

THE PURITY PROBLEM: ANALYZING AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE AND SEX
EXPRESSION OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

KATELYN RENEA THOMPSON

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by

KATELYN RENEA THOMPSON

Thesis approved:

James Stuart Gould

Major Professor

Beth M. J.

Sarah Robbins

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ABSTRACT

THE PURITY PROBLEM: ANALYZING AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE AND SEX EXPRESSION OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Katelyn Renea Thompson

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Department of English
Texas Christian University

Theresa Gaul, Professor and Chair of English

This thesis examines the nineteenth-century notion of purity as an origin for contemporary purity culture. Focusing on American women's literature as a site for change, the following chapters explore the work of Ann Stephens, Frances E. W. Harper, and Kate Chopin. By utilizing both the historical legacy of scholarship and contemporary criticism surrounding these authors, this thesis offers textual analysis of the depiction of women's sex expression and desire throughout the four texts examined. This examination provides an analysis of notions of purity as a method of controlling people historically identified as women, the ways and reasons some women writers supported purity ideals, and what they saw as the impact of confining women's sex expression. Ultimately, this work concludes that nineteenth-century American women's literature reinforced purity discourse, and future work with the texts must acknowledge the impact of notions of purity.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould dare to suggest that the changing understandings of women's literature and its value have changed the way we turn critical eyes to the literature, writing, "The traditional question 'Is it any good?' has been translated into 'What good does it do?'" (9). This question—and attempts to answer it—are complex but especially so when examining ideas of purity culture as it impacts women. "Purity culture" is, for the purpose of this thesis, defined as the belief that sex should be withheld until marriage and the resulting ideas and rhetoric that stem from this belief. This includes—but is not limited to—ideas of value based on notions of virginity, and especially the loss of value when virginal status is lost, along with implications of emotional or mental purity which restricts physical desire, therefore restricting the engagement of sex acts. This use of the term originated in the 1990s as a result of the True Love Waits movement which was associated with various denominations of the Christian Church, and purity culture reached new heights in the early 2000s when celebrities like Britney Spears and the Jonas Brothers publicly declared their own abstinence. Recent years have seen a surge in former purity culture participants openly discussing ways that the culture contributed to harmful ideas about sex and self-worth. Purity culture and its associated terminology are hard to define; what constitutes sex, virginity, and purity tends to change based on who is asked. However, it is important to note that these shifting notions of purity are mostly enforced on people who may have physical changes as a result of engaging in sex, such as the breaking of the hymen or pregnancy—in short, people who have historically been identified as women and engage in heterosexual relationships. In nineteenth-century women's literature, depictions of sex, desire, and purity are inherently fraught because of the differences in expectations and reality;

contemporary American women are *still* struggling with societal ideas that alter drastically from lived experiences.

In this thesis, I aim to examine purity as depicted in the writings I have selected through the frame of the question Bauer and Gould pose. These nineteenth-century writings offer important insight into the way women resisted and supported the ideas of purity because the purity movement was gaining traction during this era, and these texts document some of the first opportunities purity culture had to surface in ways still applicable to contemporary conversations. Frequently, there is a desire to view the work done with women's texts of the nineteenth century as inherently the work of recovery or discovery, but that is not my intention for the following chapters. The works I draw on have already, in many ways, been recovered; what I aim to do is *add in* a nuanced understanding about women and sex to analyze these stories in a new light. I do so through examinations of depictions of purity, tropes of womanhood, and sex expression. The term "sex expression" comes from Bauer, who proposes the term "for these combined rhetorical and material practices that takes into account not only physical and conjugal affirmation and adventurousness but also expression in social interaction, clothes, the body, politics, and the forms, perspectives, and rhetoric of American fiction" (*Sex* 5). With this in mind, it is important to ask Bauer and Gold's question of what good these stories do, and specifically what good do they do for those nineteenth-century women who had their sex expression confined by understandings of womanhood and purity? What good do they do for contemporary people who continue to have their expression of sexuality conditioned by the teachings of worth based on concepts of virginity? Frequently, as seen in the following chapters, the literature does not do *good*—it may even cause harm. What we gain from studying it, then, is an understanding of the early beginnings of contemporary purity culture and insight into the way

nineteenth-century women writers internalized or rejected these lessons in various situations.

This knowledge in turn equips contemporary readers to better reject the classifications of people based on their sexual status in society while understanding that “purity” is a result of marginalization and othering.

Conceptualizing Purity

First, it is necessary to broach the negative impacts of contemporary purity culture. Concepts of purity have become one of the most invasive aspects of contemporary women's lives. The way media portray fictional women, how female celebrities are reported on, and the prevalence of problematic sex education in schools constantly reinforces the idea that a woman's worth is connected to her sexual status. As Jessica Valenti explores in *The Purity Myth*, the emphasis on sexual purity for women is harmful and oppressive for both those who choose to embrace purity culture and those who rebel against it. The biased teachings of morality tied to sexual purity inflict damage on even those who are able to evade these teachings and find their worth in other areas; the stereotypes, myths, and tropes purity teachings perpetuate about women and their bodies create unhealthy expectations and understandings for *all people* that are typically either aggressively reversed or accepted. This includes negative ideas about women's bodies changing with increased sexual activity, myths about women's lack of sexual desire, and abstinence-only education's lack of information about forms of birth control. Furthermore, the teachings of purity culture are not easily escapable: the idea of the pure and perfect woman is reinforced in literature, film, art, and other forms of cultural culmination. Never sitting through an abstinence lecture which compares women's bodies to used tape or crumpled flowers does not make someone immune to these philosophies; rather, such ignorance makes people more susceptible to the subtle ways these views have become engrained into contemporary society.

Unfortunately, the intersection of purity and morality is not a modern issue with a modern solution. Rather, the rise in concepts of purity can be traced back to the nineteenth century. This connection between the present and past has been under-examined by literary critics, and this approach to American women's literature of the nineteenth century is my new contribution to this recovered work.

The end of the nineteenth century in America witnessed the first National Purity Congress in 1895, a result of years of building momentum around ideas of sexual and moral purity in smaller organizations. The ideology of the International Abolitionist Federation, originating in England in the late 1800s to end prostitution, made its way to America in the late 1800s, resulting in the formation of groups such as the New York Committee for the Prevention of State Regulation of Vice in 1876. These groups worked to repress prostitution but were quickly associated with organizations that focused on sexual purity of all women, such as the White Cross movement and the American Purity Alliance. The ideology of the purity movement, however, was at odds with the actions of Americans in the 1800s. Estelle B. Freedman writes that white middle- and upper-class American women "believed procreation, and not pleasure, was the purpose of intercourse" (199), but by the turn of the century "the evidence of contraceptive use, abortion, and homosexuality, of a tension over eroticism within American sexual ideology, and of the political defense of a sexuality limited to reproduction all suggest that Americans struggled to come to terms with the potential of an erotic, nonprocreative sexuality" (210). This struggle was documented through publications and eventually resulted in the National Purity Congress, modeled after the Purity and White Cross movement that originated in England. The National Purity Congress allowed the voices of well-known speakers, activists, and writers to be given space to plead for the end of sexual immorality. In the publication of the

speeches given at the National Purity Congress the President of the American Purity Alliance, Aaron M. Powell, wrote, “Purity is fundamental in its importance to the individual, to the home and to the nation. There can be no true manhood, no *true womanhood* except as based upon the law of Purity” (1, emphasis added). Furthermore, Powell wrote that the purpose of the Congress was:

to teach its adherents first, to treat all women with respect and endeavor to protect them from wrong and degradation; second, to endeavor to put down all indecent language and coarse jests; third, to maintain the law of Purity as equally binding upon men and women; fourth, to endeavor to spread these principles among younger companions; fifth, to use every possible means to fulfil the command, ‘Keep thyself pure.’ In the higher education of men is the best possible safeguard for womanhood and girlhood. (7)

Though this understanding of purity seems to place an emphasis on the responsibility of men, rather than women, to maintain notions of goodness and morality within sexuality, it also emphasizes that women are different from men in this regard. Teachings about preserving purity suggested that women must be protected (and restricted) *by* men because women—that is, morally upright women—would not wish to engage in sex acts for any reason other than reproduction. In contemporary teachings of purity, this message has been twisted to place the responsibility on women while continuing to attempt to limit women in their sexuality. With this simple address, the implication that women are incapable of sexual desires (unless they are, in some way, flawed) is documented and given a foothold that will last for years.

Defining Purity

While comparing contemporary impact to nineteenth-century origins, it is also worth considering the changing definitions of purity. At the National Purity Congress, mentions were

made of purity *within marriage*—therefore, it was different from contemporary ideas of virginity. Purity as it was constructed in the nineteenth century was essentially a lack of lust, and therefore a lack of sinfulness, which could be retained even after engaging in sexual acts as long as those acts served the purpose of reproduction. Purity was a state of being rather than a physical state, and by actively avoiding a tangible definition of purity nineteenth-century society was able to dictate who was and was not pure on a whim. Valenti notes that contemporary society lacks a definitive answer as well, though she examines the term “virginity” instead: “Either a book wouldn’t mention virginity at all or it would provide a definition that wasn’t medical, *but subjective*” (20, emphasis added). The lack of a set definition makes it possible for those who wish to be viewed as pure—or, in contemporary society, virginal—to play within the confines of the term; it also allows the term to be used for exclusion without having to provide reason. This is important when examining *who* purity—the ideal standard—was accessible to and supported by.

Women, Wealth, and Whiteness

Ideas of purity also created an unattainable ideal for all Americans with the image of womanhood. Beryl Satter thoroughly examines the nineteenth-century understanding of difference between men and women which led to the projection of white women as paragons. Satter writes, “Who offered the more complete paradigm of human mind or selfhood—the desirous, competitive, and rational white man, or the desireless, spiritual, and altruistic white woman?” (10). The simplicity with which men and women of the nineteenth century can be boxed into archetypes is a result of the societal expectations to which many either conformed or attempted to conform to. In a foundational essay, Barbara Welter defines these archetypes imposed on women as “the cult of True Womanhood,” which she says were presented through

“women’s magazines, gift annuals and religious literature of the nineteenth century,” all of which would have been ideal media for nineteenth-century women to consume (151). True Womanhood was defined by what Welter calls “the four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman” (152). Again, purity becomes an identifiable trait of womanhood. Welter writes, “Purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine” (154). For women, upholding these virtues also required them to limit themselves: “White women were not believed to have the intrinsic passion and desire that white men drew upon to fuel their intellectual, economic, and cultural achievements. The delicate minds and maternal instincts of women formed a closed energy system” (Satter 11). These were the type of women—white, wealthy—then held up by society as what all others (no matter their sex, race, or class position) should aspire to. Welter writes, “Without [purity, a young woman] was, in fact, no woman at all, *but a member of some lower order*” (154, emphasis added). Imagining upper-class white women as desireless and perfect embodiments of purity then creates a marker of privilege easily connected to women’s bodies. Desire was connected to the masculine and to the marginalized, and the concept of perfect womanhood (sans desire) became the outline for social improvement.

The loss of purity in nineteenth-century society categorized a woman as lesser, but the opportunity to be pure was also restricted to white women with the potential to achieve upper-class status. Part of the class separation in emerging purity beliefs was purely a result of access to birth control: as Freedman asserted, abortion rates and the use of other contraceptive methods rose throughout the nineteenth century. In *The Moral Property of Women*, Linda Gordon lists the variety of birth control methods available in the nineteenth century:

infanticide; abortion; sterilization; withdrawal by the male (*coitus interruptus*); suppositories designed to form an impenetrable coating over the cervix and withdrawn after intercourse; intrauterine devices; internal medicines—potions or pills; douching and other forms of action after intercourse designed to kill or drive out the sperm; condoms; and varieties of the rhythm methods, based on calculating the woman’s fertile period and abstaining from intercourse during it. (13-14)

This indicates that sexual desires were not somehow disappearing—rather, wealthy women had the financial means to hire physicians and buy products that could prevent them from becoming pregnant outside of marriage and visually revealing themselves to be lacking purity, and free options, such as withdrawal and rhythm methods, were notably flawed. Gordon highlights the “hypocrisy” of nineteenth-century sex practices—which she labels “prudery” instead of purity—as limiting the availability of birth control even farther; “birth control was one of those unmentionable [topics]. As a system of sexual politics, prudery forced birth control knowledge underground and may even have produced a decline in knowledge of reproduction control methods” (9). Furthermore, “Victorian constraints also interfered with the communication of birth control remedies from one generation to the next. And prudery hardly encouraged the ingenuity and experimentation required for developing home-remedy birth control techniques” (Gordon 12). Purity benefitted wealthy white women by restricting the number of pregnancies they would endure in their lifetime—an important benefit, as pregnancy still frequently resulted in death or lifelong health issues. In *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950* Judith Walzer Leavitt notes that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, white households had almost reduced their reproduction by half—however, white rural women and white immigrant women (both of whom would have likely been mid- to lower-class, financially) continued to

have more births than their wealthy counterparts (19-20). For lower-class women, purity became a way for “polite” society to restrict ability to move socially rather than a way to protect their bodies.

Furthermore, notions of purity were essentially reliant on whiteness. Though the nineteenth century saw the abolishment of enslavement in America, people of marginalized races were still subject to horrific racism and were separated from the white “ideal” at every possible turn, including ideal womanhood. The conditions needed for women to be “pure”—financial security, bodily autonomy, physical safety, social standing, etc.—were denied to women of color through racist laws and belief systems. In nineteenth-century women’s literature, the ideas of racial purity frequently intersect with those of sexual purity. As Hazel Carby discusses in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, women of marginalized races were portrayed as being unable to achieve purity because their bodies were sexualized by the white gaze. Notions of purity—if accessible through circumstances of birth that included education and freedom—offered a toehold into social levels their race otherwise barred them from. Women of diverse backgrounds had the opportunity to be held in higher regard in society or lift themselves into higher positions if they could successfully assert their purity. Being viewed as pure lent a woman respectability, which, in the nineteenth century, was one of the only things most women had. If women of color were “naturally” more prone to desiring sex, these women could not be pure according to nineteenth-century definitions. This also allowed crimes of sexual violence to continue to be overlooked—similar to contemporary discussions around victim blaming, women of color were understood as sexually impure and therefore unable to be victims. Resulting children from mixed racial involvements were typically assigned the mother’s race at birth, once again functioning under the assumption that white

women's belief in purity discourse would restrict them from conceiving with men of other races (Carby 25).

Racial and Sexual Purity

Much like sexual purity, racial purity was yet another way to restrict access to status. The term racial purity refers to interracial marriages and the potential for resulting children. The nineteenth-century idea of racial purity resulted in extremes, such as the decision that “marriages ... shall be contracted only between parties of the same blood ... and for the preservation of the purity of the blood of races, all sexual intercourse between persons of different bloods is hereby prohibited” (Anthony 53). Racial purity was the work of all educated white people in the minds of many everyday nineteenth-century people such as S. A. Fullmer, who wrote to the editor of *Womens Exponent*, “let us sacrifice ourselves to the noble work of advancement and culture of ourselves and our sons and daughters; teach them the laws of life and health, of the chastity and purity of the races; let no false idea deter us from this duty, as we will be held accountable if we neglect this all-important subject” (3). In a world where white was ideal—where wealth, success, and privilege were almost unattainable for people of color and still difficult to achieve for the white working class—racial purity was accepted to continue the marginalization of the racial “other” within predominantly white communities. When women of color “failed” in their purity it was blamed on their race; when working class women “failed” it was the result of their lower status and lack of refinement; wealthy white women did *not* fail, and their status offered them ways to hide the proof that they did. Where wealthy white women had access to multiple forms of birth control to prevent proof of their sexual desires, women of color frequently did not, creating a symbiotic system of racism and sexism within purity standards.

Desire and Women's Literature

Though looked down upon by the white elite of nineteenth-century society, desire still pervaded the culture; Satter writes, “Desire is a highly ambiguous concept that lay at the heart of nineteenth-century social thought. Desire was lauded by Romantics, dissected by economists, explored by Transcendentalists, and spiritualized by theologians” (15). There was push-back against the supposedly necessary absence of desire—Satter discusses two forms of thought that organized in the nineteenth century and notes, “This ‘pro-desire’ school was popular among more economically marginal women and men” (14). Clearly, many women still experienced sexual attraction and desire in the nineteenth century. The realities of dueling purity and desire for women in the 1800s can be seen in the female-created art of the time, specifically the stories written by and for women. Desire creeps into the literature of the nineteenth century in subtle ways—the shaking hands of girls, red cheeks of blushing brides, and gasping breaths figure throughout literature written by women in the nineteenth century to show physical responses and bodily desires in a world where expressing those feelings set a woman apart from the passionless, pure, spiritual ideal woman. Women writers still felt and documented desire, in spite of the perfect woman’s purity being one without lust, but they coded and weakened their depictions.

Despite this, women’s texts continued to be written, published, and read, and became a central location to call for the improvement of women’s lives. Fiction, specifically when it was written by women, was a way to advocate for social change. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter suggests that the prevalence of women writers and readers in the nineteenth century contributed to the changing depictions of sexuality: “These women novelists made a powerful appeal to the female audience by subverting the traditions of feminine fiction to suit their own imaginative impulses, by expressing a wide range of suppressed female emotions, and by

tapping and satisfying fantasies of protest and escape” (158-159, emphasis added). In Showalter’s reading, then, sex becomes a way for nineteenth-century women to suggest a life outside of the confines of True Womanhood. Satter echoes Showalter’s ideas, writing, “When female New Thought authors spoke of desire, they referred to material and sexual desires, but more broadly to their fundamental cravings for *the right to think, feel, and act for themselves*” (15, emphasis added). Bauer writes, “Women writers infused sexuality with *hope of liberation, hope of power and authority*, even as they sometimes doubted sexuality’s possibilities or its compensations for limited economic equality” (*Sex* 22, emphasis added). The use of literature as a hub for promoting women’s rights makes it necessary to focus examinations of purity discourse in the texts written as the purity movement was forming.

The mid- to late-nineteenth century was the most important period of the formation of purity ideas in America, though the issue of women’s worth being based on sexual status dates back much farther. What sets the 1800s apart in American history is the “nationwide ‘social purity’ campaign, resulting in dozens of state laws prohibiting abortion, [and] an 1873 federal law [which] prohibited any form of birth control” (Gordon 12). The Comstock law, which “forbade sending obscene matter through the U.S. mail and specifically defined any discussion of birth control—even abstract philosophical discussion—as obscene,” was a clear result of the purity movement which made sex expression and desire taboo. Furthermore, this exacerbated women’s issues controlling their pregnancies. This created a culture in which the only way to avoid pregnancy completely was to deny desire or find ways around the laws, likely easier for the wealthy to do. Gordon writes that the “repression” of pre-existing birth control information “was primarily a response to growing rebellion against the Victorian sexual system” (13). Despite this, plenty of the literature of the period still ultimately reinforced the narrative of the

pure woman as the ideal. The lack of condemnation of purity in these texts has resulted in contemporary people fighting against ideas that are hundreds of years old; battles that could have been fought in the 1800s were avoided to utilize resulting privilege and must be fought now.

In the following chapters, I examine Ann S. Stephens's *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860) and *Sybil Chase; or the Valley Rancho: A Tale of California Life* (1861), Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) for themes of purity, both racial and sexual, and its impact on womanhood.

*** Ann Stephens's work is important because of its historical location: *Malaeska* (was the first dime novel, creating affordable and accessible literature, and as an incredibly prolific writer Stephens's work reached tens of thousands of women. Furthermore, her work was firmly entrenched in the sensation genre, known for scandal and sex appeal—an ideal place to portray women as sexual creatures. In Ann Stephens's *Malaeska*, Sarah is ultimately the ideal character. Because she is an upper-class, white woman, her ability to engage in sexual actions and maintain her purity is possible; she does not reproduce with her betrothed, so her sexual status is not necessarily revealed. *Malaeska* is described in racist terms to emphasize her desire and her willingness to express her sexuality, and the loss of her husband and son are attributed to her desire and lack of racial purity. Martha is reprimanded for her flirtations before marriage—her proclivity to express sexual interest is seen as distasteful for both her fiancé and the nineteenth-century audience, and once she has moved to an affluent position she disregards her own passions to completely devote herself to the desires of her husband and children. Stephens perpetuates the idea of the white, wealthy young woman as pure and as the ideal in this novel. In *Sybil Chase*, Stephens's condemnation of women's expression of sexual desire is even more obvious. Sybil, the woman from an impoverished background, is almost made into an adulterer,

and her desire for Edward makes her a villainess. Her supposedly despicable desire is what leads to her unfortunate marriage, and it ultimately turns her into an isolated widow. Margaret, as her foil, is pure and perfect—though she veers from the tame and controllable woman, her characterization still praises purity when she marries Edward, gaining wealth and love, surrounded by virginal white with only the tamest mentions of physical response to her new husband.

Frances E. W. Harper's novel also holds an important place in discussions of purity because it offers insight into the impact of purity on Black women and the nineteenth-century emphasis on racial purity. Furthermore, Harper is an important voice to examine in the context of purity culture because of her involvement with the National Purity Congress, explored in the second chapter of this thesis. *Iola Leroy* ultimately condones the denial of desire and regulation of women's sex expression. Iola's and Marie's emphasis on moral purity coupled with Iola's overwhelming lack of desire shows a clear idea of what is "right" for women. Iola, as a model heroine, shows no genuine desire, and her moral purity creates a character worthy of high praise for capitulating to ideal womanhood. Harper complicates her story through the depiction of the mixed-race character and racial purity. The argument presented in favor of racial purity in *Iola Leroy* also supports sexual purity; Latimer's identity as a Black man is necessary for him and Iola to have more than a physical connection, thus keeping her moral purity intact and preventing her from giving into desire. Furthermore, Harper uses her depiction of the white male characters in her novel to emphasize the lack of *male* purity which ultimately corrupts—or attempts to corrupt—the physical purity of Black women. Like Stephens, Harper's novel depicts purity as a necessary trait for the ideal woman; however, Harper goes one step further with her novel by radicalizing the nineteenth-century presentation of the sexual ideal. She invites her readership to

see Black women as able to inhabit purity—and, by default, womanhood as well—just as well as the wealthy, white women who set the standard. Iola *is* the ideal woman, a fact which is highlighted by her repeated denial of her sexual desires. Much like her presentation given at the National Purity Congress, Harper notes that Black women are only “impure” because of a denial of education and crimes committed against them. Her novel presents a need for education, protection, and accountability for both men and women of all races.

Kate Chopin’s work offers insight into the “New Woman” and the changing standards of womanhood and purity at the turn of the century. Her depiction of sex expression and purity challenge nineteenth-century ideas while offering identification for contemporary women who still must struggle against these outdated beliefs. Unlike the work of both Stephens and Harper, Chopin’s novel is an extreme condemnation of the structures which guided nineteenth-century presentation of ideal womanhood. Edna Pontellier’s submersion in the sea brings her freedom to explore her sexuality more fully, and the genuine unhappiness she feels in her marriage in the opening of the novel is a concern of the past once she has found comfort in her life away from the expectations of nineteenth-century womanhood. Her nearly homoromantic friendship with Adèle at Grand Isle begins to free her from her previous understanding of what is “proper,” and, after she is released from purity during her moonlit swim, she steadily embraces her romantic feelings for Robert and seeks out financial, physical, and sexual freedom. Her sexual liberation builds suddenly when she engages in a relationship with Alcée, though her ultimate denial of purity does not come until she reveals to Robert that she is willing to act on her desires without confining herself to marriage. Edna’s death is not brought on by guilt or shame for her newfound sex expression—rather, it is the result of her knowledge that she cannot exist within nineteenth-century society without sacrificing her sex expression once more. Adèle’s survival contrasts

Edna, and she offers an ideal character who thrives within the expectations of purity culture. However, even Adèle presents a changing sex expression as her multiple pregnancies insinuate that she experiences desire. Though her sex expression is confined to her marriage and results in reproduction, allowing it to maintain nineteenth-century purity, she still suggests a more radical womanhood and acknowledges a healthy relationship with desire.

In these chapters, I aim to offer insight into the way sex expression functions to reveal coded desire, how notions of purity restricted who was the “right” kind of woman, and how nineteenth-century ideas have had a long-lasting impact on contemporary sex expression.

CHAPTER ONE: PURE SENSATION FICTION

Sensation fiction was one of the most popular genres in the nineteenth century, and the genre offered one of the most visible locations for women to be depicted sexually rather than in terms of purity. Though the purity movement would later declare all white women as lacking desire (when given enough money to do so), the sensation genre depicted women in violent fits of passion that frequently led to adultery, sex outside of marriage, and the occasional murder. Described as a story with “mystery, entanglement, surprise and moral obliquity,” sensation fiction created tension between nineteenth-century ideas of pure womanhood and desirous reality (Hardy qtd. in Pykett 5). As Jesse Alemán and Shelley Streeby discuss in *Empire and the Literature of Sensation: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction*, affordable publication formats created an environment for sensation fiction to prosper, especially among the working class (xviii). Sensation fiction frequently depicted scandalous situations, saturated with coded depictions of desire and sex, and literary critics and upholders of the social ideal did not receive the growth of the genre positively: Freedman writes, “literature on sexual behavior, ideology, and politics reveals that the *increasing visibility* of erotic sexuality, separate from procreation, presented a central problem for nineteenth-century society” in America (197, emphasis added). Nineteenth-century critics and contemporary scholars alike define the sensation genre by this increase of depictions of sexuality, specifically of women’s sexuality. The women of the sensation genre offered a sharp contrast from the ideas of purity culture and Welter’s True Womanhood. In sensation fiction, Lynn Pykett writes, “at least one of the female protagonists . . . is likely to be assertive, transgressive and a creature of passion” (9). The sensation genre was “mainly distinguished by . . . devious, dangerous and, in some cases, deranged heroes and (more especially) heroines” (Pykett 4). “Proper” nineteenth-century society considered the sexually expressive women of the genre a threat to notions of womanhood:

sensation fiction's potential impact on its audience was even more worrisome because it "swerves away from sentimental didacticism to linger on bodies and explore intense emotions rather than regulating, refining, or transcending them," which other critics have noted is especially important when the bodies and emotions belong to women (Alemán xvii). Though early advocates of purity culture suggested that white, wealthy women were passionless and pure, the sensation genre presented a more radical, and sexual, idea of women's lives (Freedman 202). However, the question that must be asked when examining sensation fiction is whether embracing sexuality was the same as defying the growing purity movement. Elaine Showalter suggests it was not: she writes, "the sensationalists and their women readers were less preoccupied with sexuality than with self-assertion and independence from the tedium and injustice of the feminine role in marriage and the family," suggesting that sexually expressive female characters served to suggest new roles rather than actually support sex expression and resist ideas of purity (*Literature* 161). As the primogeniture of the dime novel, a format heavily associated with the sensation genre, the writing of Ann Stephens highlights depictions of both sex expression and notions of purity in the sensation genre.

An elite American woman, Ann S. Stephens (1810-1886) was well-educated, a prolific writer with more than twenty-five full length novels, and her peers, such as Edgar Allen Poe, held her in high regard. Stephens and her husband published their own magazines, and she frequently featured her own writings in their publications. Her publications also branched outside of the Stephens's own magazines and earned her some lasting recognition in the American nineteenth-century literary canon. The dime novel sensation began in 1860 in America with the publication of Stephens's *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*. The short-lived dime novel has been traced from 1860 to the 1900s in America, but Alemán and Streeby emphasize

that the dime novel and sensation fiction are connected despite differing timelines: “This new cultural form had roots in the sensational literature of the earlier decades, for some of the first dime novels had been published earlier in story papers and publishers initially enlisted authors who had already established a readership” (xix). Stephens, and the story of Malaeska (which revised an earlier version that had first been published in 1839 in the *Ladie’s Companion*) helped to set this precedent. Yu-Fang Cho suggests that *Malaeska* allowed Stephens to occupy a unique place in contemporary understandings of nineteenth-century women: “*Malaeska* unsettles binary constructions [of cultural spaces] in the study of nineteenth-century U.S. literature and culture. This novel thereby enables an understanding of intersecting racial, gender, class, and cultural formations in relation to U.S. nation building” (1). These intersections highlight the difficulties women faced, including the assigning of traditional roles. Furthermore, the story of Malaeska highlights Stephens’s ideas of womanhood and, given her role within the genre, the sensation genre’s understanding of women in regard to notions of purity. However, Stephens’s lesser-known *Sybil Chase; or The Valley Rancho: A Tale of California Life* portrays lower-class and unscrupulous people as the only ones who express desire. The women in these stories are ultimately defined through their sex expression and, while they may push boundaries of True Womanhood, they still uphold the nineteenth-century ideas of purity that praised upper-class white women. In spite of the sensation genre’s reputation for pushing boundaries and depicting scandal and sex, Stephens’s writing supported the standard of purity.

Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter (1860)

In *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*¹, Stephens narrates the story of a seventeenth-century Native woman who has married a white settler, William Danforth. When Malaeska's husband dies, she receives a note entrusted by her husband to Martha Fellows, a young, non-affluent white woman, with vague directions to deliver it to the parents of her now deceased husband. Grieving, Malaeska takes her son, William, and leaves her home behind. The Danforth family allows Malaeska to live with them in Manhattan, but they treat her with racist disdain and actively try to separate her from her son. Eventually, Malaeska returns to the home she had shared with her husband, leaving her son with his grandparents, and intends to live the rest of her life in isolation. Meanwhile, while Malaeska has lost both her husband and son, Martha has married into a higher class and is raising a family of her own. Her daughter, Sarah, happens to meet Malaeska one day and the two begin a friendship, allowing Stephens to highlight Sarah as a woman who is both white and upper-class. When Sarah leaves the settlement to attend boarding school in Manhattan, she eventually meets the Danforth family and later meets William, Malaeska's son, who is now a refined young man. Sarah and William quickly fall in love. After both elder Danforths die, William and Sarah journey to her home to meet her family and be married. In a dramatic scene, Malaeska reveals her status as William's mother and he throws himself off the cliff they are standing on in response to the horror of this news. Sarah mourns the death of her intended-husband and seeks comfort in the home of her childhood friend, only to find Malaeska lying dead on her son's grave, beside the graves of her father and her husband. Three women thus surface throughout this story as opportunities for Stephens to

¹ Ann Stephens originally published the story of Malaeska under the title of "The Jockey Cap" in *Portland Magazine* in 1836 (Wingo 121). The two versions of the story are not identical: most notably, in "The Jockey Cap" Malaeska's role as mother is greatly reduced.

depict womanhood and notions of purity: Malaeska, Martha, and Sarah, and I will examine each in turn.

Malaeska

Malaeska is depicted as a sexually desirable Native woman. Stephens describes her as “beautiful beyond expression” with a “round and smooth” cheek “and large gazelle-like eyes [that] gave a soft brilliancy to her countenance” (Stephens 31). Her identity as a Native woman also contributes to her beauty, and Stephens highlights the ideas of natural, untamed wilderness that nineteenth-century society associated with Native people by linking Malaeska’s physical features to animals. Malaeska has a “laugh as musical as a bird song . . . long hair [that] glowed like the wing of a raven, and her motion was graceful as an untamed gazelle” (Stephens 16-17). These animalistic comparisons create an early association between the natural world and the feminine for Stephens’s readers. However, these characteristics are also rooted in racism: using animalistic comparisons to emphasize Malaeska’s beauty reduces her status to less-than that of the white women she comes into contact with throughout the story. Furthermore, her beauty incites violence in her life; the white men who observe her threaten both her and one another after being transfixed by her beauty. The desire the men feel for Malaeska is then turned into entitlement when one of the men threaten to kill her. His sense of entitlement to her life is so closely tied to Stephens’ description of her physical beauty that Stephens seems to be linking nineteenth-century expectations of women with death and violence. Stephens follows a long paragraph about Malaeska’s beauty with violence when she is unknowingly being observed by men from the nearby settlement, writing, “‘This is a little *too* bad,’ muttered the Englishman,

fingering his gun-lock ... 'I have a mind to shoot the squaw² and wring the neck of every red imp among them.' 'Do it!' exclaimed Danforth ... 'touch but a hair on her head, and by the Lord that made me, I will bespatter that tree with your brains!'" (17). This association between nature and dominance was representative of nineteenth-century attitudes towards Native people: Robert Bieder explored the feminization of the Native people in relation to gendered ideas of conquering, writing, "Whether Europeans and Americans saw nature as female and passive or female and threatening, it was *female* nature in need of control by *masculine* civilization/culture" (Bieder 167, emphasis added). Connecting the nineteenth-century ideas of domination for indigenous people heightens the tension of threatened violence toward Malaeska by the white men observing her beauty. While her physical features mark her as desirable, these traits also mark her as *prey* for white men with imagery of deer and birds, while also othering her from the white settlers and Stephens's white readership.

However, Stephens complicates Malaeska's desirability by also associating it with aspects of white settler identity she has adopted. When describing Malaeska's physical appearance, Stephens highlights her scarcity of traditional Native wear to emphasize the way she is separated from the rest of her tribe:

Her dress was a robe of dark chintz, open at the throat, and confined at the waist by a narrow belt of wampum, which, with the bead bracelets on her naked arms, and the embroidered moccasins laced over her feet, was the only Indian ornament about her.

Even her hair, which all of her tribe wore laden with ornaments, and hanging down the back, was braided and wreathed in raven bands over her smooth forehead. (Stephens 31)

² When describing Malaeska and other Native people, Stephens uses racist and sexist slurs. It is important to note that "the word has been used historically to be an offensive term," and Stephens associates the use of slurs with villainous characters (Schilling).

Therefore, Malaeska inhabits a perilous location. She is beautiful both because of and in spite of her Native heritage and traditions, allowing Stephens to create a character that is permissibly attractive to her white readership. Emphasizing the ways Malaeska has adopted white fashion creates a narrative that identifies her as both familiar and other for Stephens's readers. Though her sex expression continues to set her apart from the other women in the story, Stephens has made the Native character one that her audience can pity rather than revile.

Malaeska's Native identity is also used to exaggerate her physical attraction to her husband: when husband and wife are first seen together, Stephens writes, "The feelings which in *civilized life* are scattered over a thousand objects, were ... centered in one single being: he supplied the place of all high aspirations—of all the passions and sentiments which are fostered into strength by society" (Stephens 32, emphasis added). Furthermore, Malaeska is described as having an "untutored heart, rich in its natural affections, [which] had no aim, no object, but what centered in the love she bore her white husband" (Stephens 32). This is emphasized by a physical response to her husband when Malaeska's "blood darkened her cheek, and her large liquid eyes were flooded with delight" (Stephens 32). Clearly, Stephens's point is that Malaeska loves and lusts for her husband because she has not been brought up in the nineteenth-century society that would teach white, upper-class women to have "aim" or "object" higher than service to their husbands and families; in fact, it almost seems that Stephens implies that feeling desire in the way Malaeska does restricts women from also wanting improvements in the social and legal status of women. By separating Malaeska from purity discourse through her desire, Stephens then suggests that women with goals must be pure. This difference is characteristic of one of the nineteenth-century understandings of Native people: Bieder writes, "Linked to nature and feminized, [Natives] were represented as 'primitive types' and stood in the minds of many as a

force opposed to civilization, an adversary to be conquered, subdued and made productive” (167). Furthermore, portraying Malaeska’s physicality as part of her inherent nature—a part of herself she, unlike the white women in the novel, has not been “civilized” into repressing—also subtly underscores nineteenth-century ideas surrounding physical desire as a result of being less than human, less educated, less civilized, and less controlled. Malaeska’s sex expression is permitted because she is different from Stephens’s readership. However, Stephens does not appear to condone it: the passion Malaeska and her husband feel for one another ultimately leads to his death and her unhappiness.

Martha

Martha is unlike Malaeska in many ways. When readers first meet Martha, she is a non-affluent, white coquette, who is engaged to a white man. As a white couple, Martha and her fiancé better represent the ideal romantic relationship of the nineteenth century than the interracial marriage of Malaeska and her husband. Unlike Malaeska (whose physical desire for her husband is noted multiple times), Martha’s passion does not physically manifest except in her memories of a time when she “lingered near [her lover’s] side in the crowd, and had once almost touched him” (Stephens 44). Though permissible public interactions are obviously going to be different for wives like Malaeska and fiancées like Martha, the scenes Stephens creates emphasize the *setting* over the marital status. By denoting that Martha is unable to touch her fiancé amidst the crowd of other white settlers, Stephens suggests that women with an education about societal expectations automatically repress their physical desires. However, Martha is also a flirtatious young woman who uses games and manipulation to her disadvantage. Martha’s coquetry results in both her tears and her lover’s rebuke and emotional punishment (Stephens 27). Where Malaeska openly and honestly loves and desires her husband, Martha implies that her

feelings for her fiancé may change at a moment's notice, and she suffers as a result of the games she plays when her fiancé distances himself from her. This allows Stephens to note undesirable characteristics in her potentially perfect couple for the purpose of encouraging reform. For nineteenth-century readers, Martha's suffering sets her in her place and illustrates to girls reading the story what potential unhappiness could befall them if they act similarly.

Martha reappears later in the novel, now a charming wife and mother. Her life is devoted to the expectations of a nineteenth-century wife. Her transformation is completed through marriage and age:

Martha soon became too much confined by the cares of a rising family, for any practice of the teasing coquetry which had characterized her girlhood. She seconded her husband in all his money-making projects; was an economical and thrifty housekeeper; never allowed her children to go barefooted, except in the very warmest weather; and, to use her own words, made a point of holding her head as high as any woman in the settlement. (Stephens 131)

This characterization reveals a change in the young flirt, along with a sense of shame in her past. Martha has fallen in line with the nineteenth-century society's ideas of womanhood that rebuke a flirt for encouraging men and place her firmly in the home. Notably, this happens alongside her shift in class status: as a girl who must work for her family business, Martha safely expresses desire in her flirtations and could potentially exist outside of notions of purity forced on women. After her marriage, Martha is no longer required to earn a wage and she has also settled into a lifestyle which condemns her previous expressions of sexual interest. Cho argues that Martha emphasizes the flaws present in the dictation of nineteenth-century womanhood, writing, "Martha's transformation from a girlish flirt into model housewife requires tremendous self-

abnegation: the abnegation of sexual activities not serving the aim of reproduction ... and of everything that does not contribute to the welfare of her husband and children. Such self-abnegation, the narrator in the dime novel suggests, is a universal gender issue” (12). Martha does not seem to take issue with her sacrifices; she, like the ideal nineteenth-century woman, takes on her new role without question.

Sarah

The only female character Stephens depicts from childhood to adulthood is Martha’s daughter, Sarah. Sarah tends towards domesticity and enjoys having a family to dote over, the ideal picture of a nineteenth-century girl who will someday become a wife and mother. With Sarah’s enjoyment of her role in the various households she enters, Stephens implies that this character—and the other young women Sarah represents—is best suited for, and most comfortable in, a life of caring for others which they will supposedly find in marriage and motherhood. Cementing Sarah’s role in the Danforth family through fate and matrimony further emphasizes this idea. By spending her childhood with William’s mother, finding herself at a boarding school that happens to neighbor the Danforth home, and falling in love with William when he returns home, Sarah’s storyline serves to both emphasize the drama of the sensation genre and suggest that her role in life is to reconnect William and Malaeska through her ability to marry. However, the end of the novel implies that Sarah’s position in life is unlike that of any of the other women in *Malaeska*.

Though Malaeska and Martha are defined by their relationships with the various men in their lives, Sarah is instead defined by her connection to Malaeska. Sarah’s location in the novel is always fixed by her relation to Malaeska, but unlike Martha she is not her foil. Like Malaeska, Sarah finds herself alone and an outsider when she goes to Manhattan, and like Malaeska, Sarah

loses her lover. Malaeska is defined by her loss: she loses both her father and her husband in quick succession and finds herself emotionally adrift at the Danforths's home. She returns to her original home with the intention of isolation but finds a welcome intrusion in Sarah's presence. However, there is hope that Sarah will have a different life than Malaeska—not only is she not married when her lover dies (leaving Sarah alone, but not a widow), Sarah actively seeks out Malaeska in her grief. She may mirror Malaeska in important ways but knowing that she retains both family and a desire for community implies that a different ending is possible for Sarah. Stephens gives the young woman, who represents all young women of the nineteenth century, an identity and role that are not dependent on sexual desire or romantic love.

Though Sarah appears to move beyond the trappings of nineteenth-century domesticity by the end of the novel, her possible acquiescence to standards of purity in the nineteenth century complicate the character. Stephens uses natural imagery and biblical phrasing to emphasize the many ways Sarah embodies the purity and piety necessary for a young woman in her era. When Sarah becomes a fixture of the Danforth family home, her time in their garden becomes symbolic of the changes she goes through:

She saw the fruit swell from its blossoms into form till its golden and mellow ripeness filled the garden with fragrance. Then she saw the leaves drop from the trees and take a thousand gorgeous dyes from the frost. Still the old garden was a paradise. She saw those leaves grow crisp and sere, rustling to her step with mournful sighs, and giving themselves with shudders to the cold wind. Still the garden was paradise. She saw the snow fall, white and cold, over lawn and gravel-walk, bending down the evergreens and tender shrubs, while long, bright icicles hung along the gables or broke into fragments on the ground beneath. Still the garden was paradise; for love has no season. (Stephens 174)

Not only is Stephens depicting maturing for Sarah alongside the Danforth family, she also depicts sex expression in the natural changes that happen in the garden as well as in Sarah. Perhaps most importantly, Stephens reconciles this scene, tense with sexual references, with biblical imagery. In both the setting of a paradisaical garden and her repetition of the idea, Stephens recalls creation imagery and the idea of sex and nakedness before sin. Ideas of sexual purity in the nineteenth century hinged on the concept of lust as sinful; sexual acts could be pure so long as they were not the result of bodily desires. Through this passage, Sarah's interest in William is repeatedly shown to be the result of love rather than lust, making it possible for her to embrace her sex expression without losing a claim to the status granted by purity discourse.

The depiction of sex and purity coexisting for Sarah is a recurring theme. When she first enters the Danforths' garden, it is "already full of early blossoms, the row of apple-trees one great mass of flowers, and the tall pear-tree in the corner was just beginning to lose its delicate white leaves, sprinkling them daintily over the grass, where they fluttered about like a host of tiny butterflies" (Stephens 153). In this entrance into the Danforths' lives, Sarah is surrounded by images of reproduction in fruit-bearing trees and purity in white flowers. Furthermore, the apple tree once again calls back to the Garden of Eden. Stephens, then, is here affirming that Sarah's sex expression is within the binds of domesticity: biblical references, associations of purity, and emphasis on reproduction strip the ability to read Sarah as denouncing notions of purity in her potential sexual acts. This becomes incredibly important as the story comes to an end. Sarah and William have been together, possibly alone since the death of Mrs. Danforth, for a minimum of three weeks before the couple arrives at Sarah's family home (Stephens 182). Realistically, there is an implication that *months* have passed with the two alone: Sarah had completely moved into the Danforth home before William's grandparents' deaths, and Mrs. Danforth is buried under a

“snow-drift through which they dug many feet” (Stephens 180). However, when Sarah and William come to meet her family her mother has adorned the house with “an armful of wild-flowers, which the boys had brought her from the woods,” implying that the snow present at Mrs. Danforth’s burial has melted long ago (Stephens 182). Though the indication of the passage of time does not necessitate sexual acts, it does become a genuine possibility that the engaged couple have retained emotional purity instead of physical purity. Acknowledging the reality of sexual practices in the nineteenth century, it is reasonable to assume that Sarah’s purity is not tied to her marital status.

Furthermore, Sarah and William act to reinforce nineteenth-century ideas of racial purity. Rebecca Wingo argues that Sarah and William’s lack of reproduction is essential to the lack of challenge to societal norms she finds present in the novel, writing, “Upholding Sarah as a bastion of purity, the narrative cannot allow her and Danforth to produce children” (132). William’s role as an interracial man is so abhorrent to him—and, presumably, to Stephens’s nineteenth-century readers—that he would rather throw himself off a cliff than acknowledge that his mother is a Native woman. His death also stops the chance of his reproduction with Sarah, therefore again cementing her as a supporting player of purity ideals rather than a subverter of them. These ideas of racial purity are, again, tied to racist ideologies that are also present in Malaeska’s depiction as an animalistic Native woman. However, these ideas are complicated by Sarah’s actions after William’s death: she actively seeks out Malaeska, apparently longing for a sense of community and shared grieving. This choice illustrates the differences between those who support racial purity and those who do not: William, raised with his grandfather’s racist ideologies, dies at his own hands; Sarah lives, and her connection to the woman who first engaged in an interracial marriage is emphasized when she finds Malaeska next to the twin graves of her father and her

husband and “the sod on which her head rested was sprinkled over with tiny white blossoms. A handful lay crushed beneath her cheek, and sent up a faint odor over the marble face” (Stephens 218). If white flowers connect Sarah’s burgeoning into womanhood to Malaeska’s death, then the image serves to unite a Native woman with both nineteenth-century womanhood and futurity. Unfortunately, this unity comes at the price of the Native woman’s life: in Stephens’s stories, there is not space for women of intersecting marginalized identities to enjoy the push toward freedom Sarah’s character suggests.

Ultimately, most critics struggle with the ending of *Malaeska*. Cho writes, “As it critiques white supremacy and the ideology of domesticity, it simultaneously reinforces white middle-class femininity by producing and domesticating a racialized subject, Malaeska, and a working-class subject, Martha” (17). Wingo suggests that ending of the novel is weak and “ultimately wavering in the conclusion by reinforcing the same norms to which [Stephens] originally suggested the challenge” (125). The character of Sarah reinforces nineteenth-century standards of purity and idolization of womanhood. However, by leaving Sarah without a husband at the end of the novel, Stephens’s suggests a possibility of a different life than the standard of wife and motherhood for the girls Sarah represents.

Sybil Chase; or the Valley Rancho: A Tale of California Life (1861)

In *Sybil Chase; or the Valley Rancho: A Tale of California Life*, Stephens once again utilizes the dime novel to publish a story about women’s sex expression. Published in 1861, Sybil’s story opens in California during the gold rush. At the beginning of the story, Sybil is unhappily married to Phil Yates, a thief and gambler. Sybil’s role in the household is to distract the patrons and present herself as the beautiful, well-mannered wife. When Yates formulates a plan to murder and rob Robert Hinchley, Sybil intervenes and helps create a plan to spare his

life. When the devious trio enacts their plan, they are quickly caught: Tom and Sybil escape separately while Yates is hanged. Sybil returns to her previous living arrangement with Margaret Waring and her ill uncle, where Sybil plays the role of domestic goddess and nurse. Edward Laurence's deceased aunt had bequeathed all her belongings to Laurence on the condition of his eventual marriage to Margaret, and the two have been engaged the entire time Sybil has known them. Despite this, Sybil forms a romantic attachment to Laurence and enacts a plan to drive the two apart. As a widowed woman, Sybil is not sexually pure, and her clear dislike of her husband and her lack of children make it clear that her sexual history can not fit into even the nineteenth-century ideas of purity that existed within marriage. Stephens complicates notions of purity in her depiction of Sybil: only the readers know that she has been widowed, and she presents herself as a pure paragon of womanhood. She is foiled when Yates returns, revealing that Tom was the one killed, and brings her back to California. At the close of the novel, Margaret and Laurence are blissfully wed and Sybil is—once again—widowed. Throughout the dime novel, Stephens constantly pits the two extremes of nineteenth-century women against one another in the forms of Sybil and Margaret.

Contradictions of Wife and Woman

In the beginning of the novel, Sybil presents herself as a woman trapped by marriage. In her role as wife, she has almost no actual expression of self, sexual or otherwise. It is made clear that most of Sybil's actions are dependent on the whims of her husband, whom she detests. Though the role of wife is inherently a sexual position for women of the nineteenth century, Sybil's position as wife is fueled with hatred. This also suggests that her sexual acts within the marriage do not fall within nineteenth-century ideas of purity; her actions are not the result of love and do not result in the creation of children, which would cause nineteenth-century readers

to infer that any sexual acts within her marriage must be the result of her husband's "lecherous" desires. Furthermore, Sybil's husband is presented as so villainous that he taints her as well. Sybil seems to dislike herself in attachment to him and clearly denotes that she is a different person as his wife: "Sybil *Yates* was not a good woman, and yet there was something in her nature which, *under other training and circumstances*, might have dignified her into a very different person" (Stephens 47, emphasis added). This allows Stephens to echo nineteenth-century ideas of sexuality by suggesting that—without her husband's influence—Sybil could be the model woman. Emphasized by her husband's supposed death, Sybil views herself as a separate person when she is attached to her husband and contracted into a sexual position versus when she is widowed. Though Sybil endeavors to fit the role of domestic angel for her husband, Yates fails to respond in a way that recognizes her admirable dedication to her role as wife. Sybil regularly complies to her husband's wishes, despite her husband's lack of praise, as emphasized when he asks her to sing for him and she both readily complies and anticipates his later wishes: "When the song was finished she began another without waiting for him to speak, and for a full half hour she continued her efforts to amuse him, without the slightest appearance of distaste or weariness" (Stephens 55). Furthermore, Stephens describes Sybil as "customar[ily] obedien[t]" to her husband, even when she questions his actions and casts him in the role of villain (68). Ultimately, she performs the role of wife perfectly despite her sexual confinement, and the other men who frequently visit her home note that Sybil is the ideal wife, saying, "I never saw a woman more devoted to a fellow, or so ready to help him along in every way" (Stephens 61). Though Sybil appears to view herself as a bad *person* while married, she is unquestionably a good *wife*. Through this presentation, Stephens reinforces ideas of nineteenth-century purity culture which portrayed men as enactors of lust and women as inherently pure, though corruptible.

While sex expression is limited in *Sybil Chase*, desire is not. This implies that women are capable of sexual desire—but it comes at the cost of their purity. Stephens’s emphasis on the physical descriptions of her characters as attractive people reinforces that they—most importantly, her female characters the novel centers on—are capable of both feeling and creating attraction. Sybil is regarded as physically beautiful and mentally admirable. Men are “struck, even in ... moment[s] of anxiety, by her appearance” (Stephens 23), and she is the type of woman “for whom [men] felt sincere respect—the sentiment which a dull rogue has for a clear-headed, acute person whom he is willing to acknowledge as his superior” (Stephens 49). Stephens goes so far as to suggest that Sybil’s beauty inspires a desire for marriage, if only to be granted access to her sexually, when one of her husband’s friends says, “I’m not very fond of chains or ministers, but I’d get married in a legal way to-morrow if I could find a female like her to yoke myself to” (Stephens 50). Despite her desirability, her sex expression is stifled by her husband. However, this is not for lack of his own attractiveness. Stephens writes, “Yates was a remarkable-looking man ... He had once been handsome—was still so ... He was tall and remarkably well formed” (36-37). However, Stephens emphasizes that Yates would be more attractive, and therefore sexually desirable for his wife, if he did not participate in morally questionable activities: “A life of reckless dissipation had long ago worn the youth out from his face ... The exposure and action which he had experienced in that wild California existence had increased his manly beauty in strength and proportion, to make amends for sweeping the delicacy and refinement from his face” (Stephens 36-37). In contrast, Laurence is never described physically; Sybil describes him once as “pale and melancholy as a knight-errant” but Stephens never takes the time to describe his physical features in the detail she does for both Sybil and Yates (Stephens 115). This would suggest that the desire Sybil feels for Laurence is not physical—rather, it is entirely based on emotional attachment. This denies Sybil the right to a

solely sexual desire for Laurence because of her status as a woman. When considering the teachings of purity that reached popularity by the end of the nineteenth century, this lack of physical attraction between Laurence and Sybil shows that they do not desire one another physically because to do so would be corrupt. This reinforces Laurence's differences from Sybil's husband; where Sybil's connection to him is always associated with crime, villainy, and a lack of purity, Sybil's connections to Laurence maintain aspects of purity discourse even when built on coquetry and lies. Therefore, Laurence remains pure for his later marriage to Margaret, and Sybil's desires for Laurence allow her access to purity discourse if not for her unfortunate marriage.

Margaret, on the other hand, is not denied sex expression—once she has secured her husband. Her purity would, of course, be lost should physical descriptions of her love be attributed to her before her marriage. Stephens writes:

That little country church never witnessed a happier wedding, or sheltered a lovelier bride. In the *flush of unchecked love*, Margaret had bloomed into something more attractive than mere beauty. The heavy sadness had left her eyes, to be filled with gentle sunshine, her cheek was *flushed as with wild roses*, and the soft radiance of a heart at rest fell around her, *pure* as the silvery cloud of her bridal veil which swept over the snow of her garments, *clothing her with whiteness from head to foot*. The newly married pair went quietly to their home which now became sacred to them both. (214, emphasis added)

At the time of her marriage, Margaret's love is unchecked and leaves her with a physical response of flushed cheeks. The emphasis on bodily responses and purity are allowed to coexist because Margaret has married, and she has married the man that Stephens has attributed a lack of lust to for the entirety of the novel. The newlyweds are the ideal nineteenth-century couple: their

marriage only occurs once they realize they love one another, and it is made clear that the purity of both spouses will be retained in their marriage. Stephens emphasizes the use of white in this scene, much like she did in *Malaeska*, to create images of purity. The “silvery cloud,” “the snow of her garments,” and the raiment of “whiteness from head to foot” are over the top in their reassurance that Margaret is virginal. It is also important that Margaret is clearly the most successful between her and Sybil: Sybil returns to her evil husband, is widowed, and is near destitute at the end of the novel; Margaret is married, loved, and rich. Clearly, Stephens wants her nineteenth-century readers to know which version of womanhood is accepted and which is condemned, and the association of notions of purity with Margaret clearly aligns purity discourse with all that is good.

Stephens’s Thematic Complications

In the article “Seriality and Ann Stephens,” Bauer asserts that Stephens repeatedly relies on similar major themes throughout her writing. Notably, Bauer, like many other critics, does not draw on *Sybil Chase* to make her claim. Despite this, the story of Sybil is illuminated by the points Bauer makes, though there may be some need for adjustments. Bauer writes, “Stephens’s plots insistently stake evil/independent women against powerful noble heroines” (29): in *Sybil Chase*, Stephens frames Sybil as an inherently good woman who acts poorly as a result of unfortunate circumstances, and her poor choices function as a warning for her readers about coquetry and lying. Stephens utilizes the themes identified by Bauer to both criticize the patriarchal structure of the nineteenth century and moralize to the women she expected to be her readers. Bauer writes, “Stephens addresses women’s tenuous condition in a male dominated economy,” which, in *Sybil Chase*, also impacts the sex expression and loss of purity of her female characters (30). Sybil is attached to Yates by both her marriage vows and her economic

dependence; even when he is supposedly dead, she is not truly free of him because she must return to their home to gather gold he had hidden. Even at this moment, the supposedly widowed Sybil is aware that she cannot completely escape her husband and her loss of purity associated with him because she is not able to be financially independent while he is alive. Margaret exemplifies Stephens's use of finances to control women's sex expression as well. The only way she can access any of Laurence's aunt's wealth is through marriage. Furthermore, her uncle has failed to provide for her financially after his death. Through the emphasis of the virginial white wedding costume Margaret wears at the end of the novel, Stephens makes it clear that Margaret, the good and noble woman of the novel, will only engage in sexual activities within ideas of purity. Margaret, therefore, is rewarded financially and socially for her choices.

Again, Sybil and Margaret fit another theme of Stephens's writing about women. Bauer writes, "Stephens's figure of the 'adopted daughter' creates a family of seriality that recurs throughout her works: young girls have 'lost' their first family and need a second ... to recover" (31). By growing up with her uncle and eventually marrying Laurence, Margaret's struggle for social rank as a woman is relatively downplayed in the novel. Sybil's, however, is emphasized through her failure to secure Laurence as her husband. Sybil, unlike Margaret, has grown up in a lower social class, and she has only entered Margaret and Laurence's social circle through her ability to serve Margaret's ill uncle. Her overwhelming desire for Laurence reflects both sexuality and a need for upward mobility dependent on sex expression; denying Sybil this social and financial security serves to reinforce Stephens's condemnation of nineteenth-century society's entrapment of women. Finally, Bauer notes that "Stephens exposes women's rage and capability for violence" (32). This is an incredibly important aspect of the characterization of both Margaret and Sybil: though Sybil is presented as inherently good and her actions as a result

of disenfranchisement a fall from ideal womanhood, she is ultimately responsible for the plan to rob Hinchley, and the coquetry she displays is at least partly worthy of condemnation as it creates distrust between Margaret and Laurence. Margaret, though presented by Stephens as the ideal woman, has bursts of anger as well (frequently directed at Laurence), and therefore must alter the portrayal of nineteenth-century ideal womanhood that *removes* anger. Ultimately, “one of the key aspects of seriality for Stephens is that it allows women to achieve—for good and for ill—social choice and mobility” (Bauer, “Seriality” 33). Stephens frequently associates these choices with purity discourse and the idealization of the nineteenth-century woman, and she reframes contemporary understandings of nineteenth-century womanhood through these achievements. Though *Sybil Chase* is frequently overlooked by critics, the two central female characters suggest a very real need to change the understanding of what being a woman requires in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, however, Stephens’s reinforces those aspects of womanhood which she deems valuable, including purity.

Stephens, Sex Expression, and Society

Ultimately, both *Sybil Chase* and *Malaeska* serve as excellent representation of Stephens’s writing style and the dime novel while ultimately reinforcing the purity standards Stephens could have been fighting against. As representations of sensation fiction, both stories utilize the scandalous plot lines that define the genre and repeatedly suggest women were capable of more than they were represented as. Stephens uses both stories to create female characters who do not conform to nineteenth-century expectations of womanhood, though her depiction of those women as either heroines or villainesses changes. Furthermore, Stephens frequently injects multiple social issues into her work to make clear her condemnation of some aspects of the patriarchal society she lived in. All of the women in these stories are defined

through their sex expression: Malaeska is wild and isolated because of her passion, widowhood, and racial identity, implying that her social interaction and body are governed by her identity as a woman; Martha is a coquet who has been tamed by marriage and motherhood, allowing her very identity to be controlled by her husband and children; Sarah, though unmarried at the end of the novel, is defined by her relation to other women in the novel, her class position, and her lack of a husband; Margaret, portrayed as the ideal woman of *Sybil Chase*, is ultimately defined by her virginity and ability to give her body to her husband for financial gain; and Sybil is confined and condemned by her marriage while attempting to rise through social interaction and the assumed use of her body with regards to her interest in Laurence.

While condemning some aspects of the cult of True Womanhood Welter identifies, Stephens still ultimately reinforces some of them. Her depiction of Margaret as successful, Malaeska as redeemable, and Sarah as capable of doing more than the women before her all hinge on their presentations of purity. Though not as present in *Sybil Chase*, *Malaeska* also reinforces ideas of racial purity alongside the sexual. Despite writing in a genre known for its radicalness and tendency to push boundaries, Stephens's work argues for change within the household for women without suggesting a change in the roots of the way women were treated. Stephens's treatment of women who veer from societal expectations mimics a trend noted by Cathy Davidson in *Revolution and the World: The Rise of the Novel in America*, where she writes, "the novelist's critique of illicit sexual behavior often had a feminist import and emphasized the unfortunate consequences of seduction for the individual woman, not the social mores (although these were in the novel, too) against which she had offended" (190-192). Stephens's likewise creates feminist texts that, unfortunately, support nineteenth-century notions of purity. Supporting the nineteenth-century standards of women's purity results in the

continuation of many of Stephens's ideas in contemporary society. Stephens simultaneously condemns the situation women live in when married while supporting the ideas of worthiness women must reach, ultimately holding her characters to the standards she wrote against. This theme—women writers calling for radical change while utilizing purity standards to their benefit—is not unique to Stephens's work. In the next chapter, I will examine how Frances E. W. Harper both challenged and affirmed the nineteenth-century ideas of purity that would eventually influence harmful contemporary purity culture. Though Stephens used notions of purity to lend respectability to her female characters as they challenged gender roles, Harper depicts themes of both sexual and racial purity to call for an improvement of conditions for Black Americans.

CHAPTER TWO: RACIAL, PHYSICAL, AND MORAL PURITY

In *From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture*, Koritha Mitchell writes, “educated white women readers made sentimental novels a sensation, and these stories revolved around the development of a virtuous heroine who learns to ‘feel right,’ to prioritize morality and to sympathize with the less fortunate, and her doing so yields the reward of having a husband and children to nurture” (37). This makes the work of Frances E. W. Harper (1825-1911) noteworthy: as a Black woman writer, Harper’s work combatted racist stereotypes and societal expectation of the nineteenth century which deemed Black women as inherently *unvirtuous*, keeping both the real women and Black female characters out of womanhood through their supposed lack of purity. Harper’s most ambitious novel, *Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), is a far less scandalous text than either of the works examined in the last chapter. However, *Iola Leroy* does match Stephens’s shock value in its depiction of the realities of life for a Black woman during and after the American Civil War. The novel highlights the struggles of Iola as a Black identifying mixed race person and as a woman, and the sentimental aspects of the novel flourish where those points of focus intersect. By writing about a Black woman in the sentimental genre, Harper must capitulate to standards of “morality” while challenging the pre-conceived notions of who has access to perfect womanhood and the purity it entails.

According to Harper, the novel was intended to be didactic and “awaken in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christlike humanity in behalf of those whom the fortunes of war threw, homeless, ignorant and poor, upon the threshold of a new era” (*Iola* 379). Farah Jasmine Griffin describes Harper’s early life as a Black girl in Philadelphia as influencing her work, noting that her home served as a station on the underground railroad, and

Harper's interests are made obvious in *Iola Leroy* (308). Harper focused her work as an orator, activist, and writer on the improvement of the lives of Black people before and after the American Civil War, along with women's rights. Notably, issues of racial equality took precedence over issues on the basis of sex for Harper: Hazel Carby notes that Harper actively resisted Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony over Black suffrage and believed that if "it was a question of race we let the lesser question of sex go. But the white women go all for sex, letting race occupy a minor position" (Harper qtd. in Carby 68). With this emphasis, Harper dedicated her life to raising awareness of the issues Black people, and especially Black women, in America faced. Griffin emphasizes that almost all of Harper's work highlights the struggles specific to Black women in the Reconstruction era, writing, "Although black women were not granted many of the privileges of citizenship, including the right to vote, Harper saw them as central to the development of a New South" (310). *Iola Leroy*, with its Black heroine, is no exception; Harper used this novel to blend "threads of fact and fiction" in an effort to educate others about the difficulties of Black womanhood and cast her main character—and the women she represented—in a sympathetic light for her biased readership (*Iola* 379). With this intention, Harper crafted a novel of racial and gendered struggles that was the seminal work of her career.

Though Harper is now mainly known for *Iola Leroy*, she was also a popular orator and poet. Part of what makes *Iola Leroy* such a successful piece to associate with Harper's legacy is the "incorporation of her speeches and essays" throughout the novel (Carby 63). As a public speaker, Harper's own ability to adhere to the standards of women's ethics would have come under question; Patricia Bizzell writes that physical modesty and sexual morality "would be the types of modesty and morality most crucial for a woman public speaker to demonstrate if she was to avoid the kind of criticism leveled against the Grimké and other women activists" (387).

Harper, then, was highly aware of the peculiar dynamics of 1800s' womanhood, as she had to emphasize her own adherence to those standards while also carefully transgressing the boundaries set for women and people of color in the nineteenth century. The concern for women's modesty and purity was one of many ways to keep all women out of conversations about equal rights. Bizzell identifies Harper as one of "a few nineteenth-century authors [who] did take on the sensitive task of defending the woman public speaker, a task that requires them not only to question nineteenth-century domestic ideologies generally but, first and foremost, to defend this figure's chastity" (388). This defense of chastity—though necessary to be granted space for women to discuss their ideas and beliefs in the way men were able to—resulted in Harper's active participation in the purity movement of the 1800s.

It is necessary to recall the issue of sexual purity in regard to nineteenth-century women of color discussed in the introduction. "Purity" was typically unavailable to women of color in the 1800s—the bodily autonomy, financial security, access to birth control, and other resources necessary for the presentation of purity (as demonstrated by wealthy white woman) was routinely denied to women of marginalized races in America, especially Black and Native women. The sexualization of Black and Native women's bodies created social environments in which their sexual assault was an assumed fact. These women were frequently unable to engage in "proper" womanhood in the eyes of white, wealthy nineteenth-century society because of the widespread assumption that they were either inherently desirous or they had had their physical purity stripped from them by lecherous men. Carby writes that there is a "spectrum of representation of the female slave from victim to active collaborator and a historical reluctance to condemn as an act of rape what is conceived in patriarchal terms to be sexual compliance" (22). This results in the denial of physical purity completely and makes moral purity questionable.

I use the term moral purity specifically in regard to nineteenth-century women of color to refer to those who would be considered pure of heart and mind but not of body, inherently the result of actions taken against their will. Ultimately, physical purity was routinely denied to women of color as a result of nineteenth-century racism: “The parameters of the ideological discourse of true womanhood were bound by a shared social understanding that external physical appearance reflected internal qualities of character and therefore provided an easily discernible indicator of the function of a female of the human species” (Carby 25). Instead, women of color were forced to present heightened levels of moral purity if they, like Harper, were to gain any access to what Welter called True Womanhood. Nineteenth-century prejudices restricted access to purity, and therefore to womanhood, for women of color. This both preserved white society and allowed it to continue to benefit from the mistreatment of marginalized races. With this information, Harper’s role in the American purity movement is contextualized and needs to be further examined.

Harper and the National Purity Congress

The papers from the National Purity Congress, held in 1895, include a document from Frances E. W. Harper, titled “Social Purity—Its Relation to the Dependent Classes.” This copy of Harper’s speech shows her active role in the building of purity standards in the nineteenth century. In her speech, Harper advocates for the advancement of purity and suggests that it is applicable for those restricted from womanhood in the nineteenth century, saying, “And I hold that no woman loves social purity as it deserves to be loved if she only cares for the purity of her daughters and not her *sons*; for the purity of the young girl sheltered in the warm clasp of her arms, and not for the *servant girl* beneath the shadows of her home” (“Social” 328, emphasis added). This “social” purity that Harper refers to appears to be the purity of all people in society,

rather than just the wealthy white women the standards of purity lifted up as the ideal of humanity. In this way, Harper's vision is radical: rather than restricting the sex expression of women and using the bodies of women of color as a valid reason for sexual violence, Harper here says that men and women of all races should be limited in their ability to act on their desires. Though it may appear otherwise on the surface, this distinction *would* be beneficial in the nineteenth century, especially to the women of color Harper constantly championed in her work: if male purity came under the same scrutiny as women's, they are no longer able to sexually assault women before they are married, or outside of their marriage, without facing the same social recourse as white women. Furthermore, women of color would no longer have their assaults blamed on their bodies and supposed lack of purity—they, like white women, would be viewed as the victims of the crimes enacted on them.

Harper used her speech to appeal directly to those who both benefited from and were confined by 1800s womanhood, addressing her comments to the white women present: “When the degradation of one class is a menace to the peace and welfare of the other, no mistress of a home should be morally indifferent to the safety of any inmate beneath her roof, however humble her position may be” (“Social” 328). These words made it clear that Harper was referring to the upper-class women present, and her choice of the terms “mistress” and “inmate” draw clear connections between the white wealthy women and the people they employed. Harper also challenges the piety of the women she addressed while highlighting the potential for praise (should they take action) saying, “Oh, Christian women of America, God commits into your hands great privileges and glorious opportunities. It is for you to instruct the ignorant, warn the wayward and guide the inexperienced” (“Social” 330). Harper continues to emphasize the religious aspect of her argument for the protection of Black women, stating, “In rescuing the

perishing we need a religion which is a living power, and not a spent force. A religion clear sighted enough to look beneath the darkened skin and see the human soul all written over with the handmarks of Divinity” (“Social” 329). As another aspect of 1800s womanhood, piety was equally as important to the women present at the National Purity Congress as their purity; as quoted in the introduction, Welter writes, “purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine” (154). Essentially, Harper presented an argument directly to those who used nineteenth-century purity standards to their advantage, made it impossible for them to disagree with her without having their piety questioned, and charged them with the responsibility of protecting Black women from their impure sons and husbands.

Iola’s Sexual Purity

Black women’s physical and moral purity are recurring issues in *Iola Leroy*. Iola’s purity comes under attack almost immediately after her status as a Black woman is realized—the man who has been sent to bring her back from her boarding school in the North is aware of Iola’s race, though she is not at this time, and is quick to attack Iola: “From this dream of bliss she was awakened by a burning kiss pressed on her lips, and a strong arm encircling her. Gazing around and taking in the whole situation, she sprang from her seat, her eyes flashing with rage and scorn, ... and every nerve trembling with angry emotion” (*Iola* 140-141). This first assault on Iola’s physical purity is met with the typical reaction expected from a “proper” woman— “anger and mortification” (*Iola* 141). This attack is in direct opposition with the typical characterization of Black women in the nineteenth century. Carby writes:

The white male, in fact, was represented as being merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves. A basic assumption of the principles underlying the cult of true womanhood was the necessity for the white female to “civilize” the baser instincts of

man. But in the face of what was constructed as the overt sexuality of the black female, excluded as she was from parameters of virtuous possibilities, these baser male instincts were entirely uncontrolled. Thus, the white slave master was not regarded as being responsible for his actions towards his black female slaves. On the contrary, it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress. (27)

Iola's attack took place while she was asleep—clearly, she could not be responsible for her assailant's actions. Carby suggests that the depiction of Iola's innocence functions as an expression of the radically different treatments of white and Black women, writing, "a woman who was socially accepted as white was, within the same society (and text) declared nonhuman and denied all protection and nurturance" when her racial background was outed (73).

Furthermore, this scene and Iola's reaction to the assault indicate both her desire to uphold purity values as well as the unlikelihood of her seduction of her attacker. Thus, she is marked as morally pure despite nineteenth-century beliefs that Black women were unable to conform to the same standards of ideal womanhood as white women.

Iola's reaction to this assault contributes to her moral purity when her physical purity is revealed to have been lost. Iola, now an adult, is described among Civil War soldiers as "the beautiful but intractable girl who was held in durance vile by her reckless and selfish master, who had tried in vain to drag her down to his own low level of sin and shame" (*Iola* 53). Bizzell sees this as a clear reference to Iola's assault and stolen physical purity, writing, "There is not much Iola can do to prevent the loss of her virginity and her sexual humiliation, but Harper makes clear that she resisted every step of the way ... Her body has been sullied, *but not her spirit*" (391, emphasis added). Much like the nineteenth-century women speakers, Iola's purity

must, in some way, be forcefully asserted and protected. Furthermore, Harper asks, “Could it be possible that this young and beautiful girl had been a chattel, with *no power* to protect herself from the *highest insults* that lawless brutality could inflict upon *innocent and defenseless womanhood*?” (*Iola* 54, emphasis added). Clearly, her loss of physical purity was not her own doing, and Harper emphasizes that her femininity was not protected by the men Iola encountered. In “*The Changing Same: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory*,” Deborah McDowell notes that Black women’s literature frequently depicts Black women as intensely moral in the nineteenth century: “These early black heroines are sexually pure, invariably exemplary, characterized by their self-sacrifice and by their tireless labor for the collective good” (38). By painting Iola as innocent, rather than someone inciting the violent acts that readers presuppose occur, Harper is casting Iola as an upholder of True Womanhood and criticizing women who express sexual desire.

The depiction of Iola as morally pure is extreme. Her ability to express physical interest—even in the heavily coded ways common in nineteenth-century women’s literature—is restricted. When Dr. Gresham, a white Civil War doctor, expresses interest in Iola while she helps nurse soldiers back to health, she resists her own emotions: “She knew from unmistakable signs that Dr. Gresham had learned to love her, and that he had power to call forth the warmest affection of her soul; but she fought with her own heart and *repressed its rising love*” (*Iola* 151, emphasis added). At this point, Iola is resistant to acknowledge her interest in Gresham because of their difference in race and her belief that he is unaware of her racial status. Later in the novel, however, Iola is more expressive of her physical response to Gresham’s return, and she has a “deep flush on [her] face ... [as] she was living over again the past, with its tender, sad, and thrilling reminiscences” (*Iola* 287). Though this appears to offer an opportunity for Iola to

indicate sexual desire, it is ultimately stifled because of Iola's race: when Gresham proposes, he asks, "What right has public opinion to interfere with our marriage relations? Why should we yield to its behests?" and Iola replies, "Because it is stronger than we are, and we cannot run counter to it without suffering its penalties" (*Iola* 310). Iola's status as a Black woman denies her the ability to express sexual desire without completely losing her claim to purity, and Iola is keenly aware of the role nineteenth-century society plays in her sex expression when she denies this proposal.

The inability to express desire without loss of moral purity as a Black woman is raised again when Iola meets Dr. Latimer. Aside from praising Latimer's intellect and kindness, Iola does not express romantic interest in the man she will later marry for much of their relationship—though Latimer notes that "the touch of her hand thrilled him with emotion. Her lightest words were an entrancing melody to his ear. Her noblest sentiments found a response in his heart" (*Iola* 357). It is not until after Latimer has proposed that Iola expresses clear interest in him, and, even then, her interest is lacking in passion: "Her hand lay *limp* in his. She did not withdraw it, but, raising her lustrous eyes to his, she softly answered: 'Frank, I love you.' *After he had gone*, Iola sat by the window, gazing at the splendid stars, her heart quietly throbbing with a delicious sense of joy and love" (*Iola* 364, emphasis added). It is necessary to remember that nineteenth-century purity standards, as examined in the introduction from Powell's address at the National Purity Congress, still confined women's sex expression within their marriages. This results in her hand being described as limp, an overwhelmingly unsensual description that also suggests her delicacy and physical weakness as a woman, and the "throbbing" of her heart only taking place after Latimer has left her for the evening. Though she is now engaged, Iola is still unable to express genuine sexual desire for her fiancé without losing her moral purity.

Furthermore, the novel emphasizes that Iola and Latimer's marriage is a result of a meeting of the minds rather than sexual interest: "Kindred hopes and tastes had knit their hearts; grand and noble purposes were lighting up their lives; and they esteemed it a blessed privilege to stand on the threshold of a new era and labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new common-wealth of freedom" (*Iola* 365). Carby notes that their relationship "represses" sexuality to be "replaced by mental and spiritual kinship" (80). Therefore, Iola is denied the opportunity to express sexual desire—though she still expresses genuine love—for her partner in favor of highlighting the purity of their relationship. Ultimately, this preservation of moral purity allows Iola to retain her status as a respectable woman in the eyes of Harper's sympathetic readers, making it clear that she has not *chosen* to engage in sexual acts and has not acted on—or possibly even experienced—sexual desire.

This extreme of moral purity which Harper uses to compensate for Iola's lack of physical purity both preserves her as a sympathetic character for white nineteenth-century audiences³ and severely restricts her sex expression. Iola casts herself as an ideal woman as aggressively as possible; given her belief throughout most of her younger years that she was white, it is reasonable to believe that she would have learned the restricting tenets of womanhood in the 1800s, including the importance of purity, and acts on them as an adult. Similar to her argument for the National Purity Congress, Harper suggests that the difference between white and Black women is not actually expressions of desire but education: though Iola has lost her physical purity (as a result of the actions of white men who have not been held to the standards of purity),

³ *Iola Leroy* was reviewed in the "Woman's Tribune" on December 31, 1892, and the introduction to the novel, written by William Still, notes that "being widely known not only amongst her own race but likewise by the reformers ... there is little room to doubt that the book will be in great demand and will meet with warm congratulations from a goodly number outside of the author's social connections," indicating that the novel was intended for a diverse nineteenth-century audience (7). Though the book was not necessarily written *for* a white audience, it is likely that Harper intended for people of various racial backgrounds to read her work.

she is able to retain her moral purity because she received the same education as the wealthy white girls she once believed herself to be.

When offered opportunities for sex expression, Iola keeps her presentation of herself bordering on matronly and forcefully unresponsive. By repressing her desire for Gresham and only responding to Latimer in the tamest of terms, she preserves her moral purity in nineteenth-century views. For the nineteenth-century audience, Iola is the representative of all Black women who have had their purity denied to them by the assumptions of a society which casts them as inherently desirous, but she is also a representative of what Black women could be if afforded the same opportunities as their white counterparts. The private education Iola has received as a result of both her race and class have allowed her access into womanhood. Harper defies traditional depictions of Black women when she emphasizes that Iola is a victim in her assaults and that she cannot be held responsible for her loss of physical purity. However, the emphasis on Iola's moral purity results in the reinforcement of purity culture: she is unable to express herself sexually because to do so would result in the loss of the subset of purity she grasps, resulting in a direct condemnation of women who express sexual desire.

Marie's Sexual Purity

Iola's mother, Marie, appears to exist as an illustration of what could have happened to Iola if she had chosen a different path. Unlike Iola, Marie has been born into enslavement and is manumitted shortly before she marries her former enslaver, Leroy. However, Marie and Iola have similar standings in terms of the nineteenth-century purity ideal. Nineteenth-century readers would assume that Marie has lost her physical purity during her enslavement, either through force or seduction. It becomes clear that any loss of physical purity must have been out of Marie's control when Leroy reveals that, like her daughter, she is educated in the responsibilities

of womanhood and purity: ““After she was sold from her mother she became the property of an excellent old lady, who seems to have been very careful to imbue her mind with good principles; a woman who loved purity, not only for her own daughters, but also for the defenseless girls in her home”” (*Iola* 93). This also allows Marie to be portrayed as a respectable woman who has preserved her moral purity, at the least, and her general goodness is highlighted multiple times throughout the short chapters about her marriage. In fact, Leroy credits Marie’s purity with saving him from being an ““initiated devotee to debasing pleasures”” (*Iola* 92). This emphasis of Marie as an almost angelic being suggests that she can conform to the ideal standards of womanhood reserved for wealthy, white women, which in turn affirms that she is worthy of the love her husband bestows on her.

The relationship between Marie and Leroy is, obviously, complicated by race and power dynamics. Interestingly, this marriage is *based* on Marie’s purity. When Leroy’s cousin, Lorraine, suggests that Leroy treat Marie like a wife without freeing or marrying her, Leroy suggests that what he is drawn to about Marie is her ability to conform to purity standards which also keep him from engaging her sexually outside of marriage: “she is beautiful, faithful, and pure, and yet all that society will tolerate is what I would scorn to do” (*Iola* 90). Lorraine’s suggestion that Leroy take Marie as ““property, to have and to hold to all intents and purposes”” (and his further suggestion that this action would be excusable and that ““men ... would merely shrug their shoulders; women would say [Leroy] had been sowing [his] wild oats””) is repulsive to Leroy *because* of Marie’s standing as a True Woman in his eyes (*Iola* 89-90). Leroy emphasizes that his desire for marriage is a direct result of Marie’s purity, thus denying respectability to Black women who have not received Marie’s education on purity. This move legitimizes Marie as a sympathetic character for nineteenth-century audiences; it is with the

assertion that she is an outlier to the assumptions about Black women and perfect womanhood that Marie can uphold those values rather than questioning their validity. Therefore, Marie is marriageable—and able to live a wealthy life as a plantation owner’s wife—because of her moral purity.

Marie’s marriage is still heavily influenced by race. With marriage serving as the only acceptable location for sexual acts according to purity beliefs, her illustrations of desire are also impacted by race. Because she is a Black woman, her purity is already questionable for nineteenth-century audiences but, because she marries a white man, contemporary audiences can question whether her marriage is representative of interest in her spouse or fear. When Leroy proposes, Marie “started, trembled with emotion, grew pale, and blushed painfully” (*Iola* 100). While this physical response could be attributed to passion, it is notable that the language used could also describe alarm. Growing pale, trembling, and starting all indicate an anxious response; only the remark about the blush that springs to her cheeks is representative of the typical coded desire, and even that is described as “painful” rather than in terms of romance. Ultimately, this marriage plays the role of the most interesting sex expression in the novel. If Marie chooses to marry Leroy out of mutual interest, there is reason to suggest she is showing desire; if not, her marriage becomes an unsettling depiction of nineteenth-century wealthy white men’s power over others. Because her reasoning is unclear, the relationship exists as both sex expression and a condemnation of unchecked desire from white men.

Kirin Wachter-Grene suggests that Marie and Leroy’s relationship is presented as one of a genuine shared interest, writing, “it is important to note that the novel represents their marriage as consensual; Eugene proposes and Marie accepts his proposal *after* her manumission” (67, emphasis original). This argument overlooks the still-remaining potential for fear that women

may face when rejecting men. Furthermore, Wachter-Grene also acknowledges another potential factor of Marie's choice to marry Leroy: "If Black women were denied access to gender agency (read womanhood), as both slavery and [True Womanhood] ideology worked to ensure, Marie can claim her gender only through marriage" (68). In this argument, then, there is even more to be gained for Marie than wealth and comfort—she gains the ability to enter the practices of womanhood her former enslaver taught her to respect. Though Wachter-Grene ultimately reads "desire, power, pleasure, consent, and agency" in Marie's sex expression, the dynamics of race (and, inherent in nineteenth-century depictions of race, power) present in the relationship cast doubt not on Marie's moral purity but on the validity of an interracial marriage.

Presentations of Racial Purity

When examining depictions of romance between Black and white people of the nineteenth century, it is necessary to consider what the text may be suggesting about racial purity. McDowell writes, "the alleged sexuality of black women, defined against the so-called purity of white women, was the fulcrum on which racist sexual ideologies turned" (55). Racial purity is intertwined with sexual purity because of assumptions about non-white purity: to assume that Black and Native women seduce any white sexual partners is to suggest that resulting mixed race children are inherently the result of a lack of purity, and false stereotypes about men of color suggested that any non-white children born to white mothers were the result of assault (ensuring that those children were also the result of impurity). The relationship between Marie and Leroy must be examined when discussing themes of racial purity in *Iola Leroy*. Their marriage initially appears to condone interracial relationships as Marie willingly (though willingness may be defined differently by contemporary readers) enters into the marriage knowing that it will likely result in children, a surprising rhetorical move from Harper.

Marie discusses both sexual and racial purity while talking about one of Leroy's acquaintances who sent his mixed-race children North for protection:

Your friend wronged himself by sinning against his own soul. He wronged his wife by arousing her hatred and jealousy through his unfaithfulness. He wronged those children by giving them the *status* of slaves and outcasts. He wronged their mother by imposing upon her the burdens and cares of maternity without the rights and privileges of a wife. He made her crown of motherhood a circlet of shame. Under other circumstances she might have been an honored wife and happy mother. (105, emphasis original)

Here, Marie is able to make it clear that her issue is not with the lack of racial purity, but with the treatment of the children and mother by Leroy's friend. While Marie does mention the "shame" of bearing children while unwed and reinforces purity standards, it is not the focus of her speech. She notes that the unnamed woman's "crown" has been demoted to a "circlet," and her role as mother is presented as a source of indignity, but this is because of the partner, not race or chastity; her emphasis is on the "other circumstances" she alludes to, ones which seem to involve an unmarried man who could "honor" the unnamed woman. Furthermore, while Marie notes that the "shame" is visible only for the mother, her speech criticizes the actions of the married man instead of the unmarried woman. The issue appears to be the mistreatment of Black women and their children, rather than the lack of racial and sexual purity.

However, Harper's depiction of Marie and Leroy's marriage incites a different reading of racial purity in the text. Marie is constantly aware of the difficulties her children could face in life as a result of their race, and she expresses anxiety over their racial status: "Think how dear these children are to me; and then for the thought to be forever haunting me, that if [Leroy] were dead they could be turned out of doors and divided among your relatives" (108). Unfortunately,

her fears are not unfounded—it is because of their children’s racial background that they are taken into enslavement after their father’s death. The parents also seem to express guilt over their children’s racial heritage: the family explicitly sends their children away from their home and family throughout the novel so that they will not notice they are social outcasts because of their mixed parentage, and Marie and Leroy actively keep their children in the dark about their mother’s status as a Black woman since she is able to pass as white. This results in Iola’s own complicated feelings when she learns of her race, as she had formerly supported and defended enslavement as a supposedly white woman.

Furthermore, the chaos the Leroy family experiences after the patriarch’s death also supports a reading of *Iola Leroy* as condemning the lack of racial purity in Marie and Leroy’s marriage. Harper uses dramatic events to highlight the issue of raising mixed race children in the 1800s: Leroy dies suddenly from a particularly awful illness “which was creeping slowly but *insidiously* into his life, *dulling his brain*, fevering his blood, and *prostrating his strength*,” and Harper’s word choice makes the white man married to a Black woman a significant choice for the first family death (*Iola* 125, emphasis added). Here he is depicted not as a man in love, but as a man who is weak, stupid, and corrupted by an illness that will result in his wife and children being enslaved. After Leroy’s death, both his wife and youngest daughter fall into states of severe illness. Ultimately, Harper has the youngest child die, near saint-like, rather than navigate the realities of the new life forced on her with the realization of her race. Iola and Marie are almost jealous of the dying child as she lays on her deathbed, saying, “‘I would rather consign her to the deepest grave than see her forced to be a slave.’ ‘So would I. I wish I could die myself’” (*Iola* 146). After a life of privilege, both mother and daughter prefer the idea of death over the grim reality they supported for other Black people.

Marie and Leroy's interracial marriage serves as a clear foil for Iola's own romantic relationships. The first man who expresses romantic interest in Iola is white, and it is because of their difference in race that Iola refuses Dr. Gresham. When Gresham first proposes, Iola refuses, saying, "There are barriers between us that I cannot pass. Were you to know them I think you would say the same," clearly taking a different stance on interracial marriage than her parents (*Iola* 148-149). However, Gresham "knew the barrier that lay between them. It was one which his love had surmounted," a clear imitation of Leroy and his feelings for Marie (*Iola* 149). Harper suggests that the differences between Iola and Gresham are unconquerable because of their views on race, which are suggested as inherent to Gresham's whiteness. Gresham's understanding of the experience of Black enslaved people was heavily romanticized, and he imagined Black Americans to be "a picturesque being, over whose woes he had wept when a child, and whose wrongs he was ready to redress when a man. But when he saw [Iola], all the manhood and chivalry in his nature arose in her behalf" (*Iola* 149). This potential marriage would cast Gresham as Iola's hero and Iola as a distressed damsel, rather than allowing her to support herself and improve her own life. Gresham (and, by default, Leroy) is an attempted white savior who would cure all the difficulties Iola faces as a Black woman without making any impact on the experiences of other Black Southerners. Furthermore, Harper's use of sexually suggestive phrases when writing from Gresham's perspective, such as his love "surmounting" the "barriers between them" and "his nature" which "arose in her behalf," indicates that Gresham would be unable to preserve Iola's moral purity in marriage, which, as a Black woman, she must retain to receive standing in 1800s womanhood. Their sex expression is compromised by their need to preserve purity, which is complicated by their different racial backgrounds. Though there are opportunities for Iola to recreate her parent's marriage and gain wealth and status as Gresham's wife, she ultimately acknowledges that marrying Gresham would require her to

follow in her mother's footsteps and pretend to be something she is not. Iola's refusal of Gresham both suggests distrust of cross-racial marriage in the nineteenth century and allows Iola to be her own savior.

Iola's later marriage to Dr. Latimer also supports racial purity. Iola completely steps away from her parent's representation of marriage by marrying a Black man who encourages her in her efforts to offer better education to Black people. Furthermore, the relationship between Iola and Latimer allows a perseverance of moral purity in the weight given to their shared interest of helping Black Southerners while acknowledging that the same could not happen with Gresham: Iola "had admired Dr. Gresham and, had there been no barrier in her way, she might have learned to love him; but Dr. Latimer had grown irresistibly upon her heart" (*Iola* 364). Since Iola and Latimer are bonded over their desire to improve the experiences of Black Americans—not physical desire for one another—Iola's forcefully asserted moral purity is still intact in this marriage. Carby also notes the lack of desire expressed by the couple, writing, "their union was not so base as to be formed through sexual attraction; it transcended the passion of the body. Sexual desire and its metaphorical figuration as the pulsing of blood through veins was transformed, though not tempered, in Harper's text" (79). Carby's interpretation is reflected in Iola's words about her negative portrayal of denying her race for Gresham after his second proposal: "I am not willing to live under a shadow of concealment which I thoroughly hate as if the blood in my veins were an undetected crime of my soul ... I have painted it with my heart's blood" (*Iola* 312-313).

Mitchell notes that the idyllic relationship between Latimer and Iola is based on love, rather than sexual desire, to present a radical view of the Black American home in the 1800s: "Harper's novel makes a strong statement about what kind of coupling will produce homes that

benefit black communities, especially given that households based on romantic love are considered the most valuable ... and therefore meant for whites only” (75). Iola is able to express her sexuality through her marriage, but it also serves the purpose of emphasizing racial uplift. Both her sex expression and her moral purity are preserved through her connection with Latimer—a meeting of the minds, as well as the bodies. Iola displays “genuine affection” for Latimer, emphasizing that their relationship is built on more than physical desire because it is built on a mental and emotional connection; this, in turn, retains the nineteenth-century concept of purity within marriage (Mitchell 75). Though Iola loves Latimer, her *passion* is not connected to the men offered for romantic partners but to the fight for racial equality, which emphasizes her need for a Black partner. Ultimately, this allows Iola’s sex expression to be depicted as ideal for women of the 1800s.

The Multiracial Figure and Racial Purity

Racial purity is clearly an important motif in this novel and is reflected in both romantic relationships and the recurring “issue” of Iola’s white physical appearance and Black identity. The character of mixed race in nineteenth-century novels was inherently tied to racial purity, as they were “a recognition of the difference between and separateness of the two races at the same time as it was a product of a sexual relationship between white and black” (Carby 90). Though Gresham assures Iola that there is “no use in [her] persisting that [she is] colored when [her] eyes are as blue and complexion as white as [his],” she consistently refuses to mask herself as a white woman and takes up the cause of betterment for Black people after the Civil War (*Iola* 312). Carby emphasizes that Iola’s refusal to pass as white served dual purposes:

The mulatto figure in literature became a more frequently used literary convention for an exploration and expression of what was increasingly socially proscribed. Iola, as a

mulatta, allowed Harper to use the literary conventions of women's fiction and to draw on ideologies of womanhood in her heroine's fall from security. But the mulatta also enabled Harper to express the relationship between white privilege and black lack of privilege, for her heroine situated her advantages and social position in direct relation to a system of exploitation. (Carby 89)

Therefore, Iola's choice to identify as a Black woman highlights the causes Harper has devoted her work to; Iola's intimate knowledge of the different lives afforded to white women creates a need within her for Black community and partnership. McDowell suggests that "while many [critics] ... share concern to explain the pervasiveness of the mulatta in nineteenth-century black fiction, they have gone astray in reading this figure as unequivocal capitulation to dominant beliefs in the 'rightness' and superiority of whiteness" (54). The depiction of racial purity in *Iola Leroy* is not meant to support whiteness as superior; instead, Harper uses Iola's conflicting race and appearance (and the theme of racial purity which is intertwined with an interracial character) to utilize the tools of nineteenth-century respectability to craft a Black heroine who is able to argue passionately for the protection of Black women.

Ultimately, *Iola Leroy* supports racial purity in a nineteenth-century context to lend legitimacy to the other arguments made in the text. Iola's relationship with a Black man comes without the fear and threats of her parents' relationship, and she never has to hide her race to engage in society. Instead, Iola and Latimer are portrayed as mental and spiritual partners, dedicated to lifting up the Black communities they live in, and they are given space in the text to make detailed speeches that reflect Harper's beliefs on improving opportunities for Black Americans. By using Iola's marriage to support racial purity, sex expression is then also tied into the discussion; the historical emphasis on lack of choice in sex expression for nineteenth-century

Black women makes Iola's ability to choose a partner—and her choice of a Black partner—even more significant. She upholds racial purity because she must be with a partner she can desire mentally and spiritually without threatening her moral purity. The depictions of Gresham and Leroy, as the only white characters of note sympathetic to abolition in the novel, suggest that Black women could not work for reform while married to a white man (and she cannot marry for actual sexual interest without losing purity). To express sexual desire would cost Iola her standing as a woman deserving of respect, and, because her sex expression is limited by the severe depiction of her moral purity, she must be matched to a man who shares her passion for equality.

Harper, Respectability, and Purity

Black women are routinely denied sexual purity in the nineteenth century because of the perception of their inherent desire; Harper takes these stereotypes and suggests that the education white girls receive would allow Black women to be morally pure, and further suggests that men who are not held accountable for their actions are thieves of sexual purity. Similar to the speech presented at the National Purity Congress, Harper's ultimate argument with *Iola Leroy* is that Black women are not impure but that they are not given access to purity. In the novel, Harper uses themes of racial, sexual, and moral purity to gain access to a white audience and argue for better opportunities and support for Black nineteenth-century women, while also crafting a story of racial uplift for her Black audience. She also presented ways for Black Americans to begin to navigate white social spheres, outlined by Mitchell:

Frances E. W. Harper offered her pedagogical narrative *Iola Leroy* to encourage readers to define success in ways that prioritize traditional homemaking for the purpose of racial uplift, and she insisted that love cannot be the only factor when making decisions about

romantic coupling because racial uplift requires an orientation toward the collective. One must put love in service to community; only then will having a home of one's own become worthwhile. Accordingly, Harper placed a spotlight on Iola's romantic decisions, leaving no question in reader's minds that Iola's future home will benefit the race. (91)

However, the lasting impact of this work on purity culture also must be assessed; reinforcing ideas about racial purity as harmful and emphasizing that Black women cannot be physically pure makes it easy to continue these pervasive stereotypes in contemporary society. Furthermore, Iola's clear insistence on maintaining her status as a pure woman allows both nineteenth-century and contemporary audiences to villainize women who engage in sexual acts out of desire. McDowell notes that historicizing *Iola Leroy* makes it more difficult to see Iola's sex expression as "prudish" and casts Iola as engaging in sex expression in ways that were typically only available to white women, making the novel radical in its depiction of Black women's sexuality (55). While I agree with McDowell, I also must note that Harper changes the conversation around purity not by deconstructing it, but by opening it up so that Black women can also be consumed by the restriction of sex expression white women were. Harper's novel was radical in many ways, but ultimately succumbed to the need to capitulate to purity standards to engage in other conversations. In the next chapter, I will examine Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in-depth for similar themes. Chopin focuses on white women who experiment with the boundaries of purity and womanhood and, like Harper, pushes the previous confines of those structures.

CHAPTER THREE: AWAKENING SOCIETY TO WOMEN'S SEX EXPRESSION AND DESIRE

While Harper reinforced purity culture to gain status and argue for the expansion of values of purity, Kate Chopin (1851-1904) created fiction that legitimized women's sexual desires and exposed the difficulties created by confining women's sex expression. In *The Awakening* (1899), Chopin depicts Edna Pontellier, a potential paragon of womanhood in the 1800s. She is a wealthy, white woman who is married and raising her children, and therefore should be an ideal woman. However, her discontent with her life—and with the rigid boundaries that control her sex expression—becomes obvious as she takes up the mantle of a “New Woman.” Ann Heilmann defines the New Woman genre as one which utilized “sensational plot elements ... in exploring feminist themes” (89). Furthermore, the texts of the genre “caused major literary sensations with their bold exploration of unconventional gender identities and the explosive questions they raised about the (im)morality of marriage, motherhood and sexuality,” and “female authors and heroines alike were charged ... with sex antagonism (hostility towards men) and sexual intemperance; with having both too much sexual knowledge and too little sexual tolerance” (Heilmann 90). In *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*, Elaine Showalter writes, “the New Women writers of the 1890s no longer grieved for the female bonds and sanctuaries of the past ... They had an ambivalent or even hostile relationship to women's culture, which they often saw as boring and restrictive. Their attitudes towards female sexuality were also revolutionary” (68). *The Awakening* clearly fits into this definition: the novel was famously rebuked by literary society at the turn of the century for its scandalous depiction of women's sexuality, adultery, and suicide.

The depictions of Edna Pontellier's awakened sexual desires, romantic and physical affairs, and eventual suicide were long considered unsuitable for proper society. Despite Chopin's role as one of the defining authors of the genre, she was notably uninvolved in "any feminist organization" and "was strongly opposed to didacticism" (Heilmann 92). However, Chopin was immersed in the arts and women's issues; she hosted "intellectuals and celebrities" at her weekly salons, and she had been part of "a women's organization co-founded by poet T.S. Eliot's mother devoted to both social and cultural issues" before she left the group "due to dissatisfaction with the club's ideals and pretensions" ("Kate Chopin"). With Chopin's personal views in mind, the novel then becomes a scathing rebuke of nineteenth-century society that offers no solution to the problems faced by Edna—and, Chopin suggests, all wealthy, white women. The novel ultimately presents freedom in sex expression as impossible to achieve when the rest of society—both men and women—continue to uphold purity values.

Sexuality and the Sea

Edna's problems begin in the summer at a seaside resort, Grand Isle, in Louisiana. The location of this resort is important to Chopin's novel—both the Creole identity of many of the characters and the nearby ocean play major roles in Edna's discovery of her own sexuality. Though 28, married, and already a mother, Edna does not begin to truly experience and understand her own desires until she spends time at Grand Isle. Early in the novel, Edna reflects on her obviously unhappy marriage: "She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life" (Chopin 7). Marked by the water flowing over her face, her marriage is an unhappy one—or, at the outset of the novel at least, one with many expectations and pressures which Edna either cannot or will not adhere to. Her husband reflects on her shortcomings as wife and mother, noting, "In short, Mrs. Pontellier

was not a mother-woman. The mother-women ... were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals” (Chopin 9). This “mother-woman” then is an upper-class woman who fits neatly into the ideas of nineteenth-century womanhood; her sex expression is confined to her marriage and her sexual desire is deniable because of her use of sex for reproduction. Edna’s tears over her difficulties within her marriage and as a mother mark her as different from the other women at Grand Isle.

However, her late-night cry is not the only thing that sets Edna apart from these “mother-women.” Edna’s childhood in Kentucky is emphasized throughout the novel, especially when she is asked to return to her homeland to celebrate her sister’s forthcoming wedding and when she begins to gamble on horse races. As a Kentuckian, Edna is unlike any of the other women she encounters at Grand Isle. While at the beach, Edna reflects on the differences between her and the women she is spending the summer with, observing, “A characteristic which distinguished [Creole people] was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to [Edna]” (Chopin 11). Much like contemporary purity culture, Edna’s different approach to sex expression can be attributed to her religion. Edna was raised Presbyterian, which Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes “could not have been chosen casually by Chopin, for a woman reared in this faith during the 1870s and 1880s (the years of Edna’s youth) would have been preternaturally susceptible to the most crippling elements of [William] Acton’s strictures” (4). Wolff expresses Acton’s role in shaping nineteenth-century women’s sex expression as a supposed expert on women’s sexuality, and notes that his argument was that women did not experience desire (4). Edna’s religion—and, therefore, her sexual morality and unquestioning acquiescence to beliefs about purity—were firmly ingrained into her life; while sitting with another woman and reminiscing over her childhood, Edna says, “during one period

of my life religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was 12 and until—until—why, I suppose until now, though I never thought much about it—just driven along by habit” (Chopin 19). While women of many denominations worked to uphold notions of purity—a newspaper article concerning a purity conference in 1905 specifically notes that “at the opening meeting those who took part included Catholics, Methodists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Quakers, and Hebrews. There was entire harmony, the underlying thought being that while there is difference in belief, all should unite in reform work”—the difference between Edna and the rest of the women likely lies in their home state, though Edna’s personal beliefs are influenced by her religion (“National Purity Conference”). In an article titled “Louisiana Notes,” printed in *The Woman’s Journal* in 1895, a woman named Belle Kearney wrote, “The Church of Rome holds full sway. The women keep up the religion; the majority of the men are practically infidels.” Despite the power of their religion, “the women especially are having their eyes opened” to the liberation movement, and Kearney writes of one Louisianan woman who had “a gleam in her eyes that spoke volumes” and tried “to agitate the woman question, and bring men to see the injustice of it all.” This playful version of womanhood and liberation is portrayed as the norm: “The younger women down here are growing radical,” writes Kearney. The women of Louisiana—though supposedly controlled by their religion—were already finding ways to test the boundaries of their societal confinements, which greatly impacted Edna. It is only when Edna is surrounded by both the sea and Creole lack of “prudery” that Edna begins to question those ideas she has accepted. Notably, after embracing sensuality, she later refuses to return to Kentucky—and to the confines of nineteenth-century womanhood—for her sister’s marriage.

Furthermore, Edna’s sensibilities about desire *physically* mark her as other from the native Louisianans she spends her summer with: “Never would Edna Pontellier forget the shock

with which she heard Madame Ratignolle relating to old Monsieur Farival the harrowing story of one of her accouchements, withholding no intimate detail. She was growing accustomed to like shocks, but she could not keep the *mounting color back from her cheeks*” (Chopin 11, emphasis added). The difference in comfort with discussing sex expression is accentuated by Robert, the son of the resort’s owner who is well-known for his romantic and frivolous attachments to the married women who spend the summers boarding with his mother. When Robert “once quietly rested his head against Mrs. Pontellier’s arm,” she “gently repulsed him. Once again he repeated the offense. She could not but believe it to be thoughtlessness on his part; yet that was no reason she should submit to it” (Chopin 13). He is clearly comfortable engaging in physical interaction with the women he has pursued, and his repeated attempts to be close to Edna suggest that he expects her to allow his advances as long as they stay respectable. Where other women, including Edna’s close friend Adèle Ratignolle, have evidently humored Robert, Edna initially refuses those gentle flirtations which she views as crossing boundaries for polite interactions.

The difference in attitudes about sex at Grand Isle is most clearly depicted by the background characters of two lovers and a woman in black. The two young lovers are always together, always intimate, and always followed by the woman in black. Suzanne Disheroon-Green writes, “the lady in black, then, most logically symbolizes the strict moral code” that Disheroon-Green reads Edna as being held to because of the woman’s rosary beads and garments, “associated with the black habits worn by Catholic nuns” (85). Furthermore, her presence and constant association with the young lovers have invited many critics to read her as their foil—she is chastity, and they are desire. However, considering Edna’s own stricter religious background concerning notions of purity, it is reasonable to assert that the unnamed woman is not a representation of Creole beliefs but of Edna’s. Despite the Catholicism of the

woman, her intense religion is most closely mimicked by Edna who, as quoted earlier, has considered herself firmly religious since the age of 12. Disheroon-Green asserts that the lovers represent Edna and Robert, that the woman in black is chastity; while her reading is a worthy interpretation, I would also suggest that these characters can be read as an ominous foreshadowing of Edna's ultimate capitulation to desire and straying from notions of purity, ultimately followed by death in the same way the young lovers are trailed by the black-clad shadow of the woman. The lovers represent not Edna's relationship with Robert, but her relationship with her own sex expression; the woman in black is both purity and Edna's guilt from transgressing purity standards, resulting in her suicide. She is a symbol of death and the lovers a symbol of romance, and they are only seen at Grand Isle—unlike multiple other characters who reappear in New Orleans—because they are confined to the sea which transforms Edna from pure to desirous.

Though the Creole's resistance to "prudery" undoubtedly influences Edna's morphing sex expression, she is most obviously changed through her submersion in the ocean. In the opening pages of the novel, Edna is still grasping notions of purity by presenting herself as desireless while keeping romantic and physical boundaries intact. She describes the ocean as "seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 15). However, at this point she has not submerged herself in either the ocean or her own sexuality. It is after she finally successfully navigates the sea during a moonlit swim that she begins to verbalize her desire:

Edna had attempted all summer to learn to swim. She had received instructions from both the men and the women; in some instances from the children. ... A certain ungovernable dread hung about [Edna] when in the water, unless there was a hand nearby what might reach out and reassure her. But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with overconfidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water. 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 grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (32)

Edna has feared the ocean—needing “a hand nearby” to offer reassurance that someone else is in control—the same way she has shied away from sex expression outside of traditional nineteenth-century conventions. Her changing attitude towards the confines of womanhood is indicated by her former comfort with someone else in control coupled with her newfound ability to care for herself. Furthermore, this scene compares Edna to a child and evokes birth imagery to show Edna reborn when she emerges from the sea afterwards. She is clearly intended to be a different person when she finishes her first swim, and the references to her body—and more importantly, *her* role as the one lifting her body—indicate that while her changes may be internal, they are also deeply connected to the physical. Edna grows “daring and reckless” and desires to go “where no woman had swum before,” suggesting that her new understanding of her body will involve risking everything she has by doing what no (“proper”) nineteenth-century woman has done.

It is notable, then, that when Edna returns to her rooms she leaves her husband behind and is accompanied instead by Robert. Chopin writes, “no multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire” (35). Chopin’s word choice indicates the intensity of Edna’s newly released sexuality. This scene sees Edna made new, leaving the strictures of womanhood and purity behind with her husband while she sets out with the man she will later realize she loves. Water is an important motif in the novel, and it is frequently associated with this first swim and sex. While at the birthday party that will mark her formal forfeiture of her role as a married woman, Edna notes that she can hear “the soft, monotonous *splash* of the fountain” and that “the sound *penetrated* into the rooms with the heavy odor of jessamine that came through the open windows” (Chopin 105, emphasis added). This intermingling of masculine terminology with the feminine floral in the home indicates an awareness of the home as a center of sex expression. However, Edna’s husband is not present, and she is “the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, *who stands alone*,” marking the Pontellier marriage as one where sex expression has been denied. In contrast, when Edna and Robert reunite after his trip to Mexico, they are quick to mention water: Edna says, “‘I’d rather talk about you, and know what you have been seeing and doing and feeling out there in Mexico.’ Robert threw aside the picture. ‘I’ve been seeing the waves and the white beach of Grand Isle,’” clearly referencing the time the two had spent together (Chopin 119). When Robert repeats Edna’s question to her, she, seemingly mockingly, returns his answer to him verbatim. However, readers know that both Edna and Robert have thought about each other incessantly in this time, revealed through his letters to Mademoiselle Reisz. Therefore, their mention of the sea becomes a reference to their desires for one another.

Queering the New Woman

The influence of the sea undoubtedly gives birth to Edna's newfound sex expression, but the traditionally feminine association of the sea also encourages an interpretation of Edna as a potentially non-heterosexual character. Stefan Helmreich writes, "seeing the sea as a feminine force and flux has a storied history in the crosscurrents of Judeo-Christian thought, Enlightenment philosophy, and natural scientific epistemology" (29). Michael Ferber's *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* traces creation myths from multiple cultures which frequently use female pronouns to discuss the sea (Ferber "Sea"). Stories of beginnings frequently cast the ocean as the birthplace of humanity, thus associating a traditionally feminine image—birth—with bodies of water. Understanding the ocean as both a symbol of femininity and of Edna's blossoming sexual desire is important because of Edna's budding relationship with Adèle Ratignolle. As previously examined, Edna is shocked by the lack of reservation the Creole women display, especially Adèle, who has no reservations when discussing intimate details of her pregnancy. The close relationship between the two women opens *The Awakening* to a queer reading of desire as well as a heterosexual one.

The scenes between Edna and Adèle at Grand Isle are categorized by barely contained homoromantic tension. Edna notes that she "was not a woman given to confidences," but once she began to "loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her" she found herself connected to Adèle: "There may have been—there must have been—influences, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways to induce her to [loosen her reserve]; but the most obvious was the influence of Adèle Ratignolle" (Chopin 16). Adèle, then, has caused Edna to examine the structures of womanhood, including purity discourse and denial of desire, which have kept her confined. It is also worth noting that the novel uses the ocean to represent a place of birth for Edna's desire, which she can only experience after coming into contact with the

pregnant, “mother-woman” figure of Adèle. Therefore, the text suggests that Adèle begins to breakdown Edna’s beliefs about desire and “births” the new Edna who refuses to allow her sex expression to be confined by societal expectations.

Edna also notes that “the excessive physical charm of [Adèle] had first attracted her, for Edna had a *sensuous susceptibility to beauty*” (Chopin 16, emphasis added). Adèle’s physical beauty is a recurring aspect of the relationship between the two women; Edna’s artistic talents give her a “satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” and “she had long wished to try herself on Madame Ratignolle. Never had that lady seemed a more *tempting* subject than at that moment, seated there like some *sensuous Madonna*, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color” (Chopin 13, emphasis added). Here, Edna notes both the beauty of Adèle and the reaction it inspires within her while also drawing a clear connection to the religious beliefs that, as a part of 1800s womanhood, control the ability of both women to express their desires. Later, the two women rest together privately at the shore, and the emphasis on their shared space and physicality once again suggests a sexual tension: “Edna removed her collar and opened her dress at the throat. She took the fan from Madame Ratignolle and began to fan both herself and her companion” and “there was a breeze blowing, a choppy, stiff, wind that whipped the water into froth. It fluttered the skirts of the two women” (Chopin 18). It is while the two women are isolated on the shore that Edna “[leans] forward a little so as to bring her face quite close to that of her companion” and Adèle indicates a physical and emotional response:

Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, “Pauvre Cherie.” The action was at first a little confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the

Creole's gentle caress. She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others. (Chopin 19-20)

It is also worth noting that Chopin returns to formal names for her characters in the scenes that come the closest to expressing homosexual desire. She creates a sense of coldness, of unfamiliarity, between the two women in their most intimate scenes together; this has the impact of distancing the two women from each other and any sexual desires they feel for one another, and also reasserts that their identity is inherently linked to their heterosexual marriages and the men they have taken as husbands.

Edna's attempts to hone her artistic skill continue to offer her opportunities to express queer desire. When Edna visits Adèle in New Orleans, Adèle is quick to initiate physical contact which encourages Edna to once again speculate on her beauty:

Placing an arm around Edna's waist, she led her to the front of the house, to the salon, where it was cool and sweet ... Madame Ratignolle looked more beautiful than ever there at home, in a negligee which left her arms almost wholly bare and exposed the rich, melting curves of her white throat. "Perhaps I shall be able to paint your picture someday," said Edna with a smile. (Chopin 65)

However, Edna's appreciation of the female form is expressed more often as she continues to explore her own limits of desire. Chopin writes, "the house-maid, too, served her term as a model when Edna perceived that the young woman's back and shoulders were molded on classic lines, and that her hair, loosened from its confining cap, became an inspiration" (68). Separating what can be read as Edna's attraction for the female form from Adèle serves to preserve Adèle within the purity culture that she exists within comfortably as an affluent white woman. Edna recalls the ocean while she paints: "She could hear again the ripple of the water, the flapping sail. She could

see the glint of the moon upon the Bay, and could feel a soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind. A subtle current of desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn” (Chopin 68). This ties her appreciation of the beauty of the women she paints to her sexual desire, as well as to her time spent at Grand Isle with Adèle.

I do not aim to assert that Edna was a repressed lesbian, but rather to acknowledge that her blooming sexuality—taboo in nineteenth-century purity ideals—recognizes the sensual divinity of people both male and female. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes in “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” nineteenth-century women were typically homosocial, and “female relationships were frequently supported and paralleled by severe social restrictions on intimacy between young men and women. Within such a world of emotional richness and complexity devotion to and love of other women became a plausible and socially accepted form of human interaction” (9). Smith-Rosenberg writes, “nineteenth-century American society did not taboo close female relationships but rather recognized them as a socially viable form of human contact—and, as such, acceptable throughout a woman’s life” (27). Smith-Rosenberg suggests that homoromantic and occasionally even homosexual relationships were a typical part of the nineteenth-century woman’s life. However, Mary Biggs notes that “by the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, psycho/physio/sociologists, to be called ‘sexologists,’ were formulating theories that would label, scientize, and polarize sensuality and sexuality as never before” (151). Biggs notes “that Chopin was familiar with ... the existence of homosexual behavior as public sensation, as a component of artist’s lives and subject matter, and even as a choice or interest of her acquaintances” (152). The desire expressed between Adèle and Edna indicate Edna’s growing aversion to standards of purity as well as her deepening interest in the female body—both her

own and others. This potential attraction enables Edna to fully break with the acceptable conventions of nineteenth-century sex expression. Edna's potential for a queer identity may not be infringing on the boundaries of purity discourse; rather, the acknowledgement of any potential sexual desire for partners of any gender identity, in the context of purity movements and evolving definitions labeling sexuality, is what indicates her transgressive nature.

Sensuality and Masculinity

Despite the role Adèle plays in awakening Edna's desire and opposition to her previously held beliefs about notions of purity, Edna only fully transgresses those boundaries with male partners. Her sexuality is only explicitly discussed in regard to the men she has held fondness for; notably, her husband is not one of the men she attaches a history of desire to. Instead, while reflecting on her past romantic notions, Edna notes:

she was a grown young woman when she was overtaken by what she supposed to be the climax of her fate. It was when the face and figure of a great tragedian began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses. The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopelessness of it colored it with the lofty tones of a *great passion*. . . . It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met [her husband]. *He* fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an order which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. (20-21, emphasis added)

The irony of Edna's perception of herself as a "grown young woman" is heightened by her evident mistake in marriage. She makes it clear that, though she was caught up in emotion for the actor she had never met, she felt nothing similar for her future husband. Their marriage was built

on a misunderstanding about similar views—as a result, Edna goes without both physical and emotional connection in her marriage.

However, this unfortunate reality had not previously stopped Edna from attempting to perform her wifely duties in the manner expected of her. She had attempted to uphold the values of Welter’s True Womanhood until she successfully submerges herself in the sea at Grand Isle, giving birth to her newfound understanding of womanhood. After her husband returns from the same swim which has clearly changed Edna, he finds her laying in a hammock outside and summons her inside to go to bed with him. Edna realizes that “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 life *which has been portioned out to us*” (Chopin 36, emphasis added). The realization that Edna has spent her marriage pushing her own desires aside to please her husband comes suddenly. Furthermore, Edna seems to view her marriage as something that has happened to her rather than something she has taken an active role in, which clearly marks her marriage as unavailable for true sex expression because she views herself as conforming to societal expectations rather than excitedly participating.

When Robert announces his intention to leave Grand Isle—and, therefore, the social circles which Edna moves in—Edna experiences the emotional response she associated with her previous romantic and sexual interests. After Robert has bid her farewell and set out for his journey to Mexico, Edna is moved to a *physical* response:

Edna bit her handkerchief convulsively, striving to hold back and to hide, even from herself as she would have hidden from another, the emotion which was troubling—tearing—her. Her eyes were brimming with tears. For the first time she recognized the

symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her earliest teens, and later as a young woman. (Chopin 53)

In this scene, Edna recognizes a resurgence of the emotional and physical desire she associates with her life before her marriage. It could be argued that a tearful goodbye would be common, but Edna also clearly associates her response with shame when she clarifies that she would like to hide her response from others and *herself*. The sense of shame she feels for her desire and her inability to conform to nineteenth-century expectations indicate that she sees herself as failing in her duties as a wife and woman. Her interest in Robert, and her emotional and physical response to his departure, is the first sign of her own willingness to transgress the boundaries she has previously maintained. The possibility of failing as a wife and a woman would result in Edna losing her identity within nineteenth-century society.

Robert's departure for Mexico seems to temporarily staunch Edna's desire; her actions begin to focus on subverting the traditional expectations of wealthy, white women in the 1800s. She stops receiving guests who come to call, she embraces her passion for art, her duties as housekeeper (such as reprimanding the cook for unsatisfactory meals) fall by the wayside, and she appears to be rebelling against the societal confines of nineteenth-century womanhood without furthering her exploration into her sexual desires for men other than her husband. Her awakening—and the time she has had to process it since Robert left—has created a new creature; when Doctor Mandelot comes to dine with the Pontellier's and evaluate Edna at her husband's request, he observes “a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed *palpitant* with the *forces of life*. Her speech was warm and energetic. There was *no repression* in her glance or gesture” (Chopin 83,

emphasis added). Edna has embraced her sexuality, despite her lack of a lover, and incorporated it into her sex expression.

The opportunity for Edna to take a lover presents itself quickly once she has been identified as a “force of life.” Alcée Arobin has an unfortunate reputation in the upper-class social circles of New Orleans, and his relationship with Edna quickly transgresses the boundaries of her marriage and “polite” society. Though Alcée is the one with the scandalous reputation, Edna is not seduced by him—instead she seems to view him as a recipient of her desire rather than the cause of it. When the two are alone together, Edna is moved to a physical response by the sight of an old scar on Alcée’s hand—“a quick impulse that was somewhat spasmodic impelled her fingers to close in a sort of clutch upon his hand”—and he offers her comfort: “he stood close to her, and the effrontery in his eyes *repelled the old, vanishing self* in her, yet drew all her *awakening sensuousness*” (Chopin 90-91, emphasis added). Edna’s former tendency to hold onto purity as a way to legitimize her claim to social standing makes her react to Alcée as though he is repulsive, but her newfound sense of sex expression responds to him. After Alcée leaves, it becomes clear that Edna has already surpassed the boundaries of purity discourse mentally and emotionally when she notes that “she felt somewhat like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity, and realizes the significance of the act without being wholly awakened from its glamour. The thought was passing vaguely through her mind, ‘What would he think?’ She did not mean her husband; she was thinking of Robert” (Chopin 92). It is only after Edna admits to her love for Robert—to her wrongdoing, in the eyes of 1800s society—that she is capable of acknowledging her newfound desire.

When Mademoiselle Reisz asks Edna if she loves Robert—though she “ought not to”—Edna confesses readily that she does (Chopin 97). Because of the boundaries enforced by Edna’s

marriage and nineteenth-century society's understanding of purity, Edna acknowledges that she will do "nothing, except feel glad and happy to be alive" once she is reunited with Robert (Chopin 97). However, Edna is not truly controlled by either her marriage or notions of purity—she has already cast off many, if not all, of the expectations of her wifely duties in favor of the exploration of her own desires, has taken up art and studying the female form, and is planning on leaving her husband's home. After acknowledging that she cannot act on her feelings for Robert, she is quick to transgress the physical boundaries of purity that require her to both deny sexual desire and retain sex for reproduction within her marriage. Later that night, while sitting with Alcée and reflecting on Robert's imminent return to New Orleans, Edna is moved to act on her physical desire for the first time: "when he leaned forward and kissed her, she clasped his head, holding his lips to hers. It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Chopin 99). It is also important to note that *she* is in control during this moment—where before she would "submit" to her husband's desires, now she holds her lover to her. It is this transgression with Alcée that allows Edna to hope for a more intimate relationship with Robert.

This control is reflected in her relationship with Robert when he returns from Mexico. While Robert actively avoids Edna and any enticement to adultery, Alcée and Edna continue their sexual transgressions and Edna's desire to exist outside of purity discourse is intoxicating to her lover. When leaving her home after another sexual encounter, Alcée notes that "he had detected the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom" (Chopin 125). This sensuality leads Edna to seek Robert's company, and she is eventually able to make her feelings clear through physical actions when he accompanies her to the small home she has moved into alone. Shortly after

“bath[ing] her face and hands,” and again associating water with her sex expression, Edna enacts control over her desire:

She leaned over and kissed him—a soft, cool, delicate kiss, whose voluptuous sting penetrated his whole being—then she moved away from him. He followed, and took her in his arms, just holding her close to him. She put her hand up to his face and pressed his cheek against her own. The action was full of love and tenderness. (Chopin128)

Edna’s initiation of the physical aspect of their relationship shows that she has left behind the “prudery” which marked her as different from the other women at Grand Isle; she has also surpassed the boundaries of Welter’s True Womanhood which have contained the other women’s sex expression. However, Robert is disturbed by Edna’s new refusal to conform to the expectation of nineteenth-century womanhood and leaves her with a note that says, “Good-by—because I love you” (Chopin 134). The denouement of Edna’s exploration of her sexuality and ability to live outside of the confines of purity beliefs comes with the news that the man who has incited desire in her is unable to be with her because of the changes her love for him has made within her.

Robert, then, functions as the upholder of notions of purity in his and Edna’s relationship. Edna has already surpassed the limitations placed on her by nineteenth-century society, but Robert is unable to contribute to the supposed “fall” that transgressing boundaries would necessitate. Pearl Brown identifies “types” of male characters in Chopin’s fiction, identifying one as “the unmarried Creole man who shares an intimate moment with a married woman, an experience that inspires a psycho-sexual awakening in both. ... he too is awakened by the intimate experience in that he gains self-knowledge that compels him to question the public or social self” (71). Brown also identifies a “patriarchal male figure,” “who has accepted his

culture's norms for men" (71). Robert fluctuates between these two categories; he is awakened to his own intense desire for Edna, but ultimately chooses to reinforce the cultural expectations by leaving her. Ultimately, Brown writes, "Awakenings in men in Chopin's Creole stories inspire them to reflect on their position in this highly patriarchal and hierarchical society, particularly to consider whether they should move toward an acceptance of values more consistent with their own psychic and social vision than those their culture validates" (81). Robert chooses to align himself with the values of his society, rejecting the reborn Edna and her desire for sexual liberation.

Returning to the Sea

Robert's rejection and, more importantly, the realization that Robert is too encapsulated by nineteenth-century views of sex expression results in Edna deciding to return to the sea to die. Her method of suicide is significant; by returning to Grand Isle, Edna also returns to the site of her rebirth. Furthermore, her choice to drown in the sea she had previously celebrated conquering when she finally began to swim suggests that her desire has made her survival impossible. Edna's relationship with the ocean has gone from needing support and stability, finding her own strength and ability, and finally utilizing her strength to take herself too far out to return; this follows the relationship she has with her own sex expression as she evolves from relying on the marriage that brings her no happiness, exploring her own desires, and eventually moving beyond the weight of societal expectations by choosing to die rather than continue to fight for her own independence.

Sandra Gilbert finds Chopin's use of the sea as the birthplace for Edna's sexuality to suggest an image of the Greek goddess Aphrodite (named Venus in the Roman tradition), goddess of sex and love. Gilbert writes, "swimming immerses Edna in an *other* element ... in

whose baptismal embrace she is mystically and mythically revitalized, renewed, reborn. That Chopin wants specifically to emphasize this ... is made clear by the magical occasion on which her heroine's first independent swim takes place" suggesting that her first image of Aphrodite is during the first moonlit swim that washes Edna clean of nineteenth-century purity beliefs (51-52). Gilbert draws on "the traditionally female mythic associations of moonlight and water" to argue for the creation of the Aphrodite image (52). I read Edna's mythological associations differently: the first swim is lit by moonlight, a traditional symbol of the moon goddess, "Artemis, protectress of virgins as well as mothers in childbirth" (Ferber "Moon"). As the goddess of chastity, Artemis—and, by default, Edna's first moonlit swim—should be associated with Edna's former upholding of notions of purity. The water washes over Edna and begins her process of rebirth, leaving purity beliefs and Artemis behind.

By the end of the novel, Edna has achieved the ascension from Artemis to Aphrodite, and recreates an image of Aphrodite:

But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her. How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (Chopin 137)

This image, of a nude woman walking into the waves while the wind blows, conjures an association with *The Birth of Venus*, painted by Sandro Botticelli in the 1480s. Chopin could have had this image in mind as she wrote, given her familiarity with artistic society through her salons. Gilbert also finds the imagery of the final passage worthy of note, writing, “Together, her ceremonial nakedness, the paradoxically unknown familiarity of the world she is entering, and the ‘foamy wavelets’ ... tell us that she is journeying not just toward rebirth but toward a regenerative and revisionary genre, a genre that intends to propose new realities for women” (58). These two scenes, like Artemis and Aphrodite, are presented by Chopin as contrasts. Edna’s moonlit success is followed by her rapid fall from grace, culminating in Venus’s birth and Edna’s death.

Despite Gilbert’s assertion that Edna’s death is a form of metaphorical rebirth, it is a literal death. Edna’s death, specifically occurring as she has completed her transition from symbol of purity to symbol of sexuality, emphasizes the lack of opportunities for women in the nineteenth century to explore their sexuality and safely express their desires (outside of marriage). None of the other women who were present at the nighttime swim from the beginning of the novel seem to follow in Edna’s footsteps—they do not transgress boundaries as she does, and they remain complicit in the structures of womanhood and live. Adèle, for instance, gives birth shortly before Edna’s death and upholds the “mother-woman” image that Edna has never been able to achieve. There is no space in nineteenth-century purity discourse for women who find strength in sexual freedom like Aphrodite; those who embrace notions of purity, like Artemis, are the ones Chopin sees surviving the nineteenth century.

Punishment and the True Heroine

Unlike other authors who ultimately condone purity discourse, Chopin's ending appears to serve as a warning against the continuation of nineteenth-century understanding of women's sex expression. Showalter writes, "the ending too seems to return her to the nineteenth-century female literary tradition, even though Chopin redefines it for her own purpose. Readers of the 1890s were well accustomed to drowning as the fictional punishment for female transgression against morality" (*Sisters* 81). Though Edna's expressions of desire and sexuality are portrayed in extremes, it is her refusal to return to nineteenth-century expectations of womanhood and sex expression that leads to her death. Her marriage is the result of her repressed sexual desire, and it is not until she submerges herself in the sea and controls her own body in the water that she feels able to control her body on land. The homoerotic tension of Edna and Adèle's relationship indicates that the repression of sexuality can be found even in the "mother-women" like Adèle, and Edna's continuing fascination with the female form suggests that her freedom from purity beliefs allows her to embrace her desires in ways not explicitly discussed in nineteenth-century "proper" society. Edna's sexual exploration with Alcée allows her desire to flourish before it is ultimately denied by Robert, and she realizes that she cannot have what she truly wants, both emotionally and sexually, according to nineteenth-century society. Edna's transition from Artemis to Aphrodite and immediate death indicate that the change from purity to desire tracked in the novel is ultimately unsustainable.

Edna's death ultimately raises the question of her role as heroine in *The Awakening*. Though she is undeniably the central character of the story, Chopin's inability to imagine her survival does not suggest that she is worthy of emulation. Edna is not the victor, not a character to be admired. Edna's sex expression transgresses even contemporary boundaries by leading her to extramarital affairs and suicide, and while these actions do not necessarily create an inherently

“bad” character, they do cast doubt on her ability to make moral and ethical choices. Chopin’s novel has frequently been read as a condemnation of nineteenth-century expectations of womanhood because of Edna’s unfortunate end; however, I argue that Chopin’s depiction of Adèle functions as a less forceful aspiration for women’s liberation while *upholding purity values*. Adèle is, in almost every way, superior to Edna: she is a “mother-woman,” with an apparently happy marriage, and she both reinforces nineteenth-century society while testing its boundaries. Kathleen Streater notes that Adèle is both an ideal woman and feminist in her marriage; “Adele’s ability to finish her husband’s sentences suggest domestic capability and familiarity, but this exchange also signifies that in the home sphere, Adele is an equal, perhaps even dominant, partner in the marriage” (410). Furthermore, Adèle later acts *against* her husband’s wishes in support of Edna’s clear move away from women’s boundaries: “Adele decides to disregard her husband’s orders, and, to a larger extent, she has decided to disregard societal conventions ... in support of Edna. This suggests Adele’s respect for Edna’s choices, and it suggests a feminist solidarity” (Streater 411). Adèle, then, becomes a likeable character for Chopin’s readership, while still (tamely) suggesting a need for reform and women’s liberation.

If Adèle is the character Chopin’s readers are meant to imitate, it is then necessary to examine her relationship with notions of purity. Though portrayed as flirtatious, Adèle ultimately upholds purity beliefs. Edna ascribes Adèle’s comfort with her body and with men to her Creole nature, assuring readers that—though her actions may be scandalous to them—she operates well-within the societal boundaries of physical affection and conversations of sex. Her sex expression is clearly denoted in terms of purity; she is constantly depicted in white clothing and, though Edna may note sensuality in Adèle’s body, the sexualization of her body is never done *by* her but *to* her. Furthermore, the constant comparison of Adèle to the Madonna emphasizes her role as

the ultimate mother, but also reinforces her purity; the suggestion of the immaculate conception lingers heavily over every description of the pregnant woman. Showalter writes, “where previous works by American women largely ignored sexuality or spiritualized it through *maternity*, *The Awakening* is insistently sexual” (*Sister* 72, emphasis added). Adèle, then, pursues her sex expression in the traditional ways that uphold purity discourse. Ultimately, her purity is preserved in her role as mother/Madonna: clearly, she is sexually active within her marriage, but she, unlike Edna, has a veritable brood of children to prove that her sexual actions have always been for reproduction, thus allowing her to remain within the nineteenth-century definition of purity. She also survives childbirth in the final pages of the novel; though Chopin could have easily used a difficult birth to kill Adèle and render her adherence to marital purity as dangerous, Adèle instead does what Edna cannot. The “mere” act of surviving the novel makes Adèle the preferable character to imitate; though she suggests a better life for nineteenth-century women, she does so through her conformance to purity discourse. I do not attempt to dispute the legacy of scholarly work which has viewed Chopin’s novel as a story of sexual liberation and Edna as a sex-positive character; rather, I note here that, as Elaine Showalter wrote, “there are other respects in which the novel seems very much of its time” (*Sister* 73). Chopin suggests that Edna’s way of life and her ultimate rejection of notions of purity, while liberating, is impossible to survive, while Adèle offers a realistic assessment of nineteenth-century society and what is possible for Chopin and her readers to imitate. When examining the effect of *purity* on the novel, Edna’s sex expression is a threat that is resolved through her death while Adèle’s sex expression grants her safety, social standing, and, ultimately, life.

Adèle then suggests a support of nineteenth-century purity ideas, and her survival at the end of the novel ultimately casts her as the victor and Edna as the villain. Though Chopin

undoubtedly depicts more freedom of women's sex expression and desire in her novel than any of the other authors I have examined, she still ultimately suggests that there is no way for women like Edna to survive—much less flourish—in the 1800s. It is also worth considering the publication date of *The Awakening*; published at the turn of the century, the novel reads as a scathing critique of the purity system and confines of womanhood which drove Edna to suicide. Adèle's final warning to "think of the children," (Chopin 132) and Edna's reflection of regret—not for her transgressions but for their impact on her children—suggest futurity. It is notable that Adèle's futurity—and the purity culture that she supports—is well accounted for through her multiple children, while Edna's children have literally been removed from her life as she furthers her exploration of her own desires. Edna's death both suggests the need for social change and serves as a cautionary tale for Chopin's readers. In this novel, then, Chopin seems to condemn what Welter referred to as True Womanhood, but by idolizing Adèle the ultimate suggestion is that the new century could bring about change for women—but not for sex expression. Instead, Edna's death reflects Chopin's inability to imagine a future for desirous women to exist peacefully outside of societal constraints, though it also challenges the widely accepted constraints on women's sex expression. Despite Chopin's hope for a reality that would allow freedom in sex expression, notions of purity ultimately made a contemporary resurgence and continue to confine contemporary sex expression.

CONCLUSION

Notions of purity are still celebrated and praised as the ideal in the twenty-first century. Despite criticism of purity culture, abstinence-only sex education is still a common practice; teenagers still wear rings that signify withholding from sex until marriage; and, most clearly echoing nineteenth-century ideas of purity, young girls still make pledges to their fathers that they will abstain from sex until they are married. Chastity balls feature girls—some of whom have not even entered their teenage years yet—publicly promising their fathers or male role models that they will confine their sex expression to a future marriage, typically while wearing white dresses meant to symbolize their ever-lasting purity. The nineteenth-century ideas of purity ultimately attempted to restrict women’s sex expression in exchange for social status and simultaneously promoted the white, wealthy woman as the national ideal.

Though change has undeniably been made for contemporary women, the impact of purity’s recognition as a “positive” social movement in the nineteenth century is still being felt. The “True Love Waits” movement, which advocated for sexual purity in denominations of the Christian church in the early 2000s, made sexual status a topic for public debate, and adherents to purity culture in contemporary US society continue to condemn women who acknowledge and act on their desires. The use of purity as a necessary value to gain access to the privileges of womanhood in the nineteenth century has translated over the years to imposing the confines of purity most strictly on people raised as women; it is girls who are taught that their “virtue” and value as human beings is lost with their virginity, that they are damaged flowers if they take multiple sexual partners. Furthermore, the use of purity beliefs to deny lower-class women and women of color access to the supposed ideal has continued to have negative consequences. Girls of color are submitted to over-sexualization of their bodies, much as nineteenth-century beliefs

suggested that women of color were inherently desirous because of their bodies. Working-class women continue to struggle to attain affordable birth control, especially as programs which provide low-cost medical services and birth control options are protested against by those who have access to more expensive medical care.

At its root, purity culture has not changed—the upholding of purity continues to be the responsibility of women, and well-to-do white women continue to be the ones best able to benefit from praising purity culture. I do want to emphasize that I do not see an issue with anyone *choosing* to confine their sex expression to their marriages: the problem, I believe, occurs when shame is associated with sex and that shame is reserved for those who identify as women.

Ann Stephens’s sensation fiction offers insight into the confining structure of womanhood in the nineteenth century; her stories suggest that the “perfect” character can be attained by any of Stephens’s readers as long as they are white and uphold purity. Both Malaeska and Sybil Chase are not the heroines of their own stories, but they offer riveting contrasts for their foils. The resistance to condemn purity and its control over women’s lives—specifically in a genre that was known for pushing the boundaries of acceptable reading material—highlights the way that Stephens, as a white, affluent woman, likely benefitted from purity and used it to her advantage. Acknowledging some of the reasons purity was praised offers insight into the reasons it is still enacted today; the social standing Stephens had would have been lost if she suddenly began promoting promiscuity, and she was able to use purity to her advantage. Despite Frances Ellen Watkin Harper’s revolutionary call for change in nineteenth-century understandings of purity, *Iola Leroy* still conforms to 1800s purity. The lasting impact of the novel likely does more harm than good for contemporary purity culture: by inviting purity culture to control *more* people, Harper legitimizes the use of sexual purity as a measurement for

personal worth and goodness. *Iola Leroy* argues in support of battles that are still being fought today—an end to the oversexualization of women of color’s bodies, a need to hold men to the same standards as women—but does so by inviting societal control of sex expression over more people, rather than freeing all individuals from purity expectations.

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* seems to predict the freedom of women’s sex expression that would not come to fruition in the United States until the late twentieth century. Edna’s freedom to express desire is depicted as positive for her—what harms her is the inability of the people she loves to also embrace life outside of the confines of purity discourse. Adèle suggests the possibility of women experiencing and even embracing their sexual desires in the nineteenth century, though she does so while reinforcing the expectations of nineteenth-century purity ideals. Published at the end of the nineteenth century, Chopin’s novel looks back on the Victorian understanding of purity and its control of women and condemns it. Unfortunately, this warning about the impact of restricting sex expression was not fully heeded and contemporary purity culture indicates an attempt to return to these same restrictions.

This examination of nineteenth-century American women’s literature has provided an analysis of the reality of nineteenth-century notions of purity as a method of controlling women, the ways and reasons some women writers supported purity ideals, and what they saw as the impact of confining women’s sex expression. The prevalence of purity culture in contemporary society indicates a repeated history: sexual status continues to be a way to measure the worth of people who identify as women, and many of the issues concerning class issues and racist ideologies are still prominent in purity culture. When I return to Bauer and Gold’s question and ask what good this literature does, it is tempting to say it does little good, if any. However, the close examination of nineteenth-century texts has provided insight into what drives purity

culture, who has access to it, and why it can be tempting to trade sex expression for a false sense of self-worth and moral superiority.

This research yielded multiple questions for the continued work that needs to be done regarding the presentation of purity in literature. As I delved deeper into nineteenth-century purity ideals, it became increasingly obvious that those most impacted by it were women of color and women of the less privileged classes; future research on the topic should center those voices. However, those voices may also be the hardest to locate and assess for genuine attitudes towards sex expression. Not only are there difficulties in locating nineteenth-century literature from women of color and impoverished women as a result of the majority white, male canon, but they are also the writers who would be the most likely to reject the nineteenth-century purity standards. Those authors who *can* be identified may follow in the footsteps of Harper, who supported purity discourse to advocate for other areas of social improvement such as the protection of Black women. Future research may examine texts that were not written for the public eyes, such as letters and diaries, to better ascertain the genuine attitudes nineteenth-century women towards purity discourse but doing so would also move the study away from cultural impact left by the texts.

This thesis has examined the repeated perseverance of purity standards in nineteenth-century American women's literature, as well as the way depictions of sex expression and desire were impacted by purity discourse. While current discourse about twenty-first century purity culture is focusing on examining the harm it has caused for individuals, it is also important to note the ways in which contemporary purity culture reflects its origins: controlling women through the limitation of their sex expression, promoting the white, wealthy ideal, and condemning non-affluent and non-white women as inherently unable to reach the expectations

only truly made available to those with bodily autonomy and class safety. Though each of the authors I examined in this thesis offered characters that fit the contemporary understanding of a Victorian feminist, they also repeatedly showed conformance to purity standards as necessary for successful, happy endings. Understanding literature as a way to interrogate and combat the harm caused by purity culture offers an affirmation of the importance of the work done in this thesis and by other literary scholars and examining women's literature of the nineteenth century also supports the continued cry for reformation in purity discourse. The similarities between the "pure" characters in literature written over a century ago and the message of sexual value taught in modern classrooms shows that there is still a need for change. I conclude that the works by Ann Stephens, Frances E. W. Harper, and Kate Chopin "do good," as Bauer and Gold challenged, by offering insight, allowing readers to examine their own beliefs about the issue, and creating a site where purity culture can be thoroughly examined. It is time to acknowledge the tradition of purity practices interwoven into many works of literature (including, but not limited to, the ones I examine here), acknowledge the depiction of sex expression and desire in literature, and for twenty-first century society to move away from the harmful, classist, and racist emphasis on women's sexual status.

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VITA

Personal Background

Katelyn Renea Thompson
Born December 31, 1996, Longview, Texas
Daughter of Terri Sanders and Jimmy Thompson

Education

Diploma, Tatum High School, Tatum, 2015
21 credit hours, Kilgore Community College, Kilgore, 2015
Bachelor of Arts, English, Hardin-Simmons University,
Abilene, 2018
Master of Arts, English, Texas Christian University, Fort
Worth, 2021

Experience

Graduate Student Senator, Texas Christian University, 2020-
2021
Teaching Assistantship, Texas Christian University, 2019-
2021
Writing Center Tutor, Hardin-Simmons University, 2017-
2018

Publications

“Katherine Finnigan Anderson.” *Handbook of Texas Online*,
Texas State Historical Association, March 2020.