DEVELOPMENT OF SELF

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IN

HAWTHORNE'S THE SCARLET LETTER

CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING

AND

ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of the developing self-consciousness of three female protagonists in three different novels. Chapter One is a discussion of the detrimental social factors that hinder the complete self-development of Hester Prynne in the seventeenth-century New England environment of Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. Chapter Two investigates the emerging consciousness of self of Edna Pontellier and her subsequent failure to achieve an autonomy that permits her to integrate into the confining, social climate of Chopin's nineteenth-century Creole environment in The Awakening. Chapter three is the examination of the repressive forces in the futuristic society of Gilead that serve as a barrier to the development of a unified self for Offred in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. In all three chapters of the thesis, I argue that each female protagonist's struggle to successfully assert the self, and to extend the self toward genuine relationships with others, is not actualized. This study attempts to show the precarious hold of the self that the female protagonist demonstrates in each of these three works of fiction.

Throughout the body of the text, an abbreviated form

will be used for the three primary novels examined. The reference consists of the underlined initials of the title of the novel followed by the page number, all contained within parentheses. The abbreviations are as follows: TSL for Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, TA for Chopin's The Awakening, and THT for Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale.

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Introduction

Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Chopin's The Awakening, and Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale will be examined primarily in terms of social, psychological, and feminist approaches to the theme of the developing consciousness of self. Of course, "self" is an extremely ambiguous term endowed with multiple connotations. What I propose to discuss in the present study centers around the concept of "self" that is derived from the minds and from the experiences of Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter, Edna Pontellier in The Awakening, and Offred in The Handmaid's Tale. All three protagonists derive their concepts of the self in a secular world rather than in an other-worldly, transcendental realm. R.D. Laing in Self and Others defines "self-identity" as the "story one tells one self of who one is" (Laing 77). Consequently, the "consciousness of self" is one's ability to decipher "who one is." Internal and external forces shape the self and it is the conflict among the female protagonist's inner life (self), her outer life (her own actions) and the dogmatic societal influences that define a coherent or self-integrated individual. Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Edna Pontellier in Chopin's The Awakening and Offred in Atwood's The

Handmaid's Tale are all linked together as female protagonists who struggle against these conflicting forces and influences. The three novels that will be examined in this study were chosen primarily to illustrate that the development of the unified self for the female protagonist is an arduous endeavor despite the historical time period of the novel. Hawthorne's depiction of the past in a seventeenth-century New England environment, Chopin's illustration of her contemporary nineteenth-century Creole atmosphere, and Atwood's hypothetical, futuristic society of Gilead, each provide a restrictive environment that is not conducive to the female protagonist's developing self. In addition, all three novels explore the issues of the protagonists' restrictive social environments, alienation from self and community, compliance and rebellion, dual existence, historical context in terms of the patriarchal structure of society, and the possibility for autonomy or the assertion of self.

Nancy Chodorow, in The Reproduction of Mothering, provides the reader with a psychoanalytic definition of the female sense of self that is particularly illuminating and most applicable to the female protagonist in each of the three novels in this study. She maintains:

> From the retention of pre-oedipal attachment to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and

> distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. (169)

Each woman is aware of being defined by society in accordance with her relationships with others. Separateness from others for these female protagonists leads to isolation and for Edna Pontellier it culminates in death. Due to this lack of separateness to the world, it is exceedingly difficult for the female protagonist in each of the novels to work against social conventions to achieve an integrated, autonomous sense of self.

I will also refer to Abel, Hirsch and Langland's text The Voyage In - Fictions of Female Development to further exemplify the concept of self-development in The Scarlet Letter, The Awakening, and The Handmaid's Tale. The novel of female development attempts to go beyond mere comparisons to the novel of male development. This concept of male development is depicted in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, which may be defined as "A novel which recounts the youth and young adulthood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life and 'the art of living'" (Holman 33). However, the novel of female development attempts to establish a strictly female paradigm for the developmental process of a female protagonist. Indeed, there are narrative tensions in the novel of female development that

differentiate it from the characteristics of the traditional male developmental novel. The writers elaborate:

> Women's developmental tasks and goals, which must be realized in a culture pervaded by male norms, generate distinctive narrative tensions - between autonomy and relationship, separation and community, loyalty to women and attraction to men. The social constraints on female maturation produce other conflicts, not unique to female characters, but more relentless in women's stories. Repeatedly, the female protagonist or *Bildungsheld* must chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it, between the costs of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society, between the price of succumbing to madness and of grasping a repressive "normality". (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 13)

These narrative tensions can be found in the three novels to be examined.

I will also implement the psychoanalytic theories expounded in R.D. Laing's text Divided Self that pertain to the relationship of the self to the other, the self to the world and the self to the self. Laing attempts to present an "existential phenomenological account of some schizoid [sane] and schizophrenic [persons who experience a disruption or split with the relationship to the world and the relationship to the self] persons" (17). Although Laing does not mention any of the works of Hawthorne, Chopin or Atwood, I refer to Divided Self because many of the issues concerning the self in each of these three novels in this study may be illuminated by Laing's insights into the

concept of selfhood. Therefore, Laing's findings, taken out of context, are applicable in the context of the material of this thesis to study the struggle of Hester, Edna and Offred in their attempts to define and understand their respective concepts of self.

Hester, Edna and Offred learn that their relationships between themselves and their environments do not permit them the autonomy that they each desire. Indeed, autonomy for these characters in a healthy, positive manner does not seem possible. Laing maintains that the failure of autonomy is a "failure *to be* by oneself, a failure to exist alone" (Divided Self 52). He notes:

> If the individual does not feel himself to be autonomous this means that he can experience neither his separateness from, nor his relatedness to, the other in the usual way. A lack of sense of autonomy implies that one feels one's being to be bound up in the other, or that the other is bound up in oneself, in a sense that transgresses the actual possibilities within the structure of human relatedness. It means that a feeling that one is in a position of ontological dependency on the other (i.e. dependent on the other for one's very being), is substituted for a sense of relatedness and attachment to him based on genuine mutuality. Utter detachment and isolation are regarded as the only alternative to a clam- or vampire-like attachment in which the other person's life-blood is necessary for one's own survival, and yet is a threat to one's survival. (Divided Self 52-3)

The nature of autonomy will be examined in terms of the "ontological dependency on the other" that Hester, Edna, and Offred all experience. There is no "genuine mutuality" as

the women are subordinate to the patriarchal structures of their societies. Hester and Edna opt for "detachment and isolation" whereas Offred must suffer the "clam- or vampire-like attachment" to Gilead.

One final concept that is central to the development of self in each of the three novels is the self-body split. Hester, Edna and Offred each have an inner life that is in opposition to their actions in the external world. In Divided Self, Laing describes the "unembodied self" as one who is "detached" from one's body:

> In this position the individual experiences his self as being more or less divorced or detached from his body. *The body is felt more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's own being.* Instead of being the core of his true self, the body is felt as the core of a *false self*, which a detached, disembodied, 'inner', 'true' self looks on at with tenderness, amusement, or hatred as the case may be. (69)

The three central female protagonists suffer from this split or dual nature. Hester, Edna and Offred all reveal only a "false self, mask, 'front,' or persona" (Laing Divided Self 73). Edna eventually abandons the false self that is demonstrative of society's will instead of her own but Hester and Offred never completely abandon it. Hester even finds fulfillment (though limited) by outwardly conforming to a "false-self system" as a means to ensure a bearable existence in New England. All three protagonists are consciously aware of their "false-self systems" and they

all risk the distinct possibility that the false self may completely comply with the expectations or intentions of the other. They suffer a split due to outward compliance which allows society to define them and inner resistance of that compliance (Laing, Divided Self 99). Ringe states that the real self is "one that insists upon its own inviolability, that will brook no interference from others" (203). But Hester, Edna and Offred are ultimately violated by the imposition of the other and the insistence of stereotypical social norms that both insist upon labelling and manipulating the individual's own definition of self. As a result, the development of the protagonist's coherent, self-integrated and autonomous self becomes a struggle for the individual against the other and the dictums of community.

Chapter One

The Scarlet Letter - Hester's Consciousness of Self

> The world's law was no law for her mind.
> (TSL 158).

Hester Prynne is the central female protagonist in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850). She is alienated by a hostile, New England Puritanic community because she conceives and delivers a child (Pearl) as the result of a relationship with a man (Dimmesdale) to whom she is not married. The only apparent salvation for Hester (in the view of the Puritans) is for her to reveal the name of the father of her child to the public. Hester refuses to disclose her secret and subsequently she chooses to isolate herself from the community almost simultaneously with the community's decision to reject her for her "sin". Hester's withdrawal permits her the freedom to grow intellectually. However, she must struggle in her isolation to overcome the temptation to permit her interaction with society to supersede and manipulate her own self-definition.

The Scarlet Letter takes place in the rigid moral and religious atmosphere of seventeenth-century Puritan New England. In the long, introductory chapter to the novel entitled "The Custom House," the narrator prepares the

reader for the rigid and judgemental climate of Hester's environment. He reflects upon two of his "stern and black-browed" (TSL 21) Puritan ancestors who were judges at the Salem witchcraft trials. The description of the tyrannizing and unforgiving nature of his ancestors introduces the reader to the "persecuting spirit" of the New World inhabitants. Indeed, the Puritans judge themselves and their neighbours based upon an inflexible, moral and religious code of laws. They are unyielding and uncompromising in their endeavor to suppress the individual who attempts to deviate from prescribed modes of behavior. Consequently, society's restrictive norms and values generally dictate the individual's actions and inner life. Finally, the individual's self is sublimated to society's enforced ideology and the individual ceases to exemplify self-determined or autonomous behavior.

Emphasis on social context serves as a key issue in the classic *Bildungsroman* as well as in the novel of female developmental fiction (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 14). The moral environment of Puritan New England in The Scarlet Letter is constrictive and harsh. When the inhabitants of Boston await the appearance of Hester Prynne from the threshold of the prison door, their countenance is one of "grim rigidity." Their somber demeanor establishes a solemn mood which is appropriate for "a people amongst whom religion and law were almost identical" (TSL 57). The "grim and grisly presence of the town beadle" clearly indicates and

illustrates the "whole dismal severity of the Puritanic code of law" (TSL 60). Yet, it is not only the written law that proves to be uncompromising. The ardent implementation of the Puritanic law by the "general sentiment" is the force that "gives law its vitality" (TSL 217). The inhabitants of New England operate as a cohesive whole to enforce the law. The populace functions as a group to maintain laws rather than as individuals who act and think of their own volition.

However, the specific group that establishes and executes the laws for society is actually an elite group of "wise and learned men of the community" (TSL 157). Nina Baym, in her article "Passion and Authority in The Scarlet Letter," emphasizes the elitist and repressive force of the community rulers:

> Power in this community is vested in a group of elders, ministerial and magisterial, who blend its legal and moral strands into a single instrument, and, acting as a group, make that power appear diffuse and impersonal. (214)

As a result, no individual can ever possess a sense of belonging in this community that permits him/her to integrate and make up a part of its whole structure unless he/she adheres to the rigid roles and moral codes that the "learned" men institute and support. Indeed, the Puritan rulers are "dedicated to preserving the values and purposes of aging men" (Baym 215). Hester Prynne is suppressed and alienated by the patriarchal oligarchy of the Puritan New World environment. Her "impulsive and passionate nature"

(TSL 64) is evident when she indirectly, yet conspicuously, rejects the Puritanic code of law by repelling the town beadle. The narrator explains, "she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will" (60). However, the suggestion that Hester's movements are of "her own free will" is, of course, ironic. At the initial scene on the scaffold where the "vileness and blackness" (TSL 71) of Hester's sin is to be made public, she is addressed only by a voice in a "loud and solemn tone" (TSL 70). The voice is representative of all Puritanic ideology. It is the voice of authority that is subsequently revealed to be the voice of the "reverend and famous" John Wilson. The need for Hester to look *up* from the platform of the scaffold to the balcony to address the voice suggests the superior power and authority of the men who judge her. Her soul is placed into the "charge" of Dimmesdale. Consequently, the magistrates are attempting to deny Hester her inner life by attempting to usurp and control the very essence of her being.

But Hester will not succumb to public ridicule or the manipulative devices of the clergy and politicians that encourage her to identify Dimmesdale as the father of their daughter, Pearl. Yet, it is not Dimmesdale that Hester ultimately protects by withholding his intimate relationship to the baby. Hester is able to maintain an essential part of her private, inner self by concealing the name of Pearl's

father because the secret endows her with a type of power which allows her to avoid the penetrating invasion of the community. As a result, she sustains a type of autonomy because she does not renounce the power of choice even under coercive circumstances. According to Laing, the "capacity to experience one-self as autonomous means that one has really come to realize that one is a separate person from everyone else" (Divided Self 52). Despite the adverse reactions of the community to her actions, Hester has a sense of her own being and, therefore, she has a sense of what behavior is necessary to ensure her own psychological survival. When the exasperated Reverend Wilson, who has no right to "meddle with a question of human guilt, passion and anguish" (TSL 71), finally delivers a didactic lecture on sin, Hester Prynne's posture is one of "weary indifference" as the "voice of the preacher thundered remorselessly, but unavailingly upon her ears" (TSL 74). Hester asserts her individuality by intellectually dismissing societal dictums.

Ironically, it is the women in the repressive, seventeenth-century New England atmosphere who most vehemently support a system of laws and religious attitudes that insist upon the subordination of the female. The "iron-visaged old dames" (TSL 61) are the most adamant judges of Hester and her "ignominy." One of these "self-constituted judges" (TSL 59) asserts:

> This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the

> Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves if their own wives and daughters go astray. (TSL 59)

The patriarchal codes of behavior have been embedded in their minds. They have a narrow and traditionally stereotypical attitude regarding acceptable male and female behavior. They fear Hester because she has deviated from standard, habitual behavior and they are afraid and opposed to any behavior that deviates from the norm. Consequently, these "gossips" want to destroy Hester emotionally and physically. Her sin epitomizes the female individual's possibilities for change and for freedom of choice. Hester's demeanor may be contrasted to that of the Puritan women who pay a rigid adherence to the Puritanic doctrines of society.

Hester becomes the scarlet letter personified or the embodiment of "sinful passion" in a moralistic society that reduces human beings to sins and virtues. She is denied her personhood as she is not viewed and treated as a human being but as a symbol of social evil:

> ... giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman's frailty and sinful passion. Thus the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast ... as the figure, the body, the reality of sin. (TSL 83)

Initially, her only function in society is to serve as an example of decadent, moral behavior to the inhabitants of

New England. She suffers the accusatory judgement of the hostile crowd when she stands on the scaffold for the first time. She is made the "common infamy, at which all mankind was summoned to point its finger" (TSL 82). Even so, Hester remains self-contained and "haughty" because she rejects the ascribed label of social and moral villain. She will not permit the gaping and penetrating eyes of the group to undermine her self-reliance.

Indeed, Hester's self-reliance is evident as she makes a conscious choice to remain in New England after she has been judged sinful and even after she has been alienated psychologically, emotionally, and physically by the community. Hester establishes herself in a small cottage on the "outskirts of town" by the "license of the magistrates who still kept an inquisitorial watch over her" (TSL 85). Despite this "inquisitorial watch," Hester remains in the repressive environment, "kept by no restrictive clause of her condemnation within the limits of the Puritan settlement" (TSL 83). She chooses, in part, to distance herself from the community, just as she chooses self-alienation when she informs the Reverand Wilson that the scarlet letter can never by removed from her breast, "It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off" (TSL 74). She believes that New England "had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment" (TSL 84). However, her reasons for staying are "half a truth, and half a self-delusion" (TSL 84). She idealistically

dreams of a possible reunion with Dimmesdale, which illustrates her loneliness. Moreover, Hester's belief in the possibility for a reconciliation with Dimmesdale emphasizes her disregard for Puritan rules because she does not repent for her "sin." She forces herself to believe that she inhabits the "sterile" environment of her "lonesome dwelling" for the sake of penance but the "iron links" that bind her to New England cannot be broken because she is deluded into anticipating a reconciation with Dimmesdale (Carton 214).

As a result of this aloneness, Hester is an extremely marginalized character because the stigma of the scarlet letter puts her in a "sphere by herself" (TSL 61). The narrator states:

> In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it. Every gesture, every word, and even the silence of those whom she came in contact, implied, and often expressed, that she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited another sphere, or communicated with the common nature by other organs and senses than the rest of human kind. (TSL 87)

Hester's affiliation with her community is severed. Wherever she goes, she is differentiated from the other members of her community by her scarlet letter. The narrator emphasizes Hester's position as the isolated outcast, "The links that united her to the rest of humankind --links of flowers, or silk, or gold, or whatever the material, had all been broken" (TSL 154).

Still, Hester seems passively to conform to societal expectations. Due to constant social constraints, the female protagonist in a developmental novel faces the dilemma of choosing between the cost of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 12). The narrator points out that Hester "never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worse usage" (TSL 155). She becomes the "Sister of Mercy" (TSL 156) as she seems to altruistically devote all of her time to the comfort of others. Hester's scarlet letter acquires positive connotations as it becomes the symbol for the "taper of the sick chamber" (TSL 156). The "popular mind" believes that Hester reintegrates into society because she is genuinely penitent:

> With nothing now to lose in the sight of mankind, and with no hope, and seemingly no wish of gaining anything, it could only be genuine regard for virtue that had brought the poor wanderer to its paths. (TSL 155)

Hester's skill at embroidery adorns "individuals dignified by rank or wealth" (TSL 86) and much of her time is spent in making clothing for the poor. Hester chooses "inner concentration" rather than "direct confrontation" with society which leads to her position as societal scapegoat. Ironically, she "becomes the village do-gooder but she is still damned" (Donohue 38).

Despite Hester's apparently conformist behavior, she remains a marginalized character because she does not

inwardly abide by the laws of society. Hester is "Little accustomed in her long seclusion from society, to measure her ideas of right and wrong by any standard external to herself" (TSL 154). Consequently, the members of the Puritan community are deluded when they believe that the "outcast of society at once found her place" (TSL 156). Hester's "place" is a psychological one where she attempts to prevail as an autonomous thinker who believes in her own ideology rather than submitting to established values and role prescriptions. Hester's dedication to her needlework is "no genuine and steadfast penitance" (TSL 87). Instead, her elaborate artistry is a vehicle for her to preserve and maintain a type of individualism and autonomy. Baym maintains that "Hester's letter is an assertion of her pride and a masked defiance of the authorities" (218-19). Her propensity to create gorgeous and exotic garments exemplifies a passion that cannot be completely suppressed. The richness and extravagance of the colours of her materials may be juxtaposed to the somber hue of the Puritan garments. Moreover, Hester's needlework provides a sense of pleasure for her but "Like all other joys, she rejected it as a sin" (TSL 87). Similarly, her philanthropic endeavors are emblematic of a type of selflessness by the members of her community. But if Hester's good deeds are selfless, it would signify that she has sublimated her self to society's norms. Her deep concern for other human beings has been extinguished by her long years of isolation and suffering.

The narrator asserts that "Hester was actually dead, in respect to any claim of sympathy, and had departed out of the world with which she still seemed to mingle" (TSL 213). She has actually "cast off all duty towards other human beings" (TSL 164). Indeed, Hester's apparent conformity is the result of the actions of her "false-self system" that is, according to Laing in Divided Self, the "mask, 'front', or persona" for the inner self. Hester seems to become an integral part of her community as she conforms to all of their socially expected role patterns. However, she maintains a degree of autonomy by demonstrating the existence of a false self that may be juxtaposed to the intentions of her real, inner self. Since the "actions of the false self do not ... 'gratify' the 'inner self,' (Laing Divided Self 96) Hester's conformity is ultimately a distinct form of rebellion.

Obviously, Hester's form of rebellion is not one of violent revolt. Unlike the "female reformer" Zenobia in Hawthorne's The Blithedale Romance, who "made no scruple of oversetting all human institutions" (68), Hester does not attempt to alter the foundations of the Puritan establishment:

> Persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action. (TSL 159)

Hester's thoughts and viewpoints are what most distinguish or differentiate her as an individual from society. According to Waggoner, society is in "conflict with the individual's drive for self-realization" and the only "escape" for Hester is "sublimation" and "self-control" (69). There is a tension between separation and community, autonomy and relationship in a work of female development because female developmental tasks and goals are difficult to achieve in a culture that primarily functions on the basis of male norms (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 12). Successful community ties are fundamental for the female to define her sense of self. Patriarchal social conventions in The Scarlet Letter tell Hester that a woman should not abolish her ties with the community. Indeed, the "heroine encounters the conviction that identity resides in human relationships" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 11).

Hester still risks allowing society's expectations and definitions of the self to become her own. In Divided Self, Laing maintains that the "false self arises in compliance with the intentions or expectations of the other, or with what are imagined to be the other's intentions or expectations" (98). Hester is split or divided by her inner rebellion and her outward compliance. Her autonomy is not easy for her to assert, even psychologically, because she cannot avoid the comparison between society's conception of what is "right" and her own internalized value system. Baym states, "Hester is torn between a genuine desire to feel

that society has judged her rightly ... and a far deeper irrational conviction that what she has done is not sinful" (218). As a result, Hester must battle the interior struggle against permitting society's interpretations and analogies of her behavior to undermine her sense of selfhood. Outwardly, Hester generally conforms to society's expectations but her rich, inner life emphasizes that the "world's law was no law for her mind" (TSL 158). Therefore, Hester must acknowledge and accept her dual existence if she is to survive psychologically.

Hester is a "woman who wears one face to herself and another to society, but who remains very much aware (unlike Dimmesdale) of the different ways in which each of these faces is true" (Bell 51). In Margaret Laurence's novel The Diviners (1974), Morag as the female protagonist hates the "external self who is at such variance with whatever or who ever remains inside the glossy painted shell" (248). The external self or the "glossy painted shell," never really takes control of Hester. She fully discovers the internal world of the spirit. Hester resists the impending possibility for self-alienation because she ultimately resists defining her self by society's definitions. As a rebel, Hester cannot believe that her relationship with Dimmesdale is evil and she believes that her "crime most to be repented of" (TSL 169) was her marriage to Chillingworth.

In the fiction of female development, the women are usually shown "developing later in life, after conventional

expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found insufficient" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 7). Hester's developing consciousness of self is apparently initiated after her estrangement from her husband, Roger Chillingworth. Hester reminds Chillingworth that she has never loved him, "'thou knowst that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any'" (TSL 79). Domestic scenes in the past between Chillingworth and herself initiate negative remembrances for Hester. She explains, "Such scenes had once appeared not otherwise than happy, but now, as viewed through the dismal medium of her subsequent life, they classed themselves among her ugliest remembrances" (TSL 169). She recognizes that any happiness and fulfillment that she may have felt in the past with Chillingworth was a delusion because "in the time when her heart knew no better, he had persuaded her to fancy herself happy by his side" (TSL 169). Because Hester feels betrayed by the manipulative Chillingworth, she rejects the symbolic significance of a marriage vow that has no meaning in her own ideological code of laws. She has learned to analyze and interpret all aspects of her inner life.

Yet, when Hester's life alters from "passion and feeling to thought," (TSL 158) she loses a fundamental part of her identity as her affections become repressed and her femininity vanishes. The narrator comments, "Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman" (TSL 158). This

transfiguration causes Hester to change into a woman of "marble coldness." She maintains her fortitude but the transformation deprives her of her previous vitality for life:

> All the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand, and had long ago fallen away, leaving a bare and harsh outline which might have been repulsive, had she possessed friends or companions to be repelled by it. Even the attractiveness of her person had undergone a similar change. (TSL 158)

She attempts to abandon that part of herself that has caused her so much anguish by impulsively flinging the scarlet letter to the ground in the forest. Immediately, her femininity returns:

> There played around her mouth and beamed out of her eyes a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood .... Her sex, her youth, and all the richness of her beauty came back from what men call the irrevocable past. (TSL 192)

When Hester denies the symbol that characterizes an intrinsic part of who she is and what she has become, her femininity returns because she has absolved herself of the burden of her incessant guilt. However, she must put the scarlet letter back on her bosom to indicate her acceptance of a part of her past that is a necessary fragment to the completion of her whole self. She is no longer severed from a part of her self, as the "dreary change" takes place:

> As if there were a withering spell in the sad letter, her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood, departed, like

> fading sunshine; and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her. (TSL 200)

Due to social constraints, the female protagonist or *Bildungsheld* repeatedly experiences a conflict "between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 12). Repressing her sexuality would have denied Hester her autonomous nature. However, Hester loses the feminine part of self by expressing her autonomy.

One essential part of Hester's self that cannot be repressed is her daughter, Pearl. Like her mother, Pearl "could not be made amenable to rules" (TSL 93) and her role as the part of Hester's self that exemplifies her mother's sin is made quite clear in Hester's pondering thoughts:

> The warfare of Hester's spirit ... was perpetuated in Pearl. She could recognize her wild, desperate defiant mood, the flightiness of her temper, and even some of the very cloud-shapes of gloom and despondency that brooded in her heart. They were now illuminated in the morning radiance of a young child's disposition. (TSL 93)

Pearl serves to undermine Hester's definition of self because Hester attributes the defiant, independent nature of the child to the consequences of her own past relationship with Dimmesdale. Even though Pearl is purely a symbolic character, she is psychologically rendered with the truth of the meaning of the scarlet letter and its consequences. Pearl serves as a constant reminder to Hester that her selfhood is secondary to the negative significance and label of the scarlet letter that envelops Hester's entire life.

Pearl mocks Hester when the child insists that her mother acknowledge her shame in the polished breastplate of a suit of armour. The narrator explains, "the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it" (TSL 106). Pearl reinforces Hester's distorted image of self due to the social stigma of the scarlet letter. Pearl obsessively questions Hester about the meaning and significance of the letter. As an infant, the first object that Pearl becomes fully aware of is the scarlet letter. Consequently, "Hester had never felt a moment's safety; not a moment's calm enjoyment of her" (TSL 98).

Carton maintains that Pearl defines the "limits of Hester's freedom and power" (196). Without Pearl, it is suggested that Hester may have been an active reformist in "undermining the foundations of the Puritan establishment" or a "prophetess" or perhaps the foundress of a religious sect" (TSL 159). Instead, her primary responsibility lies in the act of raising a "demon offspring," who torments a guilt-ridden mother. Baym states that Pearl is the "living product, the literal realization, of the act; she is the reason that Hester can never be free of the act; she is its consequence as well as its commission" (219). Indeed, the narrator emphasizes that Hester "knew that her deed had been evil; she could have no faith, therefore, that its result would be for good" (TSL 92). Yet, paradoxically, Hester

names the child Pearl, a name that suggests hope for the future of the child. Even though the child does limit Hester's freedom, she is essential in the novel because she inadvertently saves her mother from the "Black Man" (the Devil) or from "Satan's snare." After the magistrates and ministers at the Governor's hall permit Hester to remain the custodian of Pearl, Hester informs Mistress Hibbins in the forest:

> I must tarry at home, and keep watch over my little Pearl. Had they taken her from me, I would willingly have gone with thee into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man's book too .....
> (TSL 116)

It is in the forest environment that Pearl's function as a part of Hester's self is most evident. The forest is associated with the characters in the novel who inhabit the fringes (in all respects) of society. It is aligned with Mistress Hibbins who has her excursions into it with "fiends and nighthags" (TSL 145). Pearl is likened to the wildness and the lawlessness of the forest. The narrator explains, "The truth seems to be, however, that the mother forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wildness in the human child" (TSL 194). Indeed, Pearl also becomes estranged from her mother in the forest due to the unexpected presence of the Reverand Dimmesdale. However, Pearl, as a function of Hester's self, serves unconsciously to direct Hester from a type of ignorance to knowledge. Pearl becomes estranged from Hester

because her mother mistakenly believes that she can completely eliminate the scarlet letter from her entire past, present and future by tearing it off the bosom of her dress and tossing it to the ground. Hester cries, "The past is gone! Wherefore should we linger upon it now? See! With this symbol, I undo it all, and make it as it had never been!" (TSL 192). Warren points out that the "past is a reality in Hawthorne's fiction because he never believed the transcendentalist assertion that one can escape the past simply by declaring oneself free of it" (218). Since Pearl is the embodiment of the scarlet letter, Hester is denying her daughter as well as the entirety of her self by abandoning it. Moreover, Pearl cannot acknowledge her mother until Hester accepts the scarlet letter that has become an essential and intrinsic part of her life. Finally, when Pearl kisses Dimmesdale, the symbolic trappings for her fall away and she is humanized. Baym elaborates:

> Pearl, by becoming a human being, effectively disappears as an alter ego or an allegorical projection --instead of two fragments of a single personality we now have two people. (TSL 229)

When Pearl is united with Dimmesdale, she is no longer merely a symbol that exemplifies her mother's "ignonimy." She becomes a living, autonomous individual rather than sin personified or as merely a part of Hester's self. Finally, "Pearl escapes the environment and possibly the moral code that prevented her mother from finding fulfillment as a

woman and a person" (Waggoner 71).

The forest is also a metaphor for Hester's mind. The narrator asserts:

> She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest ... Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. (189-90)

Hester's freedom to think autonomously, like that of Huck Finn's in Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), is construed in a moral and intellectual wilderness. Both characters discover in freedom a set of catagories that are not institutionalized. In the wilderness, without the constraints of society, Huck's expanding consciousness permits him to develop his own definition of morality. He rebels against the established social order (even though he is very much bound to it) when he rejects the temptation to reveal the "nigger" Jim's escape to the authorities.

Hester's situation is analogous to Huck Finn's because she is also permitted to shed the false exterior persona that she has created for society's satisfaction when she is within the seclusion of the forest. The tension between the inner world and outer life of the protagonist that is so characteristic in the female developmental novel (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 13) vanishes for Hester when she is within the confines of the forest. Indeed, Hester and Dimmesdale may efface themselves as complete human beings in the recesses of the forest rather than as a woman who

symbolizes sin or a man who represents goodness:

> How dreary looked the forest track ... Here, seen only by his eyes, the scarlet letter need not burn into the bosom of the fallen woman! Here, seen only by her eyes, Arthur Dimmesdale, false to God and man, might be, for one moment, true! (86)

But the freedom that Hester insists that they possess to make autonomous choices is illusory because it is freedom that is "amiss." She advises Dimmesdale to "Leave this wreck and ruin where it happened. Meddle no more with it! Begin all anew! ... Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale and make thyself another" (TSL 188). But she fails to discern that he cannot exchange his "false life ... for a true one" (TSL 188) until he accepts his own responsibility for the rendering of the scarlet letter on Hester's bosom. Even if Dimmesdale changes his name and starts a new life, he will still be plagued by his failure to make known his hypocrisy. Hester's development in this instance is characteristic of a novel of awakening because it is "compressed" into a "brief epiphanic" moment (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 12). But it is a false type of development or acquisition of knowledge that must be recognized as such before she can progress further.

Surprisingly, it is Dimmesdale who suddenly develops the insight to recognize the inevitability of the failure of the couple's impending escape. Dimmesdale discovers a "profounder self" in the forest but it is a self that is very much attached to the community he lives in. Hester's

subversive assertion that her relationship with Dimmesdale "had a consecration of its own" (TSL 214) is ultimately a heretical statement for him. Unlike Hester, Dimmesdale cannot escape because he always remains closely bound to the laws of society (Baym 229). Hester asks Dimmesdale if they will meet again in another life and he is horrified as he cries, "'The law we broke!-The sin here so awfully revealed!-let these alone be in thy thoughts'" (TSL 239). The law that is broken is Dimmesdale's belief in the social laws of the "iron men" which inevitably alienates him from Hester. The narrator emphasizes:

> At the head of the social system as the clergymen of that day stood, he was only the more trammelled by its regulations, its principles and even its prejudices. As a priest, the framework of his order inevitably hemmed him in. (190)

He repudiates Hester by joining with the "iron men" even though his salvation remains ambiguous because he grants it himself.

Since Hester is not "hemmed in" by the regulations of society in a psychological manner, her salvation is achieved in terms of a "freedom of speculation" (TSL 159) Hirsch writes:

> Excluded from active participation in culture, the fictional heroine is thrown back on herself. The intense inwardness that results allows her to explore and develop spiritually, emotionally nd morally, but often at the expense of other aspects of selfhood. (23)

Only in the recesses of her mind is Hester permitted a type of thought that "would have held to be a deadlier crime then that stigmatized by the scarlet letter" (TSL 159). Therefore, Hester generally forsakes open rebellion and contests societal dictums by "ironic subversion" (Bell 54). Indeed, Hester's primary comfort in her estranged and outlawed position is the self-knowledge that she has always remained true to her self and her own code of belief. Chillingworth is estranged from society by his own choice but he, unlike Hester, deteriorates, loses his autonomy, and gains no deeper understanding of his self through the consequences of his degenerative behavior.

In contrast, Hester becomes endowed with a "new sense." The stigma of the scarlet letter gives her a "sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts" (TSL 89). She inevitably loses "faith" in humankind because she learns that most of the apparently "pure" citizens in society are hypocritical. They all wear a scarlet letter on their bosoms, even if their letters are invisible. The ironic voice of the narrator in his condemnation of the hypocrisy of the self-righteous Puritans is overwhelmingly clear. The Puritans in Hester's community, who are generally as "sinful" as Hester, ridicule her and isolate her for an action that many of them have experienced themselves. In addition, Hester's ability to interpret and comprehend the complexities of human behavior so accurately may be contrasted to the members of the New England

environment, who consistently misjudge the nature and actions of Hester, Pearl, Chillingworth and Dimmesdale.

This intellectual awareness and freedom that Hester aquires places her in a realm where she consciously becomes aware of her position not only as a human being, but also as a woman in the Puritan society. The narrator explains:

> The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into other regions where other women dare not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers but taught her much amiss. (190)

Hester recognizes that if women's position in society is to improve, the natures of men and women must alter and the present structure of society must be abolished and subsequently reconstructed. Since a woman has her "truest life" in the "ethereal existence," the implication is that the whole "dark question" with reference to woman's position in society is not to be solved in the near future because change can only be wrought by individuals who live in the world of action as well as thought. De Salvo states, "For Hawthorne, woman's truest life is lived, not in the world, but on some other more spiritual plane" (5). However, while Hester gains a comprehensive vision of her own person and of human nature in general, she is ultimately powerless to transform thought into action. Moreover, she has no desire to transform her thought into action that would lead to a social upheaval. While Hester increasingly acquires a type of feminist consciousness, she is primarily

concerned with remaining true to her own selfhood for her own survival rather than personally restructuring society for the benefit of all of womankind. As a prophetess, Hester proposes that male/female relationships may become egalitarian in "Heaven's own time," (TSL 245) but the entire process will not occur by reformative action.

Hester's self-understanding and her acceptance of the scarlet letter as a fragment of the self that is necessary to comprise a part of her whole being is evident in her decision to reside as a permanent resident in Boston. The narrator remarks:

> ... there was a more real life for Hester Prynne here in New England than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow, and here was yet to be her penitence. (TSL 244)

Hester finds her "place" in the universe. Her experience on the scaffold simultaneously ignites her connection and her separation with the community. Indeed, she has the sense that "her whole orb of life, both before and after was connected with this spot, as with the one point that gave it unity" (TSL 228). It is the scaffold that enables Hester to date the "first hour of her life of ignominy" (TSL 228). Hirsch states:

> The plot of inner development traces a discontinuous, circular path which, rather than moving forward, culminates in a return to origins, thereby distinguishing itself from the traditional plot outlines of the *Bildungsroman*. (26)

During Hester's initial experience on the scaffold, she realizes that she has left behind the security and comfort of New England. Subsequently, the scaffold serves as the place where she realizes that she must forsake her future with Dimmesdale because she cannot escape the constant and overwhelming encumbrance of the past. She stays in Boston not as a woman stained and defeated by sin, but as an individual who aspires intellectually to a "higher point" even though her autonomy is limited by the repressive Puritan environment. Even though Hester recognizes the possibilities for a more fully developed self, she ultimately accepts the realities of the limited self within the confines of her restrictive community. Hester's choice to remain in New England and integrate with the community is "more indicative of strength of character than would be the solitary pursuit of an ideal, however worthy" (Warren 193).

Chapter Two

The Awakening - Edna's Consciousness of Self

I give myself where I choose (TA 167).

Now that Hester Prynne's self-development and potential for the assertion of self in Hawthorne's seventeenth-century New England environment in The Scarlet Letter has been examined, the positive influences and the detrimental factors that assist or hinder the developmental progress of Edna Pontellier in Chopin's The Awakening (1899) will now be considered. The time period for the events in the novel is the nineteenth century, approximately two hundred years later than the time period for the action in The Scarlet Letter. Like the inhabitants of New England in Hester's era, the members of Edna's society ultimately oppress the individual who breaks the prescribed bounds of stereotypical conventions or social laws.

Indeed, Edna Pontellier in Chopin's The Awakening functions in a society that attempts to dictate her inner life by external forces. The novel was first published in 1899, at a time when the question of the emancipation of women was a key issue. Nevertheless, Edna is more concerned with the inviolability of her own self against the impinging

society rather than with altering the repressive conditions (even though she is aware of them) for all of womankind. She is suffocated by her marriage, her children, and the social roles that have specific and prescribed behavioral patterns for Creole women. Creoles are the "descendants of French or Spanish, born in Louisiana" (Shaffter 19) and Edna is alienated by their practices because she is not a Creole by birth. Her developing consciousness exemplifies her revolt (initially quite passive) against conforming the self to expected behaviors. Her self-awareness leads to her acknowledgement of the limitations of a rigid society that will always and inevitably stifle her potential for complete autonomy and development of self.

The social context of Creole life in Louisiana is at first glance, deceivingly lax. The married Edna Pontellier spends much of her free time with the young and vibrant Robert Lebrun without her husband suffering even the faintest hint of jealousy. The flirtatious Lebrun is well-known at the Grand Isle summer resort for his temporary attachments to married women. Edna is appalled at Madame Ratignolle's carefree and conversational tone when her friend gives an explicit description of one of her births. In addition, Edna is also compelled to read a particularly "daring" novel in secret even though the Creoles openly discuss the content of the novel. Nevertheless, in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the hero, through "careful nurturing ... should be brought to the point where he can

accept a responsible role in a friendly community" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 6).

In contrast, Edna never feels completely comfortable in the "friendly community" of the Creoles. At Grand Isle, Edna's alienated position with respect to the Creoles is most apparent. The narrator explains, "Mrs. Pontellier, though she had married a Creole, was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles" (TA 52). The community's superficial "freedom of expression" (TA 52) and "total absence of prudery" (TA 53) deceives Edna. Thorton maintains that Creole society is deceptive because it "seems to accord women greater latitude than it is willing to grant" (51). Indeed, Creole society is basically a "solidly conventional society" where "women are presented as an oppressed class" (Thorton 51). Creole society is comparable to the patriarchal society of Puritan New England in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter because it essentially suppresses the female individual or self due to ascribed roles and traditional values.

The environment of Creole society is, indeed, detrimental to Edna's development and formation of the self. There are stereotypical conventional roles that women as well as men must accept and adapt to as acceptable standards of behavior. In particular, there is a prototype of the Creole woman that may serve as the archetypal feminine ideal. The Creole women are beautiful, "loving and true", superior entertainers, good housekeepers, and "tender,

loving mothers" (Shaffter 120-1). Moreover, Creole wives "have accepted their lot" (Shaffter 121). But Edna gradually rebels against the enforced acceptance of her "lot." Even though Edna is not a Creole woman by birthright, she becomes one automatically when she marries one. Hester in The Scarlet Letter also suffers a type of sublimation of self to her husband, Chillingworth. Hester becomes a doting wife to Chillingworth when they initially marry even though she never pretends to love him. The inner lives of both women are usurped by a "false-self system" (Laing, Divided Self 69) because neither Hester nor Edna immediately recognize that they are conforming to the "other's standard (Divided Self 98) and not their own. As a result, Edna loses an essential part of her own identity as she is inevitably expected to "become" a Creole and willingly adopt foreign role models and a foreign value system.

The beautiful and charming Madame Ratignolle serves as one of the possible role models available to a woman in the Creole culture. She functions in the novel to exemplify the epitomy of the stereotypical "mother-woman" in Creole society. The narrator elaborates:

> It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protected wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (TA 51)

Madame Ratignolle's complete effacement of self has resulted in the self-obliteration of her own individuality. Recalling Ringe's definition of self as the "one that insists upon its own inviolability, that will brook no interference from others," (203) the reader must acknowledge that Madame Ratignolle is willing to experience the loss of self for the love and comfort of her husband and family. The "fusion" between Adèle and her husband "results more from the extinction of Adèle's individuality than from the fusion of their identities" (Skaggs 91). Her entire external world and inner life focuses upon her children. She is constantly talking about her "condition." She sews winter garments for her children in the summer and she entertains for the cultural enhancement and growth of her children. There is no evidence that she develops any self-knowledge. She does not experience any degree of introspective analysis of her own situation in relation to her self, or to her family or to her environment. Seyersted states, "The Creole and undoubtedly Catholic Adèle is a striking illustration of the patriarchal ideal of the submissive female who writes her history only through her family" (140). Like most of the female characters in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Adèle is unknowingly suppressed and victimized as an autonomous individual because she supports a system that subordinates her sense of self to oppressive societal dictums.

Madamoiselle Reisz serves as the extreme of another

role model for Edna who is in direct contrast to the "mother woman" embodiment of Madame Ratignolle. According to society's patriarchal judgements of acceptable female behavior, Mademoiselle Reisz is an outcast who is possibly "partially demented." She is the alienated artist figure who is a marginalized character in Creole society. Her independence and autonomous nature is alluring for Edna in a very different sense than that of the conventional personality of Madame Ratignolle. Unlike Madame Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz is "extremely disagreeable and unpleasant" (TA 138) and entirely self-absorbed. Chopin presents celibacy as a "strong authentic choice leading to freedom" (Toth 656), but the consequences of depending on the self alone result in a development that generally eliminates the necessary affiliations with other human beings. Skaggs remarks:

> Mademoiselle Reisz's loneliness makes starkly clear that an adequate life cannot be built together upon autonomy and art. Although she has a secure sense of her own individuality and autonomy, the place she has established in her personal community lacks love, friendship or warmth. (TA 96)

Edna ultimately rejects the extreme polarity of roles that Mademoiselle Reisz and Madame Ratignolle offer to seek out her autonomous self on her own terms. However, both women manage ultimately to "advise and direct" Edna in her "awakening" (Huf 71).

In the first stage of female growth in the novel of

awakening, the "protagonists grow significantly only after fulfilling the fairy-tale expectation that they will marry and live 'happily ever after' (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 12). Like Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Edna Pontellier learns that marriage itself is not a sufficient means to establish the eternal state of "happily ever after." However, while Hester is initially alienated from Chillingworth by geographical distance, Edna's estrangement from Mr. Pontellier is the consequence of her seizing the need to reject the constraints of social conventions. Theoretically, Mr. Pontellier is the ideal husband who excels in supporting his family financially. The ladies at Grand Isle "declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world" (TA 50) because his superficial displays of thoughtfulness and affection charm and impress them. Even Edna is forced to admit that in terms of society's definition of what a husband's duties entail, she certainly "knew of none better" (TA 50).

Nevertheless, Edna's alienation from Mr. Pontellier is the consequence of his insistence that she subjugate herself to her children, to himself, to her domestic duties, and to her duty as social entertainer for the more prestigious members of Creole society. He essentially stifles Edna's development because he regards women as the embodiments of specific social and conventional roles. The reader's introduction to Mr. Pontellier serves to illustrate how he views his wife. He evaluates the appearance of the

sunburned Edna "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (44). Thorton points out that "Edna's marriage has come to seem like only one more convention within the myriad social forms that have become oppressive to her" (61). One night after her husband reproaches her for her "inattention, her habitual neglect of the children," (TA 49) she suffers an "indescribable oppression." The narrator remarks:

> She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood. (TA 49)

Edna's feelings of frustration that marriage is stifling her selfhood is clearly evident after Lèonce leaves the dinner table because he is dissatisfied with the cook's meal. Edna refuses to take responsibility for her husband's behavior and she suddenly has the desire to "destroy something." She takes off her wedding ring, violently flings it to the floor and "When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it" (TA 103). Skaggs suggests that Edna's ring functions as one of the "encircling traditions that imprison her" (103). Similarly to the character of Paula in Chopin's short story "Wiser than a God," who maintains that "marriage doesn't enter into the purpose of my life," (30) Edna decides that "domestic harmony" is definitely "not a condition of life which fitted her" (TA

107).

Even though Edna loves her children, she is not a "mother-woman." Mr. Pontellier's belief that his wife fails in her duty to her children is "something which he felt rather than perceived" (TA 50). The narrator, however, makes it clear that Edna is actually a good mother. Her only "failure" is her unwillingness to submerge herself in the role of "mother-woman" that is prescribed by society.

Like Hester Prynne's position in seventeenth-century New England, Edna's culture requires that she subordinate herself to her husband and children. Unlike Adèle, Edna's entire sense of self does not depend upon her role as wife and mother. Edna must resist the "mother-woman" label if she is to become a fully developed individual. As a result, Adèle is unable to comprehend Edna when Edna states that "she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone" (TA 97). Edna continues:

> 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. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me. (TA 97)

Women in Creole society have been taught that society's doctrines are "within" rather than external forces. Therefore, like Pearl's relationship to Hester, Edna's children as a part of the mother's self are embedded in social norms. But Edna chooses to be an authentic self who will not sacrifice her development as an autonomous

individual if it means self-obliteration. Edna's children oppress her sense of self and she acknowledges this oppression when she is "seized with a vague dread" (TA 170) as she witnesses the birth of Madame Ratignolle's baby, "With an inward agony, with a flaming outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnesses the scene of torture" (TA 170). Like marriage, child-bearing ultimately obscures the individual's essential self. As a result, Edna's inner and outer lives become divided and incompatible.

Like Hester Prynne, Edna "apprehended instinctively the dual life --that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (TA 57). Both women withdraw into an inner life that is characteristic for the female protagonist in a novel of awakening (Rosowski 49). As women, Hester and Edna are judged to be "evil" by the social standards of their respective societies. However, by their own interior codes of law, it is essential that they abandon constricting and judgemental societal labels that entrap the individual who deviates from the imposed standard norms of society. Edna ponders:

> One of these days, ... I'm going to pull myself together for awhile and think - try to determine what character of a woman I am; for candidly, I don't know. By all codes which I am aquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it. (TA 137)

She cannot allow the "false self" of her "bodily experience and action" (Laing, Divided Self 78) to control her "inward life". However, Edna does risk allowing society's labels and expectations to become her own. Even her husband wonders if her behavior does not indicate that she is "growing a little unbalanced mentally" (TA 108). The narrator writes:

> He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world. (TA 108)

In her effort to preserve her inner life, the "outward existence which conforms" (TA 57) is completely abandoned by Edna in her effort to preserve her inner life. When Edna sits alone outside late one evening, Lèonce commands her to accompany him into the house when he gets home. She instantly rebels:

> She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did. (TA 79)

When Edna is ready to go to bed, she asks her husband if he will join her and he declines because he wishes first to finish his cigar. The irony of Edna's position as a woman in Creole society is obvious. However, Edna renounces her

society's codes of duties and responsibilities. She avoids her usual callers on Tuesdays and simply begins "to do as she liked and to feel as she liked" (TA 107). Edna has become acutely aware of the differentiation between her inner self and, in Laing's terms, her "false self". Laing states:

> The self is not felt to participate in the doings of the false self or selves, and all its or their actions are felt to be increasingly false and futile. The self, on the other hand, shut up with itself, regards itself as the 'true' self and the persona as false. (Divided Self 74)

Indeed, Edna has no interest in observing social obligations or what Lèonce terms "les convenances." When Edna moves out of her home into the "pigeon-house," she experiences an exhilarating sense of freedom. Skagg maintains that Edna "realizes that what she wants is not to feel the pride of ownership herself but to escape Lèonce's ownership of herself, to leave behind forever her place among his possessions" (TA 105). Her sense of freedom may be compared to Louise's sudden liberated state after her husband's demise in Chopin's "The Story of an Hour." Louise acknowledges a "possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being" ("The Story" 164). Edna's solitude in the "pidgeon-house" envelops her with a newfound sense of "restfulness." She resolves "never again to belong to another than herself" (TA 135). She increasingly judges herself completely by her own

standards--those necessary for the development of an authentic self:

> Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to 'feed upon opinion' when her own soul had invited her. (TA 151)

Even though Edna begins to "look with her own eyes," (TA 151) her forming consciousness is depicted as a process that she cannot fully comprehend or control. It is a passive experience rather than that of the active process that is evident in the male protagonist in the conventional *Bildungsroman* (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 15). Edna begins to "realize her position in the universe as a human being" (TA 57) but she is unable to define what is happening to herself:

> She could only realize that she herself - her present self - was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the aquaintance of new conditions in herself that coloured and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect. (TA 88)

This emerging awareness is not easy for Edna to articulate coherently even in the recesses of her own mind. She yearns for the "taste of life's delirium" (TA 107) although she is unaware of what it signifies. The narrator notes that "Edna vaguely wondered what she meant by life's delirium. It had crossed her thought like some unsought, extraneous

impression" (TA 107). Edna can only "half comprehend" Mademoiselle Reisz when the pianist states, "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (TA 138). Edna is only able to partially understand Mademoiselle Reisz's warning because her developing consciousness is only apparent to her in terms of feelings and emotions rather than as thoughts and as comprehensive intellectual analysis.

Even after Edna becomes aware of the intensity of her feelings for Robert, it is her sexual attraction to Arobin that promotes understanding and ultimately lifts a "mist" from her eyes. Like Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter, Edna feels "neither shame nor remorse" (TA 139). Edna only regrets that it is lust rather than love that "held this cup of life to her lips" (TA 139). Arobin serves as the vehicle by which Edna truly becomes aware of the "flaming torch that kindled desire" (TA 139). She is startled by this sudden awareness of her own physicality because it is the "shock of the unexpected and the unaccustomed" (TA 139). Ewell maintains that "Fundamental to Edna's self-awakening is the recognition of her physical being ... which constitutes a critical prelude to consciousness" (144-5). In a novel of female growth and development it is often characteristic that the "development may be compressed into brief epiphanic moments," (Abel,

Hirsch, Langland 12) as in the case with Edna's developing consciousness. In contrast, Hester's developing self-awareness is gradual and it occurs over the course of several years of hardship and suffering due to the social stigma of the scarlet letter. Her only brief and "ephiphanic" moment of consciousness is a false type of knowledge that occurs with Dimmesdale in the forest when she suggests that they should "escape" together.

Unlike Hester, Edna's forming consciousness is overshadowed by her willingness to permit the world of dreams and imagination to supersede the world of reality. Hirsch states that "Sleep and quiescence in female narratives represents a progressive withdrawal into the symbolic landscapes of the innermost self" (23). In a novel of awakening, it seems ironic that the central female protagonist is often taking naps or commenting that she is tired. Perhaps Edna's desire for sleep exemplifies her desire to escape from the physical environment of oppressive social constraints to the realm of the imagination. Edna mistakenly believes that the liberation of self can lead to the consummation of her love with Robert. She envisions his return from Mexico in a setting that is most inappropriate and idealistic:

> A hundred times Edna had pictured Robert's return, and imagined their first meeting. It was usually at her home, whither he had sought her out at once. She always fancied him expressing or betraying his love for her. (TA 156)

Edna's imagined, ideal reunion with Robert illustrates her tendency to believe in and support romantic ideals. Edna's romantic, idealistic, and completely unrealistic yearning for Robert is analogous to Hester's deluded expectations of a reunion between Dimmesdale and herself. Like Hester Prynne, Edna fails to acknowledge limitations that are intrinsic in the social fabric of society. Edna recalls wandering in a meadow in Kentucky as a child and she recollects, "I could only see the stretch of green before me, and I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it" (TA 60). Her belief that she could "walk on forever" in an "idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (TA 60) manner is illusory.

Edna's "awakening" is characteristic of the female protagonist's developmental process because it is an "awakening to limitations" (Rosowski 52). She arrives at the conclusion that "women learn so little of life on the whole" (TA 165). She attributes her awakening from a life of dreams to the world of reality to Robert who awoke her "out of a life-long, stupid dream" (TA 168). Edna remarks:

> The years that are gone seem like dreams - if one might go on sleeping and dreaming but to wake up and find - oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life. (TA 171)

Like Morag in Laurence's The Diviners (1974), Edna feels the "severing of inner chains that have kept her bound and separated from part of herself" (271). In contrast, Robert

Lebrun, like Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter, remains bound to social conventions that are embedded in patriarchal ideology. Robert grows a "little white" with a sense of shock and incomprehension when Edna informs him, "I give myself where I choose" (TA 167). According to Ewell, Robert leaves Edna because he is too "honourable' to encumber their love with sex, too traditional to bear the consequences of Edna's new self-possession" (151). As a result, Edna realizes that Robert only views her as a woman rather than as a "whole person" (Skaggs 107). She also recognizes the transitory and shallow nature of her sexual relationship with Arobin as she ponders, "'Today it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me ...'" (TA 175). Doctor Mandelet informs her that sexual love is merely a "decoy to secure mothers for the race" (Huf 78). Edna learns that she can "challenge the social obstacles to her new selfhood, but she is powerless against the 'ways of nature'" (Ewell 152).

The sea, like the forest environment in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, serves as a vehicle for the protagonist's discovery of these limitations. Both environments symbolize realms of physical, intellectual, and spiritual freedom and simultaneously they are places that signify social constraints and limitations. Edna's affiliation with the sea develops into a metaphor for her increasingly developing sense of self-knowledge. She yearns to "swim out where no woman has ever swum before" as she

seems to be "reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (TA 74). Yet, Mr. Pontellier stifles and diminishes Edna's attempts for control when he nonchalantly informs her, "'You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you'" (TA 74). It is the sea that invites Edna's "soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (TA 57). However, the sea also suggests Edna's impending failure to actually achieve the inner freedom that she so vehemently craves:

> But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us even emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult! (TA 57)

The "Holy Ghost" is only capable to "vouchsafe" woman with limited wisdom. Edna's position as a woman is analogous to the discovery made by Hester Prynne that the attainment of the individuated self in an oppressive society can perhaps only be fulfilled in "Heaven's own time" (TSL 245). Indeed, Thorton asserts that the "voice of the sea, as well as the Gulf spirit, holds out to Edna a promise that cannot be fulfilled" (65). The sea is comparable to the "certain light" that begins to "dawn dimly within her,--the light which, showing the way, forbids it" (TA 57). The "light" and the sea signify crucial elements to suggest that Edna's freedom is inevitably unattainable.

In contrast to Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter, Edna's knowledge of her limitations not only as a woman but

as an individual, does not lead ultimately to reintegration with her community. While Hester acknowledges and subsequently chooses to live with her limitations of the self and the self's positions in society, Edna will not.

Edna chooses to remain isolated from the "alien world." She is unable to reconcile her inner life with the opposing external social conventions of Creole society. All she wants is her "own way" and "to be let alone" (TA 171). Edna is finally unable to "trample upon the little lives" (TA 171). She desires complete autonomy but she "oscillates perpetually" between the polarities of "complete isolation or complete merging of identity" with the other (Laing, Divided Self 53). But Edna realizes that if she is to live a completely autonomous existence it would be necessary for her to sacrifice the future of her children. Instead, she chooses to sacrifice the 'unessential'--her mortal life" (Ewell 152). Edna chooses to escape what she perceives to be an unbearable existence. She refuses to compromise the integrity of her inner self to illustrate actions of the "false self" which would be society's will and not her own (Laing, Divided Self 71). She is comparable to the symbolic bird with the broken wing who flounders "disabled down, down into the water" (TA 175) because Edna does not possess what Madamoiselle Reisz defines as the "courageous soul" that "dares and defies" (TA 176). As Edna swims further out into the depths of the sea, her mind is filled with childhood memories. Deaths in novels of awakening "represent less

developmental failures than refusals to accept an adulthood that denies profound convictions and desires" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 11). Edna cannot return to her conventional role of wife and mother and she cannot live the autonomous existence that the self demands. Whereas Hester in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter can live with limitations that are imposed upon her inner life by others and by social dogmas, Edna's definition of self clearly rejects the need for social connections with friends, family and community that dictate the will of the self. These relationships cannot be reconciled with Edna's self-integrity. Consequently, for Edna, "Death becomes an escape from female plot and the only possible culmination of woman's spiritual development" (Hirsch 44).

Chapter Three

The Handmaid's Tale - Offred's Consciousness of Self

They force you to kill, within yourself (THT 181).

Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1984) also examines the developing consciousness of self and the subsequent potential for the assertion of self. It has been demonstrated that Hawthorne's "escape" into the past and Chopin's confrontation of her present nineteenth-century environment do not provide suitable social climates for the establishment of the unified self for the female protagonist. In this chapter, the futuristic society of Atwood's Gilead will be investigated to determine whether or not the possibility for the development of a coherent self exists for the female protagonist in the twenty-first century.

The events in The Handmaid's Tale occur in a hypothetical city (Gilead) in the United States in the near future. Society in the 1980's deteriorated and the birthrate plummetted due to environmental and social factors. The President was shot and the Constitution was suspended. As a result, the fundamentalist Christian theocracy of Gilead was instituted as a viable means to remedy society's past ills and to prevent the same "errors"

from happening in the future. In this tyrannical atmosphere, Offred, the central female progonist in the novel, has very limited freedoms. She is not permitted to read, she cannot formulate friendships and moreover, she is taught not to think. Her developing awareness of the self is constantly undermined by Gileadian labels that catagorize all members of society according to the designated societal functions. Self-knowledge for Offred leads to a developing rebelliousness and subversiveness (similarly to Hester and Edna) against social dictums that results in the conflict between her inner self and her external environment.

In the futuristic society of Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, there has been a return to "traditional values." The men serve as commanders, warriors and guardians of the state and the women are mothers, breeders and housemaids (Yeoman 97). In the authoritative regime of Gilead, the Commanders are the ruling elite. The Wives govern and control all domestic matters but it is the Commanders who initially establish the ground rules that are to be stringently followed. Therefore, the power that the women acquire in this new regime is ultimately illusory. Women are rigidly defined by their ability or inability to serve as procreators. The Handmaids, in particular, are subjugated to the oppressive state because they are powerless to control even the usage of their own bodies. Indeed, Offred is a "national resource" who must obliterate her autonomous self if she is to physically survive in the totalitarian

Republic of Gilead. Offred's potential for growth requires her withdrawal from the antagonistic, repressive Gilead because social conventions alienate her from the authentic self.

The Republic of Gilead is a "repressive puritanical theocracy" (Carrington 128) that supports a patriarchal power structure. The social norms of Gilead are even more confining than the rigid puritanic doctrines that monitor the behaviors of the inhabitants in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. All individuals are ranked according to their genders and according to their functions in society. They are defined by the colours of their clothes which indicate levels of social and political hierarchy in society. Despite this hierarchical structure in Gilead, *all* individuals in the Gileadian society are oppressed. The Guardians of the Faith are used for "routine policing," the Eyes are the secret police and the Angels of Light abolish religious groups that are heretically opposed to the fundamentalist Christian doctrines that the regime propogates and superficially supports. Subversive action results in death, whether it be by a rifle shot, a hanging or a frenzied execution by the public. Offred emphasizes the repressiveness of Gileadian society, taking careful note of her surroundings while on one of her walks:

> We reached the first barrier, which is like the barriers blocking off roadworks, or dug-up sewers: a wooden crisscross painted in yellow and black stripes, a red hexagon which means Stop. Near the

> gateway there are some lanterns, not lit because it isn't night. Above, us, I know, there are floodlights, attached to the telephone poles, for use in emergencies, and there are men with machine guns in the pillboxes on either side of the road. (THT 19-20)

Even though all inhabitants of Gilead are oppressed by the tyrannizing quality of the state's power, the patriarchal nature of the laws ultimately subordinates women to men as well. In the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the fictional hero eventually integrates into the social structure of society, even if that society is initially unsupportive or antagonistic towards him (Frieden 304). But integration into the patriarchal framework of society for the female protagonist in The Handmaid's Tale, would necessitate the acceptance of a theoretical dogma that undermines and annihilates the female self. According to Malak, "Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theocracy and practice (11). The Handmaids listen to a man's voice on a disk as they eat lunch that instills the male-oriented ideology that they are encouraged to adopt. The voice stresses, "'*Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kindom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent*'" (THT 84). Only the Commander has the power of the "word" as he reads to the Handmaids from the Bible. Offred acknowledges his power and his control over her own life as she ponders to herself, "watch out, Commander ... I've got my eye on you. One false move and I'm dead" (THT 83). She also acknowledges the

power that the doctor has when he offers to "help her" to become pregnant. If she is caught, however, the penalty for *her* would be death. Her victimization is clear as she recognizes the doctor's dominance over her.

Offred yearns to be pregnant because women serve only to "fulfil their biological destinies" (THT 206) in the patriarchal regime. Offred is shocked when the Commander's wife suggests that perhaps it is her own husband's fault that Offred cannot conceive because "It's only women who can't, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective" (192). The Handmaids, like all other members of the Gileadian society, have one function or only one prescribed role to play in society. These women are "breeders" who repopulate the Republic of Gilead. They are objectified and dehumanized as Offred points out, "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (THT 90). When Moira is physically punished for rebellious behavior, her feet are so swollen that she is unable to walk. However, Aunt Lydia stresses, "For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential" (THT 87). Social norms and conventions negate the individual's self. Handmaids are merely valuable commodities in a society that judges a woman according to her ability to perform competently her prescribed function.

"Unwomen," are condemned to the Colonies after they have failed three times to have a perfectly healthy child. Their "Unbabies" or physically deformed infants are "put

somewhere, quickly away" (THT 107). The inhabitants of the Colonies serve to perform radioactive clean-up duties. They are "sterile" and they are societal "discards" in an environment that promises them a life-span of approximately three years. A young woman's success in avoiding the wretchedness of the Colonies depends upon her ability to function as a flawless "breeder" for the Republic of Gilead. At the "Birth Days," the Wives are in "control" of the "product." The Handmaid's "reward" is the transferring of her services to another home rather than being sent to the Colonies to be declared an "Unwoman." Obviously, the constraints of society extinguish any sort of autonomous inclinations that a Handmaid might have. Unlike Edna Pontellier in Chopin's The Awakening, Offred is unable to "do as she liked" or lend "herself to any passing caprice" (THT 107). While Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, can stand "alone in the world--alone as to any dependence on society," (TSL 158) Offred cannot. Offred's physical survival depends upon her complacent adherence to the ideological Gileadian thought processes.

Like Hester Prynne and Edna Pontellier, Offred risks allowing societal expectations to completely shape her own sense of self. She defines herself and judges herself on her apparent inability to become pregnant. She comments, "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own"

(THT 69). Offred, like Marion in Atwood's The Edible Woman, allows herself to be manipulated and "shaped" by outside forces. Marion goes to the hairdresser's at her boyfriend Peter's insistence even though the experience for her is merely one of resignation to "endurance." Marion notes:

> When at last all the clamps and rollers and clips and pins were in place, and her head resembled a mutant hedgehog with a covering of rounded hairy appendages instead of spikes, she was led away and installed under a dryer and switched on. She looked sideways down the assembly-line of women seated in identical mauve chairs under identical whirring mushroom-shaped machines. All that was visible was a row of strange creatures with legs of various shapes and hands that held magazines and heads that were metal domes. Inert; totally inert. Was this what she was being pushed towards, this compound of the simply vegetable and the simply mechanical? (TEW 218)

Like Marion, Offred's own sense of self is usurped by her absorption of imposed social norms.

Sublimation is obvious at one Handmaid's Birth Day. The seemingly successful birth becomes a means to indicate failure to the other Handmaids. Offred remarks, "We ache. Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. What confronts us now the excitement is over, is our own failure" (THT 120). Offred is aware of the irony of the women's culture when she silently admonishes her absent mother, "'You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies'" (THT 120).

The women's culture in The Handmaid's Tale is

ultimately more restrictive for women than the patriarchal cultures that exist in seventeenth-century Puritan New England in The Scarlet Letter or Creole society in Chopin's The Awakening. The return to "traditional values" in The Handmaid's Tale surpasses the social environments of The Scarlet Letter and The Awakening in terms of the oppressiveness for women. Although Hester and Edna's choices are limited, Offred has no choices. The emancipation of the female's inner self is possible for Edna (though with negative consequences) in nineteenth-century Creole society. Even in seventeenth-century New England, Hester suggests that perhaps society of the future can be restructured and attitudes can change to allow women to achieve a "fair and suitable position" (TSL 160). Ironically, approximately four centuries after Hester's prediction, the society that exists in Gilead subordinates the female self to an even greater extent than it did in previous eras. Consequently, it is most difficult for Offred to develop a "coherent self" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 14) in a society where social conventions allow the authentic self no opportunities for growth.

Like Hester and Edna who are conscious of the "outward existence that conforms" and the "inward life which questions" (TA 57), Offred is also aware of her "dual life." Indeed, all three of the female protagonists in each of the three novels are aware that their outward lives conform to society's standard modes of behavior but their inner lives

rebel against accepting these dictated behavior patterns. Offred explicitly differentiates between her inner self and her "false-self system" (Laing, Divided Self 74). She asserts, "My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (THT 62). Offred becomes alienated from her physical body because the state has usurped her control of it. She is more consciously aware than Hester and Edna that she must not demonstrate evidence of her mind/body split because if her actions were to adhere to her intellectual desires for freedom and relationship, she would be executed.

Consequently, Offred views her body in a negative manner. She maintains, "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because its shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely" (THT 58-9). She begins to feel disembodied (or unembodied in Laing's terms) because her body has become the state's "instrument" rather than her own. As a result, she comes divided from an essential part of her self that is a necessary fragment the formation of the whole. Yet, she remembers when her body was "lithe, single, solid, one with me" (THT 69). She continues:

> Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst

> and shrivel within it, countless as stars. Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. (THT 69-70)

She has become a "cloud," because as a feeling, thinking, autonomous individual she lacks substance. Laing elaborates, "In ordinary circumstances, to the extent that one feels one's body to be alive, real and substantial, one feels oneself alive, real, and substantial" (Divided Self 66). Offred's description of herself as a "cloud" and her despondent demeanor clearly exemplifies this lack of being "substantial." Indeed, her entire existence is focused around the "central object" which is the "shape of a pear." Instead of an existence that is defined by the awareness of a unified self, she is defined and ultimately symbolized as an "object," essentially a "two-legged womb." Indeed, it is "hard and more real" than she is because it has become her only source of identity. It "glows red" to signify her function as a Handmaid because Handmaids are defined by the colour red. Inside, the space is "black-red" to suggest the necessary combination with the Commander for creating a pregnancy. The space is also "black-red" rather than "red-black" to suggest the power and authority that the Commander possesses over Offred. The "moon" each month serves as an "omen" to remind her that she has failed to conceive. Obviously, her body has ceased to be an "implement for the accomplishment" of her own will.

Offred's alienation from a part of the self is evident when she studies her reflection in a mirror. She sees herself as a "distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger" (THT 9). Offred's disturbing allusion to the fairytale of "Little Red Riding Hood" is clearly indicative of her own passive and helplessly victimized position. In addition, Offred's distorted self-image reflecting from the mirror is comparable to Hester Prynne's reaction to the reflection of her scarlet letter, "represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions" (TSL 106) in a gleaming suit of armor. Both women are plagued and disturbed by labels that have been assigned to them. Rigney maintains that the "mirror is a symbol of the split self" and it "provides a distorted image of the self, thus stealing one's sense of a real or complete self, robbing one of an identity" (94). Offred has no real sense of possessing her own identity because society's prescribed rules and regulations have fragmented the self. Indeed, she apologizes to the reader because the story is in "fragments" but she can do "nothing" about it because of the conflict between her inner and outer lives that is actually fragmenting the self.

Offred's psychological fragmentation is evident when she must participate in the ritual of the Ceremony. The Ceremony demands that the participants function in a "state of absence, of existing apart from the body" (THT 150).

Offred states that at the Ceremony, she would "pretend not to be present, not in the flesh" (THT 150). But the detachment is difficult for Offred since she has established a congenial relationship with the Commander. She asserts, "This act of copulation, fertilization perhaps, which should have been no more to me than a bee is to a flower, had become for me indecorous, an embarassing breach of propriety, which it hadn't been before" (THT 151). The Commander is no longer a "thing" to her. As a result, it is difficult for her to alienate and detach her mind and feeling from the Ceremonial act.

If the "basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world," (Chodorow 169) then the abolition of the emotional life in Gilead can be viewed as entirely detrimental to Offred's development. Aunt Lydia stresses that the Handmaids must be "impenetrable." Hester and Edna choose to be "impenetrable" whereas Offred's life depends upon it. Yet, ideal conditions for the development of the self include intimate bonds with other human beings. Laing explains in Divided Self:

> In the absence of a spontaneous, natural, creative relationship with the world which is free from anxiety, the 'inner self' thus develops an overall sense of inner impoverishment, which is expressed in complaints of the emptiness, deadness, coldness, dryness, impotence, desolation, worthlessness, of the inner life. (90)

Offred is spiritually and emotionally empty. She asserts, "I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing

does, except the pollen of weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor" (THT 98). Offred's emotional bankruptcy is comparable to Hester Prynne's loss of a deep compassion for humankind in The Scarlet Letter. Offred's mind, like Hester's, becomes alienated from her feelings. Offred suggests that perhaps she has "become used to" the Salvagings (public executions for societal dissidents). When she studies the corpses hanging from the Wall, she feels a "blankness." Her detached manner emphasizes that she has conditioned herself not to feel as she observes:

> The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting.
>
> But on one bag there's blood, which has seeped through another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child's idea of a smile. This smile of blood is what fixes the attention, finally. These are not snowmen after all. (THT 131)

But Gilead's social climate encourages the abnegation of the emotional and spiritual part of the self because the inhabitants must concentrate primarily upon maintaining physical survival.

Self-abnegation is surely the consequence for the Handmaids who lose their individuality. All fertile women are grouped together as potential baby-making devices. They all have tattoos on their ankles that indicate "ownership." They are all temporary and disposable. The Handmaid who previously inhabited Offred's room hanged herself because

Serena discovered that the young woman was having an intimate relationship with the Commander. Offred recognizes the precariousness of her own position when she comments, "If your dog dies, get another" (THT 175). One Handmaid is easily and conveniently replaced with another. Offred cannot psychologically and physically alienate her self from the community the way that Hester and Edna do. Unlike the central female protagonists in The Scarlet Letter and The Awakening, Offred is able to lose her sense of self to achieve complete anonymity. At the Ceremony, all Handmaids share in the anxiety and the pain that the expectant mother experiences and they all join hands to create a unity. Offred acknowledges, "It's coming, it's coming, like a bugle, a call to arms like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we are no longer single" (THT 118). When the birth of the baby has occurred, it is a "victory" for all of them. They are all part of a "team." Aunt Lydia rejoices in the thought that for the generations to come, women will be working as "one" for the procreational process. The Handmaids have been denied their autonomy because of the rigid singleness of being that rejects the potential for inner, individual growth.

The loss of identity that also discourages the development and assertion of selfhood is the abolition of the Handmaids' original names. Offred has been "stripped of her name, and given a patronymic to show that she belongs to

her Commander ... Of Fred" (Carrington 128). The elimination of the Handmaids' real names implies a type of reductionism of their status as human beings and emphasizes the power and control that the Gileadian regime possesses over the rights of the individual. She despairingly laments, "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (THT 91). She tells Nick her real name and, therefore, she re-establishes her own self-perception and all of the behaviors and characteristics that she associates with her real self or identity. She becomes "known" and subsequently she becomes "valuable" as an authentic, autonomous person. She emphasizes that the significance of one's name is essential to the individual's attempt at self-definition:

> My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark. (THT 79-80)

Offred's knowledge of her "buried" name endows her with a type of power because it is a fragment of her past life that

reminds her of a self that could act according to its own will.

However, the Handmaids are taught to completely obliterate any memories that they have retained from the past. In The Scarlet Letter, Hester Prynne idealistically believes that she can abolish the past, to "make it as it had never been," (THT 192) by tearing the scarlet letter off her bosom and flinging it to the ground. Hester's spontaneous negation of the past is like the promotion of Gileadian doctrines that insist that real freedom may be attained only in the present and only by abolishing the past. Indeed, there is a pervading juxtaposition between the past and the present in The Handmaid's Tale. Both states are necessary for the individual to develop and to continue to develop a genuine self.

Offred clings desperately to her memories of the past. These memories serve as a vehicle for her to maintain some sort of sanity and they also permit her to establish a definition of self. She admits that her memories keep her functioning spiritually alive in the present. She has lost her bank account, her job, her child and Luke. When Offred loses her job, she feels "shrunken," diminished. Describing her relationship with Luke, she maintains, "We are not each other's any more. Instead, I am his" (THT 171). Offred's situation is obviously analogous to Hester's in The Scarlet Letter and Edna's circumstances in The Awakening. Hester functions specifically in her married life to ensure the

comfort of Chillingworth and Edna in The Awakening feels as if she is one of her husband's pieces of "personal property." Nevertheless, Offred is only able to endure life in the new regime because she anticipates a message from Luke. She states, "It's this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive. I believe in the message" (THT 100). She remembers when her life permitted her to make her own choices. But she has become a "rat in a maze" that is "free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (THT 155). She is presently entrapped in a condition of "reduced circumstances." The entire nature of freedom has been reconstructed to constrict the individual's physical movements, spiritual growth, intellectual and emotional development. Aunt Lydia informs the Handmaids, "There is more than one kind of freedom ... Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from" (THT 24).

Like Aunt Lydia, in The Handmaid's Tale, the Creole women in The Awakening, and the "gossips" in The Scarlet Letter, many of the women in Gilead overtly support the patriarchal power structure of the society and even strive to ensure its success. Essentially, these women are encouraging other women to subordinate the self to the will and the doctrines of the state. Malak asserts:

> The Aunts, a vicious elite of collaborators who conduct torture lectures, are among the church-state's staunchest supporters; these renegades turn into zealous converts, appropriating

> male values at the expense of their female instincts. One of them, Aunt Lydia functions, ironically, as the spokesperson of antifeminism; she urges the handmaids to renounce themselves and become non-persons. (THT 12)

Unquestionably, Aunt Lydia has renounced her self to the state. Just as Anna in Atwood's Surfacing hides and escapes from the self behind layers of make-up, Aunt Lydia loses her identity behind the rhetorical jargon of the Gilead doctrines. Aunt Lydia is a victim of the expectations of the misogynous Gilead environment and she is also a victimizer herself. According to Offred, the Handmaids are Aunt Lydia's "to define." Offred's depiction of Aunt Lydia suggests that this woman truly believes in the Gilead ideology that insists upon the silence and the subordination of women. Aunt Lydia sets up a hypothetical scenerio to illustrate what the future holds for the Handmaids:

> There can be bonds of real affection ... Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task. Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable or humane. Your daughters will have greater freedom. (THT 152)

The irony of a condition of "greater freedom" for the future Handmaids is obvious because they will still be required to perform an "appointed task." Consequently, they will continue to be denied as thinking, autonomous individuals in addition to the sustained denial of the possibility for a coherent self based upon individual characteristics rather

than as state "functionaries."

In the "Salvaging" chapter, the women's complacent support of the absurd regime is most evident. All of the women must indicate that they support the fate of the convicted prisoner who is to be hanged. Offred comments:

> I've leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it, the rope hairy, sticky with tar in the hot sun, then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman. I have seen the kicking feet and the two in black who now seize hold of them and drag downwards with all their weight. I don't want to see it any more. I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope. (THT 260)

At the Particicution (brutal, physical executions of alleged rapists by the Handmaids) Ceremony, the condemned "rapist," who is actually a "political," is viciously beaten to death by the angry, riotous crowd of women. He becomes an "it" and his life becomes something that must be eliminated. Even though Offred implicitly rebels against such barbaric displays of behavior, she must succumb to the expected rules and regulations of the state if she is to ensure her own survival. Offred believes that "people will do anything rather than admit their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot" (THT 202). If a Handmaid is judged successful by her willingness to participate in a brutal ritual, then she will take part in it. The outer life dictates the individual's inner life in Gilead. Offred's simultaneous compliance and rejection of the Gilead norms further

illustrate the duality of the self or the divided self. She has not intellectually absorbed the absurd doctrines of the unyielding Gileadian state but her actions must indicate that she supports it. Offred realizes that the teachings of the leaders are self-serving even though there is "no way of checking" (THT 84).

The role of "silence" is a significant factor in the state's desire to usurp and control the Handmaid's inner life. Indeed, "while male protagonists struggle to find a hospitable context in which to realize their aspirations, female protagonists must frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 7). At one of the Prayvaganzas (where men and women are indoctrinated with Gileadian religous propoganda), the Commander leads the service. The misogynous nature of the puritanical religious doctrines is evident:

> 'Let the women learn in silence with *all* subjection'...'All,' he repeats. 'But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.' (THT 207)

Nevertheless, Offred proposes that silence does not necessarily mean compliance with the Gilead ideology. The flowers in Serena's garden become a metaphor for Offred's developing, active subversiveness. Offred elaborates:

> Well. Then we had the irises, rising beautiful and cool on their tall stalks, like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash, light blue, light mauve, and the darker ones, velvet and purple, black cat's-ears in the sun, indigo shadow, and the bleeding

> hearts, so female in shape it was a surprise they'd not long since been rooted out. There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently. (THT 143)

In Gilead, the subversive self, if one exists, must be kept silent and hidden from the penetrating eyes of society. All individuals in Offred's community who strive for a type of freedom that echoes a freedom from the past find themselves hanging on the Wall. If they manage to avoid the horror of the Wall, they may become marginalized characters who clean up the Colonies or else, like Moira, they inhabit establishments similar to Jezebel's. Moira's flamboyant character serves as the antithesis to Janine's obedient and subservient nature. Both women serve as possible role models for Offred. However, similarly to Edna Pontellier who ultimately rejects her potential role models embodied in the persons of Madame Ratignolle and Madamoiselle Reisz, Offred cannot be the abrasively courageous Moira or the weak and passive Janine.

Moira is an outspoken feminist who insists upon asserting her autonomy, even in the new and repressive state of Gilead. When Moira escapes the well-guarded Centre, Offred comments, "Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose" (THT 125). Her escape frightens the other Handmaids because the state's dictatorial doctrines have abolished their sense of their own needs for

an authentic self. Offred emphasizes the "security" that the Handmaids acquire within the confines of the repressive regime:

> Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure. In the upper reaches of the atmosphere you'd come apart, you'd vaporize, there would be no pressure holding you together. (THT 125)

Moira is able to "survive" because she mentally rejects the Gilead dogmas and actively refuses to participate in society. She never suffers from a divided sense of self. Moira refuses to compromise her inner life for the sake of her outer life or for the sake of appearances. As a survivor, Moira "must recognize and reject not only the pathology of social and sexual arrangements but her own participation in these arrangements as well" (Rigney 126).

In contrast, Offred's subversiveness, like Edna's in The Awakening, graduates from passive in nature to active. Malak elaborates:

> Offred's progress as a maturing consciousness is indexed by an evolving awareness of herself as a victimized woman, and then a gradual development toward initiating risky but assertive schemes that break the slavery syndrome. (13)

Her subversive consciousness surfaces initially within the depths of her own mind. Offred never fully integrates the Gilead ideology with her own inner code of norms and values. Her dismissal of the doctrines of her society is evident as

she wonders if Ofglen, unlike herself, is a "real believer, a Handmaid in more than name" (THT 19). When the Commander wants to take Offred out to Jezebel's, Offred asserts, "I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things" (THT 217). Similarly to Hester and Edna's beliefs that their deviations from expected behaviors that society imposes is not wrong, Offred never feels that the adherence to her own inner life is reprehensible. Her encounter with Nick in the Commander's parlor exemplifies her ultimate disregard for societal dictums:

> I want to reach up, taste his skin, he makes me hungry. His fingers move, feeling my arm under the nightgown sleeve, as if his hand won't listen to reason. It's so good, to be touched by someone, to be felt so greedily, to feel so greedy. (THT 93)

Malak emphasizes that Offred has a "maturing comprehension of what is happening around her. Thus the victim, manipulated and coerced, is metamorphosed into a determined conniver who daringly violates the perverted canons of Gilead" (14). Offred's "maturing comprehension" permits her to evaluate the regime as a tyrannical force that undermines the individual's self-development.

Self-development is undermined for the Handmaid in a society where individual and intellectual thought is repressed. Consequently, the irrational mode of thought that is embedded in the Gilead dogmas becomes the only standard alternative in society. The oppressed female

inhabitants are willing to "accept" their "lot" or "biological destinies" because they are kept ignorant of all matter that does not pertain directly to Gilead's ideological scheme. Aunt Lydia teaches the "girls" at the Centre that "Knowing was a temptation ... What you don't know won't tempt you" (THT 183). The Handmaids are required to wear "wings" which serve not only to shield them from the temptations of men, but they also shield them from "seeing" or from knowledge. Edna's belief in The Awakening that women "learn so little of life on the whole" is accentuated in Atwood's novel. Offred states, "Given our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view of the sky, of anything ... We have learned to see the world in gasps" (THT 29). Offred recognizes the fact that a thinking, intelligent Handmaid is in a potentially dangerous position when she admits, "I try not to think too much ... Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last" (THT 7). When the Commander persists in seeking her opinion pertaining to new Gileadian society, she remarks, "I try to empty my mind. I think about the sky, at night when there's no moon. I have no opinion" (THT 198). Like Hester in The Scarlet Letter, Offred must keep the duality of her inner and outer lives a secret.

Yet, even Offred suffers from an ignorance or lack of knowledge that jeopardizes her intellectual development. In retrospect, she thinks of the incident when she is watching a television documentary with her mother about the

mistress of a man who supervised one of the camps where they confined the Jews before they were killed. Offred considers what the mistress had been thinking, "She was thinking how not to think. The times were abnormal. She took pride in her appearance. She did not believe he was a monster. He was not a monster to her" (THT 137). Offred's situation in the "abnormal" environment of Gilead is clearly analogous to the Mistress's in the past. Offred believes that the Commander "is not a monster" (THT 238). However, she does realize that they "lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (THT 53). Ignoring, rather than confronting the harshness of reality, permits one a type of freedom because it absolves the individual from responsibility. Offred explains:

> The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives.
>
> We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom.
>
> We lived in the gaps between the stories. (THT 53)

But Offred learns that the passivity of ignorance is dangerous. Ignorance will permit the alienating and oppressive atmosphere of Gilead to become "ordinary." Carrington maintains that Atwood is warning that "those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it" (130). Therefore, if the Handmaids are ignorant of the past, their

roles will not appear to be so abnormal or absurd in the present because they will possess no recollection of the past which could serve for comparative purposes.

Offred is forced to take responsibility for her own actions when she suspects that the authorities may be aware of her subversiveness. Unlike Edna in The Awakening, Offred is willing to permit abnegation of the self for the sake of physical survival:

> Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce ... I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. (THT 269)

Offred waits quietly and passively for her inevitable captivity. She contemplates suicide as a viable escape but unlike Edna, Offred chooses to "Live in the present, make the most of it, it's all you've got" (THT 135). Therefore, in the only manner that is available to Offred, which is the choice of a tenuous hold of life over death by her own hand, she refuses to be a victim. Clearly, her situation is comparable to the nameless protagonist in Atwood's Surfacing who maintains, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless ..." (191). Yet, Offred ultimately has no other choice than to be a powerless

victim as she resigns her will to her captors. Whereas Edna will not obliterate herself to the will of others to accept the limitations imposed upon the potential for an autonomous self, Hester and Offred are willing to accept their "lots." Hester accepts the limitations of the self so that she may live as harmoniously as possible in her community. Offred acknowledges and abides by the limitations of the self to ensure her physical survival. She informs the reader of her complete helplessness, "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers because it cannot be helped" (THT 277). The ambiguity of Offred's fate does not permit the reader to ascertain whether or not Offred succeeds in escaping the state's penalty for her subversion. Her future remains uncertain as she must depend upon the will of others to continue to determine the course of her life. In The Scarlet Letter, the possibility for positive connotations for Hester and her scarlet letter remains ambiguous throughout the tale and this ambiguity is not resolved at the end. In The Awakening, Edna's demise remains uncertain because it may be interpreted as the triumph of the assertion of an autonomous self or the failure of that self to triumph against oppressive social conventions. Perhaps the ambiguity surrounding the fates of Hester, Edna, and Offred is emblematic of the precarious hold that the female protagonist exemplifies on the self. Indeed, the formation of the unified self for each of the

three protagonists is not plausible because their inner lives ultimately reject the imposed social norms of their respective communities. As a result, Hester, Edna, and Offred develop strictly in terms of self-knowledge. But inner growth alone renders the success of the developmental process ambiguous because it alienates the individual from humankind.

Conclusion

The emerging self-consciousness and the subsequent possibility for the assertion of selfhood is an equivocal issue in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Chopin's The Awakening, and Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. While the central female protagonists achieve a type of self-knowledge that enables them to evaluate their own precarious positions as women in patriarchal societies, they also learn that any attempt at expressing autonomous behavior is suppressed by repressive social conventions. Hester Prynne, Edna Pontellier, and Offred do not ultimately exhibit fully integrated, coherent selves because the self for all three characters is buried and consumed by the outrageous and cumbersome limitations of their respective societies and their relationships with others.

The three female protagonists in each of the respective novels are very marginalized characters who cannot, and moreover they will not, completely integrate into the social fabric of their communities. In The Awakening, Edna's independence and self-determination is achieved only by forfeiting and severing her ties with the community. Hester in The Scarlet Letter re-integrates into the initially hostile community where she finds her esteemed

and accepted "place" as an altruistic philanthropist. But her autonomy is limited because it exists only in her mode of thinking as her behavior is rigidly scrutinized by the myopic vision of the judgemental Puritans. The futuristic, patriarchal society of Gilead is analogous to Creole society and the New England environment because it demands self-abnegation. Like Hester and Edna, Offred is denied self-definition as she is indoctrinated by Gileadian propaganda that serves to obliterate the authentic self. Yet, Edna, Hester and Offred refuse to willingly accept prescribed roles. Edna rejects the "mother-woman" role, Hester knows that she is not merely the embodiment of the scarlet letter "A" and Offred recognizes that there is more substance to her being than serving as a "two-legged womb" for the state of Gilead.

Consequently, withdrawal from hostile, constricting communities is the inevitable outcome for these female protagonists who struggle with the conflict between their inner lives (inner selves) and their outer lives (false-self systems). The dual existences of Hester, Edna and Offred are the result of uncompromising social norms and values that repress the individual's inner self. As a result, the women each suffer from a fragmentation of self or in Laing's terms, they possess an "unembodied self." They outwardly conform to expected patterns of stereotypical behavior but intellectually they rebel against societal constraints. Hester outwardly conforms to social expectations even though

psychologically she has "cast away the fragments of a broken chain" to humankind. Edna conforms to her expected role of self-sacrificing wife and mother until she abolishes that role and "*les conveyances*" altogether. Offred's adherence to the doctrines of Gilead is essential if she is to ensure her survival even though she is not a "real believer." Edna, Hester and Offred overcome the overwhelming temptation to abandon their own inner code of values to join forces with social conventions.

Their withdrawals permit them a type of psychological journey from ignorance to knowledge. Hester learns that her past cannot be terminated and that it will always remain an integral element of her present self. Offred learns the dangers of ignorance and the more threatening effects of "ignoring". Moreover, she recognizes that she must take responsibility for the consequences of her own actions. Edna discovers that she can never function as a completely autonomous woman within the confines of Creole society. Indeed, all three protagonists address this essential issue of freedom. Withdrawal permits Hester, Edna and Offred "freedom of speculation" (TSL 159) but they are denied the right to assert their own wills and they are not permitted to transform thought into action. While Hester and Offred are generally willing to conform to society's behavioral expectations to grasp a "repressive 'normality,'" (Abel, Hirsch, Langland 13) Edna will not accept the limitations of compromising her inner self for the purpose

of functioning in the world of action. Edna's participation in the world of autonomous action, similarly to Hester's and Offred's, is temporary and finally an effort in futility.

Development or growth for the female protagonist is limited due to this inner isolation and subsequent passivity. Hester, Edna and Offred are not passive in terms of maintaining their own subversive ideologies that may be juxtaposed to the unyielding, tyrannical rules of their respective political bodies. However, they are passive and powerless in terms of being able to choose or alter their own conditions in a positive manner in society. They are all encouraged (Offred is basically forced) to be silent. Consequently, all three women withdraw into the world of daydreams and memories. It is only in the realm of imagination that they can escape from despair and exemplify some sort of control. Even Edna, who adamently insists upon asserting her autonomous desires, never seems to be in complete control.

Whether the time period is seventeenth-century Puritan New England, Creole society in the late nineteenth century, or the futuristic society of Gilead in the twenty-first century, it is nevertheless obvious that all three female protagonists have a tenuous hold on selfhood. Moreover, it is the futuristic regime of Gilead in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale that depicts the possibility for an authentic female self as most unrealistic. Nor does the future hold much promise for the complete growth of the

female protagonist. The fictitious Professor Pieixoto, in the "Historical Notes in The Handmaid's Tale" at the end of the novel, makes it quite evident that even in the projected year of 2195 societal labels still exist to confine the individual. He notes, "We know that this city [Gilead] was a prominent way-station on what our author refers to as 'The Underground Femaleroad,' since dubbed by some of our historical wags 'The Underground Frailroad' (*Laughter,groans*)" (THT 283). The reaction of the professor's audience to his feeble attempt at humour illustrates that there is still a misogynous aspect in society.

Indeed, the ambiguity surrounding the potential for the female protagonist's integrated self at the conclusions of the three novels demonstrates that her possible release from society's prescribed roles and labels is ultimately uncertain. However, if the external life of limitations and boundaries can ever be reconciled with the heroine's specific aspirations and goals, then the female protagonist may transcend the confinement of developing strictly in a spiritual manner and become fully integrated with the self and her community. Edna Pontelliers must reach beyond the narcissistic, obsessively narrow dwelling on the self and Hester Prynnes and Offreds must not be willing to ultimately abnegate the self for the other if the female consciousness is to develop and grow in a positive, healthy manner.

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