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THE CONFLICTING ROLES OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN LITERATURE OF
THE 1890'S

Submitted in partial fulfillment
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A woman's place is in the home / Housewives are such dull
dull people / Women's talk is all chatter / Intelligent
women are emasculating / If you're so smart why aren't you
married / Can you type? / If you want to make decisions in
this family, go out and earn a paycheck yourself / Working
women are unfeminine / A smart woman never shows her
brains / It is a woman's duty to make herself attractive /
All women think about are clothes / Women are always playing
hard to get / No man likes an easy woman / Women should be
struck regularly, like gongs / Women like to be raped /
Women are always crying about something / Women don't
understand the value of a dollar / Women executives are
castrating bitches / Don't worry your pretty little head
about it / Dumb broad / It is glorious to be the mother of
all mankind / A woman's work is never done / All you do is
cook and clean and sit around all day / Women are only
interested in trapping some man / A woman who can't hold a
man isn't much of a woman / Women hate to be with other
women / Women are always off chattering with each other /
Some of my best friends are women...

- Robin Morgan, Sisterhood
is Powerful

The period of the "gay nineties" incorporated radical changes in American life. The age was one of "robber barons", Haymarket Square, Populism, an influx of the "new" immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and the Women's Christian Temperance Union; further, in 1890, the census noted the closing of the frontier.¹

Rumblings of reform movements came from Bryan in the Midwest and Watson in the South; they advocated progressive, responsible government. The spirit of Social Darwinism and Spencer's phrase, "survival of the fittest" influenced literature as well as the business-centered industrial society.

This time period contained many conflicting ideas, but the emphasis was on industrial and business progress and success. No one was sure whether Darwinism would replace a belief in God, and everyone but the sweatshop employees was convinced that success was a noble goal.

This epoch is also marked by confusion and debate in its literature as well as politics. The serious writers of the time were generally realistic, and their narratives were often written from a reporter's viewpoint. While the Social Darwinism of the time was transplanted into determinism in the literature, the religious reaction to this doctrine,

called the "social gospel", is also evident. The literature itself became more readily available through serialization in magazines which most often appealed to a female audience. Men were presumably busy acting out Horatio Alger stories.

Along with the popularization of literature via magazines, another phenomenon aimed at women increased in importance - advertising. Then, as now, advertising was as vital to the survival of the magazine as the number of subscribers. (Women became the largest group of consumers, who bought products for their households, and because of this power, became recognized as the stability of the family's moral existence and the reflection of the beauty of the prosperous civilization.) According to Thomas Beer: "It is the business of the artist, the shopkeeper and the publisher to show vain women an improved photograph of themselves".²

This paper is an attempt to examine the roles and images of female characters in the literature of the 1890's. The characterizations of the women vary from region to region, but they generally concern people who are expected to fulfill the complex role of mother-woman-wife-moral guardian. Much of the literature deals with the problems faced by the women when forced to assume this role. Very few of the writers studied suggest that this role should be abolished or altered; rather, they most often simply deal

with it as a given fact. That this role is often impossible to fulfill is suggested by only a few writers - and they are, without exception, female writers.

The works consulted in this study include a variety of literary works, in order to obtain an overview of the period. The novels and stories range from James' The Portrait of a Lady to Wiggin's Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, and from Garland's Main - Travelled Roads to Frederic's The Damnation of Theron Ware. Secondary sources were also consulted, ranging from historical studies of women to literary anthologies.

The paper is divided into three major sections:

- 1) The influence of environment on female characters;
- 2) The social roles assumed by the women; and,
- 3) The impact of these roles upon the lives of the female characters.

Some of the works consulted in this study are classics of modern literature and familiar to almost any reader, while other novels and stories are obscure. In order to discuss certain points, themes and characterizations, fairly extensive plot summaries are sometimes necessary, especially since many of the works are little-known or long forgotten.

The roles of women in this confused, rapidly changing age are rather limited by environmental factors. Since the literary trend of the era was toward realism, determinism and naturalism, the portraits of female characters are painted with much attention given to the boundaries placed upon the women by their environments. The environmental factors influencing the women include their physical surroundings and the social roles they are expected to assume. The condition of the female characters stems from the combination of these two factors. All of the women are trapped by the social structure, and their physical locations and economic status further limit them.

The physical environments in which the female characters live are of considerable importance in determining their personalities.

The diverse physical settings of the midwestern prairie, New Orleans, Boston and Paris provide completely different life styles for their residents. It seems logical to speculate that the women are more confined to their geographic areas and therefore, more subject to the suffering caused by the particular environment than are the men, who have the option of moving West or changing occupations. The men are encouraged to move and change, but mobility is limited for women. Women in the 1890's had little choice

about vocation or the place where they lived. In view of this, the influence of the environment upon the women becomes even more important.

This theme of physical environment influencing the lives of the women and helping to determine the roles they will assume is related to the conflict between city and country settings. Throughout many of the novels of the 1890's, characters are trapped by the harshness of a rural environment, so they become exhausted and their lives become merely struggles to survive. Some of these people leave the rural areas in hope of finding better opportunities in the city. There, they become dehumanized also, but the city is portrayed as even more horrible than the harshest countryside. The city seems to represent evil in the forms of greed, dirt, alcohol and immorality which cannot be escaped. The wealthier class seems to leave the American city to explore the European way of life. They, in turn, become entangled with the confusing, cosmopolitan world, which begins to dictate their behavior. As a result of this, arranging the concept of the influence of physical and geographical environment on the women characters around this idea of city/country conflict seems to be appropriate.

The geography, topography and climatic conditions in New England have a strong influence on the character of the inhabitants. The setting provided by the New England landscape - its rocky, infertile land, its hilly coarse terrain, the growth of scrub-bushes and tall, inflexible pines all acted as antagonists to the original settlers and continued to plague the residents during the 1890's. The long, dark, severe winters with blankets of smothering snow and gusts of icy wind and the comparatively brief summer with its limited harvest in autumn combine to make New England existence a constant struggle for its inhabitants. Edith Wharton vividly describes the setting of Ethan Frome in terms of its oppressive influence on the characters. First, the village they inhabit is called Starkfield and the cold wind seems to dry up the life and enthusiasm of Ethan, his wife and the only vital, alive character with hope, Mattie. Wharton describes Frome, (like the women): "He seemed a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in fast bound below the surface."³ The women in this world are also cold and bitter from their constant struggle with the elements.

The harshness of the weather and the terrain limit the already restricted opportunities of the women to travel and visit relatives and friends. The concept is conveyed in a touching scene from Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of

the Pointed Firs. Jewett describes, through the persona of a young woman from Boston, a family reunion attended by the women she has been spending the summer with; residents of the seacoast village of Dunnet Landing. The reunion is held once a year, in the summer, since that is the only time they can leave their household duties. Most of the participants in the reunion are elderly and the joy of the old friends seeing each other again and their sorrow at parting is intense because of the distinct possibility that they may not see one another again. The setting of New England prevents free travel and limits human relationships.

The Country of the Pointed Firs is set in a seacoast village, and the proximity of the sea is no longer an asset by 1890, but there remains the heritage of the seacoast town.

The people of Dunnet Landing have lost sons, husbands and fathers to the sea and it once was the source of their livelihood. Their heritage is in this unproductive environment and they cling to it. Captain Littlepage's tales, the stories of a retired seafarer, are listened to no matter how often he wishes to tell them. This is the way these women accept the boundaries defined by the New England landscape; they do not attempt to leave, they simply cling to the past.

The harsh countryside is again depicted by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, in her story, "Christmas Jenny", portrays a cold, bleak country with perpetual blizzards, where most people spend their time making themselves warm. Jenny, however, is an old woman who is thought to be crazy by the rest of the community because she lives on the outskirts of the village and she takes in sick and wounded animals to care for and raise. She decorates her cabin with greens from the trees and blends in with the natural environment while the others struggle against it. But Jenny has to sacrifice human relationships for this harmony with nature.

Generally, the New England setting tends to limit mobility, human contact, contact with outside world and hope for change. The sylvan ideal of tranquility in a rural setting sometimes comes to light, but in stories of New England and the Midwest, the emphasis seems to be on the environment as an enemy, as an oppressor; yet occasionally a character like Freeman's Jenny achieves harmony with nature, which seems preferable to being trapped into the society of her neighbors.

The literature of the Midwest also reflects this theme of struggle with the elements and battle for survival. The Midwest and the "old Northwest" (the region now called Wisconsin and Michigan), unlike New England, seems

to offer hope and opportunity to its inhabitants despite the hardships they impose on the settlers. The concept of the new land and new opportunity is evident in much of the literature dealing with the Midwest. By the 1890's, the farmers have many grievances against the eastern interests - the banks, the railroads, the politicians. They have convictions that their way of life, although often difficult and frustrating, represents the old enduring way of life. The time-honored values, the timeless ideals, while the eastern moneyed interests represent corruption and immorality.

The farmers, beside facing bleak winters, droughts and insects plagued their crops, faced exorbitant railroad rates for shipping their crops to market, high interest rates on loans and diminishing capacity of the land to produce crops.⁴ Out of this setting come the stories of Hamlin Garland, a writer of Populist persuasion.

The story, "Return of a Private," illustrates the element of struggle in the life of a Midwestern farmer. Garland uses the struggle of the Civil War to compare to the everyday struggle on the prairie in order to emphasize his point. The plot of the story is simply a man returning from four years in the Union Army. "His war with the South was over and his fight, his daily running fight with nature and against the injustice of his fellowmen was begun again." Strength, determination and hard work is required

to withstand this struggle and both sexes share the work. The women are sturdy and are measured in terms of their productivity, both offspring and work output. Women are expected to perform the additional function of being the moral guardians and comforters of the menfolk. Garland's story, "Mrs. Ripley's Trip", offers a profile of a hardworking, steadfast wife and mother who is middle-aged. Mrs. Ripley has been saving small change for twenty years, in order to make a short visit to her relatives in New York state. She prepares for the trip for days; she does extra cooking and leaves specific instructions for her husband and her son on conducting household affairs. Mrs. Ripley returns from her trip only to find that the men cannot function without her to cook and clean for them. She also decides that the priorities of her way of life are the best, when she compares them to her New York relatives' lives. The purpose of Mrs. Ripley's trip is to bolster her self-esteem and her Midwestern values. The story also depicts men as dependent upon the women for strength and reassurance, both of which are necessary on the prairie. Garland's women become slaves to the land and the weather conditions in order to survive. The physical environment touches their daily lives and makes them either healthy and robust or breaks their health altogether. This is not true of all the writers.

The optimistic side of prairie life in the 1890's is depicted by Willa Cather in My Antonia. Antonia Shimerda is the daughter of a Scandinavian immigrant family who settle on the prairie. She faces harsh winter blizzards, the suicide death of her father, who cannot face the battle with nature; and the heartbreak of bearing a child outside of marriage. Through all of this hardship, Antonia retains her faith in the goodness of people and her beliefs in the wholesomeness that the world has to offer. From the time she is a small child, Antonia marvels over the beauty and mystery of nature and she applies this innocence to human beings as well. Willa Cather portrays Antonia as a symbol of hope, despite hardship, and she achieves this symbolism by showing Antonia surrounded by children, working the land.

Throughout this optimistic novel, Willa Cather warns her readers of the danger of leaving the wholesome country life and going into town. The forces of nature may be harsh, but they do not compare with the evils and cruelties perpetrated on humans (especially females) by other people in the city. Midwestern literature is full of admonitions about the evils of urban living. As previously stated, midwesterners mistrusted the cities' bankers, railroad executives, etc. for very substantial reasons. Also, the wholesomeness of living close to nature and doing honest

physical labor, conditions highly valued by these people, are absent in city life. So, when Antonia leaves the farm to become a housekeeper in Black Hawk, a man takes advantage of her innocence, deeply hurts her and leaves her to bear his child. Later, we see Antonia out in the country again, married to a hardworking man, the mother of a dozen children, all involved in working the land. There she is content and untroubled.

Hamlin Garland reinforces this idea of immorality as a part of city life in "Under the Lion's Paw". This story reflects not only mistrust of the urbanite but the Easterner as well. The plot is simple: an honest, hardworking farmer, although assisted by friends, is threatened with losing the land that he has worked for years and which he, by prior agreement, was entitled to buy. Butler, the landlord, who has spent time in Washington, D.C., with his brother who is a Senator, has decided to go back on his original promise and make the farmer pay the full value of the land that the farmer himself improved. The farmer gives in and pays the higher price so that he may hold up his end of the bargain and maintain his dignity. The contrast between city and country environmental influences is obvious.

An eastern writer in sympathy with midwestern ideals was William Dean Howells, the "Dean" of American Letters during this period. In The Rise of Silas Lapham,

Howells shows that the basic, moral, family-oriented, Christian teachings are best even though one may be faced with a place in city "society" or financial success. The Laphams are newly rich country people who are trying to conform to "society". As their emphasis on the importance of material things increases, they become more vulnerable to greedy schemes, and they eventually end up back in their original economic class. They realize then that their old way of life was more wholesome and more desirable. The change from country to city life only brings sorrow to the Laphams. Mrs. Lapham (whose first name is, appropriately, Persis) is Silas' moral mainstay throughout the novel. She warns him of the evils of the new life and she is glad to go back to the simple country life, although she stands by Silas no matter where they are on the social ladder. Like Hamlin Garland's and Willa Cather's females, Persis represents goodness and strength and the moral way of life. Like Antonia, Persis fights the evil influences of the city's social life with its lack of human compassion. As previously stated, fighting the elements of nature is far simpler than fighting the teeming cities.

Theodore Dreiser, in Sister Carrie, provides the fullest picture of the influence of city life on a girl from the country. Carrie goes to Chicago where she intends to make a good living. She is innocent and curious and a

little bewildered, sitting on the train headed for the city. After trying to find a decent job and working for low pay in a factory, Carrie sees that she does not want to lead this miserable life, nor that of her sister, a dull, overworked, humorless housewife. She is caught in the cruel trap of the city - a life that displays riches and success but offers to most people a life of drudgery and disappointment, made worse by the frustration that the desired prizes are always just beyond one's grasp. Thus vulnerable, Carrie is taken in by Drouet, a fast-talking, small-time man-about-town. She is drawn to him simply because he can provide her with material necessities and a few luxuries. He, in turn, realizes that all he need offer to her is material comfort. She is able to survive the struggle of life in the city, but in order to do so she must compromise her respectability and swallow her pride. Drieser's novel is full of forces that determine the fate of the various characters - one of which is the role of the urban environment in reducing Carrie to an animal seeking shelter and food. The concept of the evil influence of city life on young people is a constant theme throughout this period of literature.

The urban environment is even more vividly described by Stephen Crane in Maggie: Girl of the Streets. He shows a filthy, depressing scene of the slum life in New York City. Maggie Thompson, like Carrie, only sought escape from the squalor of tenement life, drunken parents and difficult, unceasing labor. She looks for protection from this brutal world from Pete, who is kind to her in a matter-of-fact way. Maggie sees him as something better than her - someone a step higher on the social ladder, somewhat above the kind of life she leads. She is impressed when he takes her for beer to a smoky nightclub and she eventually runs off with him. He soon casts her aside and she soon dies, exhausted by the brutality of life in the slums. Both Maggie and Carrie look for a way out of the lives they are living, lured on by the promise of material comfort and love; both compromise respectability and remain unfulfilled. Carrie, however, proves more adaptable and prosperous. She learns to use the men not only for survival but she knows when to abandon them and live on her own strength and resources. But she never finds love and contentment in the city, as the novel implies she may have if she had stayed in the country and led a simpler life.

These views of the brutality of the urban environment contrast with the descriptions of city life that appear in novels dealing with a wealthier class of people. To them the city offers entertainment and social opportunity, but it is a place from which the society people flee in the hot summer when they leave the pressure of the urban life and go to sea or country resorts. Edith Wharton describes the social whirl of city life in terms of its monotony and dulling effect on the lives of the female characters.

Edith Wharton in The House of Mirth depicts the social life of New York at that time as extremely demanding and absurd. Lily Bart, the heroine, is trapped in the role of a socialite, holding artificial values of material wealth and social status. The influence of the city upon Lily is similar to its influence on Carrie and Maggie; she is unable to attain the wealth and security that she desires and she is continually frustrated when she sees it paraded in front of her each day. Lily cannot adapt to her changing financial situation (she loses a great deal of money in a bad investment; yet she continues to spend money to keep up appearances), nor is she suited to perform any useful function for employment. Lily finally commits suicide. Wharton's point here is that upper class (as well as lower class) city life diminishes the capacity of people to work hard and appreciate the basic Christian

ideals of life.

Henry James deals with the reactions of upper middle class Americans to the new experience of the European environment. This is a new environment and it is difficult for Americans to adjust. Their adaptability is limited, the Americans are hurt by cultures they don't understand. In two novels dealing with female characters, Daisy Miller and The Portrait of a Lady, James shows that traits born of the American way of life of opportunity and expansion and progress, industriousness and energy, innocence and self-righteousness are all factors that work against Americans in the European environment. Daisy Miller sets out with an open mind regarding the people and things she may encounter in Europe; she is a little crude and unpolished for European standards. Daisy is enthusiastic about being a part of life, she is excited about discovering everything she can about living. She is perhaps like Antonia Shimerda or Carrie Meeber, but Daisy is not in America and so she cannot devote her life to the land. Daisy is trapped by American, urban, middle class values - conscious of attaining better things than she now possesses. Daisy's activities and her overexposure to living (staying out a night to see the Colisieum by moonlight and contracting "the fever") eventually cause her death in the rigid Roman society. Daisy's death is symbolic of the American

inability to live in a different environment. In The Portrait of a Lady, Isabel Archer, who is better educated and more subdued than Daisy, falls victim to the decaying morality of Europe. Her marriage to a man she thought dignified and moral becomes a trap when she finds he had deceived her about his past and his motive for marrying her was to gain access to her money. Isabel feels cheated, but she stands by her commitment to maintain her dignity.

In these two novels, James illustrates the difficulty of traits and values born of the American way of life surviving in another cultural environment. Absent from European culture is the element of struggle and hardship. All of the physical environments in American novels, either urban or rural contain struggle for their inhabitants. The most adaptable women are those who are flexible, willing to compromise and learn to survive. In the city, this entails loss of morality and manipulation of others, (Sister Carrie). In the country, survival means hard work and faith in the future. Unfortunately, most of the female characters simply survive in their environments; they can do little to escape, unless they depend upon men to help them attain financial security or move with them westward to seek a better life.

This lack of control over one's own destiny in dealing with the physical environment is compounded by a woman's lack of control over the role she will play in the social environment. The expectations of society leave women very little latitude in choosing the paths they will follow. Instead, they are confronted with strict social castes which they must learn to adjust to or suffer the consequences if they do not adjust. The men, during this prosperous period of the Gilded Age, were offered endless new opportunities for employment and advancement in new technological fields and in the expanding industrial complex. They were offered the prize of achieving the "American Dream" so frequently portrayed in the series of stories written by Horatio Alger. Women took more and more jobs in the 1890's, but they were low-paying and offered no advancement. Anything a woman earned became the property of her male guardian.

The society invariably cast women in the role of a wife, a secondary, supportive, helper for a man. If a woman could not play out a Horatio Alger story, she certainly aimed at marrying someone who could. Along with being faithful wives, women were expected to be devoted, dedicated and productive mothers, representing goodness and upholding the morality in life for their families.

Women as wives were also expected to be sexually accessible to their husbands, as a part of the marital agreement.

Considering these strong currents leading toward social acceptance for women, a strong backlash began to come to the surface in protest against these rigid social standards. Women were demanding the right to retain their own property and the right to vote. They began to participate in higher education and to re-evaluate the priorities of such a social system. Some of these women were female authors who considered the problems of being a woman in such a culture. Male authors considered the social environment's effect on women from a more general viewpoint; they looked at the problems of an industrialized, "progressive" society and their impact on people's individual lives.

The social roles which women are forced to assume leave them little opportunity to grow or change and give them a sense of powerlessness which grows out of the inability to make choices and decisions. Since the choices women could make were limited to matters regarding the home and the raising of children, they became something apart from men, somehow superior morally, though inferior intellectually; they became the mythical, symbolic reflections of the prosperous, Christian, progressive society. This conflicting set of roles is a senseless

paradox and women reflected this confusion in their own lives and the literature attempts to deal with it.

As mentioned before, marriage is the first social goal that a female strives to attain. The irony of the situation is that in order to secure a husband, a female must be unassuming, helpless and coy. Once she is married, she must be skilled at countless varieties of household chores and willing to work around the clock, while she maintains her original sweetness and charm.

Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton deal with these problems of adjustment to society's expectations and the expectations of a husband after the marriage. In The Awakening, Mrs. Chopin tells the story of Edna, who is unhappy in a world which provides everything that society says a woman should have. Edna is an upperclass woman, married to a successful New Orleans businessman. They have two children and an active social life. Mrs. Chopin's novel depicts the contrast between reality and illusion in the marriage. As a child, Edna was raised to believe that she would someday marry her ideal of a man: one who is gentle, strong and handsome. The reality of her marriage is that there are no traces of these illusions. Life is dull and boring and her husband is not a "cavalier". The reality of marriage is that it smothers all of the carefully cultivated illusions about love. As Mrs. Chopin puts it: "As the devoted wife of a man who

worshipped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams".⁵ This loss of illusion makes the marriage unbearable for Edna; she feels the oppressiveness of her good husband who makes all of the decisions in her life. Unfortunately for Edna, she maintains her power to contemplate alternative ways of living and she eventually destroys herself. Marriage in The Awakening, according to Kate Chopin, requires a docile, decorative, unthinking woman.

Edith Wharton's The Old Maid is a novel of marriage and motherhood and women leading lives secondary in importance to those of the men. Charlotte, a young socialite, marries her handsome suitor and cannot quite pass off "the reminder of the phrase 'to obey' in the glittering blue of the marriage ceremony".⁶ Mrs. Wharton, like Mrs. Chopin, discusses the concept of illusion and reality in marriage: "the startled, puzzled surrender to the incomprehensible exigencies of the young man to whom one had at most yielded a rosy cheek in return for an engagement ring; there was the large double-bed; the terror of seeing him shave calmly the next morning, ... the evasions, insinuations (and) resigned smiles..."⁷ Mrs. Wharton stresses the inability of married women to live their own lives, except through their husbands

and children.

In The House of Mirth, Mrs. Wharton shows a woman who is so deeply convinced of the social necessity of finding a husband that she comes to think of men only in relation to the amount of financial security they can provide. Lily Bart doesn't really love any man enough to marry him, yet she's forced to consider almost anyone she sees as a prospective husband, because she is in financial trouble and she is beyond the marriageable age. As Lily says: "We (women) are expected to be pretty and well dressed till we drop - and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership."⁸ Lily has been raised to be dependent and attractive to men and she finds that she cannot adjust to any other roles in life.

The similar situation of being trained for the condition of marriage and then finding that one is trapped by her marriage is a common theme. Although Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin discuss the women renouncing control over their lives while married to "good husbands", Henry James shows a woman who lost everything by marrying a man who, she thought, admired her ability to think and decide things for herself. Isabel Archer, in The Portrait of a Lady, is a young, intelligent, educated American woman who is traveling in Europe. She

inherits her uncle's fortune through the efforts of her cousin, Ralph, who wants to be sure that Isabel will be able to maintain her independence. Isabel feels a need to "do something" with her life. She meets and falls in love with Osmond, a dignified, educated American widower living in Italy, with an estate and a young daughter. Isabel feels that this marriage will fulfill her every need and that, above all, Osmond has respect and reverence for her thoughts and opinions. Osmond turns out to be a petty, avaricious, vindictive master of his home and eventually smothers the enthusiasm in Isabel's character. He prevents her from having her own friends and living her own way, and he will not listen to her opinions and views. Osmond was merely using her for her money and he deceived her regarding the real mother of his daughter, who was his mistress, Mme. Merle. Mme. Merle calculated the advantages of the marriage for Osmond. Isabel's situation represents the ultimate collision of illusion and reality in the marital set-up. The wife is powerless, disillusioned and a legal non-entity. There is, however, in the eyes of society and these women, who were raised in this society, no way out. Perhaps the security of the social position acquired by being married accounts for their reluctance to leave their husbands.

Most of the recently mentioned novels involve upper-class people, where the characters are free to worry about intellectual conflicts, instead of the rent or the next meal. In stories and novels dealing with lower-class people, the men seem to have less power to dominate the women -- perhaps because money is linked to power, and perhaps because when money is scarce, both husbands and wives must contribute their share of effort for the common good. In Howells' The Rise of Silas Lapham, Persis, Lapham's wife, has worked side-by-side with him in his business ventures since their marriage. They are, even in good economic times, partners. Persis married Silas because she had faith in him.

The conditions of marital relationships in the Midwest, like that of the Laphams, seem much healthier. Marriage in the Midwest is not only socially desirable for a woman, but economically desirable for both husband and wife, so that they may work as partners. All of the marriages in Hamlin Garland's prairie tales are partnerships; they share the work and the benefits.

There are two novels of this time period in which the women want to marry their suitors and surrender their lives to the choices these men may make; but because of their economic situations and the women's discontent with their station in life, they cannot be passive. Frank Norris' McTeague deals with the marriage of a humble

dentist to the daughter of poor, immigrant parents in San Francisco. McTeague's wife, Trina, feels a need to yield to his great strength; she wants to be dominated and protected, as long as he is able to provide for her. When he loses his license to practice dentistry, she begins to hoard money and keep it away from him. McTeague begins to drink and become abusive to her and she enjoys suffering by his hand. McTeague deals primarily with greed and lust for money, but the submission of a wife to such extremes as physical abuse by her husband indicates that Trina's upbringing has prepared her to give up everything (except her money) at the will of her husband.

The woman's need to make herself secure shows again in Drieser's Sister Carrie. Carrie becomes involved with Drouet, who preys on her innocence and the fact that she is alone and hungry in a strange city. He sets up housekeeping with her and provides her with some clothing but he, without giving her the benefit of marriage, expects her to wait for him, to become a recluse from the rest of the world. Carrie, as a result of her upbringing, expects that he will marry her. She is, naturally, uneasy about their current status. Carrie would have made Drouet a good wife. He showed no interest in marriage and Carrie was more impressed by a man she

thought was more dignified, more refined and more capable of providing for her. This man is Hurstwood, discontent with his marriage and enchanted by Carrie's youth and freshness. He promises her marriage, steals money and tricks her into running off with him. As with Drouet, Carrie looks at Hurstwood as a provider and considers he is far above Drouet. This marriage also never materializes and Hurstwood does not provide for her. After this, Carrie decides to provide for herself and leaves Hurstwood. One of the most striking elements of this story is Carrie's willingness to marry both Drouet and Hurstwood out of her inbred instinct to seek a provider. The fact that Carrie does better providing for herself (she becomes a successful actress) without being hampered by either of these men. What Carrie never finds, however, is the mythical bond in marriage - love.

Love for Sister Carrie as well as for Edna (The Awakening), Charlotte (The Old Maid), Lily Bart (The House of Mirth) and Isabel Archer (The Portrait of a Lady) is a cruel illusion, shattered by the realization of day-to-day life.

In order to better understand the social pressure on women to assume the role of a man's wife, it seems logical to examine works of this time dealing with unmarried women. Considering the types of characters who are unmarried, it would appear the institution is

not suitable for these women (or for many of those who are married) for many different reasons, some of which are the fear of men, responsibility and sex.

There are basically two views of unmarried women in this literature. The first and most prevalent is that unmarried women are to be pitied; that they are lonely and have missed living life. The women who fit this category's requirements think of themselves in much the same way, except that they often feel that the things they've missed in life (husbands, children, etc.) were things they are glad to have escaped.

In much of the literature of the 1890's written by the New England Twilight Writers, this idea of fear of sex, childbearing and being subjected to the will of a husband (master) is obvious. The women of New England, by 1890, have lost sons, husbands and fathers to the Civil War, to the sea, to the westward movement, and to the industrial cities. Therefore, men are scarce and most of the communities described in the stories of New England at that time (many by women) are dominated by females. Even women who are or have been married live in an essentially feminine world. Since there are few men, the women learn to exist without them. They learn to order their lives around values which they were taught to believe in. These values include hard work,

cleanliness, reverence for God, but not aggressiveness, competition or success in the outside world. Women in this environment are nevertheless attracted to men, but they are also afraid of being hurt. More important, they are afraid of having their set, ordered, secure way of life disrupted. To summarize, the women, even though forced to be self-sufficient, are still socialized to play the role of wife and mother, if they are confronted with the choice. These two conflicting roles cause the women to fear and resent men. Contrast this attitude with the more open, mutual responsibility relationships of the Midwest. The key seems to be the presence or absence of a common goal, which was always there on the prairie, but had disappeared in New England.

The second type of unmarried woman is more difficult to find in literature. She is the educated, liberated "new" woman, who is "evil" because she does not accept the role of wife and mother. On the other hand, she is a refreshing change from the boring, uneducated drudge who is wife and mother.

The first type of unmarried woman is the classic, stereotyped "old maid", who makes futile attempts to enjoy life through other people. Edith Wharton, in The Old Maid, tells a melodramatic story of Delia, who bears a child out of wedlock, has her married sister adopt the child and lives the rest of her life as the child's

"Aunt", suffering because she cannot be the child's mother but thriving on watching her grow.

This image of the pitiful spinster is also in a scene in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's Jane Field where Jane and a group of stately New England matrons like her decide to go on a short trip. One of the women is an "old maid" who expresses concern about leaving her cats alone for two days. The other matrons scoff and laugh at her for worrying about such trifles, after all of the other women, many of them widows, have finished worrying over their cooking, etc. Even in this feminine world, the married women have more prestige than the "old maids".

Jane Field's daughter, Lois, whose father was killed in the Civil War, has a suitor who comes to call on her, but she feels uncomfortable with him since she has very little to talk about. More important to Lois and her mother, though, is the prestige they both gain when the neighbors see Lois with her "gentleman".

Feeling important is a major aim of most of these women. "A Poetess" is a story by Mary Wilkins Freeman, dealing with a woman named Betsey, who lives alone, spends most of her time gardening, cooking, sewing and cleaning and in her spare time, writing poetry, which she calls her "love letters to life". Her one joy in life is to write poems for children's birthdays, holidays, etc.

The people in the village cannot understand that Betsey is a human being with real emotions, since she has no children, she has no "depth of feeling". At the same time, Betsey is glad that she has avoided "that trouble", marriage. Her usefulness and purpose in life is taken from her when she overhears people saying that her poetry is poor. Since people think she is incapable of emotion, she believes it too. It is tragic that single women, apparently afraid of marriage, must create their own usefulness.

Mrs. Freeman's story, "A New England Nun", is a study in women in this type of society in fear of men. Louisa, who is engaged to Joe, has waited for years while he made his fortune in Australia. She has become accustomed to living a useless, yet busy life. Louisa keeps house and sews constantly. She keeps her male dog constantly chained behind the house, because she is afraid of his aggressiveness toward herself and others. One day Joe returns and Louisa feels that her calm, serene (yet secure) way of life has been invaded by this brutal, uncontrollable force. The implications are also those of Louisa's fear of being forced to submit to him sexually. However, Louisa feels obligated to marry Joe as she had promised until she overhears him talking to another woman and telling that woman he loves her. This gives her the perfect excuse to break the engagement and return to her closed, ordered, feminine world.

A book which fits the New England setting and deals primarily with women, but which is not ordinarily included in the category of the New England Twilight works is Kate Douglas Wiggin's Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. Rebecca, as a young child, is sent to live with her two maiden aunts in Maine. One aunt, Miranda, is a woman without love or patience, which everyone invariably attributes ~~to~~^{to} the fact that she is an "old maid". Aunt Jane, however, was as a young woman, engaged to marry a soldier who was killed in the Civil War. As a result of having been loved and wanted, (if not married), Jane is able to have compassion and understanding for Rebecca as she grows up. At the end of the novel, Aunt Miranda dies and leaves her home to Rebecca, indicating that she loved the child and this was her only way of showing it. Both Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Wiggin seem to have sympathy for the "old maid" in a feminine culture, in which they are given very little respect by their own sex.

Sarah Orne Jewett, who also wrote about New England women at this time, not only had compassion for these unmarried women, but she described them in such a way that they become respectable and even admired by the reader, if not by the other characters in the stories. In her stories the women (all of her characters) maintain their self-respect and respect for others even in the New England

setting. In short, the women have dignity. In her book, The Country of the Pointed Firs, Jewett describes a character everyone calls "poor Joanna". Joanna was jilted by her fiancé just before the wedding. She decided that she had to live in isolation from that time on in order to "do penance" for becoming so vain, so wicked when she was hurt. Joanna lives alone on Shell-heap Island and provides for herself. Joanna is an extreme example of the condition of New England women at this time. They live in a world with women's values, yet they are vulnerable to men. As a result, they are isolated. Joanna, however, chose to punish herself for reacting normally to being rejected and she becomes a martyr, with dignity, because living on the island was her choice.

Another of Sarah Jewett's characters makes this dignified choice to remain unmarried. Sylvia, a child of eight or nine, comes from the city to live with her grandmother in the Maine forest in "A White Heron". She begins to see the beauty and complexity of the forest and its inhabitants, and she eventually feels a part of her environment. A stranger comes one day, a handsome young man, representing her chances for love and marriage in the future. She desires to gain the man's attention by answering his questions about the location of the white heron he is hunting. For reasons unknown even to herself she cannot tell him where the bird is. She gives up his

favor for the world she loves and feels part of. Jewett gives the reader her idea of Sylvia's alternative choice: "Dear loyalty, that suffered a sharp pang as the guest went away disappointed later in the day, that could have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves!" Sylvia and Sarah Jewett maintain their dignity. Even in a culture like late 19th Century New England, women may make choices, but they must be strong and confident to survive. Mary Wilkins Freeman's women may make the same choice of living alone, but their reasons seem to be fear and uncertainty, while Joanna and Sylvia have more individual, moral reasons.

In contrast there is a character in Harold Frederic's book, The Damnation of Theron Ware, who represents the educated, free-thinking, "liberated" woman of the 1890's. Celia Madden is strong-willed, Catholic, intellectual and uninhibited in displaying her beauty. In contrast to her, Ware's wife Alice is plain, dull and ordinary. Alice may have come from New England. Celia, of course, represents all of the things that are threatening American culture in the 1890's. Celia lures Ware, a simple, gentle preacher, off the path he has chosen by dangling all of the evils in front of him; intellectualism, sexuality and alcohol. For all of this, he leaves his good career and simple life. The fact that Celia Madden

is single goes to the fact that she is evil; a "free spirit" with no responsibility. A woman like this is an evil influence on a good, simple man, just as the things she represents bring havoc to American, middle class culture.

Another instance in which a single woman changes the typically American outlook of a man occurs in Henry James' The Ambassadors. Strether, a product of Wollet, Massachusetts, changes his concepts about competition and success as he sees Paris society. One of the things that impresses Strether is the oppressiveness of American females as compared to French women. American women seem very burdensome with their constant harping on "getting ahead" after Strether meets Maria Gostrey, who is unmarried. Maria does not demand things from him; she is tactful and kind; she becomes his "confidant". The fact that Maria is unmarried does not mean that she is seeking a husband, or that she is lonely. Celia, too, is perfectly happy alone.

These women make interesting contrasts to the New England women. Why does the society consider marriage such an important attainment for women? The women themselves write of unhappiness and fear about marriage; why does this society consider women married or unmarried so suited to the institution? As Sarah Orne Jewett states

in A Country Doctor: "It must be recognized that certain qualities are required for married and even domestic life, which all women do not possess; but instead of attributing this to the disintegration of society, it must be acknowledged to belong to its progress."

Closely tied to the role of a man's wife is the role of a mother. In the 1890's women expected to be proud to bear their husband's offspring. It was believed that the female disposition was especially suited to this purpose.⁹

It seems that children are perceived differently in the literature of this period. A few female writers express their concern that a woman's role is almost inevitably that of a mother - Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin are among these few. Otherwise, the abundance or scarcity of children in a story or a novel seems to indicate the hopefulness or the hopelessness of a given situation. More specifically, the novels that are clearly deterministic (Sister Carrie, McTeague, Ethan Frome) also tend to be pessimistic and therefore contain no children as characters to indicate revitalization or hope. Novels of the New England Twilight writers infrequently include children who offer hope. Children are dealt with in a tragic manner, indicating they will go the way of their elders.

In The Awakening, Kate Chopin's heroine, Edna, is the mother of two children. Edna sees herself trapped in a "mother-woman" role, which means that she must be feminine, gentle and concerned constantly about the impression she is making; yet she must abandon all of her needs, replacing them with the needs of her husband and children. While Edna feels real concern for her children, she realizes that she cannot live only through their lives; she has needs of her own. Mrs. Chopin seems to be one of the few writers of this period who writes about motherhood realistically, not treating it as though it was a sacred duty of all women to perform and enjoy. Even Edith Wharton, who discusses motherhood without glorifying it, discusses one woman's fulfillment because of a child who provides her joy.

Delia in Wharton's The Old Maid lives her life through her daughter, who was an illegitimate child adopted by Delia's sister. This, somehow brightens her life and makes it worth living. Charlotte, Delia's sister, has a more realistic view of the motherhood role. She says: "And then the babies, the babies who were supposed to make up for everything and didn't..." She, like Chopin's Edna, feels trapped in her role as mother and just a little guilty for not being content in her "mother-woman" role.

Throughout these two novels, as well as most of the writings from New England, run indications that the women

fear the process of childbirth. Women die of things like broken hearts and exhaustion. These seem to be euphemisms for childbirth and its complications. Needless to say, it was a dangerous process and yet many of the women felt that it was simply part of being a woman. One can imagine the horror stories passed from one woman to another, all causing the women to fear childbirth - a process that resulted from sex. Sexual access was, of course, one of the rights a man could not be denied by his wife. It is no surprise that motherhood and marriage bred discontent in women.

As previously stated, most of the novels deal with children as symbols of hope. Henry James, in The Portrait of a Lady, has a young girl provide Isabel Archer with the only element of innocence and hope left in her life. Isabel, an American woman who is educated, wealthy and enthusiastic, ~~marries~~^{is} a man in Europe who epitomizes all of the values she believes in - kindness, dignity and respect for her. She finds later that he has lied to her, married her for her money and that he thinks that her ideas are merely contemptible. Osmond, her husband, has a daughter, Pansy, whose mother is actually Osmond's mistress, but everyone believes that Pansy is the daughter of Osmond's first wife. Isabel finds out about Osmond's deception and she feels a strong maternal instinct toward Pansy. Perhaps because Isabel, although trapped in this

marriage, sees hope in the innocence of Pansy. Pansy may be taught to live in a way different from the corrupt views of her father and his mistress. Here, Pansy offers some hope.

The writers of New England deal with children in terms of the freshness and liveliness and new life they offer, but overshadowing this optimistic view is the feeling in almost all of the New England literature - that the dying culture and foreboding environment will smother any new life. One gets this impression from the literature primarily from the fact that there are so few children in the stories and novels.

Perhaps the most optimistic of the novels of New England is Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, in which Rebecca, a spirited country child, gives her enthusiasm to all of those around her. She lives with two maiden aunts and manages, by bringing people to the house and helping them to live a life outside of the home, to show them that they can enjoy life. They live their lives through Rebecca and they play out a mother's role because Rebecca becomes their child. At the end, her aunt leaves her the house in her will. Rebecca, although she has received an education by this time, decides to bring her impoverished family to "the brick house" and provide for them. This, for Kate Wiggin, is a happy ending,

but it is actually rather pessimistic; Rebecca turns down offers for jobs and travel and opportunities to use her education in favor of remaining in "the brick house".

Sarah Orne Jewett, in her novel, A Country Doctor, states through one of her characters: "while there's life there's hope." In this novel, she deals with the ambitions of Nan, a girl raised by people who never trained her for the role of a wife and mother. As a result, Nan wants to be a doctor. Because of her strong ambition, she finally does so and in time she is accepted by the community. The novel ends pessimistically, though, with Nan in her ancestors' graveyard. This shows that she has ties to the New England past - she is bound to be trapped by the dying, static civilization. Jewett's novel is ironic, then: although Nan as a child grew up free from the usual social pressures and thus represented hope, she could not succeed in the atmosphere of turn-of-the-century New England.

In Jewett's, "A White Heron," Sylvia, a young child, is sent to live with her grandmother in the woods. Her grandmother helps her learn about her natural surroundings and Sylvia becomes a part of her environment. She refuses to disclose the location of the heron's nest to the hunter, who represents her opportunity to attain love and companionship from a man. This shows that Sylvia, a young child, will not break the unproductive tradition of the

women of New England at that time. She chooses to remain alone and childless. She represents no hope.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman discusses children in two different stories. In "The Twelfth Guest", she describes a dinner party, and all of the guests are old and concerned about petty things, such as the color of the tablecloth. A young girl comes to the door, looking for some food. They invite her to eat with them and she helps them clean up the meal. Her eyes are grateful to them, but she says nothing. The women want to help her and raise her to be a "young lady" in the image of themselves. The women feel useful again. One day, Christina disappears, without a word. The women are outraged and upset; they feel like mothers who lost their children. The reader gets the feeling that Christina is not a particularly hopeful character, but she demonstrates the women's need to feel wanted as mothers.

In her story "Sister Liddy", Mrs. Freeman expresses her feelings that children are a symbol of revitalization. This story is set in an almshouse and the adult characters are pathetic, but "the children were all hearty, and although the world had lost all its savor for the hearts and minds of the old ones, it was still somewhat salt to their palates. Now that their thoughts had ceased reaching and grasping, they could still put out their tongues, for

that primitive instinct of life with which they had been born still survived and gave them pleasure. In this world, it is the child only that is immortal." Mrs. Freeman believes in the new spirit offered by children, but she also sees the bleakness of New England in the 1890's.

Rose Terry Cooke takes another view of children in New England. In "Old Miss Todd", a lonely spinster takes in a young boy and cares for him, sends him to school and helps him in any way she can, hoping sometime that he will repay her by falling in love with her. This is a tragic story of a misplaced motherhood instinct and a desire to be needed. In the barren, feminine world of New England, either of these needs could become obsessions. In this world, children are feared, needed and loved by women who are not their mothers. Their vigor amidst a dying society underscores the irony of this situation.

Conversely, in the Midwest, children were almost a necessity to their parents, in order to work on the farm. Hence, it is not surprising in the works dealing with this region to find children always plentiful and as vigorous as their parents. In view of this, motherhood is almost an obligation for the wife of a farmer. Women in these stories thrive on being surrounded by large families. They became co-workers with their children and perhaps enjoyed a closeness not possible in the city.

In Garland's story, "The Return of a Private", the soldier's wife, Emma, has managed to keep the farm producing crops and raise the children for the four years he was away. He tells her that she is a perfect wife and the story shows that her worth is evaluated according to her productivity of offspring and work output. In an atmosphere with these values, how could a woman reject the role of motherhood?

The most optimistic characterization of Midwestern woman as a mother is found in Cather's My Antonia. Antonia, from the time she is a child, works as hard as any man but she retains her femininity, a condition made possible by her ability to bear children. She is also portrayed as being content with this life and she regards her oldest daughter more as a companion than a child. Antonia has an enthusiasm for living life which she passes on to her children. It is this vigor of the people of the Midwest and their wholesome, hardworking family cooperation that have contributed to the agrarian myth. An essential part of this myth is a mother like Antonia.

The role of "mother", from indications in the literature, was reluctantly accepted by most married women. It demonstrates another social pressure exerted upon women by their husbands, namely the little power over the roles they assumed.

Close to the wife and mother roles of women is the role of the moral guardian and reformer. If the other roles entail conflict, this one certainly provides more confusion. American women, at this time (after industrialization), become the symbols for morality, stability and family life. While the men assume the position of breadwinner, the women are left with the responsibility of teaching the children Christian ideals and giving their men moral support. The influx of women into the (elementary) teaching profession and the use of industrialization are not a coincidence. The men were busy in the competitive, amoral, business world and the women were left to nurture the children and see that they remained innocent. At about this time, (1830's), women became active in opposing the evils of the society. The first was slavery; the second, temperance. The men thereby abandoned their moral responsibility to the women. By the 1890's, men resented and scoffed at these "moral" creatures who became fanatics, like Carrie Nation who tried to cure the evils of saloons by taking after them with an ax.

It is ironic that, after assigning to women moral guardianship, men resent their harping and complaining in efforts to alter the men's patterns of behavior. As Thomas Beer states in The Mauve Decade, the women, in the view of men, managed to instill "baseness in virtue."

Women's roles as wife and mother imply that they are responsible for the spiritual well-being of others. This does not allow them to express other feelings and still be considered feminine. Women who do not accept these responsibilities for one reason or another are considered abnormal, evil, or at the least, deprived.

In literature, the female writers know better than this, that women not playing traditional roles are not abnormal - but the society makes them suffer for it. The males tend to portray females either in those roles or longing to be like someone who is a wife and mother. Even Dreiser's Carrie, who adheres to no moral code and becomes a financial success, suffers because she is not loved by a man, implying a woman can't have both.

With all of the social and psychological pressures applied on women to assume these traditional roles (to the benefit of the males) and the conflicting, opposing nature of the roles themselves, is it any wonder that the women react in all kinds of strange ways, which cause the men to feel that somehow, women's minds and bodies are just a little weaker than their own?

The literature of the 1890's seems to have more compassion for the condition of women and the reasons for their problems than the social order of that age. The "Gilded Age" simultaneously glorified and degraded women. It is easy to think highly of a lowly servant.

These roles of wife, mother and moral guardian suit a male-dominated society. But the women who are forced into these roles often suffer, or adjust in a manner that causes them to lose their identity as individuals. The first step for most of the women in assuming these roles is the realization of the meaning of their positions in life. They are only what others care to make them - their husbands' and children's concepts of a wife or mother. Immediately, after growing up on the illusions that give marriage and motherhood a legendary, mythical quality, they discover the reality behind the illusion.

One of the most optimistic women in this period of literature, Antonia Shimerda in Cather's My Antonia, reflects this concept of the collapse of illusion. Antonia falls in love with a railroad worker and they decide to marry. They go away to get married, but he leaves her before the ceremony. Antonia returns home, finds she is pregnant and resolves to raise the child. She resigns herself to take the blame for believing in the love of a man. She had every right to expect happiness and her disillusionment is nothing compared to her shame at bearing a child out of wedlock. Antonia survives though and she lives a happy life once she finds a "good man". Although one of her dreams collapses, she

lives for others; a husband and children.

Other women cannot cope as easily with the disappearance of their life-long dreams in the face of reality, as Antonia was able to do. Isabel Archer in James' The Portrait of a Lady is a good example. Her upper middleclass background and education have trained her to believe in the virtues of a sensitive life, concerned with beauty and gentleness. Her energy for exploring this kind of experience is boundless. She meets and marries Osmond, who displays all of the qualities of a gentleman. Her disillusionment comes when she learns that he married her exclusively for practical purposes and that respect for her as a human being was not a component of their relationship. Isabel's realization is a logical outcome of the roles she assumes - no matter how much her good character is stressed, the only character that is acceptable is one that lacks individuality and a woman who does not abandon her individuality suffers, like Isabel.

Unlike Isabel, there are other women who literally do not survive the collapse of their dreams. Crane's Maggie compromises her respectability for protection from a man from the brutal family life she has had to endure. She believes that he loves her, simply because he is kind to her in small ways. After she leaves home to be with him, he leaves her and she is disgraced in everyone's

eyes, especially her own. Maggie dies shortly after this, broken-hearted and neglected. She was raised in the way of most women: to believe that men will care for her. Maggie's destruction is due to the fact that women often must care for themselves, contrary to the social pressure which makes women dependent. Another woman who dies of what Jewett calls a "broken heart" is Adeline, in A Country Doctor. Adeline is raised with the same beliefs in the happiness that marriage and motherhood will bring as are most women. She marries and has children and her husband becomes a drunkard. He disgraces Adeline and the family. All of the neighbors, after Adeline dies in childbirth, are convinced that the hardships and disillusionment of her marriage are the real causes of her death. Adeline makes it clear before she dies, that she does not want her child to be brought up to believe in the happiness of married life. Jewett uses the entire novel to illustrate the unsuitability of some people for marriage.

Other women in this literature face reality and ^{are} ~~were~~ able to adapt themselves without suffering the anguish of Isabel Archer or the destruction suffered by Maggie and Adeline. The most notable of these is Dreiser's Sister Carrie. Carrie, alone and frightened in a new city, is befriended by Drouet, a man who realizes her innocence and helplessness. He furnishes her with material comforts,

she becomes his mistress. She expects him to marry her but after realizing that he does not intend to do so, she simply resigns herself to the material pleasures he can offer her. She is then impressed by another man, Hurstwood, who is wealthier and more refined than Drouet. She is persuaded to run away with him even though he's married. Once again, she expects to be married but gradually loses this expectation as well as infatuation for Hurstwood when he cannot support her financially. Finally, Carrie moves out and begins a successful career. The point is that Carrie, first seeking love and comfort, realizes that neither is possible and so adapts herself to the situation by fulfilling her primary needs. For this she uses men only when she needs them and rejects them when she doesn't. Carrie's pragmatic view of a woman's role is the result of the social system, when all illusion is stripped away. Specifically that love can exist or be absent, but the women always must depend on a man. Even though Carrie attains material success, she is still without a man to "care" for her. Women are raised to think that they need a man for love and security. Finding a man to provide both is a difficult matter - as Dreiser demonstrates in Sister Carrie.

Unlike Carrie, Edna, in Chopin's The Awakening, never abandons her quest for finding the "perfect gentleman" of her dreams. Edna was raised on romantic dreams of a

perfect lover. She constantly remembers a dashing Cavalry officer she met as a young woman. The officer is the embodiment of her dreams, and when she marries, her husband is everything he is supposed to be - a "good husband". The romantic illusion, however, is missing. In search of this romantic ideal, Edna takes a lover: Robert, who is the embodiment of all of her dreams and illusions. She finds, however, that she cannot live both lives. But neither can she ever stop pursuing the illusions from her childhood. Even in her death, she sees visions of the Cavalry officer. Perhaps Mrs. Chopin's character states this concept of illusion and disillusionment in love and marriage when she says: "Youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race. And Nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create and which we feel obligated to maintain at any cost."¹⁰

Not all of the women react so negatively to their social roles; some seem to adjust rather easily, making the best of the situation. Hamlin Garland's character, Mrs. Ripley, is a good example of healthy adjustment. She ~~is~~ convinced of her own worth and value because her family is appreciates her hard work and devotion. After Mrs. Ripley's trip is through, she also realizes that the life she is leading is preferable to the life of her

relatives. Similarly, Elmiry Todd in Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs, living in an unproductive seacoast town in Maine, makes the best of seemingly futile life. Elmiry becomes the town's expert in growing and making up all types of herb concoctions for her neighbors. She becomes a main bulwark of Dunnet Landing's society, because she is the confidante of most of the women. Elmiry is a timeless, ageless figure, who keeps the people close to one another. There is one touching scene in which she tries to persuade "poor Joanna" to come back to the mainland after years of self-imposed isolation. Elmiry explains to Joanna that everyone loves her and that they want her back. Elmiry Todd is demonstrating her position - she is the healer, the comforter, the matriarch. This is her form of adjustment.

The grown woman Rebecca in Wiggin's Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm also accepts and thrives on small-town life. She chooses to stay in the brick house of her aunt to see that her brothers and sisters are raised in this healthy, close-knit community. Both Rebecca and Elmiry Todd live their lives for others and seem satisfied to do so.

Some of the women seem to thrive on the roles they assume, but most struggle to maintain their self-respect while functioning within the context of other people's images of themselves.

Many of the women react with resentment toward their roles in society. As mentioned before, Chopin's Edna in The Awakening somehow resents her husband, even though he adores her. She resents the oppressiveness of her role as "mother-woman" because it does not allow her to be anything else. The resentment of her social position becomes resentment of her husband.

Similarly, in Wharton's The House of Mirth, Lily Bart is better about her role in society. She realizes that, as she grows older and through misfortune loses her financial security, she is suited only for one thing - to be a companion to a gentleman and to put his needs before hers. She sees that society has given her nothing else to survive with - she is a poor worker who can't function without being admired. Lily finally dies, a victim of social circumstances. One scene depicts Lily's (and probably Wharton's) resentment over the social roles inflicted on women. Lily is on a train talking to a boring young man who is interested in her. Although he bores her, Lily feels compelled to follow up her conquest - first, because her pride and vanity thrive on his attention; and second, because he is a man and thus she must be courteous. The absurdity is that she does not like him but because of the values of society, she looks at him and all men as prospective providers. Because of this Lily loses respect for herself.

Other characters react to the oppressiveness of their social roles by withdrawing from society and living in isolation. This concept of isolation is often connected to the idea of atonement for a sin that one has committed. This concept of isolation and self-imposed suffering seems most prevalent in the stories from New England. Perhaps by withdrawing from society, these characters maintain their self-respect and dignity, instead of suffering the debasements Lily Bart encountered by attempting to live up to social expectations.

Mary Wilkins Freeman's "Christmas Jenny" provides an example of isolation. Since Jenny is a recluse and not part of the stream of community life, most of her actions are regarded with suspicion by the people of the village. Jenny is unmarried and she cares for lost children. Her method of coping with the hostility and suspicions of the community is to reject most human companionship and devote her time and energy to caring for animals. She compensates for loneliness by caring for these creatures and rejecting the values of the community. In this case, she does not punish herself; she is punished by the community's suspicion and distrust.

Two other New England women undergo self-imposed isolation to atone for specific wrongs they feel they have committed. They, like Jenny, feel more comfortable alone

and away from most human life. Jewett's "poor Joanna" in The Country of the Pointed Firs feels that she must live in isolation in order to compensate for the great anger and malice she felt at the world and more specifically at God when her fiancé left her shortly before the wedding. In her opinion, she didn't deserve the company of others because of her behavior.

In a similar manner, Mattie in Wharton's Ethan Frome punishes herself by consigning herself to a life of hardship and loneliness. Mattie is the niece of Zeena, Ethan Frome's wife. She comes to live with them and to assist Zeena, who is ailing. To Ethan, Mattie is the complete opposite of everything that Zeena and his life have been. Mattie is bright, lively, healthy and warm. Ethan falls in love with Mattie and one evening when they are sledding down a slippery slope, there is an accident in which both are injured. Mattie regards the pain and injuries as punishment for spending time with and caring for Ethan. When she recovers, she decides that she must atone for her misdeeds by staying at the house, in disgrace and isolation, to care for Zeena, who is a hypochondriac and insanely jealous of Mattie's youth and beauty.

This abundance of guilt and the need to "pay" for one's misdeeds in New England seems to reflect the old Puritan beliefs in profit from adversity and purging one's soul.

It is also worth noting that some of these women, such as "poor Joanna" and Mattie, pay for misdeeds which they are not entirely responsible for: their expectations of being loved and cared for were all that they were seeking. Perhaps their faith in men is their only sin.

Since women are severely limited by their social roles, they tend to exercise strict control over the areas in which they have some opportunity for decision-making. Their concerns are with the things which seem trivial to those involved in the "man's world" of business and enterprise. Throughout the literature of this period, the women seem preoccupied with housekeeping, shopping, appearance, health and spending their only resource - themselves. Some of the stories and novels depict women tyrannically ruling a home to maintain its appearance. This is whimsically funny to some men, who realize that women are suited for this sort of thing, but tragic to those who realize that women are left with only these few areas to control and through which to try to attain fulfillment. The stringent social rules established for women to follow leave them little to claim as their own. The portions of their lives that they can control become the most important concerns for them. Also, because many of the women who are not wives or mothers feel useless, their preoccupation with "unimportant" matters gives them

some purpose in life.

The first concern of women is supposed to be housekeeping. In many of the stories and novels under discussion, the women demonstrate their value by the cleanliness of their homes. In Frank Norris' McTeague, the dentist's new bride Trina is constantly scrubbing and cleaning to prove to her husband that she loves him. The mere fact that he chose her as his wife proves his love for her. Women must constantly prove their love.

This idea of obsessive concern with housecleaning is even more obvious in the stories of New England written by women. The characters in these works do not have husbands to please, but only themselves and each other^{to} scrutinize. Perhaps some of their concern with cleanliness comes from the Puritan values, but most of it seems to come from a desire to give some order, meaning and purpose to their lives.

In Mary Wilkins Freeman's Jane Field, for example, a group of matrons and widows decide to visit a friend in a nearby town. The women all diligently clean their homes before they leave, in case someone should see inside the house while they are gone. This obsession with neatness is the only way the women can achieve identity and purpose, since their homes reflect them as people.

Louisa, in Freeman's "A New England Nun", displays

the same preoccupation with make-work duties. She stitches seams in cloth, rips them out and sews them up again just for pleasure of doing the sewing. Idleness and purposelessness ^{are} ~~is~~ also seen in Wiggin's Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. Rebecca's Aunt Miranda is a tyrant in her household. She requires the furniture, rugs and curtains to be left undisturbed. Aunt Miranda becomes upset because Rebecca uses the front staircase instead of the back, because the front stairs are visible to their infrequent visitors.

This over-concern with cleanliness and housekeeping by women who hold limited "female" roles in turn oppresses the people forced to live in such surroundings. The women in Jane Field feel guilty when they take a short trip because they are abandoning the "responsibilities" they created for themselves. Perhaps this idea of the stifling effects of this preoccupation with cleanliness and order is best expressed in Wharton's Ethan Frome, where Ethan and Mattie are alone in the house which Zeena has kept in impeccable order: "in the warm, lamplit room, with all its ancient implications of conformity and order, she seemed infinitely farther away from him..."

Perhaps the reasons for their preoccupation with order include the women's desire to compensate for the absence of human relationships. Paradoxically, their concerns work both ways, compensating for and simultaneously preventing

human interaction.

Related to the housekeeping is the decoration of the home. In two stories, this concern of the women is evident. In Maggie: Girl of the Streets, Crane portrays a pathetic Maggie attempting to decorate a miserable flat so that Pete, her suitor, will be impressed. She buys small decorations and puts curtains on the windows. Of course, Pete doesn't notice her efforts and the decorations are later destroyed by her drunken mother.

Unlike Maggie, Ethan Frome's wife Zeena keeps hidden the decorative glass dish that she values most of all of her possessions. This one decorative piece is never used, only coveted. When Mattie uses it in Zeena's absence, breaking it in the process, Zeena is outraged. Zeena's world is so limited that she cannot even see the value in decoration, the way that Mattie and Maggie can. She cannot even share possessions with others by displaying them.

The act of decorating one's surroundings seems to indicate some hope and consideration for the people in the family or in the community. Rebecca in Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm has friends, poor children, who want to earn the money to buy a lamp to decorate their home. The importance of this lamp or Maggie's curtains or Zeena's dish seem to reflect some degree of pride in one's

surroundings. Since decoration of the homes is the women's responsibility, they consider it is a reflection of them.

Another concern of the women in this literature is their clothing and appearance. This is a concern of wealthy as well as poor women, since a woman's appearance is her foremost concern, especially if she wants to find a man. Clothing also indicates social status in the community, especially in a predominantly female community like New England. In Freeman's Jane Field, the women who are all matrons or widows dress only in black. The difference in social status between black muslin and black silk is immense, however. In Freeman's story, "A Gala Dress", two unmarried sisters share one dress for purposes of public appearances. The women simply sew different trimming on the dress each time it is worn, to give the illusion of two dresses. The New England women are so particular and careful about their clothing that all of the women in the community notice that "Old Miss Todd" is wearing ribbons in her hair in Rose Terry Cooke's story of that name.

While the New England women are primarily concerned with their appearance for the sake of their status in the community and as a way of maintaining their self-respect, women in other novels are concerned with clothing for purposes of social climbing and attracting a man.

To illustrate this point, there is a minor character (Lena) in Cather's My Antonia who is a farm girl trying to make a living in a small town. Lena envies the clothing of the wealthier women in town and decides to become a seamstress. She copies the wealthy women's fashions in cheaper fabrics and sells them to working girls who wish to dress in style. Lena has done nothing more than capitalize on the women's desire to appear wealthier than their social position would allow.

Dreiser's heroine in Sister Carrie is one of these women who equate clothing with social position. Carrie's first attraction to a man comes when he buys her stylish new clothing. Thereafter, she admires the women on Fifth Avenue each week as they display their finery. After Carrie begins to earn money as an actress, the first things she buys are clothes. The women seem to put so much emphasis on clothing, because a good appearance offers security ~~to~~ⁱⁿ a man's world. Edith Wharton's Lily Bart in The House of Mirth sums up the feminine need to be well-clothed:

"A woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman?"

Women assuming the roles of wife and mother or those living alone often tend to be preoccupied with their

health. Since their youth and vitality are crucial to their social success, concern with health is understandable. This preoccupation with health and sickness seems most prevalent in New England, where the weather and the terrain breed depression and feelings of uselessness. It seems logical, then, that many of the women are preoccupied with their health. Sickness becomes a focus of their lives - they can gain the sympathy of those around them if they are ill and thereby gain attention and a feeling of importance.

The frustration in the life of Ethan Frome's wife Zeena is evident in her constant complaining about her poor health. Zeena's suffering is well-known to all of the inhabitants of Starkfield. In fact, Zeena gains notariety and social prominence in the village because of the number of doctors that she has visited.

Similarly, in Freeman's Jane Field, the women in the village are so concerned over the health of Jane's daughter, "poor Lois", that they convince this young woman that she has consumption. The women in Jane Field seem to resent the fact that Lois is young and healthy and express their resentment by frightening Lois.

Perhaps this preoccupation with health in New England is ~~probably~~ related to the constant awareness of death in a bleak, lifeless society. The women don't have small

children; the men have died or gone away. All these women have left are memories of the past. Indications of their awareness of death, such as the old friends' reunion scene in Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs, seem to suggest that they will follow the paths of their ancestors and die in New England, rather than escape.

This concept of preoccupation with illness raises an interesting point. The ladies of New England and the women of good family and wealth elsewhere were taught that a woman must be delicate, dependent and frail, while the women in the midwest were expected to work alongside their men. Perhaps the New England women, with or without men, were simply acting out the roles they were taught to play. Unfortunately, they had no one to listen to their complaints.

Another trait that seems peculiar to the New England women is their concern with heritage and ancestry. By the turn of the century, New England had lost much of its economic importance, due to the decline in the fishing and shipbuilding industries and the movement of the factories to the South and into the middle Atlantic states. New England was no longer the center of American culture; during this time William Dean Howells shifted the literary center from Boston to New York.

The women, too, have lost their power and influence in New England, so they cling to the stories and legends

of the past. In Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs, there is a character who represents this glorious past. He is Captain Littlepage, an aging sea captain, who loves to relate the same adventure stories to the women over and over again. The women in the village are always willing to listen probably because the excitement of his adventure stories contrasts so radically with their dull lives. They thrive on the glory of a past in which only the men participated; but they are fiercely proud of that heritage.

Similarly, the widows in Freeman's Jane Field keep exotic treasures brought from distant lands by their seafaring husbands. One can picture the quiet seacoast villages with the neatly kept little houses, all with Widows' walks overlooking the sea. The women cling to their rich heritage.

In two of Freeman's other stories, she uses the characters' concern with heritage to illustrate another type of pride - in social position. In "A Gala Dress", two unmarried sisters nearly starve and are never seen in public together because they only have one decent dress. This is for the sake of maintaining their dignity and their social position, which they believe their father occupied. They dwell on the idea that they are aristocrats, and that is the only thing that sets them apart from everyone else in the village.

Freeman makes this point in another more tragic story, entitled "Sister Liddy". The story is set in an almshouse and all of the women spend their time discussing the beautiful homes they once lived in and the prestige of their family names. These women are also trying to gain respect from those around them by identifying themselves with the past, because the present offers them nothing.

Another outcome of a woman's inability to lead a life outside of the home is her interest in establishing a high, substantial and good social position. In New England, the women are forced to dwell on ancestry, while other women spend their time striving to maintain their positions, or criticizing others for their inability to do so.

Lily Bart, in Wharton's The House of Mirth, foolishly invests the money she has in an effort to profit because she needs more money to maintain her "social schedule". She needs clothing, well-furnished rooms, and money to travel in order to satisfy her friends of her eligibility to participate in the season's social events. Lily loses her investment, her dignity and her friends as a result of being solely concerned with social status. In this novel, Wharton is commenting on the absurdity of this concern, but she is also saying that many women have no other choice but to play this game; there are few other paths open to the women.

Unlike Lily Bart, who realizes that she is trapped in an absurd game, Mrs. Hurstwood in Dreiser's Sister Carrie uses her social position to her advantage. Hurstwood is Carrie's second suitor in the novel, and when his wife finds out about their involvement, she locks her husband out of the house and forces him to give up his right to their money, property and children. Mrs. Hurstwood has been so deeply concerned with social position and wealth throughout the marriage that her husband's departure causes little disruption in her life. Mrs. Hurstwood is the worst product of social rules that confine women to "domestic" concerns. At the end of the novel, she is pictured comfortably seated in a Pullman car with her daughter, who is to be married shortly. She is unaware that Hurstwood has just committed suicide, dying penniless in a flophouse room.

Mrs. Hurstwood's and Lily's only sense of self-importance is the social positions they achieve; not the fulfilling love of a man and children that they grew up believing they would receive. Unlike these women, there is one female character who is concerned with the corruption that climbing the social ladder may bring. She is Persis Lapham, in Howells' The Rise of Silas Lapham. As Silas makes his fortune and the family tries to conform to the upper-class life, Persis realizes that this complicated life causes the family to lose sight of the important, basic values in life. Persis knows that Silas cannot

adjust his ways to the gaudy society of the newly rich. When they lose their house and their money, Silas realizes that real happiness and contentment comes from leading the simple life. It seems that Howells, through Persis, is criticizing the social system for the same reasons as Wharton. However, unlike Lily, Persis and Silas can live without wealth.

The women characters, by being placed in limited roles, are forced to live their lives concerned with seemingly trivial and useless things. Many of the women become neurotic, simple-minded, weak-willed and silly, as a result of their limited opportunities. Some of the reactions of the women to their roles are depicted in this literature more tragically; the ~~w~~omen go insane; ~~they~~ ^{they} commit suicide. These most pronounced reactions to the lives they lead indicate the seriousness of the oppression of women in strictly defined social roles.

These extreme outcomes of social oppression are not confined to New England, nor to any one economic class. In Frank Norris' McTeague, Trina is an excellent illustration of mental illness resulting from her role as wife. Trina has grown up in a poor family of immigrants. She and her mother display an over concern with money, because they must be able to feed and clothe the family on their limited funds. Just before her marriage to McTeague, Trina wins five thousand dollars in a lottery. McTeague has a fairly

steady income as a dentist and combined with the interest on Trina's account, the couple expect to live comfortably. When McTeague is forced to stop practicing dentistry because he has no license, Trina refuses to allow him to use her money to maintain their standard of living. She fiercely clings to "her" money and resorts to starving and saving pennies rather than touch her money. McTeague becomes angered at her greed and begins to abuse her because she won't spend the money. He finally leaves her and shortly after that she begins taking the money out of the bank, bit by bit, simply to be able to have it in her possession. Her obsession with the money leads her to take it all out of the bank and count it everyday. One day, McTeague, starving and drunk, demands the money from her. She fights him and he beats her to death. Trina's greed is a part of her character, regardless of her sex, but her need to keep "her" money away from her husband shows her need for security, independent of that offered by her husband. As long as Trina had "her" money, she had some sense of power and independence, even though the money became an end in itself in her mind. Trina demonstrates a woman's efforts to control her own destiny - and going insane in the process.

Unlike Trina, the main character in S. Weir Mitchell's novel, Constance Trescot, displays uncontrolled desire to change her husband's life and behavior. Constance marries

an unassuming attorney and tries to further his career by having him take a job from her uncle, who has land interests in the Midwest. There is a land claim at stake in a legal proceeding, which Trescot wins. He is a kindly man and as he is moving toward Greyhurst, (the opposing attorney in the case), Greyhurst shoots and kills Trescot. Greyhurst is acquitted in a jury trial because he claimed Trescot appeared to have a gun. Constance not only mourns the death of her husband but also feels tremendous guilt at forcing him to assume the position which led to his death. Constance was raised to be a "good wife", to love and support her husband. In attempting to do so, she indirectly caused his death. This guilt becomes a desire for revenge against Greyhurst. Constance spends most of her time devising various ways of disturbing and reminding Greyhurst of the fact that he is a murderer. She also constantly plays on his sympathy by making the point that she is now a widow, left alone in the world. Constance cannot go on without her husband, she has played her role of the "good wife" to its full extent and he has been taken away from her. She cannot function without him as the center of her life, so she substitutes revenge as the target of her energies. Becoming obsessed with the idea of haunting Greyhurst, Constance finally provokes him enough to hold a gun on her. At this point, he commits

suicide in her presence. Constance remains unaffected by Greyhurst's death, but she finds that her life is now entirely without direction.

Constance Trescot depicts a woman so bound to her social role that she cannot adjust to a life without her husband. Mitchell makes the point that Constance is not even receptive to the influence of religion or of friends and relatives.

In Freeman's Jane Field, Jane suffers for attempting to make a good life for herself and her daughter, by following social rules. Jane is a widow with a daughter of marriageable age. Jane is notified of an inheritance of ~~property~~ ^{property} which rightfully belongs to another member of her family who she knows is unavailable. She travels to the town and impersonates her relative. She plans to live in the house without taking any of the money, simply because she wants her daughter Lois to have a chance to find a husband in this village. Lois finds a suitor, and all is going well until her friends from home come to visit her. They begin to realize that Jane is impersonating her relative and Jane breaks down and confesses that she has done something wrong. She continues to murmur confessions to everyone around her for the rest of her life. Jane's insanity is the extreme manifestation of all of the social pressures which she has been forced to bear. She

carries a Puritan sense of sin and guilt; she has been economically oppressed and emotionally repressed all of her life, by living the role assigned to her.

Trina's greed, Constance's revenge and Jane's whimpering are all extreme outcomes of the roles women assume in the social system. Perhaps more important than these glaring examples of social failure are the small, seemingly, insignificant ways in which the women manifest their discontent with their alternative in life. These include hypochondria, concern with clothing, etc. These indicate a serious lack of recognition of the needs and humanity of the women. It is a paradox that women are expected to assume secondary roles in life and that, when they rebel or react against these roles, they are childish and unappreciative.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to conclude this study is to use Kate Chopin's The Awakening to illustrate the dilemma of conflicting roles faced by most women in this literature. As was previously mentioned, Edna (the main character) grew up on every girl's dream of finding a man who is the "perfect gentleman". The image Edna carries through her life is one of a dashing cavalry officer who she has seen but never known. She marries a man who is considerate of every aspect of their lives, except her imagination. Edna now has all of the material security she needs and children, but she still dreams of

a gentleman who will embody all of her illusions. She takes a lover, Robert, who is younger than she, but she cannot bear the thought of leaving her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Although Robert represents the embodiment of her imagined lovers, Edna realizes that even he does not prevent her from dreaming of the freedom she needs to pursue her illusions and dreams of love. The novel ends with Edna wading naked into the ocean finding physical and emotional freedom as she submits to the power of the sea. Her last vision, ironically, is the same as her first illusion - the Cavalry officer.

The Awakening epitomizes the women's inability to function in society if and when their desire and human needs conflict with the strict social rules of behavior and role-playing. The only escape is submission, that is, suppression of one's individuality, insanity or death, all of which constitute suicide regardless of the name.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Turner, "The Frontier in American History", p. 1.
- ²Beer, The Mauve Decade, p. 58.
- ³Wharton, Ethan Frome, p. 14.
- ⁴Morris and Greenleaf, USA, The History of a Nation, p. 234.
- ⁵Chopin, The Awakening, p. 898.
- ⁶Wharton, The Old Maid, p. 14.
- ⁷Wharton, The Old Maid, p. 14.
- ⁸Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 7.
- ⁹Shapiro and Hobbs, The Politics of Constitutional Law, p. 128.
- ¹⁰Chopin, The Awakening, p. 986.
- ¹¹Wharton, The House of Mirth, p. 7.

Quotes not footnoted in text

<u>Page in text</u>	<u>Reference</u>
34	"A White Heron", in Brooks, Lewis and Warren (eds.) <u>American Literature, The Makers and the Making,</u> p. 1584.
36	Jewett, <u>A Country Doctor</u> , p. 285.
37	Wharton, <u>The Old Maid</u> , p. 15.
40	Jewett, <u>A Country Doctor</u> , p. 35.
41-2	Wilkins, <u>A New England Nun and Other Stories</u> , p.191.
57	Wharton, <u>Ethan Frome</u> , p. 93.
60	Wharton, <u>The House of Mirth</u> , p. 17.

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