“I AM MORE THAN YOU LET ME BE”:

THE NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL OF MOTHERS IN THREE LATE VICTORIAN WORKS

A Thesis

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I'm more than you know

I'm more than you see here

I'm more than you let me be

I'm more than you know

A body and soul

You don't see me but you will

I am not invisible

I am here

U2 – "Invisible"

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Introduction

Motherhood is ‘the ancient vocation that is also an institution’ (Atkinson, ix). By necessity, the mother is present as giver of life. The feeling that is connected to motherhood is deeply rooted with most women. At first sight everybody seems to know what it is but when looking more closely, many people have a different interpretation of what motherhood in present-day society is or what it means to them. Women’s interpretation of motherhood ranges from simply the act of raising children to a state of being that defines them. This range of interpretations operates in a society that has become more complex over time. In such a society women’s roles have changed and as a result so have their perception of what motherhood entails. The mother has changed from being a fulltime-caretaker for her children’s daily needs into a present-day director of operations with another career outside the domestic space of the house. This not only gives her the opportunity to be economically independent but has also increased her self-esteem.

This present-day situation in which mothers have options to combine a career and motherhood, having a role in both the public and private spheres, is an achievement that was obtained over a long period of time, requiring substantial changes in patriarchal society. The altered situation very often profoundly increased the mother’s well-being. In many cases it enabled her to be a better mother and have a positive attitude towards motherhood because she was not confined to the mother role and had the opportunity to be economically independent.

The caring characteristics that make a woman a mother have not changed. Images mostly depict her in this capacity, whether in sentimental paintings such as *Mother and Child* by Charles West Cope (1852), *The Garden Bench* by James Tissot (1882), or in established art such as Gustav Klimt’s *Mutter und Kind* (1905). The images presented in these paintings

are those of the loving and sympathising woman who is surrounded by children and other family members and is often set in a domestic or pastoral environment. Even though the first two paintings veer into the sentimental, all three paintings present a positive representation of motherhood.

This celebratory portrayal of the mother as presented in many a painting is not often found in nineteenth-century domestic fiction. At a moment when 'feminism began to emerge as a potential political force' (Abrams, www.bbc.co.uk/history), novels published in the late nineteenth century show another side of the mother figure. Yet, many novels contain a mother character that is not depicted as loving and caring but rather as unlikeable, cold hearted, self-centred, and manipulating.

This negative description itself is not a new phenomenon. Despite the fact that the mother is also honoured as such in the tradition, there has been a long-standing concern with either hiding or denigrating the mother. In Anglo Saxon texts 'mothers are traditionally excluded and hidden' (Dockray-Miller, xiv) and in the first chapters of "Genesis", mothers and all other women are linked to the original sin and 'constantly reminded that death came into the world with Eve, "the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20)' (Atkinson, 6).

The negative representation of the mother in late nineteenth-century novels seems to be at odds with the feminist idea that certain women were aiming for at the time. So the question that comes to mind is why mothers were often hostilely rendered in late nineteenth century literature at a moment when the women's rights movement was already on the rise. This rise of the movement made it possible for women to speak up to some degree. It was not difficult to publish accounts of the social and legal wrongs. However, it was a challenge to get the social and legal situation for mothers actually changed because in general Victorian ideas concerning motherhood and family life were still traditional. Most mothers were aware of their position but were either content with it or not in a position to make any changes. Writers,

including many writers who were mothers, took it on themselves to portray the mother's distorted social position, one that made her practically invisible within the public realm. I shall argue that they described mothers as difficult and troubled characters in order to expose what the social conventions prescribed by a patriarchal society did to some mothers and how it affected their behaviour. In this way that writers revealed to the public what was wrong with the mother's position and what caused the flaws in that position.

A number of the causes for this negative representation of the mother are of a social, legal or political nature. This thesis will focus on the legal aspect of property inheritance, the social restraints put on career options for mothers and the lack of possibilities to enhance personal development.

To elucidate these issues, this thesis will analyse three texts written in the 1890s: George Bernard Shaw's play, *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1894), Henry James's novel, *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), and Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899). These two novels and one play were chosen because each has a mother at its centre and all belong to the same cultural and historical moment. The mother character is either the female protagonist, as in *The Awakening*, or one of the main characters, as in *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *The Spoils of Poynton*. In describing the mother character in this particular way, all three authors take a broadly feminist approach in their texts.

These texts also indicate that this phenomenon of the negative portrayal of mothers should not be considered a local or regional phenomenon, but a feature of an ongoing crisis regarding the position of women in general (and mothers in particular) in the entire English-speaking world. All three come from different parts of that world (a female author from the southern USA, an Irish playwright, and an ex-patriate American author resident in England) and express different aspects of the unsympathetic representation of mothers. They show the

reader that it is a simplification of the situation to put the blame for their conduct just on the mother.

Their behaviour is a result of their need to survive as a mother in a society that perceives them as second-rate.

Each author studied here has his or her own reason for their interest in the role of the mother in their texts. Chopin is concerned with controversial gender issues in society , Shaw is in strong favour of equal rights, and James is fascinated by the influence of society on morality, and beauty. Kate Chopin was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri but spent her married life in Louisiana, a southern state generally considered as more conservative than northern states. For many, the United States represented a New World, a land of opportunities but this New World still repressed women just as they were repressed on the other side of the ocean. Reform successes on women's rights were first found in the northern parts of the United States with the "first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York (1848)", granting of "property rights to women" by the Massachusetts legislature (1854), and "full voting rights" for "women in the Washington territory" (1883) as Joke Kardux writes in her course material on American Literature 1865 – 1917. Chopin's role in this reform in the conservative South was that she wrote 'about issues which she found compelling – issues which were often controversial' (Beer, 1) and frequently involved a female protagonist. Chopin was influenced by 'many *fin de siècle* artists' (Gilbert, 17) who had the dream, 'of living beyond patriarchal Victorian culture', 'beyond the strictures and structures of their own culture' (17) in a new culture without the oppression derived from gender distinction. In *The Awakening* Chopin describes her point of view regarding a mother's situation when that dream vision cannot be formed into a reality.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean George Bernard Shaw was a highly public advocate for equal rights for men and women, as part of his fight against the exploitation of

the working class. This advocacy finds dramatic expression in *Mrs Warren's Profession*. In this play he points out that a mother's career opportunities are few, especially if she is part of the lower social classes. In many cases she is compelled towards prostitution if she wants to escape from poverty or move up the financial ladder due to lack of other options. At the same time she is looked down upon or considered a social outcast because of her inevitable career path. These women are condemned by the same social group who were responsible for poor payment for the 'respectable' jobs that were available to working class women, thereby practically forcing some of these women to turn to prostitution due to lack of other options.

Finally, Henry James is included because he links up both continents, the United States with Europe. He was born in America, lived the majority of his life in Europe and in the end died a British citizen. James explores themes such as personal freedom, the place of beauty in society, and the moral life in a time in which economic value was often considered of more importance than the aesthetic one. Although he devoted his life to art, at the same time he would also be aware that people must live in society and make their emotional, spiritual and ethical choices, oppressive or not. In *The Spoils of Poynton* James criticises contemporary legal aspects of property inheritance related to mothers and married women. He shows the reader that ruling property inheritance laws were unjust and exemplified inequality within marriage. Property inheritance was almost impossible for a woman due to the common law. "Until the passing of the Married Women's Property Act in 1870, wives were prohibited under common law from owning property" (Wynne, 6). This law therefore was likely to induce ″bad″ behaviour on the part of Mrs. Gereth who not only wanted to keep what she thought was morally hers but who also wanted to protect beauty. Her view on these matters influenced her behaviour, and not necessarily in a good way.

Each literary text is discussed in a separate chapter. The first chapter gives an overview of how motherhood was perceived in late Victorian culture and how motherhood

became more and more the core business and sole purpose in the lives of married women. The central controlling aspects of patriarchal society and religious values form part of this discussion, as do the legal regulations that applied to women and married women in particular.

The second chapter explores the influence of limited career options for working-class women and mothers in particular by looking at Mrs Warren, the mother figure in *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Mrs Warren chose her career because of 'economic realities' (Edgar, xxi). She is a working-class woman who wants to break away from working class conditions. Due to her class background she did not have many options if she wanted to escape from poverty. Through her line of business she was able to give her daughter a proper education and escape the working class environment. Although it is no longer necessary for Mrs Warren to work in an environment where she earns her money immorally, she does not leave the profession. One reason for this, on an economic level, is that she wants to be a part of the money earning business system but another reason is because there is no alternative for her if she wants to make a living for herself. The discussion will be about career options for working-class women and mothers. The discussion will also include the contradiction between career options for women and mothers and social opinion on these career options.

While the second chapter focuses on moral and economic aspects of working-class motherhood, the third chapter emphasises legal restrictions applying to mothers and real estate. At first sight Mrs Gereth in *The Spoils of Poynton* can be perceived as a manipulating mother figure who wants to sabotage her son's plans simply because she does not like his fiancée and does not want her to live in the house. However, the discussion will show that Mrs Gereth's behaviour comes from her determination to fight for what she thinks is morally hers. This means not just fighting for the house and all the objects in it she has collected over

the years but also fighting for her place in society that will be jeopardized when she has to move out of Poynton Park.

The fourth chapter examines the consequences of lack of personal development of the mother figure, a constraint that turns her into a dislikeable character. From a materialistic point of view Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* lives the life of a woman who 'has it all'. This life and the identity that comes with it are not satisfactory to her. Edna is a woman in a golden cage, one who has time to think about her life. She becomes aware of the fact that motherhood cannot be her sole purpose. She cannot lose herself in motherhood and gets bored by the existence she has to lead. She feels trapped in her situation to such a degree that she can find no other solution than to break free from everything that connects her to her restricted situation. She leaves the marital house, the 'golden cage' she has been living in during her marriage. The discussion will show that her lack of personal development influences her thinking and eventually leads her to commit suicide – an act that will leave her children motherless.

Chapter 1 Motherhood in Late Victorian Culture

Considering the fact that the Victorian period covers more than sixty years, it is clear that Victorian motherhood as an institution did not remain unaltered in either reality or popular perception. The image of motherhood at the end of the nineteenth century was different from the one perceived at the Victorian period's beginning. In the 1830s and 1840s the position of the mother was glorified as a result of the Evangelical Revival (Houghton, 342), turning the mother into an angelic figure. By the end of the Victorian period this idolized image of motherhood began to show some cracks. These emerging cracks were part of a 'widespread and potent manifestation of anti-Victorianism' (Keating, 162) that had already started to raise its head in the 1870s. One of the signs of this manifestation was a growing discontent among some women regarding social limitations and an awareness of legal and social inequality between men and women, especially mothers.

In mid-Victorian life the 'angel in the house' (as Coventry Patmore famously named her) that ruled 'the centre of Victorian life' (Houghton, 341), mostly lived her life in the private sphere of the house and her family; she was effectively 'confined to the home' (341). The mother-wife had her domestic affairs and was regarded as the person 'dedicated to preserving the home as a refuge from the abrasive outside world' (Altick, 53), a public realm in which the husband harshly had to compete to make a living. Otherwise she was expected to do little but to wait for her husband to come home from a life lived in the public sphere and to pursue 'her true function' which was 'to guide and uplift her more worldly and intellectual mate' (Houghton, 349). In mid-Victorian life women in general did not necessarily perceive this as an example of oppression and this unconsciousness was also reflected in mid-Victorian literature. 'For the mid-Victorian novelist, marriage, a family and home, were ideals to strive

for, rewards paid for surviving the dangers of a perilous world, an attained condition of stability' (Keating, 161).

During the late nineteenth century this image of society changed. The uxorious description of the wife and mother by Coventry Patmore was not taken very seriously. People in general grew tired of the ever present aspect of moralism and feelings of repression both emotionally as well as socially and in some aspects legally. This feeling was also present in literature. 'For the late Victorian novelist, marriage, family and home, were more commonly symbols of repression, to be treated warily at best and if necessary to be avoided entirely by desperate flight' (Keating, 161). Women became more aware that society did not consider them equal to men. Besides being a woman they were also classified as a mother at the same time, either at present or in the future with all the social limitations that this role entailed. Changing this perception seemed to be a challenging task that would take quite some time. This thesis focuses on the mother in the 1890s but inevitably will also look at women's position in general because a change in the social and legal position of the mother almost automatically called for a change in the social and legal position of women.

Despite the impact of the ever-present patriarchal society, the position of the mother had not always been as repressed as during the Victorian period, though it should be noted that due to class, region or character not all women in this period experienced this same feeling of repression. Before the Industrial Revolution:

> In the old communistic household, which embraced numerous couples and their children, the administration of the household, entrusted to the women, was just as much a public, a socially necessary industry as the providing of food by the men. This situation changed with the patriarchal family, and even more with the monogamous individual family. The administration of the household lost its public character. It was no longer the concern of society.

> It became a private service. The wife became the first domestic servant, pushed out of participation in social production. Only modern large-scale industry again threw open to her — and only to the proletarian woman at that — the avenue to social production; but in such a way that, when she fulfils her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and cannot earn anything; and when she wishes to take part in public industry and earn her living independently, she is not in a position to fulfil her family duties. What applies to the woman in the factory applies to her in all the professions, right up to medicine and law (Engels, 79).

Engels only talks about the woman's family duties; the man's family duties are not discussed. Even though he refers to higher professions, his observations mostly apply to the proletarian woman. This negative unequal perception of a woman's position was not always confirmed by women themselves. *The Woman's World* magazine published articles from women who did not feel repressed, for example the women in "The Working Ladies Guild" who were part of a company that 'had for its object the assistance, by pecuniary or other aid, of unmarried or widowed gentlewomen who may be in need for employment in straitened circumstances, or suffering under temporary difficulties' (Tabor, 423). Another example of this unrepressed tendency is the article "The Fallacy of the Equality of Woman" by Lucy M.J. Garnett in *The Woman's World* (1888) which shows that women were well aware that they were not the same as men and that this was not necessarily something to pursue. Rather, in her view, women should see themselves as "co-equal" meaning that they are equal to men without denying their own femininity. They should acknowledge that they are different without feeling inferior, or as Lucy M.J. Garnett states:

> It would be manifestly absurd to speak of the superior beauty of the physical form of the Apollo Belvedere and the inferior beauty of the Venus of Milo.

> Each is perfect in its own way; but, as the two modes of perfection are different, one cannot logically speak of the Apollo and the Venus as equal, but only as co-equal in beauty. So it is, I hold, with the mental capacities of men and women. These capacities are wholly different in character – in man characteristically originating and creative, and in woman receptive and elaborative; and hence not equality, but co-equality, can be logically predicated of men and women mentally as well as physically (531).

Garnett's article does not specifically deal with family duties but matters of public life and she probably focuses on middle and upper-middle class society. The important aspect is that she does not feel the need to be the same as a man but merely wants to be respected for her own capacities.

Next to women's magazines with pro-female articles, newspaper articles also included pieces by and upon women and mothers. Late nineteenth-century newspapers from the *Nineteenth Century British Newspaper Database* teach us, however, that the majority of articles relating to mothers dealt with injured children due to non-attendance of the mothers, leaving children unattended in general, and matters concerning upbringing of children, but not with any activities in the public sphere. 'Women have always been concerned with the home' (Houghton, 341) but where mothers pre-nineteenth century contributed to the economy, nineteenth-century mothers almost completely lost their lives in the public spheres and could only pursue activities that were morally justified such as charity and church work.

The cause of this setback in freedom and confinement to the mother's domestic situation was the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution and accompanying progress introduced an era of prosperity and increasing wealth that induced a 'reorientation of the masculine attitude' (343). The nineteenth century showed a decline in active and productive women as the new prosperous nation was fondly embraced:

> the nation's increasing wealth and the growing complexity of the mercantile economy required a special kind of managerial expertise which supposedly was a peculiarly masculine gift. At the same time, prosperity among tradesmen and skilled artisans, often accompanied by a separation of business premises from the home, encouraged the detachment of women from the money-making world, and they began to aspire to a state of gentility devoid of responsibility (Altick, 51).

The Industrial Revolution had taken a lot of work out of the hands of mothers and wives that had enabled them to take part in public life. Basic upper and middle class family needs were fulfilled by servants and because of industrialisation a growing number of objects and commodities that were 'formerly produced in the household' (52) were now available in shops.

Next to these domestic consequences that kept mothers from participating in the public sphere, the industrial revolution also had a social influence. The nation had required wealth and wanted to display it. This display of wealth was not only done by buying luxurious commodities and real estate but also through the 'powerful concept of refinement' (51). For upper and middle class mothers this meant that their lives were brought back to being 'decoratively futile' (51). When they were part of the higher gentry they were accomplished attendants at dinner parties and supported male self respect and honour based on their aesthetic qualities, social graces and opulence. If men were not able to keep their wives out of the labour force society simply regarded this as a sign of lack of wealth and therefore lack of status. Keeping the wife out of the labour force was a basic aspect of showing wealth. Hired staff that kept the house added to the status of the mother-wife as an object in the house and a decorative accessory on her husband's arm when he desired her to be just that. It reduced her life to paying social visits and roaming society for proper connections regarding possible

future marriages. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier acts as an example of this type of decorative wife. That this type of life does not always change the character of the mother for the better can be seen in Henry James's *The Awkward Age* (1899) in which the Duchess and Mrs Brookenham both try to secure their own future by trying to connect their relatives with the rich Mitchy.

The primal function of the wife next to being a decorative object in the house was that she had to fulfil her marital role by becoming a mother. Men regarded themselves as superior to women in every way except for the feminine aspect, which is the ability to bear children. Although it was only in this role that she was not regarded inferior to man, at the same time this role kept her confined to the house. It was expected of a woman to become a mother and if she had become a mother to devote herself completely to this particular task, if possible within the ranges of refinement and aestheticism. Quite a number of 'Victorian novelists were certainly not immune to the prevalent propaganda; celebrations of contented mothering are frequent in the fiction of the time' (Manheimer, 532). The situation of contented mothering in itself is a positive situation as long as it is what a woman wants. Madame Ratignolle in *The Awakening* shows that a mother can indeed be perfectly content with her mother-role. Although women were expected to become mothers, they still had their say in marriage when it came to the matter of having children. Children were an expression of consent and acknowledgement within marriage, an 'erotic satisfaction of marital love – enhanced as they are by abstinence before, and restraint during the ideal marriage (and one aspect of this restraint, [...] is the right of the wife to decline intercourse unless she feels desire)' (Mason, 13).

The reduced influence of the mother on public life resulted in a situation in which the Victorian mother looked for ways to use her influence elsewhere. Even though her economic influence was generally little, her social influence could be substantial when she was part of

the middle and upper-middle classes. This social influence involved securing the social acceptance and future of her children as well as her own by preparing possible socially correct marriages, just as Mrs Brookenham does in *The Awkward Age*; who desperately tries to secure her daughter's future, so that she herself can have the affair she wants for herself.

By the end of the nineteenth century women were having increasing difficulties with the marital limitations. These limitations were of a legal and social nature. The legal implications of the marital state stimulated female repression within marriage. To all women, and even more to mothers, applied that 'whatever their social rank, in the eyes of the law women were second-class citizens' (Altick, 57). The best known historical fact concerns women's right to vote. The struggle for suffrage was a long process that lasted from 1832 well into the twentieth century. The majority of men in England got the vote in the early 1880s but it was only by the end of the nineteenth century that women gained the right to vote in local elections and 'only in 1918 did women win participation in national elections' (57). This inequality can be added to other inequalities that particularly applied to married women and that kept the mothers in their submissive role. These inequalities had to do with the custody of children, divorce possibilities, and possession of personal property before and after marriage.

Well into the nineteenth century, 'until 1839' (58), mothers in England had no custody rights at all. As Richard Altick shows, custody matters changed during the Victorian period. 'Until 1839 a woman who was separated from her husband, regardless of the reason, lost custody of their children' (58). In 1839, just two years after Queen Victoria had ascended the throne, the law was changed and in the case of a separation allowed the mother to 'retain those under seven' (58). It was not until 1873 that 'the age was raised to sixteen; (58). By then the children were already almost adults and in some cases able to earn their own living. At first sight these legal changes seemed a positive development for the children's well-being. However, in the light of the woman's legal inability to hold on to most of her possessions, the

Infants Custody Act of 1886 ‘made the welfare of the children the determining factor in deciding questions of custody’, as written in the document *Women and the Law in Victorian England*, so even then the father could remain sole legal guardian during his lifetime if the mother was unable to offer the children decent living circumstances. The result of inadequate custody regulations was not just painful for the mother. In the end it was the child that suffered the most as is clearly portrayed in James’s *What Maisie Knew*, in which Maisie is essentially abandoned by both her biological parents, is growing up without a stable home, and does not recognise the awkwardness of her situation.

The second aspect that stresses marital inequality concerns the ability to get a divorce. Next to the fact that getting divorced was regarded as socially unacceptable and that social consequences were severe, it was legally almost impossible for a woman to divorce her husband. Before The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 it was a costly and time-consuming activity for the husband to divorce his wife, not to mention the impossibility for the wife to divorce her husband. Divorce was ‘condemned except in the most intolerable circumstances’ (Altick, 58) and was ‘possible only by means of an act of Parliament introduced for the individual case’ (58). The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act seemed merely designed to make it less difficult for a man to divorce his wife but not the other way around. As in many other instances ‘the balance of justice was tipped toward the ruling party. A husband could divorce his wife on the simple ground of adultery, but a wife had to prove not only her husband’s adultery but also an additional offense such as desertion, cruelty, rape, or incest’ (58). ‘There was no provision for consensual divorce, so the divorce granted Jude and Sue in *Jude the Obscure* would have been invalid since they were not in fact adulterous’ (qtd. in Women and the Law in Victorian England). The social implications of a divorce had not changed, and it was still condemned. This situation remained unchanged throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and was only altered in 1923 ‘when the grounds of divorce were

made the same for both sexes' (qtd. in Women and the Law in Victorian England). The act of 1923 only concerns the grounds for divorce and does not specify change in ownership of pre-marital possessions of the wife.

Lack in ownership of objects and property is a final aspect of marital inequality. To Victorian women 'property ownership was quite literally a fiction under British law' (Wynne, 143). The mother-wife in any marriage had practically no legal possessions. As soon as she got married she was 'covered or protected by her husband' (143) and seen as a unity. Only in this unity there was no balance of power. As a result of being a '*feme covert'* (Wynne, 143), as this was termed under the common law, everything she owned was transferred to the ownership of the husband. 'Married women had no independent legal existence' (143) and she was therefore 'not able to retain her own property or earnings, sign a contract, or make a will; neither was she responsible for her debts' (143). For the well to do, transfer of wealth could be avoided by putting money for future inheritance in a trust since a trust did not fall under the ownership of the husband. This legal construction of coverture seemed the ultimate instrument of a mother's dependency within marriage. All was covered under the blanket of love but according to one critic, 'love is the mask used to disguise transactions involving power; it is the ideological bone thrown to women to distract their attention from the powerlessness of their lives' (Himmelfarb, 5). Surely, marriage was an ideal situation to many women and many women found love within marriage but within marriage the balance of social and mostly legal power was in favour of the men. Only after the passing of two Married Women's Property Acts, in 1870 and 1882, women could control their own earnings and property but damage had already been done and the majority of all property was owned by men. This became the new situation because the act was not retroactive. In *The Spoils of Poynton*, Henry James describes how women may behave when they are caught up in this powerless situation, using the example of Mrs Gereth, who tries everything within her power

to hold on to her beloved Poynton Park with all its antique treasures. Inheritance laws made the first born man of the deceased the legal heir and gave the heir legal powers to evict the widowed mother from the property.

All this shows that the marital situation included a number of limitations on the mother's side. The next three chapters deal with three particular situations in which the ideology of the times influenced the lives of mothers. Chapter Two discusses career options for mothers in late Victorian society through analysis of *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Chapter Three analyses the influence of inequality of the inheritance system on a mother's behaviour in *The Spoils of Poynton*, and Chapter Four discusses the effects of society on a mother's behaviour by analysing *The Awakening*.

Chapter 2 The Influence of Career Choice on the Perception of Motherhood in *Mrs Warren's Profession*.

After a first reading of just the play it seems easy to state that George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* only concerns the relationship between mother and daughter but leaving it at that would not do the play justice. As stated in his 1902 'Preface' to the play, Shaw did not write plays for mere amusement and his critical views on contemporary society were not just a form of expressing his feelings of discontent. He wrote his plays 'with the deliberate object of converting the nation' (Weintraub, 49) and in the process he did not shy away from any immoral topic. As he said himself:

> I am not an ordinary playwright in general practice. I am a specialist in immoral and heretical plays. My reputation has been gained by my persistent struggle to force the public to reconsider its morals. In particular, I regard much current morality as to economic and sexual relations as disastrously wrong (49).

His ideas about morality were incorporated in a number of his plays such as *Widower's Houses* (1892) and *Mrs Warren's Profession.* To him a play appeared the obvious medium to convey his ideas. This was in part because the theatre audience consisted 'predominantly of the professional middle class' (McDonald, 31), a class in a society that Shaw thought was responsible for the poor socio-economic situation of the working class and a group 'most likely to yield tangible results in improving the status quo' (31).

Shaw was a leading member of the Fabian Society, 'a society founded in 1884 consisting of socialists' (OED) and was in his own way 'extremely influential in the development and dissemination of socialist and progressive ideas in Britain and beyond for over half a century' (Griffith, ix). Part of his ideas dealt with the influence of the economic

situation on sexual inequality. To Shaw ‘equality between the sexes was an essential component of socialism itself’ (166). He explicitly condemned sexual inequality and believed that men should acknowledge that ‘mankind is male and female, like other kinds, and that the inequality of the sexes is literally a cock and bull story’ (165). He was a firm believer that ‘dissimilarities between the sexes were the product of convention’ (165). Furthermore he rejected ‘traditional male idealization of women as paragons of virtue, as dutiful, self-sacrificing wives and daughters capable only of managing the immediate problems of domestic life’ (165) and did not believe that ‘man pretends that his soul finds its supreme satisfaction in self-sacrifice’ (165). Although Mrs Warren sacrifices the mother-child bond by keeping Vivie away from her professional life, she never sacrifices her own life completely by stopping her business activities when there is no longer a financial need for it.

One of his consistent arguments for sexual equality was the need for economic independence for women and in particular working-class women. Working-class women and children worked under abominable circumstances and at the same time received the lowest pay. The money these women earned was not sufficient for living a decent independent life. Married women were economically dependent on their husbands and women who were not married had to look for other options to earn enough money in order to break free from poverty.

One other option for women to earn enough money was to work as a prostitute. In a society that valued morality and virtue it is remarkable to see that quite a number of women turned to the immoral activities of prostitution to retrieve extra income because they saw no other way to survive in any decent job and because there was a demand for it. ‘London, ports and army towns held the highest number of prostitutes’ (Bartley, 4). In 1871 ’40 percent of single women aged fifteen to twenty-nine, who resided alone in lodgings in Plymouth were registered prostitutes’ (Walkowitz, 154). London police prosecution statistics from 1896 show

that ‘7, 537 women were put on trial for prostitution’ (Bartley, 2). The police records only give an indication of the number of prostitutes. The actual number was probably higher but ‘either because they were comparatively law abiding or because of evident police or other protection, they were not recorded’ as prostitutes (Finnigan, 17). ‘As there was virtually no female equivalent of the prosperous male artisan, prostitution occurred because of the inadequacy of women’s wages in relation to their needs’ (Bartley, 7). It can even be said that ‘prostitution was based on the inequitable distribution of wealth: it needed one section of the community, namely men, to have enough surplus money to be able to afford to pay for the sexual services of another section of the community, namely women, who were financially less well off’ (9). It was not the immorality of prostitution but the immorality of the economic situation that led these women to prostitution, and it was the injustice of this that drove Shaw to write *Mrs Warren’s Profession*; or as one critic writes: ‘The play critiqued the ideological and economic system that produced the prostitute, attacking the problematic double standard of male privilege and the deeply entrenched objectification of women’ (Dierkes-Thrun, 293).

The Lord Chamberlain’s Office that dealt with theatre censorship saw the situation differently. It was not as concerned with the economic criticism displayed in the play as Shaw was. Its main focus on *Mrs Warren’s Profession* concerned the immoral aspects of implied prostitution. The Office believed one should not write about such matters, no matter what their causes were. The Lord Chamberlain thought that *Mrs Warren’s Profession* idealized prostitution and that it portrayed prostitution as a means for women to become wealthy. Even though the words prostitution or prostitute were never actually used in the play, the implication that it was about prostitution was enough reason for the conservative Lord Chamberlain’s Office to censor the play, despite Shaw’s note on the title page stating that this play was ‘designed to give an extremely disagreeable, but much needed, shock to the conscience of the public in a matter of deep social importance’ (Conolly, 50).

In his preface Shaw denies that he idealized any immoral activities, arguing that 'no normal woman would be a professional prostitute if she could better herself by being respectable, nor marry for money if she could afford to marry for love' (Shaw, 181). He also refers to Mrs Warren's profession as 'White Slave Traffic' (182) that was poorly dealt with legislatively, indicating that it was not his intention to approve of prostitution. Later on in the play he emphasizes it again when Mrs Warren says, 'Do you think I did what I did because I liked it, or thought it right, or wouldn't rather have gone to college and been a lady if I'd had the chance' (246). Even though Mrs Warren states it so clearly, to the Lord Chamberlain the play was still regarded as immoral simply because of the subject matter. An altered version of the play that did pass for licence in March 1898 proves this. This licence referred to the 'mutilated copy with the second act omitted and Mrs Warren converted into a female Fagin.' (Conolly, 52). It is in all these lines that Shaw proves that the Lord Chamberlain's Office either missed the meaning of *Mrs Warren's Profession* completely or felt attacked in its beliefs because it was part of a government body that was part of the establishment.

Shaw is very outspoken in his preface when it comes to the censorship activities of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. He finds their power 'despotic and even supermonarchical' (Shaw, 181) and their short-sighted acts on censorship the reason that 'legislators and journalists were not better instructed' (182) about these social immoralities. He was convinced that proper audiences consisting of people who had seen the harrowing poverty from up close such as 'clerical members of the Christian Social Union and of women well experienced in Rescue, Temperance, and Girls' Club work' (183) would understand *Mrs Warren's Profession*. These groups saw the effects of the social economic immoralities and would agree with Shaw that the problem and the fight against this problem needed a different approach; otherwise any battle against prostitution would be a losing one.

However, to get his message across to the public Shaw needed to get *Mrs Warren's Profession* into the theatre. Getting the play staged in public theatres seemed impossible because the Lord Chamberlain's Office would not give a licence for a play. It was not only the Lord Chamberlain who deemed the play to be immoral; following the official judgement, J.T. Grein, founder of the Independent Theatre Society was one of the first (followed by many) who 'disappointed Shaw by rejecting his play because of its subject matter' (Conolly, 47). Grein would have been able to stage a private production of the play and would not have needed a licence in order to do so because his company was independent. After a number of rejections in England, Ireland and the United States, the play staged eventually at the New Lyric Club in a private Sunday performance by the Stage Society in 1902. J.T. Grein's comments after the performance are characteristic of those parts of society that did not want to understand the tone and subject of the play. He mentioned to the newspaper theatre critic that the play 'was not fit for women's ears; its representation was unnecessary and painful', and the 'problem it raises is neither vital nor important' (56). These private performances were attended by affluent, middle-class people. Grein seems part of that social group in which women did not have to work because of poverty. Again, little was said about the social and economic aspects of the play and when they are touched upon they are not considered important.

To Shaw these social and economic aspects were important. He wanted to draw 'attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together' (Shaw, 181). Society could be seen as a 'bully who lives on the earnings of a woman's immorality in getting cheap commodities' (Bartley, 7). The majority of the group of working-class women who resorted to prostitution did it to escape extreme poverty. Socially it

made them less acceptable than working-class people with an underpaid, undervalued but morally acceptable job, and a cause of many problems. In a society in which morality and virtuous living were thought of as important and feasible aspects of everyday life, people wanted to have a scapegoat for their shattered ideals caused by the increasing number of prostitutes. They wanted it to be every immoral woman's own choice and own fault that they had become the person they were; in this way the problem could not be blamed on society.

The 'guilt of Mrs Warren's Profession' (Shaw, 200), however, was not to be thrown on Mrs Warren or any other woman considered to be immoral. Shaw wanted 'to throw that guilt on the British public itself' (201). It was because of the poor social economic system that so many women resorted to prostitution, whether these women had a strong character or not. That is also the reason why Mrs Warren is described as a strong woman. In his description of Mrs Warren, Shaw shows it was not just the emotionally weak and 'feeble-minded' that became prostitutes (Bartley, 14). On the contrary, Mrs Warren is described as a strong business woman who knows what the source of power is; as she herself says, 'Knowledge is power and I never sell power' (Shaw, 229). What she does sell is economic weakness by letting prostitutes work for her. Most of them are prostitutes because they want to escape poverty just as Mrs Warren did when she started working in prostitution. Maintaining her business and earning money at the expense of these prostitutes might make her a supporter of the iniquitous social system that keeps her business flourishing. She knows it's wrong but the fear of having to live in poverty again and growing old alone is more potent than her moral conscience. She acts within 'her limits as a human being' (Edgar, xix) and makes her choices on the basis of life experience.

Shaw wanted to make clear that initially Mrs Warren's choices were circumstantial and a result of social conditions. He succeeds in that by letting Vivie be the bourgeois voice of inexperienced youth when she says to her mother that

> Everybody has some choice, mother. The poorest girl alive may not be able to choose between being Queen of England or Principal of Newnham; but she can choose between ragpicking and flowerselling, according to her taste. People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them (Shaw, 246)

Her reaction may be seen as naive and pretentious but Vivie is a product of her environment. She has no knowledge or experience of what poverty actually entails and understands her mother's situation therefore differently. To her that situation was about free choice and the improper activities of her mother. Vivie formulates the thoughts of a well-to-do society but society is put back in its place by Mrs Warren's reaction: 'Oh, it's easy to talk, very easy, isn't it?' (246). The audience is left wondering whether they have been judgmental after Mrs Warren discloses to her daughter where she came from and explaining the circumstances that led her to becoming a prostitute. In doing so Shaw made Mrs Warren a human being with all her flaws, doubts and good intentions. He did not make her a villain because of her profession although that was expected by society. Her profession is a result of her economic situation but does not define who she is. She merely wanted to escape from the poor situation she was living in and since she was a working-class woman looking for a job in an 'overstocked labour market' (Bartley, 7) not many options were open to her. Just like her younger half-sisters, she tried to earn her money in a morally acceptable way, but these waitressing jobs were dead-end jobs that kept her alive but did not give her any prospects for the future. It is in the descriptions of the morally acceptable jobs of Mrs Warren and her half-sisters that Shaw shows the immorality of the economic situation. One of her younger half-sisters 'worked in a whitelead factory twelve hours a day for nine shillings a week until she died of lead

poisoning' (Shaw, 247). Her sister knew it was bad for her health since 'she only expected to get her hands a little paralyzed' (247), but still remained working in the factory due to lack of other options.

Mrs Warren's other half-sister also experiences the downside of a moralistic society. This sister became a victim of the effects of alcohol used by her husband. He drank his wages, leaving little money for the family. As a result she descended to a life of poverty and although this was not socially acceptable, it was not regarded as immoral. Shaw thought otherwise and raised an ironic question that urged his audience to think: 'That was worth being respectable for, wasn't it?' (247).

Not just her sister's experiences help Mrs Warren make her choices but also her own work experience. In the years prior to the years when she was a prostitute Mrs Warren herself slaved 'fourteen hours a day serving drinks and washing glasses for four shillings a week' (248). It is her older sister Liz who is the critical voice of socialism when she says: 'What are you doing here, little fool? Wearing out your health and your appearance for other people's profit!' (248). It is another reference to the existing economic inequalities ruling at a time in which working-class people, and in this case women, were exploited because of a surplus of labourers due to industrialisation.

It seems that Mrs Warren uses her account of her upbringing to justify her life. It is only after she has justified her current profession that she can say, 'Why shouldn't I have done it?' (248). Her thoughts about her choice make her human. She knows her choice is immoral but 'the alternative offered by society collectively to poor women is a miserable life' (201), so it is not a matter of choosing between 'morality and immorality, but two sorts of immorality' (202). This almost turns *Mrs Warren's Profession* into a tragedy because both alternatives portray a 'disorder in society' (Peck, 107). However, it does not turn into a tragedy because of the professional success of Mrs Warren and her urge to survive in this

disordered society. By raising the question why she should not have done it she not only wants to receive understanding regarding her choice from her daughter, a person who only knows the moral side of life and never had any shortage of money, but she also makes the audience, and especially the Lord Chamberlain, uncomfortably aware of the distorted society of which they form a part.

Shaw's human approach to Mrs Warren is also what makes her a ″good″ or ″bad″ mother. At first glance it would be obvious to call her a ″bad″ mother based on her profession. However, it is not her profession itself that makes her a ″bad″ mother, but rather society that thinks she is a ″bad″ mother because of her profession. The sociologist Georg Simmel offers one possible explanation for this:

> The significance and the consequences that society attaches to the sexual relations between man and woman are correspondingly based on the presupposition that the woman gives her total self, with all its worth, whereas the man gives only a part of his personality in the exchange. Society therefore denies to a girl who has once gone astray her whole reputation (Simmel, 378)

Mrs Warren shows that whether or not a person is a ″good″ mother depends on more than the profession she has. Her daughter's remark concerning her mother's physical absence during her childhood years reinforces this sense of Mrs Warren as a ″bad″ mother. In Act I, Vivie refers to it when talking to Pread, as she tries to find out what her mother is like and says, 'don't imagine I know anything about my mother. I know far less than you do' (Shaw, 219). In Act II she questions if Mrs Warren is her mother: 'Are you my mother?' (244). It is as if she does not acknowledge her as her mother even though she knows that Mrs Warren is her mother. The only way Vivie knows her mother is through her money. Mrs Warren's money had always been present where Mrs Warren herself was not. It seems that Mrs Warren approaches both her professional and private life from a monetary point of view. She sells her

own body while being a prostitute, sells other bodies while she manages the brothels on the continent, and displays her affection for her daughter in monetary terms as well by making sure Vivie does not lack anything materially and is able to attend a good school. The fact that Vivie has a difficult time acknowledging her mother should be seen as a child's reaction to the long periods of physical absence of her mother during her formative years. That would make Mrs Warren a ″bad″ mother indeed.

Looking at the situation from Mrs Warren's point of view whether or not she is a ″bad″ mother is a different story. Shaw deceives the audience because there is much more to Mrs Warren than is contained in Vivie's image of her, an image that largely reflects a difficult mother-child relationship. Mrs Warren takes care of her daughter. This is clearly present in all the protective remarks a mother would make concerning the well-being of her child, such as, 'Vivie: put your hat on dear: you'll get sunburnt' (221), and when she introduces Vivie to Sir George Croft as 'my little Vivie' (221). Mrs Warren's protective behaviour continues in her conversation with Frank in the beginning of Act II when she warns him about any false intentions he might have with Vivie: 'I won't have any young scamp tampering with my little girl' (232). The lines add to Shaw's sympathetic portrayal of Mrs Warren.

What makes Mrs Warren a ″good″ mother is the fact that she wants to offer her daughter a better life. She knows that society deems her occupation immoral and therefore keeps her past a secret to her daughter. She realises that she cannot bring her daughter to Brussels or Vienna if she wants to give her a respectable upbringing. These two cities had a reputation for facilitating prostitution and were where Mrs Warren had her brothels. Staying with her mother in one of the cities where Mrs Warren conducted her business would increase the risk that Vivie might come into contact with the social world her mother lived and worked in. Not only would living with her mother in Brussels or Vienna risk tainting or compromising Vivie's reputation, Vivie would also constitute a risk to her mother's

anonymity. Mrs Warren uses the pseudonym Miss Vavasour for herself just as other prostitutes used pseudonyms 'to conceal their legal names from the authorities' (Rivers, 175). She wants to protect her daughter from the professional world she lives in and all the criticism that come with it because she knows that the world she lives in is immoral. Mrs Warren wants to give her daughter a chance to have a better life despite the sacrifice both mother and daughter have to make by not seeing each other regularly. The sacrifice Mrs Warren makes affects the relationship with her daughter permanently and could even be seen as the root of Vivie's New Woman-inspired thoughts and behaviour since Vivie has to learn to be independent when her mother is on the continent for business.

Vivie is the embodiment of the New Woman. She is 'the sexually independent' woman who 'criticized society's insistence on marriage as woman's only option for a fulfilling life' (Showalter, 38). She proves herself to be free-spirited, independent, educated, and career-minded; moreover, she enjoys the pleasures of smoking and drinking, activities that were commonly regarded as unfeminine. In her judgements she is outspoken about the activities of the Victorian bourgeois woman and thinks of her as being a 'waster, shifting along from one meal to another with no purpose, and no character' (Shaw, 238). Her reaction can be described as a reaction given by the young and inexperienced who are quick to judge as she mentions that she would 'open an artery and bleed to death without one moment's hesitation' if she had to live a life like that (238). She aspires to being independent of a man focusing on a career. She wants to work and when she is tired of working she likes 'a comfortable chair, a cigar, a little whisky, and a novel with a good detective story in it' (218). However, as Kibard points out 'she is not so much a New Woman but a man in drag' (Kibard, 61). 'Her clothes, her cigarettes, her assumption of the dominant position behind the desk in the last act, her dismissal of cultural interests, her pain-inflicting handshake, and her over-assertive independence demonstrate that she has cultivated the external behavioural attitudes

of masculinity so that she becomes a male caricature' (McDonald, 34). Precisely because Shaw was a supporter of the New Woman, he presents Vivie as a caricature of the bachelor and his desires to ridicule male domination in society and to emphasise that it has to end. Women were not supposed 'to ape masculinity, but to demonstrate its insufficiency' (Griffith, 162). In her reaction to her mother's question as to what sort of woman she is, Vivie exaggerates the male insufficiency and makes herself less credible. Vivie desperately wants to demonstrate her ability to be independent and even suggests that only women matter in society as she replies to her mother that she hopes she is the sort of woman 'the world is mostly made of'(Shaw, 245) because that is the sort of woman that gets the world's business done. In all her progressive thinking this remark is part of a naive enthusiasm which may be thought to be a characteristic of inexperienced youth in which she only takes the female side into account and rejects male interference or opinion. Shaw illustrates this in the discussion Vivie has with Frank concerning their relationship: 'I think brother and sister would be a very suitable relation for us'; 'It's the only relation I care for, even if we could afford any other' (271).

Besides the personal reasons why Vivie considers her mother to be a ″bad″ mother, Vivie also thinks of her as a failure in this regard because Mrs Warren represents old Victorian thinking. It is not because her mother was a prostitute but the fact that her mother continues the line of business that is related to old Victorian thinking that enabled the exponential growth of prostitution. In her quest for independence Vivie wants to set herself free from a society that 'offered only two possible images for women. They might be either the idealized wife and mother, the angel in the house, or the debased, depraved, corrupt prostitute' (Kent, 60), and her mother supports both. Her mother caters to the needs of the husbands of idealized wives and mothers and at the same time supports the socio-economic

system by keeping her brothels open and her prostitutes at work. Only when Vivie turns away from this society and therefore her mother will she be able to live her life as a New Woman.

Although Vivie regards her mother as part of old Victorian society, Mrs Warren could actually be seen as an early version of the New Woman without her realising it. She is the independent woman who runs her own business but who does not lose her femininity in the process of acting as an equal to men. Mrs Warren even expresses her regret about being a mother: 'No woman ever had luck with a mother's curse on her' (Shaw, 285). In this way, she represents the radical New Woman who is opposed to motherhood.

With all her human flaws and good intentions Mrs Warren is both an inadequate mother and a caring mother. Victorian society finds Mrs Warren a ″bad″ mother because of her immoral profession, while her own daughter finds her a ″bad″ mother because of what Mrs Warren represents and supports in terms of old Victorian thinking. She is a product of the Victorian social-economic climate and should not be judged as she is by society and by her daughter. Her decisions are based on the need to survive and her willingness to sacrifice herself for her daughter. In the end Mrs Warren knows she can only be the ″good″ mother in the eyes of society and her daughter if she lets her daughter lead her own life and therefore she lets her daughter go.

Chapter 3 James's Critique on Inheritance Laws in *The Spoils of Poynton*

Negative portrayal of the mother in *The Spoils of Poynton* is not, as is the case in *Mrs Warren's Profession*, related to socio-economic inequality but rather shows the influence of the English legal system concerning property inheritance on a mother's behaviour. Due to the English legal system, Mrs Gereth is about to lose the house and all the portable property she collected during her marriage with Mr. Gereth to her son and his fiancée Mona Brickstock, 'a woman lacking in aesthetic sensibilities and incapable of appreciating the collection' (Mills, 670). Losing the house and its objects would not just be a loss of material goods, but it would also be a setback for Mrs Gereth's 'social worth' (Altick, 134), as she will no longer be able to display her wealth and taste when she has to move to a small house called Ricks. She uses Fleda Vetch to prevent this scenario from happening. Fleda 'is a young artistic girl whom Mrs Gereth places in the impossible position of having to pursue her light-hearted son, who is himself pursued by the philistine Mona Brigstock' (Edel, 451). Mrs Gereth wants Fleda to become the new mistress of Poynton because the younger woman recognises the beauty of the collected objects just as she does. James initially wanted to write a novel about a dispossessed mother but as the novel evolves 'he removes Mrs Gereth from the center of the stage and puts Fleda in her place' (Edel, 451). Fleda is a character 'full of tensions and contradictions' (Baym, 102) and less innocent and self-less than one might initially perceive her to be. Just as Mrs Gereth has a motive for her behaviour, so does Fleda for her behaviour and Fleda's motives influence the negative representation of Mrs Gereth as a mother.

All the actions of the female characters in this novel are prompted by a legal system that treated women as if they were invisible. Reflecting other oppressive aspects of patriarchal society, despite the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1883 property inheritance in the late nineteenth century was still dominated by men. Before the passing of these acts,

property fell into male hands through marriage and through inheritance. If a woman was the heir of a property, and no other arrangements were made, it would change ownership to the husband if she got married. This did not only apply to real estate: ‘As far as a married woman’s personal property was concerned, all property that she possessed at the time of marriage and all that she acquired after marriage became her husband’s’ (Fiorato, 35).

With the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 it became easier for married women to inherit property or retain ownership after marriage. However, making property inheritance and ownership more accessible to women was not the main reason for establishing these laws but just seemed to be a side effect. As Jones points out, these Acts ‘never intended to absolutely equalize married women’s status vis-à-vis their husbands’. They just ‘recognized that women were vulnerable under the common law insofar as husbands’ rights to manage and control wives’ property evoked the possibility of seizure for their husbands’ debts’ (Jones, 92). Even though women were enabled to have ‘separate property that they could use in protecting themselves and their families’ (Jones, 92), substantial changes were not perceived in the short term. In fact, ‘in some jurisdictions, husbands retained full control as though the common law regime had not been changed’ (Jones, 92). Another aspect that did not boost the number of female property owners was that many properties had already transferred ownership to men before the new acts had been passed. Former regulations that prescribed transfer of property after marriage or death to the male subject had led to a situation where many of the properties were already owned by men. Therefore, as expected, quite some time passed before the number of property owning women increased.

James’s views on property inheritance were perhaps not so much affected by the inequality of the property inheritance. Although he finds that this type of inheritance was part of ‘the ugly English custom’ in which the mother is ‘deposed, turned out of the big house on

the son's marriage and relegated' (Edel, 79), the 'social setting is taken as a given. It is there only as a background against which James can see what his women will "do", how they will cope' (Stubb, 158). He had an 'active interest in the turmoil of the end-of-the-century English life' (Jacobsen, 1), but can be classified as an observer of reality rather than a radical activist. He was interested in how his characters would respond to this reality and he achieved this by building pressures into their situations or, as Richard Lyons puts it, James was 'a man in search of a society' and his work displays 'a tension between social ideals and their manifestation in social behaviour' (75).

The characters that are subject to these social pressures are often women. James's 'attitude towards his women is that he sees them and their problems as "interesting"' (Stubbs, 157). He is morally intrigued and recognises that their problems offer aesthetic possibilities. 'He never protests against the environment or its values because without them the very things he finds "interesting" could not exist – that is, the consciousness of leisured and sensitive men and women' (158). In *The Spoils of Poynton*, the strain between social ideals and their manifestation in social behaviour appears in the conflict caused by the inheritance of Poynton, the question of legal and moral ownership, and the women's behaviour as a result of that. Lyons suggests that 'It is thus the mother's situation as victim that James sees as representative and significant, not her passion for the chairs and tables, the cabinets and presses, the material odds and ends' (60). That is, however, only one aspect of her situation. The other aspect is the loss of beauty and refinement that Mrs Gereth is about to experience by having to give up all the objects. They represent not only a loss of social status but also the loss of aesthetic refinement when they are owned by people who do not appreciate its beauty. He exposed social wickedness by describing a reality to which the reader could relate. He 'depicted what Victorians termed the "Woman Question" as an undercurrent in much of his work' (Wynne, 142) and in *The Spoils of Poynton* the "Woman Question" is represented by

the subject of property inheritance and how it might impress itself on a woman's sense of identity.

Despite James' preference for reality it seems that the conflict that is described in the novel is 'deflected from an exposé of women's exclusion from property ownership onto a battle between women for the "spoils" that is, Poynton and its antiques' (144).This is, however, not the case. In describing this battle between the women James does not deflect from the topic of property ownership but in fact describes the painful reality of it for women and in particular mothers who have become widows. It is a reality in which women had to use social skills to secure their social and economic position because, despite the Married Women's Property Acts, legal means were not sufficient enough.

Although the novel revolves around three women who want to stay at Poynton and call it their home, none of them has ownership of the property. In their attempt to remain or become the mistress of Poynton all three women show a side of themselves that exposes their will to survive socially. In the middle of this power struggle stands Owen who is the legal owner of the property. He is Mrs Gereth's son but his relationship with his mother is never described as particularly warm. She seems to care more for her objects than for her son and it is as if she sees her objects more as her children than her actual son. There is a coolness between the two characters that indicates that the bond between mother and son has never been close, even though James does not specifically describe what caused the distance between them.

The cool relationship may support the belief that Mrs Gereth is a ″bad″ mother. Her dominant character produced a son who does not really act, and on many occasions does not know what to say. He rarely says 'more than an "Oh, it's all right" '(Faulkner, 142) and he is often incapable of expressing his thoughts in proper language, such as when he parts from Fleda after meeting in London and he is only able to utter, 'I want you to understand, you know – I

want you to understand' (James, 77). His verbal clumsiness 'disarms the reader' and makes him come 'off as the underdog, no match for the scheming women around him' (Faulkner, 143) and already places Mrs Gereth at a disadvantage, when it comes to the text establishing a negative perception of her.

But Owen is not as innocent as he appears. On several occasions, he manipulates Fleda. When he finds Fleda at Ricks after he discovers that his mother took most of the inventory of Poynton, Owen does not confront his mother with his discovery. Instead, he discusses the matter with Fleda and manipulates her into convincing his mother to return the objects, and lets Fleda know that if she does not succeed or is not willing to persuade his mother to return everything to Poynton that he will 'set the lawyers at her' (James, 93), meaning he'll sue his own mother. As Fleda replies with 'That's horrible!' (93), Owen can only acknowledge this when he confirms that this would be 'utterly beastly' (93), implying with this remark that he knows exactly what he is doing both to Fleda and to his mother. Owen also manipulates Fleda when it comes to helping him to 'get Mona to break off their engagement' (Faulkner, 144). He wants Fleda to make the decision for him as he asks her,'*Am* I to tell my solicitor to act' (James, 145). Being engaged at the time was taken much more seriously as a specific social status with obligations than is the case in present times. Since Fleda wants to do what is morally right she is incapable of doing what Owen asks of her, although she knows that Mona is only interested in Owen as the owner of Poynton and its complete inventory, and is indifferent to the beauty of the objects. Owen even mentions Mona's materialistic interest himself when he refers to Mona's behaviour after the objects have left Poynton when he says, 'She behaves as if I were of no use to her at all!' (143); in this way, he turns himself into a person who is not in control of the situation.

In all his actions, or rather lack of action, he represents a patriarchal society in which he acts as if he cannot be blamed, yet he sustains this type of society by acting the way he

does. It is because of his father that he legally owns Poynton and it is because of the legal system that he is allowed to evict his mother from Poynton. It is from his point of view that Mrs Gereth takes on the role of the ″bad″ mother when she decides to disrupt the status quo of the system by moving the things from Poynton to Ricks. Owen reacts because his 'structural support system comes into focus' (Faulkner, 145). It is a support system that is based on the values of a patriarchal society in which adjustment to this society is important and threatened in its existence. Up till then he had always been taken care of by patriarchal society. It is almost as if he uses the influence of such a society as an excuse and as if he wants to imply that he cannot help it that Mrs Gereth has to leave the house with all her personal belongings for him to enjoy.

Mrs Gereth is not just the victim of the situation. Legally she never owned Poynton so moving the furniture she collected from Poynton to Ricks make her actions illegal. She used to be mistress and although she has no legal rights to the objects in the house, her aesthetic and moral rights do make her the owner of the objects because contrary to Owen, Mrs Gereth possesses good taste and appreciates the beauty of the objects. Mr. Gereth left everything to his son even though 'he is under no obligation to do so' (Wynne, 15) because the Married Women's Property Acts had already been passed. During her marital life there was just 'an illusion of ownership' (15). Now that her husband is dead she has to 'fight against powers and forces, against the institutional pressures that maintain a shadowy presence behind the action: in the father's will, in the implicit marriage contract between Owen and Mona and, above all, in the threatened solicitors that Mona keeps urging Owen to set on her' (Lyons, 66). It becomes a fight in which the beauty of the objects themselves no longer seems to matter.

The only one who will have legal ownership of the property is Owen. He is also the only one who can change the situation for his mother but just like his father he remains a part of the 'institutional blindness' (Faulkner, 149). The fact that he does not change the situation

can be a result of his mother's view of him as a person with a 'monstrous lack of taste' who does not genuinely appreciate beauty and who suffers from 'exaggerated prudence' (James, 38). She finds that her son lacks character traits that she carefully developed herself during her marital life. He is the reason why she has to leave everything behind that gives her a 'sense of identity and rootedness in the world' (Wynne, 15). James describes her feelings as resembling those of someone forced to abandon her children: 'they're living things to me; they know me, they return the touch of my hand. [...] There's a care they want, there's a sympathy that draws out their beauty' (James, 53). She is not rooted in relation to people, but in relation to objects and by taking her personal properties away from her Owen takes away this identity and rootedness.

Owen does not only deprive Mrs Gereth from the objects that give her a sense of identity and aesthetic pleasure, but also makes her move to a smaller house. This places her social position in jeopardy because she is part of a society in which 'the purpose of acquisition is to produce a spectacular effect, a studious exhibition of expensiveness that demonstrates to others one's exemption from useful activity' (Otten, 263). As soon as Mrs Gereth leaves Poynton for Ricks she feels her social position is already declining; the 'first news [Fleda] had from Mrs Gereth was news of the lady's having accomplished, in form at least, her dread migration' (James, 73) and Mrs Gereth finds herself 'too savage and odious to be fit company' (James, 73) even for Fleda, a girl whose social position is lower than Mrs Gereth's position.

Mrs Gereth's emotional state in which she finds herself too savage and odious is, however, temporary. She takes all her precious objects from Poynton without asking permission. By taking the things from Poynton Mrs Gereth opposes the established system and without realising is, she shows characteristics of the New Woman who 'was young in the 1850s, when the feminist campaign for the reform of the married women's property laws

began in earnest' (Wynne, 146). By taking back what she believes is her property she tries to take back her identity. She wants to do everything in her power to achieve this no matter whom she hurts in the process. She tries to marry her son off to Fleda, an essentially good girl who has the same appreciation for beautiful objects and who is the type fit for a 'Paterian aesthetic response' 'in which the body and senses are utilised' (Mills, 676). In the meantime Mrs Gereth steals the objects she thinks are morally hers in order to secure that their beauty is not lost. She knows how to act independently and expresses that in her behaviour during the removal of the furniture from Poynton to Ricks. She states, 'I lifted tons with my own arms' (James, 83) indicating that she is not afraid to get her hands dirty in order to get what she wants; furthermore she shows authority when she asks three employees to help her without reporting her actions to her son. She did not ask them politely, but she 'marched up to them and looked each straight in the eye' (84) and lets them know she is the one in control. She actually feels empowered when she has moved the things to Ricks and informs Fleda: 'Magnificent both in her exhaustion and in her triumph she sank on the sofa again, the sweep of her eyes a rich synthesis and the restless friction of her hands a clear betrayal' (83). She is convinced that she made the right decision concerning the objects as she laughs and says 'they really look better here' (83). Her objects are back in a place where they are again appreciated for their beauty.

The tragic part is, however, that even though she seems in control at this point, she is actually 'trapped in the past; her old-fashioned husband makes a will which does not allow her to take advantage of the reformed property laws, and she is disinclined to enter public life' (Wynne, 146), in which she could have shared the beauty of and appreciation for the objects. Her victory is temporary because she knows that if she wants to have a chance of a socially acceptable life she has to return the things to Poynton where Mona will be the next mistress.

Together with Fleda, Mona is one of the characters who can either lead Mrs Gereth back to the property or permanently remove her from it. Mona forms a threat to Mrs Gereth and her objects. This is not only because she wants to possess that which gives Mrs Gereth her identity but because she wants to have them for superficial materialistic reasons and not for their beauty. It is as if Mona wants to take away Mrs Gereth's 'children' from her as she has already done with Owen. Although Mrs Gereth identifies every single object with beauty and grace, they also seem 'to take on meaning and value', because she uses the things to regain power over her situation. She 'identifies her own power with them so closely' that 'by refusing to give them up' she 'challenges Mona's dominion' and her independent spirit (Faulkner, 141).

Mona Brickstock turns out to be an elusive character. Although she is often spoken of, she rarely appears in person. She seems a New Woman who 'is intent on her rights' (Wynne, 146) but she acts conventionally. She wears 'patent-leather shoes, which resembled a man's' (James, 52) and seems only interested in the economic value of all the objects at Poynton. Her economic interest is also displayed in her threat to Owen when she says that if he does not 'get the things back, she won't have anything more to say to' him (102). Mona's actions show that she is confident and independent, bolstered as she is by her financial situation, though she uses these characteristics only to benefit herself. Despite the fact that she is not yet legally tied to Owen, she misuses the social obligations of the engagement and already makes him choose between herself and the relationship with his mother when she demands that the furniture returns to Poynton. She will have an opportunity to become the owner of the spoils because of enforcement of the new property laws. The only person who forms a threat is Fleda because she is a potentially marriage candidate for Owen. She is unattached, Owen likes her, and she has the 'aesthetic purity' that would 'make her a suitable heir' (Mills, 677) to Mrs Gereth's objects.

Fleda has none of the characteristics of the New Woman. In the beginning of the novel she seems to be the typical Victorian heroine. She is the 'Jamesian woman' who 'instinctively opts for fineness' (Stubbs, 162), unlike the New Woman who, in James's view, does not appreciate beauty. Her 'subordination of her feelings for Owen to her sense of the ″right″ thing to do' (Stubbs, 162) James sees as a beautiful act. As James puts in the preface to the novel, 'if I want beauty for her – beauty of action and poetry of effect, I can only, I think, find it just there; find it in making her heroic' (qtd. in Matthiessen, 217 in Stubbs, 162). James renders Fleda heroic by making her the only character who is not 'prepared to sacrifice someone else in order to gain' her 'own end. Fleda alone is willing to sacrifice no one but herself' (Roper, 196) and although this is admirable we may regard her self-sacrifice also as foolish and unwarranted.

Contrary to Mona, Fleda does not portray independent behaviour. She cannot afford the luxury to behave independently because she does not have the financial means to behave as Mona does, since Mona is already rich. She has been on a 'quest for security' (McLean, 14) for quite some time because people are talking about her situation. 'She learns from Maggie that "people were saying that she fastened like a leech on other people – people who had houses where something was to be picked up" ' (James, 73). Still, she 'is determined to make something big of her meeting with the Gereths' (McLean, 14), as she finds in them the possibility of living at Poynton. In her search for security she meets Mrs Gereth at Waterbath, family home of the Brigstocks, with whom she forms 'an alliance based on mutual distaste for their surroundings' (Mills, 672). Mrs Gereth sees in Fleda the perfect candidate to watch over the objects she has collected because she recognises that Fleda 'was dressed with an idea' that was real (James, 36). She believes that Fleda has taste and that she recognises the beauty and aesthetic value of the objects at Poynton. She wants Fleda to be her replacement at Poynton so she can watch over the objects as if they were Fleda's children. The only thing Fleda has to do

is to lure Owen away from Mona and marry him herself, and that should not be a difficult task because, despite his engagement, Owen actually prefers Fleda to Mona. However, Fleda believes in the moral good and does not 'base her morality on the assumption that the aesthetically aware should receive preferential treatment over the obtuse and the vulgar' (Roper, 196). The situation causes an internal moral struggle in Fleda. She does not want to interfere in Owen's engagement and cannot sacrifice others for her own gain. She really wants to be a good person but finds it difficult to see that beauty has fallen into the hands of those who cannot appreciate it for its own sake. Her moral conscience prevails when Fleda learns that most of the furniture is illegally with Mrs Gereth at Ricks. She decides to help Owen to get all the objects back, not just to safeguard her own self-image by acting 'nobly', but also because it is the moral and honest thing to do. The tragedy is that in the process of succeeding in her own Victorian goals of subordinating her feelings, she not only hurts Owen by rejecting him but also Mrs Gereth by taking away the opportunity from her to be a good caretaker, almost like a mother, to her objects if Fleda had married Owen. No matter how Fleda acts in her attempt to do the right thing, there will be unhappy consequences for somebody.

One thing that remains the same despite Fleda's attempts to do the right thing is the negative manifestation of motherhood that Mrs Gereth offers the reader. Property inheritance laws cause Mrs Gereth to adjust her behaviour and to turn into a ″bad″ mother towards her son in order for her to survive socially and retain her identity by keeping her things. She is also turned into a ″bad″ mother by pragmatic standards since she loves her spoils for their aesthetic representation and the ideal of completeness, and not for their economic value. Her 'maternal feelings' shifted 'to the things and Mrs Gereth is described as the "great queen-mother" of the collection' (Mills, 677),' and what mother would not fight for her children despite what the perception of her behaviour is by others. Mrs Gereth calls Fleda's action,

‘“incredible folly,” “idiotic perversity,” and finally the “insanity of a passion that bewilders a young blockhead with bugaboo barriers, with hideous and monstrous sacrifices” ’ (Baym, 110). It is with these expressions that she condemns not only the attitude towards mothers and property inheritance issues but also the declining importance of interest in aesthetic responses.

Chapter 4 A Mother's Search for Identity in *The Awakening*

The maternal character in *The Spoils of Poynton* is perhaps not the main character and Mrs Warren in *Mrs Warren's Profession* shared centre-stage with her daughter Vivie; however, there is no doubt that in *The Awakening* the mother, Edna Pontellier, is the protagonist. Edna Pontellier is 'a young wife and mother who refuses to be caged by married and domestic life and claims for herself moral and erotic freedom', as Sandra Gilbert writes on the back cover of the Penguin edition of the novel. During this process she also claims her freedom from her maternal duties. She marries a wealthy Louisiana businessman and does her marital duty by giving birth to two sons. She spends her summers at Grand Isle, Louisiana, together with women from other well-to-do southern families, doing little to nothing, and her winters in New Orleans where she is supposed to follow the social conventions in order to uphold the position of her husband's social status. In addition to supporting her husband, her purpose in life should be to attend to the needs of her two children; however, the quadroon nurse looks after the children and follows them around wherever they go. Edna does not mind that somebody else performs this task. As Edna is not occupied with nursing her children, she has time to reflect on her life, on who she is and how others perceive her. The people around Edna all represent an identity that Edna either wants to embrace or distance herself from, and as such they contribute in some form to Edna's awakening. Her husband Léonce Pontellier represents oppressive society, Madame Ratignolle is the embodiment of motherhood, Mademoiselle Reisz is the respected artist, and Alcée Arobin and Robert Le Brun are her romantic lovers.

Chopin describes Edna's awakening in a 'highly original style and voice' (Nolan, 118) that differs from her earlier work, which had, according to reviews, 'focused on the 'quaintness', 'charm' and distinctly regional flavour of the writing and had positioned her

firmly within the framework of local colour fiction' (Nolan, 118). With *The Awakening* Chopin established an 'impressionistic narrative' with 'lyrical, sensuous prose, symbolism' and 'focus on the inner consciousness of its heroine' (Nolan, 118). Chopin's description of Edna's time in Grand Isle shows a natural realism that lets the reader feel the humidity of summer and her broiling need to break free and find her identity. In order to avoid narrative longueurs, Chopin frames and explores Edna's moments of epiphany. These epiphanies push the narrative forward and bring Edna closer to the identity she wants to embrace.

In order to find her own identity, her 'authentic' self, and to achieve freedom she believes she has to release herself from the role that society determines as being her identity, her social self, namely her role as wife and mother. She cannot identify with motherhood because she feels that this particular identity diminishes her 'authentic' self. Society only allows her one identity and since she has become a mother, there is no possible alternative. In search of her true identity she takes on different roles but in the end 'she comes to reject in succession the various social roles available to her: whether that of wife, mother, woman of society, artist and/or lover' (Ramos, 149). However, the relationship of motherhood as a biological fact to its place as a socially and culturally understood position complicates this. No matter how hard she tries to reject the mother role, Edna will not be able to reject her role as mother completely because biologically she will remain a mother whether or not she rejects the social role.

Not just her biological status as a mother determines her role but also society itself. Edna is part of a social class that is much concerned with social status. This social class is called the 'leisure class', a term made current by the economist Thorstein Veblen near the end of the nineteenth century. It is a society in which ownership plays an important role. Ownership in this respect does not just involve ownership of property and things, but also 'the ownership of women' legally in marriage and extending 'itself to include the products of their

industry, and so there arises the ownership of things as well as of persons' (Veblen, 21). Ownership reflects the amount of wealth and 'the possession of wealth confers to honour' (Veblen, 22). Edna is less occupied with honour than is her husband Léonce. She feels oppressed by this society of the leisure class to which she and Léonce belong and gradually she shows resistance. Ann Heilmann suggests that 'In the early stages of the novel, Edna engages in passive resistance' but 'after her spiritual and physical arousal to music and swimming, she becomes overtly defiant of her husband's demands: "her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She [...] denied and resisted"' (94).

In her resistance to her husband and society Edna gradually becomes a representative of the New Woman. She defies the compulsory aspect of motherhood and can only enjoy motherhood when it is 'no longer dictated by custom but imparted freely and willingly' (Heilmann, 97). She is genuinely happy when she sees her children but only on her own terms and when she feels more liberated: 'How glad she was to see the children! She wept for very pleasure when she felt their little arms clasping her [...]. She lived with them a whole week long, giving them all of herself, and gathering and filling herself with their young existence' (Chopin, 151). Chopin only describes how the children satisfy Edna's feelings and does not say much about the children's feelings in themselves. So even when she enjoys certain aspects of motherhood, Edna is still portrayed as a self-directed character. Her children are only there for the moment and are not a part of her search for identity because as soon as she leaves them they fade into the background: 'All along the journey homeward their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul. She was alone again' (152). Another aspect of the New Woman is her opposition to marriage. Just like many New Women, Edna also opposes marriage and the married life. Léonce tells Dr. Mandelet that she refuses to go to her sister's wedding: 'She won't go to the marriage. She says a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on

earth' (118). As 'she began to do as she liked and feel as she liked' (107), she left the marital home on Esplanade Street. It is this type of life that she no longer accepts as her life and therefore she turns away from the life style as well as from her husband: 'It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui' (107).

The root of Edna's representation of the New Woman was formed in her younger years. In her younger years Edna's father's perception of fatherhood influenced her thoughts on motherhood. She is raised by her father, a former colonel in the Confederate army and figure of Southern masculinity, and her 'two uneffusive sisters' (Seyersted, 134), in absence of a mother who died when she was still a little girl. This may give an insight into why she is 'not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others' (61) and why motherhood does not interest her. She has fatherhood as an example and her father was similarly not taken by being a parent, as can be read in the scene where the omniscient narrator sketches his portrait: 'He resented the intrusion of the children [...]. When they drew near he motioned them away with an expressive action of the foot' (121). Edna's father could only be a distant father to her, while her sister Margaret assumed the practical maternal responsibilities. The affectionate quality present in a mother that would give Edna the ability to express her affection disappeared from her life and the male influence primarily remained. Her father 'had bequeathed to all of his daughters the germs of a masterful capability, which only depended upon their own efforts to be directed toward successful achievement' (120). It is this 'masculine' capability that may lead us to see her as a New Woman and also helps her in the process of breaking free from motherhood as dictated by society. Women were supposed to take care of the children while men went into the public world, just as Edna had to take care of the children while Léonce was in New York and

Robert in Mexico pursuing a career. Because Edna also wants to pursue her desires, her actions can therefore be tagged as male.

Due to the lack of a mother figure during her childhood, any expression of motherly love seems unattainable for Edna. Pursuing the unattainable turns out to be a recurring project for Edna. Growing up she had an interest in men who were all unattainable. She was too young for the cavalry officer; the young man in Mississippi was engaged to be married to another woman; and the great tragedian was considered an unsuitable partner because of his occupation: a man who devoted his life to the arts could not adjust to the married life. Léonce Pontellier is the man she finally marries but 'her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident' (62). She is not as passionately in love with him as she is with the former three men. Her marriage to Léonce is more a rebellious act against her father and her sister than an act based on passion:

> Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband (Chopin, 62).

The men she passionately loves are all unavailable, but the man she marries she does not passionately love. She merely accepts him as a husband for convenience and in rebellion against her family: 'she fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them' (62) and 'she grew fond of her husband' (63) but there was no passion.

This lack of passion results in a relationship to which she cannot completely devote herself. She has to conform to her role as a mother and wife but she struggles with doing so. She feels caged in her marriage and misunderstood by her husband. Chopin presents her situation to the reader in the opening chapter by means of the image of the parrot and the mockingbird. These two birds 'are making lots of noise; notice however, that the birds are separate and do not communicate' (Clark, 336). The description of the two birds represents

'an image of isolation, confinement, and lack of communication' (Clark, 337), just as Edna experiences in her marriage. She is the bird living in a cage that represents the oppression of women from Veblen's 'leisure class', both in marriage and in their lives as mothers.

The scene with the birds is just one example of imagery that Chopin uses to represent Edna's emotional situation. Images of the ocean play an important part in her emotional transformation as well. The ocean is the place where Edna learns how to swim and where she feels free and invigorated. 'Swimming immerses Edna in an *other* element – an element indeed of otherness – in whose baptismal embrace she is mystically and mythically revitalized, renewed, reborn' (Gilbert, 51). It is the ocean that makes her feel a 'new strength' when she wants 'to swim far out where no woman had swum before' (Chopin, 73) and with that strength a feeling of freedom arises which she does not know as a person immersed in the leisure class.

An example of a member of this leisure class is Léonce. He is a wealthy man whose exact occupation is unclear, but who is in the 'brokerage business' (48) and therefore 'exempt or excluded from industrial occupations' (Veblen, 7). He lives for outward appearances and social acceptance and his wife is part of those appearances and a precondition for such acceptance. 'Chopin immediately characterizes Léonce as an impatient businessman who scrutinizes his wife for sunburn' (Gilbert, 47). He looks at his wife 'as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property' (Chopin, 44) and believes that Edna should stick to her duties as a married woman of a certain class. Léonce needs Edna to display his 'possession of property', which is 'the basis of popular esteem' and 'a requisite to that complacency which we call self-respect' (Veblen, 25). He needs Edna to occupy her role so that he can maintain his self-respect and honour. When they live in New Orleans, one way to achieve this lies in his attempts to have a say in what her daily activities should be. He finds it important that Edna acts according to ruling conventions which means that she should focus on her social

commitments. Since her children are taken care of by other women, her life consists of domestic activities that are of importance to Léonce's life, such as making sure that the cook delivers a proper dinner when Léonce comes home, being at home on Tuesdays on 'Mrs Pontellier's reception day' (Chopin, 99) so she can receive her visitors who are indirectly related to or may influence Léonce's business, being available to Mr. Pontellier so that at 'certain evenings during the week she and her husband' could attend 'the opera or sometimes a play' (100), and taking care of the children when the quadroon nurse is not around. Within the marriage Léonce simply wants Edna to support the image he wants to impart of the successful businessman with the successful family, showing society he is wealthy by making his wife do as little as possible and Edna being of service to him by being a ″good″ mother. That is the image that gives him confidence and self-respect as well as social status in the community.

Although Chopin portrays Léonce as a controlling husband, he does love Edna. When Edna goes for her first successful swim, Léonce watches her to make sure she is alright; as he mentions to Edna, 'you were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you' and in his conversation with Dr Mandelet it shows that he misses the Edna he knew and the intimacy he had with her.

Despite his love for Edna he doubts her mothering abilities. Edna's duties as a mother are something that he finds self- evident. He makes this clear when he comes home from Klein's hotel one evening and thinks that one of the children has a high fever and needs looking after. When Edna does not agree with his opinion concerning the fever, the omniscient narrator gives the reader an insight into his thoughts on Edna's capacities as a mother when he reproaches 'his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children'. He disagrees with Edna's behaviour and believes that it is a 'mother's place to look

after the children' (48). If the child had had a fever he might have a point, but whether or not this is the case does not become clear.

Léonce is not completely wrong when it comes to Edna's capacities as a mother. She loves her children but is not completely devoted to motherhood. Contrary to the mother characters in *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *The Spoils of Poynton* it is not only bourgeois society, personified by Léonce, that implies that Edna is a ″bad″ mother. Rather it is something she admits to on several occasions, expressing her conviction that self-sacrificing motherhood is not her ideal identity and that she will therefore never take on this role. Actually, she does not know what to feel when it comes to her children. She loves her children almost as an intermezzo in her continuous search for identity, while she lives in a society in which 'motherhood and individuality seem mutually exclusive' (Schweitzer, 162). She is 'fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them' (Chopin, 63) and when the children stay with their grandmother for a longer period of time she does 'not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her' (63).

These feelings are not socially acceptable. They expect her to embrace the mother role as Madame Ratignolle does. Society wants her to choose between two identities: the mother or the spinster-artist. Adèle Ratignolle is the 'supreme example of "the mother-woman," the self-effacing species of nest-makers dominating' Grand Isle (Seyersted, 134). When it comes to her being a mother she 'is a surface of clichés' (Schweitzer, 169). She represents a type of motherhood which is part of a 'certain ideology', 'which makes femininity and maternity inseparable, crucial to the maintenance of patriarchal society' 'but incompatible with female desire, autonomy, or independent subjectivity' (169). There is no question about what her

identity is and Adèle loves this identity. Not only does she enjoy being a mother and does she love her children and husband, but she is also respected for it by society.

Contrary to Madame Ratignolle's feelings concerning motherhood Edna explains herself straightforwardly concerning her ideas on motherhood to Madame Ratignolle when she declares, 'I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself' (Chopin, 97); she repeats her words towards the end just before she walks into the ocean. Swimming out into the ocean is her ultimate act in breaking free from society and obtaining a feeling of being reborn again. By walking into the ocean she can 'elude' her children who 'appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days' (175). But even when she walks into the water she contemplates both her family life as well as the characteristics of the artist as presented by Mademoiselle Reisz. Madame Ratignolle, being the mother-woman she is, does not understand Edna's take on motherhood. They have a 'rather heated argument' but the two women do 'not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language' (97). Adèle Ratignolle is content with her life whereas Edna is not able to embrace the mother-woman and cannot understand how Adèle could be content with her life.

Edna's thoughts about motherhood and the heated argument she has with Madame Ratignolle seem, however, rather curious because the children make 'little demand on her time and attention throughout the story' (Schweitzer, 163). It looks more as if she uses her children as a scapegoat for her situation. Society has decided that she should play the social role of a mother and in her attempt to break free from this social role her children and husband are the obvious characters to blame. Throughout the novel the children are not the centre of her moral attention. Only near the end when she walks into the ocean Léonce and

the children cross her mind but she never contemplates what the effect of her actions might be for her children.

In Edna's search for a fuller identity Mademoiselle Reisz personifies the possibility of another identity than that of the mother, indeed one that is diametrically opposed to the mother-woman. Madame Ratignolle awakens feelings in Edna that she identifies with the figure she does not want to embody whereas Mademoiselle Reisz's identity of the artist who lives for her passion is the identity that Edna wants to embrace. Mademoiselle Reisz is the artist who 'prompts an overwhelming experience of sensual and spiritual epiphany in Edna' (Heilmann, 98) when she listens to Mademoiselle Reisz's piano performance. Society respects Mademoiselle Reisz as an artist but the description of her character also indicates how society judges women who follow a passion other than being a mother. She is described as an unattractive character: 'a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarrelled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others' (Chopin, 70). She is not married and most of the time she lives an isolated life both on Grand Isle and in New Orleans. She has devoted her life to music and because of that did not get married or have children. As motherhood is related to caretaking and self-sacrifice, this description of Mademoiselle Reisz implies that for women creating art and creating life are incompatible. Only because of her musical abilities is she still 'accepted in society' (Clark, 339). The fact that she chose to devote her life to music instead of motherhood places her just on the fringes of the leisure class, away from the conspicuous consumption of men and women who conformed to social conventions.

Mademoiselle Reisz's freedom and her ability to create are aspects of the artist's life that attract Edna. After her move to the small house she starts painting again. However, as Heilmann notes:

> Edna is not so much an artist proper as drawn to the physical work for its sensual potential: "being devoid of ambition, and striving not toward accomplishment, she drew satisfaction from the work itself". While she is pleased to find her painting a source of income, a professional artistic career in the footsteps of Mademoiselle Reisz is no viable alternative for her (Heilmann, 98).

Edna is still a married woman and even though this could be undone, she would remain a mother. She is caught between the facts of society and biology: she can abdicate from the mother role as it exists in society but she cannot cease to be the mother of her children. Although she distances herself from this role and tries to be an artist, it is because of motherhood in its social meanings that she could never be the artist that Mademoiselle Reisz is. She could not devote herself completely to her art form and be a mother at the same time because society does not allow this double identity.

Mademoiselle Reisz's identity as an artist not only helps her to become aware that there is another identity than the mother-woman, her piano playing also awakens a physical feeling of a sexual nature, which is further awakened by two young men, Alcée Arobin and Robert Le Brun. Arobin only satisfies her physical needs and although she is in love with Robert, she will never again consider herself a man's possession. Mademoiselle Reisz's music had rendered:

> Edna speechless while making her body come into its own. It is as a direct result of hearing her play that Edna who all summer had felt an ungovernable dread of the water, is now ready to abandon herself to it and learns to swim (98).

She swims away from the shore where her husband is watching her, as if she decides that she no longer wants to remain within her social environment where she is not supposed to explore

her own feelings but is ready to let new feelings in that help her find her identity in a broader society with different boundaries than the confined society she is presently part of.

With the arousal of Edna's sexual feelings that contribute to finding her identity and giving in to these feelings she distances herself even more from her maternal identity. Noteworthy is that she is not able to have this sexual awakening within her marriage; she calls the time that follows the wedding "the most lamentable spectacle on earth" (Chopin, 118). Léonce makes it clear to his friend Dr. Mandelet that his marital sexual life has ceased to exist since Edna's spiritual awakening when he says, '"She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and – you understand – we meet in the morning at the breakfast table"' (118)

In the end breaking free from marriage and motherhood does not give her the answer and identity she is searching for. Despite the fact that she does not have any material lack in her life and has a husband who gives her a relative amount of freedom, she can neither find satisfaction in her life nor any identity. Edna seems focussed on a final destination but finding satisfaction and identity in one's life is a gradual, continuous process that adjusts in time under the influence of life experience. Only in the end during the birthday dinner party that she organizes as a 'ceremonial celebration of her departure from one household and her entrance into another' (Gilbert, 43), she discovers that the social roles she identifies herself with do not give her the satisfaction and identity for which she had hoped. Now that she has her own place and can provide for herself with her painting she becomes aware of the fact that nothing has changed; 'as she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her' (Chopin, 145). This does not mean that the ennui is the problem but rather shows that she perceives her search for identity as a quest with a final destination. Just as the men in her younger years whom she passionately loved were unattainable, so is this idea of a final identity she is looking for. She thinks that her breaking free from society would provide her

with a new identity but in the end she is still legally married to Léonce and she will always be a mother to her children, as determined by society and through biology, despite the fact that she left them to the care of somebody else.

According to society Edna can be called a ″bad″ mother. Not only by committing suicide and decided that her children would grow up without a mother but also because she left her children and rejected the role of the mother-woman. Regarding her children she acts in a self-centred way by not considering what her death would do to them. Edna herself would agree with society's opinion. She does not want to sacrifice herself for her children, and hence she would be a ″bad″ mother. She approaches motherhood as if it is fatherhood and just like her father and her husband she only wants to spend time with them on her conditions, when she wants to, without self-sacrifice and knowing that it concerns a limited amount of time. On these instances when she is with them she is dedicated to her children but this is for a few hours at a time, on occasion. It shows that she can only be a ″good″ mother when she is not forced into one identity. However, an identity that consists of being more than one type of woman is something society is not ready for yet. 'Her ideas of self-assertion were bound to be condemned outright by the Victorian moral vigilantes' (Seyersted, 146). As far as society is concerned, her identity will always be that of a mother.

Chopin shows the reader what can happen to a woman when society confines her to one identity. She reminds the reader that committing suicide is not a positive act. In an 1898 interview with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch it is suggested that her attitude 'towards women's suicide was more critical than sympathetic' (Toth, 121). In this interview she indicates that suicide was not gender-related when she says:

> Leadership in society is a business. It is a good thing for women who have no other occupation to engage in it and endeavour to keep up with the social whirl. There is nothing about it that I can see that would tend to produce an unhealthy

> condition of mind. On the contrary, it prevents women from becoming morbid, as they might, had they nothing to occupy their attention when at leisure … Business men commit suicide every day, yet we do not say that suicide is epidemic in the business world. [...] Why all this talk about women? (Toth, 120)

Walking into the sea and committing suicide is Edna's act of self-ownership, a decision made within a society that had defined her identity as that of wife and mother. Her suicide seems her ultimate freedom from motherhood and at the same time a warning for society against what can happen if it imposes motherhood as the only viable option for women.

Conclusion

As shown, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, *The Spoils of Poynton* and *The Awakening* all depict the figure of the mother somewhat negatively. In each instance the author uses this negative portrayal of the mother-character to point out that society needs to change both socially as well as legally with regards to women and especially mothers.

Mrs Warren shows what the effect can be of lack of social change regarding female career options. Shaw uses her behaviour in order to expose the limited options available to mothers in terms of job opportunities. Constrained by the lack of alternative options, she chooses economic survival over morality; although her choices are limited, that same society judges her. In *The Spoils of Poynton* it is the behaviour of Mrs Gereth that is used to emphasise that the legal system does not support the mother when it comes to property inheritance. Finally, in *The Awakening* the mother character, in the form of Edna Pontellier, shows that a woman's identity is not automatically commensurate with the limited identity of being a mother. The maternal image may not be sufficient enough for every woman and society should adjust to this altered need.

All three mothers choose to pursue what is good for themselves. They fight for their own cause in order to survive economically or socially. It is because of their fights that all three women experience a certain degree of loss; whether it is the loss of a daughter, cherished objects, or an ideal. This is not just because they have to make sacrifices due to patriarchal social conventions and legal regulations but also because they are condemned by other women, as Mrs Warren is by Vivie, or are trying to break away from patriarchal conventions, such as Edna is trying.

Other women misunderstand both Mrs Warren and Mrs Gereth. Mrs Warren loses her daughter because her daughter, who is the embodiment of the New Woman, does not

understand her mother's decisions and sacrifices. What Vivie tends to forget is that because of her mother's decisions and sacrifices she had the opportunity to freely adopt the range of ideas that characterise the New Woman. In Mrs Gereth's case it is Mona who adds to Mrs Gereth's loss. Mona is the type of woman who still believes in conventional society and marriage, but who has also adopted beliefs of the 1890s in which economic and financial gain seem to overrule beauty and refinement. Mona neither appreciates the beauty of the objects and nor does she possess the refinement that Mrs Gereth desires for in the next keeper of Poynton and its treasures. The younger woman only sees the financial value and wants to be the owner of the objects regardless of Mrs Gereth's feelings. Lastly, Edna Pontellier's loss does not entail the loss of a person or an object but a loss of an ideal, that is, the ideal of finding her identity. It concerns an identity that does not embrace motherhood but rather an identity that allows her to be independent. In fact it diminishes motherhood into a state of repression.

Men and women, but mostly women, have fought for equal rights for a long time. A large number of apparent inequalities have been resolved. For the bigger part, today's mothers are able to choose their own career and legal changes have improved the mother's position substantially. However, change within patriarchal society is only one aspect of the process. It seems less complicated to introduce economic and legal changes for the benefit of mothers than to change people's ideas about motherhood. This applies to both men and women. The New Woman had a negative view of mothers. Opposing thoughts about motherhood among women contributed greatly to the negative perception of motherhood. Even in today's society the mother without any other identity is sometimes negatively perceived by other women. As long as today's women do not unite in this matter, the negative perception of mothers will continue to exist.

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