman, Fitzgerald often fought, made poor marks, and achieved a measure of notoriety as the freshest boy at school (Donaldson 19). The uncomfortable nature of his childhood contributed to his belief (cultivated throughout his life) that he was meant for different and better experiences than his classmates and others around him.

His desire to be superior to his peers led him to evaluate his environment. When Fitzgerald was nineteen and his sister fourteen, he wrote instructions, much like a scholarly treatise, that explain to Annabel how to win the attention of young boys. He provides her with “leading questions” to use to entice as well as questions to avoid. He told her that she could say, “I hear it you have got a line,” but she should never ask about school or college, unless the young man brought up the subject first. Fitzgerald tried to show that it was important for her to get a boy to talk about himself, and once done, she would have him “cinched and harnessed” (Donaldson 20). Mentoring in this way continued when he became a father who would sometimes brutally instruct his daughter, Scottie.¹ The belief of remaining true to one’s nature remains at core to all his instruction.

Fitzgerald sought to live what he believed to be important experiences. While he and his work may not be associated generally with existential philosophy, much of his writing explores alienation, absurdity, freedom of choice and the repercussions of those choices.² His characters often engage in internal struggles to redefine their lives. While characters like Charlie Wales seek to imagine elaborately the life he and his daughter will live in the future, Jay Gatsby represents characters who wish to reformulate their actual pasts.

¹ For Fitzgerald’s letters to his daughter, Scottie, see The Letter of F. Scott Fitzgerald, edited by Andrew Turnbull (32).
² For Sidney Finkelstein’s argument that Fitzgerald was “of this milieu” and that his fiction relies on attitudes of alienation and dissolution, see Finkelstein, Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature (171).
Early, “The Ice Palace” presents young Sally Carol who aspires to transcend her Southern upbringing and surroundings for what she feels will be greater, more vibrant experiences and locations. She says to her boyfriend Clark, “I don't know. I'm not sure what I'll do but—well, I want to go places and see people. I want my mind to grow. I want to live where things happen on a big scale” (Fitzgerald, *Stories* 63). Though she loves those with whom she has grown, she still hopes for greater experiences, even with Harry from the North, a “Yankee.” Her sense of confinement and restlessness causes her to explain to Clark:

Yes—because I couldn't ever marry you. You've a place in my heart no one else ever could have, but tied down here I'd get restless. I'd feel I was—wastin’ myself. There's two sides to me, you see. There’s the sleepy old side you love; an' there's a sort of energy-- the feelin' that makes me do wild things. That's the part of me that may be useful somewhere, that'll last when I'm not beautiful any more.

(64)

She gets her chance to resolve her aspirations when she finally goes to “where things happen on a big scale—” to Harry’s home in the North.

Cold descriptors characterizing Sally Carol’s visit to the North conflict with her character described as “sunshine” and “cheerfulness.” The description of her visit systematically shows her incompatibility with people she meets in the frigid environment of the chill North and their attitudes about life. Her introduction to a “large room with a Madonna over the fireplace and rows upon rows of books” further separates her from her native environment, its innocence, and its religious affinities.

Sally soon realizes that these individuals are even more concerned with remaining fixed by habit and living in the past than those she left at home. Harry tells her: "Our grandfathers, you
see, founded the place, and a lot of them had to take some pretty queer jobs while they were
doing the founding. For instance, there's one woman who at present is about the social model for
the town; well, her father was the first public ash man—things like that” (Stories 69). Such
events diminish Sally Carrol’s ambitions for a life in the North; moreover, her interaction with
Roger Patton, a literature professor, reminds her to remain loyal to her romantic nature.
Ultimately, her disillusionment becomes undeniable when her visit to the Ice Palace puts her in
actual peril and she realizes she must return home.

Escaping a middle-class life of anonymity is not Fitzgerald’s only concern. He also
thought and wrote about escaping time. His retelling of the story that would become “The
Curious Case of Benjamin Button” chronicles the life of a man who ages backward. Having been
born a seventy-year-old man, Benjamin ages backward until he reaches infancy, when everything
“was dark.” Reinventing and escaping time reappear in various Fitzgerald short stories and his
most enduring work, The Great Gatsby.

Years after Gatsby, in “Babylon Revisited” (1931), Fitzgerald wrote about Charlie
Wales’ attempt to escape his past. While telling the story, Fitzgerald’s narrator continually
references time, its passing, and Charlie’s regret of losing time with his daughter. As Critic Joan
Turner asserts: “[h]is almost constant use of words relating to time helps reinforce one of the
main themes of the story: the past cannot be escaped” (Fitzgerald, Stories 282). Charlie attempts
to prove that he has escaped the out-of-control drinking of his past, making him now safe and
able to care for his daughter. Charlie must convince his sister-in-law, Marion, that he has
escaped, that he now lives a different life. Her inability to forgive him of his drinking and the
effects it had on him and his family frustrates his hope to convince her that he has reformed and
escaped “those crazy years.” Marion’s resolute stance keeps him from obtaining his daughter,
Honoria, who is now trapped with her. While Charlie remembers only “one night” and tells Marion his drinking occurred for only “a year and a half,” she tells him, “it was time enough.” While he loses this chance, Charlie hopes that letting “slide for six months,” he may get Honoria back. Like *Gatsby*, this story examines reinventing the past.

As authors write characters who wish to escape *from* something or, some characters wish to escape *to* something, a destination, or *to* an identity they have psychologically constructed for themselves. Jay Gatsby in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* attempts this type of escape; he hopes to escape from one existential reality to another. While the novel chronicles Gatsby’s obvious flight from the here and now, other characters within the novel also seek to escape their present lives. As Tom’s infidelity and Daisy’s flights from the rational represent escapes, the novel records other more nuanced ideas of liberation, hope, and longing. In fact, every major character in the novel attempts escape in some form.

From an early age, James Gatz seeks to break free from his social station and, as Jay Gatsby, to live the idealized life symbolized by Daisy. He attempts to not only reinvent himself but also reality. In his pursuit of Daisy, Gatsby uses all his resources in the present to realize dreams of what his past might have been. Although his stories of the past are embellished, he uses them as capital, spending them to escape and to reconceptualize his past to include Daisy; if he wins a place in her world, as her equal, he achieves the elusive dream. Ultimately, Gatsby’s happiness lies in his quest to relive his romance with Daisy, but now having money and the freedom it implies. Gatsby’s desires reflect an attitude Americans felt at this time—the hopes of making great financial gains. Gatsby’s ability to take advantage of the financial possibilities and
windfalls of the period allows him to gamble a lived existence in order to come as close as he can to realizing a utopian dream.

The tremendous changes occurring during the 1920s, when people flocked from the rural, agrarian countryside to the prospects offered by larger cities resulted from the recognition of America as the great land of opportunity and the ability to escape material poverty. Credit, bootleg booze, installment buying, and a raging jazz scene helped encourage the belief in unlimited possibilities. Gatsby intends to recreate his life with all the entitlements held by Daisy, Tom, and others, to reinvent history, time, and the world’s perception of him.

Fitzgerald believed that “[t]he best of America was the best of the world …. France was a land, England was a people, but America, still had about it a quality that was a willingness of the heart” (Fitzgerald qtd. in Stern 170). Published in 1925, Gatsby captures this era, Fitzgerald’s own feelings about what he would dub the “Jazz Age” and the American dream. Pointing to ideas of movement and escape, critic Milton Stern believes that the novel relies on Fitzgerald’s understanding…

that in America there had been an enormous displacement of the possibilities of self by the possibilities of wealth, and consequently, that American society, had become a highly mobile, tentative, and obscurely unfulfilled and omnivorous energy directed toward power and luxury, but with no sensitively or clearly defined human ends. Looking about him in the modern moment … even the man of ‘heightened sensitivity to the promises of life’ … if he lacked that advantage of an educated understanding of the idea of America, sees only the attractiveness of wealth with which to articulate his unique American response. (168)
Some *Gatsby* characters establish personal definition through money. George Wilson epitomizes how intrinsically tied are having money and the fulfillment of the American Dream. Wilson continually pleads for Tom’s car, not to own it himself, but to sell it in order to make the money to leave the garage and escape his paltry life in the garage. His hopes elude him because he allows Tom to dictate his material conditions and his chance for success. Wilson’s pathetic attempt to break away from his impoverished circumstances intensifies after he discovers that Myrtle has “some sort of life apart from him in another world” (76), that she can escape the confining life of the garage. Feeling betrayed and embarrassed by his small vision of escape, Wilson plans to run from the situation, taking Myrtle “whether she wants to go or not.” The difference between Wilson and Tom regarding their need to escape centers in money. The more money each has, the freer he is to escape his limiting conditions, obligations, and burdens. Because money offers him such freedom, Tom acts without personal consequences. He comes and goes where he pleases, sleeping with those he pursues. His freedom influences his relationships, like his affair with Myrtle. His freedom enables him power to assume that Myrtle will escape her husband at his request. Having such great potential to escape, Tom fails to understand the constraints those around him feel. Wilson’s sudden desire to flee perplexes Tom: “What do you want money for, all of a sudden?” (123).

Although Myrtle shares the need for hope with Gatsby and Wilson, hers is less noble than Gatsby’s or even her husband’s; her desires are shallow and superficial, without real direction or purpose. She wastes her hope. When she runs to the embodiment of her material wants (what she believes to be Tom and his car), the incarnation of her ostentatiousness (Gatsby’s flashy car driven by the wealthy Daisy) strikes her down, killing her.
By describing the Valley of Ashes and drawing a stark contrast between Gatsby and the other characters, Fitzgerald bleakly characterizes the American struggle for financial security. The description, replete with references to escape and transcendence, reinforces the desperate situation for those at the bottom of the country’s social hierarchy. Through the “fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, there exist chimneys and rising smoke where, with transcendent effort, men move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (23). The valley is “bounded on one side by a small foul river”; it reminds the downtrodden of the impossibility to escape their lives in the valley. Doctor T. J. Eckleburg watches through his gold-rimmed glasses over this valley of broken dreams, of failure and existential limitations.

Gatsby’s extraordinary gift of hope beginning early in his life stems from his understanding of the necessity of money. Born into a farming family that he refuses to believe was his family at all, the seventeen-year-old James Gatz quits working as a janitor and leaves St. Olaf College after only a few weeks. His efforts pay off when he meets Dan Cody, a copper millionaire who serves as Gatsby’s mentor. They travel for ten years, and Gatsby learns how to get money, what it means to have money, how to be a gentleman, and how to transcend his earlier life.

Readers first see Gatsby as he poses in a way that suggests a longing to reach beyond his position: “he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I [Nick] was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (21).
Escaping poverty and social anonymity drives many of the novel’s characters. The masses of revelers at Gatsby’s parties experience time and space with someone who has escaped. Critic Milton Stern explains: “[f]or Gatsby the goal was the ecstasy of Daisy, for Fitzgerald the ecstasy of art; for both, it was the expectation, and momentary realization—expressed in the excitement of wealth and parties—of ecstasy in life” (166). These experiences represented by Daisy and art offer entrance into the “rapturous, transcendent state of being of the dream.” The need to escape advances this novel, motivates its characters, and provides substance and tragedy in their ultimate goals.

Money underwrites the American Dream, and Jay Gatsby has acquired much. Moreover, the dream coexists with the “dream of self,” in an absolute liberation from the “conditional world” of sweat and struggle. Having enough money to escape the toil that leaves many Americans in the Valley of Ashes, under T. J. Eckleburg’s “persistent stare” (24), Gatsby has the requisite wealth to fulfill his aspirations and live his dream.

Much about Gatsby seems superficial, his wealth largely ill-gotten. His is a type of Horatio Alger story: a young man from humble beginnings succeeds through determination and courage. Not a victim of circumstances like Wilson, Gatsby strikes out and escapes to make something of himself. Ultimately, Gatsby must escape his past to reach his anticipated future and enter upon a new conception of his life.

Gatsby’s attempt to convince Nick of his heroic action during World War I captures Fitzgerald’s own conceptions of grandeur. Gatsby speaks of how he and his troops staved off the enemy for two days—actions that won him promotion in “every Allied government” and a decoration from “even little Montenegro down on the Adriatic Sea” (66). Relating these events is crucial to Gatsby because he would not want, as he tells Nick, for anyone to think he was “just
some nobody”; he wants Nick to understand that his experiences transcend the typical soldier’s and especially those who did not serve.

An “extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I [Nick] have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again” indicates an obvious example of Gatsby’s living for a dream. From an early age, he strives for a better life, “a Platonic conception of himself.” Daisy becomes the embodiment of that idea once he meets her. Pursuing her, Gatsby uses embellished stories as capital to construct an environment that will appeal to her; if he wins her, he wins all. Though Fitzgerald knew that “the American dream and American wealth are inseparably related” (Stern 163), Gatsby derives his greatest happiness from his quest for and anticipation and expectation of Daisy’s unconditional acceptance.

Because Gatsby remains in the shadows, few know much about the essential man. The real Gatsby remains elusive to the end, when his father provides his account of James Gatz’s past. Fitzgerald himself had this to say a year after he first published the book: “Also you are right about Gatsby being blurred and patchy. I never at any one time saw him clear myself—for he started as one man I knew, and then changed into myself—the amalgam was never complete in my mind” (Letters 358). On some level, Gatsby escapes, but on others levels, he remains the subject of speculation: bootlegger, murderer, heir to some royalty. Even Nick has to piece together disparate facts to construct his conception of the man.

Using traditional methods to define Gatsby obscures a real understanding of the character, for if Gatsby accepts his identity in the here in now, he does away with his hope of what he seeks to become. Nick believes Gatsby represents all for which he has unaffected scorn, but he wonders at the man’s ability for infinite hope. Hope constitutes Gatsby’s greatest essential characteristic. Gatsby not only intends to have the wealth to win back Daisy, he intends
to reinvent himself into someone who has always had money—someone, he believes, worthy of Daisy. While Gatsby escapes the poverty of his youth, he wants a chance to do his life over, specifically to relive the time of his life when he and Daisy loved each other; he wants to be able to recapture those moments as her equal. Nick understands Gatsby’s quest as romantic folly. He describes Gatsby’s desire to escape with Daisy:

He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: “I never loved you.” After she had obliterated four years with that sentence, they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago. (109)

Responding to Nick’s statement, “You can’t repeat the past,” Gatsby asserts, “Why of course you can!” When Nick speaks of Gatsby’s showing Daisy his house: “He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity. Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an overwound clock” (92). At this moment, his attempted escape from time becomes tangible, and returning to the room, Nick reports: “there was a change in Gatsby that was simply confounding. He literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room” (89). For that brief moment, Gatsby had, indeed, escaped his past.

Gatsby retreats with all that he has from the here and now to concentrate on the life he envisions. Nick imagines that vision, what Daisy means to Gatsby:

He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been
confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain
starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was. . . .

One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street
when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees
and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward
each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which
comes at the two changes of the year. The quiet lights in the houses were
humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars.
Out of the corner of his eye, Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really
formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to
it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down
the incomparable milk of wonder. (110)

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy’s white face came up to his own. He
knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her
perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he
waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon
a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower
and the incarnation was complete. (117)

C. S. Lewis believes that individuals who despise or love something, must fully engage their
attention to that object. He asserts the impossibility of self-reflection about one’s feeling on a
given matter at the same time one worships or hates that object: “You cannot hope and also think
about hoping at the same moment” (Lewis 45). Gatsby suspends, either through ignorance or
will, any analysis of his dream. Lewis contends that “The surest way of spoiling a pleasure was
to start examining your satisfaction.” Gatsby never questions himself, his dream, or the superficial environment he seeks to enter. Fitzgerald describes *Gatsby* to his friend Ludlow Fowler: the whole burden of *Gatsby* is “the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world that you don’t care whether things are true or false so long as they partake of the magical glory” (Fitzgerald, *Letters* 78).

Chapter six of the novel begins with a description of Gatsby’s real past; it ends with his desire to recover a modified version of that past. Before his time with Cody, Gatsby serves as a major in the First World War where he commanded a heavy machine-gun regiment. During his training, Jay Gatz falls in love with Daisy, which briefly allows him to believe that he is somehow her equal. These feelings exacerbate his already strong desire to transcend his meager beginnings and enter a world he could, at that time, only imagine. His actions during the war win him enough distinction to make him eligible to attend Oxford. His time at one of the oldest, most renowned colleges in the world does not, however, provide him the validation he seeks within the social class he wishes to enter. Gatsby still continues to carry with him some aspects of his Midwestern, provincial beginnings.

Coming from a well-off, stable family in the West, Nick shows little need for the same type of escapes others seek. Brought up in a secure, middle-class environment of “well-to-do” people in a Midwestern city for three generations (3), Nick bases his principles in real-world practicality and has little regard for romantic quests for the impossible. Nick’s stable life also contrasts with the Wilsons and individuals such as those at Myrtle’s apartment. Nick went to an Ivy League school; his place in the world is, for the most part, comfortable. When Gatsby offers Nick the opportunity to take part in some of his business dealings, Nick falls back on his Midwestern principles and declines, instead of pondering the monetary rewards of doing so.
When Nick visits his cousin Daisy for the first time, he does so not with excitement or even interest but rather with a sense of obligation and duty. Even his affair with Jordan is only slightly more than a passive interest: he does not actively pursue her and matter-of-factly reviews her moral failings. This sort of detachment represents a type of escape that Nick shows as early as the beginning of the novel when he speaks of leaving a girl back home.

By giving directions to a stranger early on, Nick eliminates his sense of displacement. His ability to do so gives him a sense that he “was a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler. He [the stranger] had casually conferred on me the freedom of the neighborhood” (4). This, along with a description of West Egg in springtime, presents an attitude of hope and potential. His sense of himself around the other characters becomes more defined, even if his disdain for them grows. He is educated about Gatsby’s life “step by step, as the reader is, and his moral conclusions come precisely as the reader is ready for them” (Stern 194).

Despite his conservative nature, Nick finds ways to escape his boredom and loneliness. Taking his dinners at the Yale Club, he walks Madison Avenue and begins to “like New York.” The adventurous feel of the night and the action of the men and women provide enough stimulation for him that he picks out women from the crowd and imagines that in a few minutes he would enter into their lives, and “no one would ever know or disapprove” (154). He enters without consequences his relationship with Jordan Baker in this way, spending time with her, off and on, throughout the summer. During a party in Myrtle’s apartment, Nick says, “I wanted to get out and walk southward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair” (35). The metaphor relates how his relationship to Tom, Daisy, and Gatsby entraps him.
Nick lessens his “unaffected scorn” by recognizing in Gatsby “something gorgeous, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life … it was an extraordinary gift of hope, a romantic readiness such as I shall never find again” (2). Absolutely optimistic, Gatsby never sees the tragedy in his hope, what it has done to him, or how it affects the people around him. He sees only his horizons, past what others view, and defines, as best he can, the only paradigm he understands.

Nick’s sense of freedom mediates between Tom, who is married but unwilling to be constrained by his obligations, and Gatsby, who is unmarried yet completely committed. Nick, on the other hand, has “no intention of being rumored into marriage” when Daisy hears “from three people” (19) that he is engaged to a girl out West. His affair with Jordan is passionless and runs its course, without obligations or consequences.

Witnessing Tom’s dominance over Daisy, Nick understands the problems within the Buchanans’ marriage as a result of Tom’s liberties. Nick responds,

> It seemed to me that the thing for Daisy to do was to rush out of the house, child in arms—but apparently there were no such intentions in her head. As for Tom, the fact that he “had some woman in New York” was really less surprising than the fact that he had been depressed by a book. Something was making him nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart. (20)

Nick understands the inherent lack of freedom Tom allows Daisy as well as Tom’s inability to satisfy his longing for some type of meaningful existence not predicated on his physical prowess: “I hate that word ‘hulking,’” objects Tom crossly, “even in kidding” (12).
Having always lived in the affluent society Gatsby and Fitzgerald had always sought to enter. Daisy understands the hypocrisy inherent in her situation, and her difficulties cause her to create her own type of escapes. At the same time, the thought of her being an independent woman never occurs to her.

Daisy’s voice is “full of money” (120), and she appeals to men, suggesting possibilities of escape: “there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered ‘Listen,’ a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour” (9). Yet, with all of suggestiveness, her inclinations remain elusive. She asks, “Do you always watch for the longest day of the year and then miss it? I always watch for the longest day in the year and then miss it” (11). Her questioning what it is that people plan underscores her detachment from anything significant. Her wealth allows her to live without consequences, and her inability to control her destiny frees of responsibilities.

Rarely having to struggle, Daisy argues for an important type of escape when she wishes that her daughter be “a beautiful little fool” (17). Aware of how powerless women in her position are, she argues implicitly that girls should live in their own world, making themselves happy, rather than spending their lives pleasing men. Daisy knows of her husband’s flirtations and allows him to escape his commitments to her and his family.

Gatsby’s time with Daisy in 1917 exposed him to things about which he had spent his youth fantasizing. During the war, however, Daisy ultimately gives up waiting for his return and escapes by reentering her position in society: “Daisy was young and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes”: 

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Through this twilight universe Daisy began to move again with the season; suddenly she was again keeping half a dozen dates a day with half a dozen men, and drowsing asleep at dawn with the beads and chiffon of an evening dress tangled among dying orchids on the floor beside her bed. And all the time something within her was crying for a decision. She wanted her life shaped now, immediately—and the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand.

That force took shape in the middle of spring with the arrival of Tom Buchanan. There was a wholesome bulkiness about his person and his position, and Daisy was flattered. Doubtless there was a certain struggle and a certain relief. The letter reached Gatsby while he was still at Oxford. (151)

Tom ultimately takes over that “artificial world” and dictates Daisy’s freedom. Being described as a powerful man, Tom nonverbally communicates, according to Nick, “Now, don’t think my opinion on these matters is final,” he seems to say, “just because I’m stronger and more of a man than you are” (7). Without question, his strength dominates, and Daisy’s freedom resides only in what her husband allows.

Once Gatsby returns from the war, he learns even more the disparity between Daisy and his world. When Daisy and Gatsby are eventually reunited and touring Gatsby’s home, he sets off a cascade of shirts. The experience provides Gatsby a new experience where “everything in his house is according to the measure of response it drew from her [Daisy’s] well-loved eyes” (91). Showing that he can meet Daisy on her social level, Gatsby is able to provide her with an experience that transcends, in material terms, what she has known.
Daisy’s inability to find a release from her situation exasperates her, and she claims she has been “everywhere and seen everything and done everything”; “Sophisticated—God, I’m sophisticated!” (17). Earlier, she reminds Nick of her social position by looking at him “with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged.”

Her ability to escape into her imaginary worlds allows her to cope with marriage to Tom and to some degree with her apparent mistake of not waiting for Gatsby. What Daisy might hope for motivates Gatsby: he longs to have Daisy want him back, regardless of her already being married. When Gatsby confronts Tom with the affair, the situation awaits her decision: to whom will she commit? While Gatsby is confident in what he believes her wishes to be, Tom calls up his connection with her; they have a history together predicated on their mutual understanding of their social standing. Despite this exchange, Gatsby ultimately remains unwilling to abandon his dream; he waits for Daisy, hoping Tom’s actions will force some issue to fall in his favor.

Jordan Baker also avoids victimization, her callous demeanor helping her to remain detached from commitment and genuine feeling. She remains too caught up in the moment to look beyond herself; but because she cheats at the one thing that provides her acclaim, she violates any configuration that might make hope genuine and valid. Jordan contrasts with Daisy in that she independently moves and lives. Tom underscores the difference when he argues “They  oughtn’t to let her run around the country this way” (18). Daisy indicates her understanding of the irony when she responds, “Who oughtn’t to?” But, Tom exerts his patriarchal control over his family and calls into question those who do not.

Nick realizes that Jordan’s inherent dishonesty stems from her inability to confront more profound existential questions:
Jordan Baker instinctively avoided clever, shrewd men, and now I saw that this was because she felt safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible. She was incorably dishonest. She wasn’t able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard, jaunty body. (58)

By avoiding the rules of her sport and acting carelessly about such things as leaving a rental car with its top down, she perpetually escapes the consequences of her actions. When Nick confronts her about her poor driving, she responds that she need not be careful because “other people are . . . I hope I never will,” she answered. “I hate careless people. That’s why I like you.”

Tom also deals with escape. Despite Tom’s being enormously wealthy, “even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach” (6). He fails to distinguish himself in any significant way; in fact, he disgraces his family and causes them to move from town to town. After having spent a year in France and drifting around with people who played polo and “were rich together,” he left Chicago and came “East in a fashion that took your breath away.” His history of moving and acting freely contradicts what Daisy and Tom say is their permanent move to East Egg—“I’d be a God damned fool to live anywhere else” (10). Nick feels that Tom will forever drift in a wistful flight, “forever seeking . . . the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game” (6) Unable to point to any great deeds other than those on the polo field, he seeks to control Daisy, has meaningless affairs, and squelches weaker individuals like Wilson. While Myrtle’s shallow and materialistic nature makes her an easy victory, and despite Tom’s ability to control her, he still finds it necessary to use his great physical strength to dominate her, breaking her nose in front of others when she reminds him of his obligations.
Tom and Daisy, who most epitomize their station, live hollow, irresponsible lives; they escape repercussions for their actions. While Tom limits his wife’s happiness, he also impedes others from fulfilling their aspirations. He keeps Wilson suspended in financial limbo by not selling him the car. Instead, he continually taunts him: “I’ll have my man send it over next week” or “I’ve got my man working on it now” (25). While sleeping with Myrtle, Wilson’s wife, Tom provides for her other material wants while he keeps himself free of commitment. In this manner, Tom’s escape reflects his personal offensiveness and indicts his social class.

Given all his powers, Tom cannot escape his ignorance: “There was something pathetic in his concentration, as if his complacency, more acute than of old, was not enough to him anymore” (13). The perverse in Tom’s world view becomes apparent when he uses “scientific” arguments to justify his racism. Distorting the argument in Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, Tom makes assumptions, believing that the white race will be overtaken by other races. Envisioning threats to middle-class whites, Tom denigrates just about every race not his own. His position is ignorant and meaningless.

Later, Gatsby’s ability to effect changes threatens Tom as Nick notices a change in Gatsby. While Gatsby may have initially “glowed” at being reunited with Daisy, the pathos of Gatsby’s quest becomes apparent when he, having thought he had overcome the obstacles to reuniting with Daisy, hears Daisy struggle to voice her allegiance to him and unconvincingly assert that she “never loved you [Tom], do you hear?” (130). Her inability to understand and definitively voice her desire to escape with Gatsby raise doubts regarding his goals. He cannot control everything.

Although the young Daisy was Gatsby’s ideal, he eventually realizes that she no longer lives up to his conception of her. When Gatsby mentions escape, she fails to comprehend what
he asks. Though Gatsby allows her to believe that they are of the same social class, he and Daisy have grown apart and now understand the world and their situation in fundamentally different ways.

In the end, Gatsby’s romantic vision to escape with Daisy, his romanticized world where they can relive their time together, proves impossible: “Oh, you want too much!” she cries to Gatsby. “I love you now—isn’t that enough? I can’t help what’s past” (132). She begins to sob helplessly. “I did love him once—but I loved you too.” Gatsby’s eyes open and close. “You loved me TOO?” he repeats.

Later, Gatsby stands vigil over Daisy at her home: “He was clutching at some last hope and I [Nick] couldn’t bear to shake him free” (132). Daisy’s not accepting Gatsby on his terms closes the door on his ability to escape his past and his actual identity as a “common swindler.” Though he spent every effort to reinvent his world and his existential being, the success of his escape attempt lies outside of his control, with other people, and ultimately brings about his demise; he is unable to free himself from the constraints of a real world or the realities other characters force him to accept.

Fitzgerald’s desire to break free and escape what he considered too meager an existence motivated him to live high with Zelda in their legendary lives. His desires also materialize in his fiction. Stories like “The Ice Palace” show how escaping one’s past can demand the forfeiture of an essential identity. “Babylon Revisited” records one man’s attempt to escape his past life by reinventing his and Honoria’s present situation, an effort doomed to fail.

Gatsby shows the greatest effort at escape. While all characters in The Great Gatsby seek some escape, “Gatsby paid a high price for living too long with the same dream” (161). Those characters without clear visions and moral centers are unable to avoid catastrophe: “They were
careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . .” (179). The power of Gatsby’s desire to escape, “his capacity for wonder,” makes his dream seem more tangible; it allows him to believe “in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—” (180).
Ernest cared far less than I about aesthetics. What he cared about was the action and the emotional body of the traveler. He was a born traveler as he was a born novelist.

—Janet Flanner

Ernest Hemingway won the Nobel Prize in 1954. In his acceptance speech, he observed: “It is because we have had such great writers in the past that a writer is driven far out past where he can go, out to where no one can help him.” Good writers are compelled to strike out and reinvent life rather than rest on previous conceptions of writing. Hemingway lived life and wrote stories, posing his characters against a great emptiness and absurdity, the nada. For him, in order to live an authentic life, one must confront the great abyss represented by death—stand up to it and subdue its power.

In *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935), Hemingway asserts: “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*” (22). Knowingly or not, Hemingway references one of the country’s first and greatest novels of escape. In Samuel Bluefarb’s study of escape in modern American fiction, he contends that *Huckleberry Finn* constitutes the prototypical American escape novel, one which greatly influences American authors and their stories. Escape plays a part in Hemingway’s early short fiction and drives novels like *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*.

Hemingway was born on July 21, 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois, to a country physician who taught him to hunt and fish, and to exist comfortably within nature. On the other hand, his mother, Grace Hall Hemingway, stressed the importance of religion, music, and the arts. As a young person, Hemingway often rebelled against his mother as he consciously cultivated his father’s love for and knowledge of the natural world.
Despite tensions, his mother influenced him to think critically and to live independently. When Ed proposed, she explained her refusal to perform housework or fill the role of a quintessential Victorian housewife. Hiring a live-in maid, she pursued her artistic interests (Hotchner 16), while Ed did most of the cooking and cleaning. An avid disciple of Jane Addams, Grace Hemingway often held meetings for the suffragettes, where professors from The University of Chicago occasionally lectured (Nagel 30). A trained opera singer, she gave music and voice lessons in her home and composed and published music. These beliefs and pursuits sometimes isolated her from her children.

Spending summers with his family in rural northern Michigan, Hemingway often accompanied his father on professional calls among the Indians, and he learned much about living authentically in the natural world.¹ After high school and spending six months as a cub reporter for the Kansas City Star, Hemingway entered WWI as an ambulance driver for the American Red Cross. Wounded in July 1918, he returned home in January 1919. “Soldier’s Home” reflects Hemingway’s experiences in the veteran Harold Krebs’s taking what his parents consider too long after his return to find work and readjust to life at home. Hemingway spent time writing, but his submissions to Redbook and Saturday Evening Post were rejected. Having few prospects and wanting to separate from the cast of characters at home,² he chose journalism over college. Working at the Toronto Star Weekly, he escaped home and parents and developed a journalistic style of plain, direct sentences. The Star sent Hemingway to Paris in 1921, where he worked as foreign correspondent. Leaving the Star in late 1923, he began producing the works that made him famous.

¹ For argument concerning how Hemingway used the theme of authenticity to distinguish him from the urban bohème, see Timo Müller, “The Uses of Authenticity” (30-31).
² Kenneth Lynn’s Hemingway discusses Grace Hemingway and the rising tension in the Hemingway house during the 1919 summer (97-101).
The period’s literature expresses a generation’s struggle to readjust to domestic life after the war. Escape is central to Hemingway’s stories from the beginning. Whether characters depend on escape to exert their independence, confront authentic existences, or save their lives, many characters are inspired by, sometimes obsessed with, getting away.

As Carlos Baker made clear some time ago, Hemingway’s seemingly simple stories often have deeper, more substantial meanings. For Jean Paul Sartre, “The greatest literary development in France between 1929 and 1939 was the discovery of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Caldwell, and Steinbeck …. At once, for thousands of young intellectuals, the American novel took its place together with jazz and the movies, among the best of the importations from the United States” (1). Yet, critics who remark on the existentialism in Hemingway’s writing often overlook the contribution escape provides to the subject. Ben Stoltzfus’s and Leslie Fiedler’s insightful discussions of authenticity in Hemingway’s work only marginally take up escape and getting away. Fiedler argues that Hemingway's nature is a place for rebirth or therapy and that the hunter or fisherman has a moment of transcendence killing the prey. Timo Müller’s perceptive focus on authenticity in Hemingway’s stories discusses escape in only one character in one novel: Jake in *The Sun Also Rises*. He argues that Jake seeks to escape his environment in order to discover an existence based on more traditional values (32). Running concurrently with these more commonly accepted critical approaches, “escape” offers new insight and understanding of Hemingway’s works.

Existential concerns lie in Hemingway’s exploration of “nothingness,” the *Nada*. While critics define the term differently, Ben Stolzfus argues that the idea relies on characters confronting death and mortality. He explains that personal redemption for Hemingway occurs at
the moment of death, at the moment when one cannot escape reality. Despite a recent public act of cowardice, Francis Macomber represents characters who die happy because their last hours are authentic in their literally and figuratively confronting death, mocking it, and subduing its psychological effects.

Robert Stephens discusses nada, generally limiting it to the context of the never-spoken understanding of war by those who experienced it:

The insiders of the escape experience are self-directed; they share a common experience that they recognize without speaking about it. They are in rebellion against the values of their homelands and live in Paris to be free of conventions that hamper their quests. Their belief in the validity of the immediate and individual action frees them of claims by the outside world. They form a minority society always in flux. Wherever their individual quests take them, they deny the previous experience or locale by occupying themselves with only the present action. Thus Brett Ashley takes a succession of lovers in her quest for the only one who can give back to her a sense of spiritual integrity she has lost. Similarly the insider savors the individual drink, the individual meal, the individual scene as the basis of value. (Stephens 82)

This insider status allows these individuals to distinguish themselves from the typical, escape the common. The anxieties Hemingway’s characters feel about life and death compel them to choose between submitting to the absurdity and the randomness of death or to command their psychological effects and break free from them.

Individuals in Hemingway’s earliest novels such as those in The Sun Also Rises (1926) deal with escape when they continually move throughout Europe and live by extremes, searching
to stave off their feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness. Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) flee war in order to save themselves as well as create new lives. Concerns about escape also exist in the stories that make up Hemingway’s collections *In Our Time* (1925), *Men Without Women* (1927) and *Winner Take Nothing* (1933).

Hemingway used semi-autobiographical stories to reveal the influence of escape on him and his writing. *In Our Time*, his first book-length collection of stories, deals with the dissolution many young people feel while growing up in the modern world. Many stories look back to traditional coming-of-age difficulties such as bitter breakups and parental failures; others turn to explicitly modern subjects, such as alienation, death, and the effects of war. The Nick Adams stories deal with “becoming a man,” as they address getting away. These early short stories and first two novels rely on the need for their characters to escape while rarely committing to the here and now, never allowing themselves to be tied down.

“Big Two-Hearted River,” the concluding story of *In Our Time*, follows Nick’s desire to shed his wartime memories. Nick metaphorically relinquishes certain effects of the war in releasing a trout from his line. He dictates the fish’s circumstances; freeing the trout, Nick exerts control in a life and death moment, and sheds, however briefly, the continual wartime fears of death: “‘He's all right,’ Nick thought. He was only tired” (Hemingway, *Short Stories* 176).

In reviewing *In Our Time*, D. H. Lawrence comments on the idea of escape in Hemingway’s characters. Lawrence writes that although Hemingway’s short book does not pretend to be about one man, it is about one man. Lawrence describes Nick, who represents his generation, as someone who

… is a type one meets in the more wild and woolly regions of the United States.

He is the remains of the lone trapper and cowboy. Nowadays, he is educated, and
through with everything. It is a state of *conscious*, accepted indifference to everything except freedom from work and the moment's interest. Nothing matters. Everything happens. One wants to keep oneself loose. Avoid one thing only: getting connected up. Don’t get connected up. If you get held by anything, break it. Don't be held. Break it, and get away with the idea of getting somewhere else. Just get away, for the sake of getting away. Beat it! ‘Well, boy, I guess I’ll beat it’ Ah, the pleasure of saying that!

...His young love-affair ends as one throws a cigarette-end away. 'It isn't fun anymore.’—‘Everything's gone to hell inside me.

He doesn't love anybody, and it nauseates him to have to pretend he does. He doesn't even want to love anybody; he doesn't want to go anywhere; he doesn't want to do anything. He wants just to lounge around and maintain a healthy state of nothingness inside himself, and an attitude of negation to everything outside himself. And why shouldn't he, since that is exactly and sincerely what he feels?"

(Lawrence, “Calendar” 647)

The escape pattern follows, according to Robert Stephens, a three-stage process of rejection, avoidance, and establishment of new values or a new situation. This process emphasizes directly perceived experiences rather than abstract teachings about experience; protagonists are agents of action rather than speculation. By their physical flight or emotional withdrawal *from* their situations, they reject and flee their circumstances. He or she escapes *to* another situation in order to find more acceptable experiences. Escape, in this light, must thus be understood as a technique or process, not an end in itself (Stephens 52).
Also in *In Our Time*, Hemingway’s "Cat in the Rain" presents a woman’s feeling of confinement perpetuated by her husband and society. Just as "the cat was trying to make herself so compact so that she would not be dripped on" (*Short Stories* 129), so the woman feels pressured to reduce her needs to become less burdensome to others. Later, when the woman exerts herself through questioning and making demands, she finally escapes the role placed on her by her husband. She had worn her hair short to please her husband, but she now anticipates a return to the conventional and greater personal fulfillment. Stating “I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back I can feel... I want to have a kitty... I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles" (*Short Stories* 131), she looks to escape to retrieve the life of a traditional American wife.

A sense of entrapment also affects Hemingway’s male characters. In “Cross Country Snow” (1924), good friends Nick and George take what may be their final skiing trip together. A sense of finality pervades the story as Nick anticipates becoming a father and George looks forward to returning to school. Nick’s impending “entrapment” leaves him unsure of what to think of the situation as he responds that he feels good “but funny” about the baby (*Short Stories* 146). Skiing down the mountain, he worries about becoming a father, returning to the States, and losing his freedom.

Olivia Edenfield argues that Nick accepts the consequences of his biological actions as Frederic Henry does in *A Farewell to Arms* when he speaks to Catherine about their expected child: “You always feel trapped biologically” (139). While Edenfield accepts the sexual symbolism that reinforces the biological components within the story, she believes that the sense of entrapment and the impossibility of escape remain the core issue. The feeling of finality Nick has about his life’s trajectory makes him ambivalent about himself and his future. While he
knows things will never be the same, he still hopes that he will be able to escape and ski again: “‘We’ve got to,’ said Nick.’ It isn’t worthwhile if you can’t’” (Short Stories 146). But, George only expresses a sense of powerlessness about not being able to do so again: “I wish we could make a promise about it” (147); Nick responds realistically, “There isn’t any good in promising.”

The later classic “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (1936) illustrates a character redefining himself through escape. On Safari in Africa, Macomber panics when confronted by a charging lion he has wounded. His natural reaction is to escape the threat by running, but after being saved by a more experienced hunter who subsequently cuckolds him, Macomber uses his embarrassment and shame to reinvent himself, becoming able to later face courageously a charging buffalo. Carlos Baker and Ben Stoltzfus affirm that this great change occurs because of Macomber’s growth from “boyhood to manhood” (Baker 188-189; Stoltzfus 206). Macomber’s escapes when he subdues his fear, his inauthenticity, which he replaces with the “self-assurance and strength of a man who can stand his ground when confronting the buffalo—or his wife” (Stoltzfus 207).

Macomber had never confronted a life-and-death situation, never questioned his essential character or his bravery. His initial reaction to the lion’s threat shames him and leads to his wife cheating on him. Facing the abyss of nothingness and discovering that he has nothing more to lose, he makes authentic choices that validate his existence: “To accept death is to heighten the capacity for living, and that in turn leads to a heightened sense of authentic personal existence” (Stoltzfus 211). Confronting the approaching buffalo, Macomber sheds his cowardice; embracing his new identity rooted in affirmative personal choice, he can briefly transcend his existential situation and dictate the terms of his own life and death.

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3 Baym uses “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” to move analysis away from narrow interpretations of Hemingway’s “bitch” stories and attempts to show how Hemingway’s characters and stories are misrepresented (Baym 112-120).
Henry James established a category of literature depicting Americans in Europe. Critic David Grant contends that Hemingway consciously follows James: “Europe traditionally represents to American novelists a life, or Life itself, that remains somehow unavailable back home. The paradox of Europe as both the antithesis of America and the only field upon which Americans can become themselves runs throughout both authors’ works” (267). Hemingway’s expatriates in The Sun Also Rises leave their native soil in search of this “Life.” Once in Europe, however, they continue to seek ways to free themselves from their situations. Searches for spiritual and artistic satisfaction sometimes result in their looking past their new surroundings to seek out more profound pursuits and validating experiences.

In The Sun Also Rises, Hemingway develops his own theory of writing, rejecting the influence of traditional styles. Early drafts of the novel have the narrator speaking to the reader: “In life people are not conscious of these special moments that novelists build their whole structures on. . . . None of the significant things are going to have any literary signs marking them. You have to figure them out by yourself” (Balassi 44). In the end, Hemingway returns to a “clear, restrained style,” his characters continually seeking to “figure out for themselves” the nature of their lives. Left in a moral vacuum, characters struggle to redefine their beliefs in morality, justice, masculinity, and love. Disengaging from the world around them, they seek to flee familiar lifestyles in hopes of finding alternative, more validating experiences, even if they only vaguely understand this end.

Finding life solutions became complicated by physical and psychological realities like ‘shell shock’ and the other effects of modern combat. In an environment where one could be killed without seeing the enemy, where shells could be lobbed from thousands of feet away, soldiers were powerless to respond personally or control their own lives. These experiences
affect Hemingway’s protagonist Jake Barnes who also suffers a physical injury effecting sexual dysfunction. His injury necessitates his finding a way to recover a normal existence, escaping or reshaping his new life.

Obvious escapes in the novel include characters becoming expatriates. Seeking to escape inauthenticity, these individuals eschew nada, an elusive force they feel but cannot articulate. Jake lives abroad hoping to discover how, given his condition, he can live his desired life. Accepting his assignment in Paris, he acknowledges hope in Europe’s potential to provide the solutions he seeks as he serves as a journalist among fellow expatriates who also experienced the First World War.

Continually invoking religion, Hemingway constructs baptismal scenes where characters metaphorically experience small but important spiritual epiphanies. Characters repeatedly find it important to bathe, shave, and clean themselves during moments when something, however small, changes in their lives. In these “baptisms,” characters wash, bathe, and otherwise cleanse themselves in preparation for a new experience, some type of renewal, an escape from the past.

Hoping to find integrity and value in each successive escape, the characters flee ennui and meaninglessness. Movements from one setting to the next form a Hegelian triadic dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Jake must reinterpret life as a celibate. The loss of two male lovers renders Brett unable to commit to anything or anyone; she becomes both empty and self-destructive. Even Robert Cohn’s search for self-respect fails.

These expatriates exist between an exciting, chaotic world and romanticized conceptions of life too elusive to realize. Jake cannot secure the family life he witnesses others living or discarding. His war wound and his “true love” Brett’s psychological wounding make it difficult

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4 For exploration of Ernest Hemingway as an influential creator and arbiter of authenticity in modern (popular) literature, see Timo Müller, “The Uses of Authenticity” (28-42).
for him to engage fully in the world he inhabits. He fishes and enjoys nature; he follows the
bullfights as an *aficionado*. Even his job offers satisfaction. He remains stalwart for friends,
providing emotional support for his immediate circle, even Brett. But he wishes to live as the
head of a household and as a provider of a traditional life.

Using Paris as a starting point, a circle of literary expatriates, including Stein,
Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Pound, and artist Pablo Picasso shared their innovative ideas on
literature and art. As Matthew Bolton describes it, “Paris has long held a totemic place in
American culture as the ideal city in which to lead the artist's life. In the Paris of the popular
imagination, one leaves behind the conventionality, materialism, and petty moralizing of
American culture and instead pursues a bohemian life of the mind” (23). During the ‘20s, this
city thrived with a Bohemian cafe culture—filled with writers and other artists. While a
Modernist aesthetic existed here, this movement in art and literature reflects the postwar feelings
of cultural dislocation, a breaking with tradition, and the freedom to experiment. Some
Americans returned to where they fought to re-gain a connection. The war had scarred them in
many ways, and Paris, for them, seemed a place to find the necessary treatment. The
sophisticated, easy life that Paris offered American expatriates, however, too often effected a life
of decadence, a moral void.

The superficial life in Paris can be, according to Hemingway’s Jake, as simple as the
ability to “make friends” by simply over-tipping. Though life in Paris liberates, it also facilitates
a pointless wasteland as empty as it is exciting, despite its alternative lifestyles, full cafés, and
experimental music. Traditional values have lost their reference points. Jake describes his
relationship to the world: “Perhaps as you went along you did learn something. I did not care
what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about” (152).

Yet, characters are unable to act successfully. Jake cannot secure a mate, have sex, or father children. Brett cannot commit to either Mike or Cohn; moreover, Mike remains too drunk to love while Cohn simply loves the idea of love. Bill finds an American woman in Spain, but he, also, is too cynical to love.

When in the second chapter Jake tells Cohn that “You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another” (19), he explains the motivation behind many of the novel’s characters who epitomize escape in their hunts for meaning, identity, and clarity in life. Critic Robert Stephens says that Hemingway’s protagonists “serve as prime commentators on the tendency of the spiritually dislocated of the age to seek their salvation by escaping from the horrors of the age” (51). Some characters search for conceptualized destinations; others strive for contrived, ill-defined goals. Refusing to return to established situations, these characters epitomize a key element in twentieth-century American fiction: disassociation.

While characters find it difficult to locate their personal identities, some in Paris assume alternate personalities. One night Jake introduces the prostitute Georgette as Georgette Leblanc and his fiancée, when she is not his fiancée and her name is Georgette Hobin. Brett bends gender expectations, acting and dressing like a male and referring to herself as a “chap.” Through these inauthentic acts, they temporarily escape both themselves and accountability. Even in new environments, Jake seeks further forms of escape by separating from his companions. In doing so, he associates himself at first with the nobler actions of characters like Montoya and Romero and the genuineness of the natural scene, away from social codes and
obligations. Later, he forfeits his ideal by aiding in the corruption of Romero, Montoya’s prized bullfighter.

Robert Cohn loses his traditional life—a wife and children—through divorce. Cohn then succumbs to another “very forceful” woman who usurps power in the relationship; in fact, “Cohn never had a chance” (13). Cohn exercises the least amount of freedom of all the characters. Being a “member through his father of one of the richest Jewish families in New York” (12) provides him with a great amount of security and is able to avoid the existential crises others face. Cohn’s financial dependence frees him as it restricts him. Having married and lost “the first woman who was nice to him,” he reaches Paris with his new fiancée, Frances, who dominates him at every turn. The inability to be himself limits any romantic inclination and confines him spiritually, eliminating the essential freedoms for which Paris is known.

Cohn is inauthentic and avoids grappling with real challenges that might provide significance in his life and pursues an idealized world rooted in outdated ideas. He is unable to point to any definitive character-building challenge or crisis in his life in order to distinguish himself from the typical—his divorce is something that came after he had already made up his mind to leave his wife; athletic challenges came in a ring, a confined, controlled environment. He shows a tendency toward romance by reading the dreamy *The Purple Land*, but he sleeps through the natural splendor of the Spanish countryside. Brett’s effects on Cohn are immediate, and as soon as he falls in love with her, he begins to decline: his tennis game deteriorates; his writing suffers. Although falling in love with Brett defines part of Jake’s crisis, it is Cohn’s primary crisis. His fixation effects rejection by all. Taking out anger by punching Pedro Romero, Cohn proves pathetic when Romero refuses to fight. Cohn feels that capturing Brett would establish his superiority by having the object of everyone’s desire, but his clinginess only
diminishes him further. His awkward efforts in handling life and pursuing his goals coincide with his inability to defend himself against attacks from others, even his own lovers.

Brett first appears dressed as a man, raising gender and identity issues. She struggles throughout the novel, trying to break away as she strives for something that she is unable to understand or articulate. She remains unable to commit, even to the one she knows holds her salvation, at least spiritually.

Brett’s actions and sexual appetite are self-destructive. The continual process of losing distinction as Lady Brett Ashley emblematically represents her perpetual loss of identity. In freeing herself from her abusive husband, she becomes too free, untethered to any of the once validating entities in her life, escaping for escape’s sake. She moves from man to man in a state of detached awareness of her condition. Her gender allows her to be capricious, and she leaves situations when convenient for her to do so—often relying on Jake for cover and emotional support: leaving the count to break in on Jake at four-thirty in the morning, she seems to be running from herself, telling Jake that she “Just wanted to see you” (41).

Moving about freely, collecting and shedding men, Brett entraps those attracted to her. Jake represents the obvious example, although Michael and Cohn suffer much the same fate, even as the latter two also function as the antithesis to what defines Jake as a man. These men are unable to “walk away,” while Cohn’s attention to Brett magnifies Jake’s psychological entrapment and underscores his physical limitations. While Jake understands Cohn’s ability to provide her what he himself cannot, he also knows the mutual love Brett and he share, albeit unconsummated. While part of Jake’s crisis stems from not being able to have what he reasonably desires, the woman he loves also cannot commit to him.
Romero stands as a paragon of propriety and morality, conventionally defined. Brett ignores these values, but, following a brief relationship, she releases him from receiving the full effects of her crowd and allows him to escape.

Jake associates manliness with the ability to get away, yet he cannot escape the fact that his wound precludes him from finding happiness, completeness. He becomes the rock to which other characters return when in need: Brett, for example, uses him for support, even while she toys with other lovers. Robert turns to him in his most desperate moments, and Mike comes for money. Although Jake does not stand up to Brett and passively accepts Cohn, he compares well with the Count regarding a confident masculinity. Jake also retains some amount of freedom to get away and escape his surroundings when he escapes by telling them, “Well, I’ve got to get back and get off some cables” (19). He finds genuine release in nature, fishing, and bullfighting. He even uses taxies to free himself.

Early on, Jake and Brett reveal their feelings for one another in taxies. The first ride to no particular place establishes Brett’s unhappiness: “I’ve been so miserable” (32). Her angst and loss of spiritual bearing show when she expresses a love for Jake but fails to give up her lifestyle or commit to him. Later, Brett’s appearance at Jake’s door in the middle of the night occurs at a particularly difficult moment for Jake, then just asleep after crying over their relationship. The encounter emphasizes the greatest difficulties Jake faces: Brett with other men, his helplessness to compete physically. Frustrated attempts to free themselves of feelings for each other ensnare them both. During the first cab ride, Brett pleads with Jake that he keep his hands off of her, simultaneously revealing his need to hold and possess her and how affected she is by his physical contact. She pleads that she “can’t stand it,” even if she “turns to jelly” (34) when he touches her.

5 For commentary on how Jake represents the "everyman," see Michael Remolds’ Hemingway: The Paris Years (323–324).
Because there is “not a damn thing” they can do about it, they are biologically trapped by their desires for one another.

These taxi rides also contribute to the narrative framework for Brett and Jake’s story. Their first taxi ride occurs just after Brett is introduced; the last ride comes as the novel closes. These vignettes reveal the most intimate and, for Jake, the most honest moments between the two. Jake’s ride with Brett in Madrid at the end of the novel clarifies his experience, his growth, in Paris and Spain. Stephens contends, “He has outgrown his bohemian friends and is emotionally ready to seek the values of the matador Romero, the only one in the book who overtly escapes the futility of the expatriate circle” (58).

Earlier, Bill and Jake temporarily escape to Burguete, effecting a pastoral interlude for them both. First, they lose Robert Cohn. Cohn’s inability to comprehend the symbolic significance of the adventure finds him asleep while the others enjoy the Spanish countryside. Leaving Cohn, Bill and Jake metaphorically leave behind indecision and awkwardness; after all, Cohn is “just so awful” (107). Once Cohn departs, the pair begin their ascent to Burguete, and “it felt nice riding high up and close under the trees.” The Basques are “swell people,” and the Americans engage their camaraderie. On the bus and at bus stops, the travelers and the Basques bond, exchanging stories and drinks. Later, Jake feels “good to be in bed” in this idyllic setting away from Paris. In the countryside, everything is “awfully clean,” and they pass “some lovely gardens and had a good look back at the town, and then we were out in the country, green and rolling, and the road climbing all the time . . . In the Basque country the land all looks very rich and green and the houses and villages look well-off and clean” (97).

Arriving in Burguete, Bill and Jake commence “working for the common good” by communicating and sharing experiences. Unlike experiences in Paris, in the mountains actions
are more direct, clear, and supportive. Here, they joke about “irony and pity” for one another while they communicate about their deepest concerns. Bill even broaches Jake’s injury with him. In nature, they are able to shed their fictitious selves and relate to each other, to the world around them, and to themselves in a way they do not in other places: “Listen. You’re a hell of a good guy, and I’m fonder of you than anybody on earth. I couldn’t tell you that in New York” (122).

Summoning religious themes that offer some amount of salvation, Bill humorously reminds Jake, "Remember the woods were God's first temples," a contrast with life in Paris, where life remains suspended in purposeless, constant flux. In the country, Jake tells Bill, "It felt good lying on the ground" (128). They “rejoice” in their blessings and “utilize the fowl of the air” and “the product of the vine” (129). By invoking biblical terms about the Garden of Eden and the cleansing of “baptismal” waters, the men metaphorically express their rejuvenation as a direct antithesis to their existence in civilization. At the end, they visit a monastery which “isn’t the same as fishing” but is also a spiritual experience.

As the men stand in front of the chapel, Bill spots the pub across the way. The juxtaposition with the chapel parallels the relationship of Paris with Burguete. While the pub suggests the decadence of Paris, the chapel represents the spiritual transformations these two, particularly Jake, experience. All three—Jake, Bill, and Harris—“utilize it [the pub]” (134), but as they do, camaraderie and spiritual connectedness dominate their interaction.

Pamplona synthesizes the spiritual affirmations found in Burguete and the revelry of Paris. While the festivities grow, even rage, in Pamplona, the people are happier, and their relationships are founded on more than money, intoxicants, and/or sex. Having experienced the spiritual rejuvenation in the glow of the Spanish countryside and witnessing the plateau of Pamplona “rising out of the plain” (99), Bill and Jake arrive “in the late afternoon” (129) as the
sun shifts the focus of their spiritual journey. Arriving at Montoya’s hotel, Jake explains Montoya’s concern for *aficion*, a metaphysical principle centering in passion for what one does, here particularly regarding the *corrida*: “there was no password, no set questions that could bring it out, rather it was a sort of oral spiritual examination with the questions always a little on the defensive and never apparent, there was this same embarrassed putting the hand on the shoulder, or a “Buen hombre” (137) Those sharing this spiritual honesty were excused any number of offenses and were always guaranteed a room at Montoya’s. Those not living life according to this passion remained outsiders and never entered into this “very special secret.”

In Pamplona, the characters come as close as they can to a state of balance. Mike explains his wartime exploits and the present insignificance of his and his friend’s lives. He diminishes his war efforts, seen in his disregard for the medals he borrows from a tailor. Now jaded, callous, and morally bankrupt, Mike and his friends refuse to believe in what they had traditionally considered important and epitomized in such decorations. After washing, Jake makes his way to the bulls, perching himself to take full advantage of the action of the bullfight. Here, he comes closest to the life and death challenge of the *corrida*. Just before the *fiesta* starts, the cycle of rebirth begins as the earth cleanses itself with rain: “it was fresh and cool on the plateau, and there was a wonderful view. We all felt good and we felt healthy, and I felt quite friendly to Cohn. You could not be upset about anything on a day like that” (155). The revelry in Pamplona is done with solemnity, ritual, tradition. Contrasting with the wild abandon of Paris, the large amounts of drinking in Pamplona happen with wine-skins at arm’s length rather than with cocktail glasses in crowded bars. Time-honored traditions unfold as communal acts done in unison rather than as matters of personal gratifications.
Pedro Romero, the perfect and beautiful bullfighter, represents the synthesis of Parisian expatriates’ lifestyles and the attitudes found in the Spanish countryside. Hemingway goes into great detail to explain just how virile and capable Romero is and how perfectly he fulfills his potential. Fortunately, Brett’s role as temptress in Romero’s life is brief. She recognizes that Romero is not her future and relinquishes him from her effects.

Contrasting Romero with Belmonte and his devolving capabilities, Jake speaks to how this later bullfighter has lost the skills to confront the nada, unlike Romero, who ably does so. The narration also offers an implicit contrast between Cohn and Romero: Cohn seeks to control his exploits and adventures; Romero accepts, in an honest way, the difficulties of his life and the ever-present threat of death:

Romero never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural in line. The others twisted themselves like corkscrews, their elbows raised, and leaned against the flanks of the bull after his horns had passed, to give a faked look of danger. Afterward, all that was faked turned bad and gave an unpleasant feeling. Romero’s bull-fighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time. He did not have to emphasize their closeness. (171)

Jake further illustrates Romero’s ability to face danger: “Romero had that old thing, the holding of his purity of line through the maximum of exposure, while he dominated the bull by making him realize he was unattainable, while he prepared him for the killing” (220). Although he accepts guidance from others, he is able to escape control of others and puts himself out beyond where they may help him. There, he faces the absolutes of the natural world, confronts the possibility of death, and subdues its dominance over his actions.
Romero loved bull-fighting, and I think he loved the bulls, and I think he loved Brett. Everything of which he could control the locality he did in front of her all that afternoon. Never once did he look up. He made it stronger that way, and did it for himself, too, as well as for her. Because he did not look up to ask if it pleased, he did it all for himself inside, and it strengthened him, and yet he did it for her, too. But he did not do it for her at any loss to himself. He gained by it all through the afternoon. (220)

Epitomizing Jake’s ideals, Romero blends the lofty archetypes of mythology with the real world, practical requirements needed to survive nada in the social world and in the arena. Just as he “directly” kills bulls, he subdues the emptiness.

Daylight brings relief, clarity, and revelation. The novel’s final section finds Jake at the ocean in San Sebastian, where he looks into the light, expresses his freedom in subtle terms, and begins the day by moving at his own pace. While the festivities and the bike riders have left him hours ago, Jake waits and readies himself with breakfast for his day at the water. As the world goes by, he moves to a different beat, one that he creates; as he floats in the water, he sees only a cloudless sky. In the end, “It felt as though you could never sink” (241). His remarks—“I sat in the sun and watched the bathers on the beach”—signals his position as a spectator of life. He examines life’s problems and passes judgment: “They looked very small.” Later, a swim completes his thorough, albeit brief, cleansing: “he dove cleanly and deeply, to come up through the lightening water” (242). Significantly, just after this, Jake receives a telegram from a troubled Brett needing help in Madrid.

Although Brett willingly leaves Romero, she remains a threat to Jake. Jake, however, is still possessed of the clarifying, thus liberating, mindset of his stay in San Sebastian. He will
again rescue Brett, but with his mind cleared, he embraces a vision rooted in the universal and
timeless, strengthening him against the angst, the Nada, associated with Brett. Escape and some
approximation to the “ideal” life may be possible for Jake and both are registered in the
exchange closing the book. “Oh, Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had such a damned good
time together” (251) Jake responds with self-aware, clear-minded irony: “Yes,’ I said. ‘Isn’t it
pretty to think so?”’
CONCLUSION

While literary theorists continue to debate the characteristics of modernism and the modernist aesthetic, this dissertation ties the events of its historical period with modernism’s feelings of anguish, uncertainty, and anxiety. Historically, the work of artists, writers, and philosophers has exemplified a cultural tendency toward escape. About the turn of the twentieth-century, individuals became greatly empowered to change their social, political, and religious situations. In effect, escape became more achievable and traditional entities became unstable, losing their significance. Left without these markers in their lives, the characters authors wrote about during these shifts sought to return to the past, to remain lost, or to re-define both their identities and existential ideals.

This study begins by establishing how thinkers and writers express concerns about individual agency and escape. The dissatisfaction these writers and thinkers had about the prevailing circumstances of their lives caused them to find ways to transcend the political, religious, and social beliefs limiting their choices. Ultimately, however, they found it increasingly difficult to quantify what it was they wanted to escape. The more possible it was for them to “leave,” the harder it became to “escape” with positive results.

This study begins with Kate Chopin. It reassesses the traditionally accepted feminist approach to her work, showing how Chopin’s environment when she was young promoted attitudes of self-determination, self-worth, and personal empowerment. Her reading of contemporary literature, especially Emerson, further fostered the idea of self-empowerment. After her husband’s death, she began to write in earnest, her ideas about how life should be lived by both men and women anchoring her stories. Many of her characters follow personal aspirations, even acting contrary to the accepted social norms.
Critics continue to read Chopin’s works as emancipation stories. Variations exist, but criticism generally explains Chopin’s female characters in relation to men’s lives and male institutionalized power over women. While her characters who wish to escape their situations in life must contend with the patriarchal structures, other obstacles to their emancipation exist. Too much attention to the external patriarchal forces diminishes the importance of the actions that both male and female characters take to find personal fulfillment, many choosing alternative paradigms by which to live in order to find happiness, respect, and place in the world.

With Edith Wharton, the study’s focus changes from examining how society at large and personal drives affect characters to how a particular segment of a social world dictates the actions of individuals who live within its narrow parameters. Wharton wrote living by or escaping the rules of a particular culture. She experienced not only the pressures exerted on women at the turn of the twentieth-century, but the specific social dictates of the highest strata of American society. Although born into the class at the top of the New York cultural world, she left that environment philosophically, artistically, and physically. Her characters, however, remain subject to its forces. In her early stories, some characters obligate themselves to this milieu and its demands. Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* aspires to improve her social station and enter higher levels of culture, yet she misconstrues that reality and ignores her own essential nature. As a result, she suffers and finally fails to obtain her goals. Ethan Frome cannot escape and remains under his wife’s control because he feels obligated to her by social dictates. Newland Archer, in *The Age of Innocence*, cannot escape the grip this society has on him and his ability to act freely. While he is able to criticize and understand this culture’s inherent hypocrisy, he chooses to remain within it, foregoing his desire to leave with Ellen Olenska. The breakdown of traditional social and moral structures causes individuals to lose a sense of
placement and identity. They fail to locate or understand themselves in these new environments, unable to find salvation or to break free of their angst.

F. Scott Fitzgerald thought about transcending his social situation all his life. Aspirations toward grandeur and superiority perennially concerned him, and his stories often rely on personal reinvention. Stories like “Ice Palace” show a character who wishes to escape her adolescent environment to find more profound living in the North; however, once protagonist Sally Carrol experiences life in the North, she realizes how out of place she is and how that setting conflicts with her essential nature. She eventually realizes that her escape is ill-advised, and that her proper place is back home in her provincial environment. Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” and “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” consider social escapes in relation to time. “Babylon Revisited” deals with Charlie Wales’ need to slow down the time away from his daughter. But as he awaits her return, his past life-style reasserts itself and closes off his hopes for the future. Benjamin Button physically lives a life that goes beyond the usual influences of time. While the character acts as an adult during adulthood and as a child during childhood, his growing in reverse, reinvents time in a unique way. This theme of reinventing time plays out to its fullest in Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby. Gatsby tries to return to an earlier period in his life and relive that life in ideal terms—transcending his station by having more money, greater status, and more profound experiences.

Hemingway’s life-long quest was to write “true” sentences based on authentic experiences. His character’s display disapproval of and dissociation from their situation and need to escape the Nada, their anxieties over the emptiness and absurdity in life. Freeing themselves from traditional ways of living and thinking, they hope to shake the inevitable forces that afflict people’s lives. In “The Short Happy Life of Frances Macomber,” the protagonist
escapes an aimless existence, taking his life into his own hands, challenging himself to confront a life-and-death situation. Confronting death bravely, he transcends the inauthenticity characterizing his previous life.

Characters in *The Sun Also Rises* further illustrate how escape functions in the search to find validation and meaning in life. Expatriates seeking alternative experiences, these characters additionally attempt to get away from one European environment after another. Action moves from a state of chaotic decadence in Paris to its antithesis in the Spanish countryside, where characters genuinely connect. Ultimately, in Pamplona the frivolity of the festival fuses with the serious threats to life unfolding in the bullfighting ring. All characters are tested here and found wanting. Nevertheless, Jake and the bullfighter Romero, because authentic, emerge essentially whole at novel’s end.

In the West, the possibility for individuals to escape social, political, and religious constraints increased until roughly the end of the nineteenth-century. During the first quarter of the twentieth-century, serious literary figures began to highlight a developing philosophical (and emotional) crisis resulting from the individual’s inability to escape or redefine himself/herself regarding traditional entities and values. Collapse of a generally shared social vision resulted in an inability among intellectual and sensitive persons to construct identities in the manner of previous generations—in some relation to those earlier ideals. The literature of the writers discussed in this study dramatize their understanding of the losses—intellectual, spiritual, and social—at the personal level following upon this wholesale disintegrating of an earlier, widely accepted definition of the “meaningful” or “good” life. Through their characters’ needs to
escape, these authors confront their own intellectual and spiritual struggles and anatomize and articulate the dissociations, displacements, and angst of their generation.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I was born into an Air Force family in Valdosta, Georgia. I lived in various places, including Germany and Japan, but I was mainly raised in Utah. After high school, I attended what is now Northwest Florida State College and later earned a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from Valdosta State University. After attending the University of West Florida for a short time, I returned to Valdosta State for my Master in Arts in English Literature and then entered Florida State University in the Department of Interdisciplinary Humanities. Having taught at various colleges, I now hold a full-time position teaching Composition, Literature, American Literature, and Humanities.