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## Athletic Women in Fiction and Fact: The Portrayal of Women involved in Athletic Activity in Novels from 1890-1920's

Kristi Marie Vera

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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**Athletic Women in Fiction and Fact**

**The portrayal of women involved in athletic activity  
in novels from 1890-1920s**

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**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**The Faculty of the Department of American Studies**

**The College of William and Mary in Virginia**

**In Partial Fulfilment**

**Of the Requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts**

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**by**

**Kristi M. Vera**

**1992**

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

*Kristi Marie Vera*

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Kristi Marie Vera

Approved, December 1992

*Richard Lowry*

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Richard Lowry

*Elsa Nettels*

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Elsa Nettels

*John Thelin*

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John Thelin

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the portrayal of women involved in athletic activity in novels from 1890-1920. An attempt was made to define how gender, social class, and athletics functioned simultaneously during this time period.

Four representative novels were chosen to be analyzed: The Awakening, which functions as an archetype for those novels which succeed it; Daddy-Long-Legs, a popular college fiction novel; The Fruit of the Tree, a piece of Progressive reform writing; and The Great Gatsby, in which the first true American female athlete appears. The works are studied chronologically to see if there is any growth in the development of the athletic heroines.

The paper also looks at three actual athletic women of the time period -- Eleanora Sears, Senda Berenson, and Gertrude Ederle -- to see if their lives parallel those of their fictional counterparts.

Analysis of the novels and lives of the actual sportswomen suggests that both the novels and the culture of the day limited women's roles. Although the fictional women attempted to use athletics as a means of asserting their own autonomy, they were either destroyed by their participation or assimilated even further into their accepted role as women. Their counterparts did not fare much better.

## **Athletic Women in Fiction and Fact**

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in novels from 1890-1920s**

## Introduction

Writing at the turn of the century in Munsey's, A. O'Hagan once wrote, "to whomsoever the athletic woman owes her existence, to him or her the whole world of women owes a debt incomparably great. Absolutely no other social achievement in the behalf of women is so important and so far reaching in its results." <sup>1</sup> If O'Hagan was correct, then one might expect to see many athletic heroines in novels from the turn of the century, yet one does not. Indeed, until The Great Gatsby, there are no true sports heroines portrayed in American fiction. Why is this? Perhaps the 1900 definition of sport will provide some explanation. The eleventh edition of The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines "sport" as : "a contracted or shortened form of 'disport'. to amuse, divert oneself, O. Fr. se disporter or deporter, to have off work, hence to play, Lat. dis - , away and portare, to carry; the origin of the meaning lies in the action of turning away from serious occupations, of 'diversion', play amusement, entertainment or recreation. The term was. . . particularly used of out-of-door or manly recreation."<sup>2</sup> Sport and manliness went hand in hand. Nowhere is there mention of "feminine" recreation. Yet, this definition of sport also

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<sup>1</sup> A. O'Hagan, "Athletic Girl," Munsey 25 (1901): 729-730.

<sup>2</sup> "Sport," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1910 ed.



reveals why women were gradually becoming involved in athletics. While lower class women were too busy working and/or taking care of their families to participate in such "diversions," upper class women were rich enough to have off from work, to broaden their spheres to include the athletic realm. Hence, around the turn of the century one begins to see a trickle of novels in which women participate in some form of athletic activity.

This paper looks at four texts which were published between 1890 and the end of the 1920s and attempts to analyze how women were portrayed when involved in athletic activity and why the author portrayed them in such a manner. The texts vary greatly. The Awakening (1899), by Kate Chopin, was deemed so shocking that it ruined her writing career for all practical purposes. Daddy-Long-Legs (1912), by Jean Webster, belongs to that little known category of "College Fiction" and can now be found in the children's section of the library. The Fruit of the Tree (1914), an obscure Edith Wharton novel, reads like a piece of Progressive propaganda. And finally, The Great Gatsby (1925), by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is read in colleges and high school Junior English classes throughout the country. Yet, as varied as the texts are, their athletic heroines are surprisingly similar. Their struggles and successes in their athletic pursuits show a fictional world concerned with social class, gender roles and athletic participation. Indeed, these three forces are so intertwined that to change even one of them interrupts the fixed orders the writers

have attempted to create for women within their texts. It is to these athletic women that we now turn.

## Chapter I: Edna Pontellier:

### Prototype for Fictional Athletic Women

Edna Pontellier is a woman who married young and rich, in an attempt to escape the confines of her traditional Presbyterian home, yet found that marriage, rather than freeing her, bound her in the role of wife and mother. Edna was expected to fulfill the role of wife and its responsibilities. But such an existence seemed empty to Edna. Her life lacked purpose except to fulfill the expectations of others. Her life was what Nietzsche called "weightless." Such weightlessness was not uncommon at the end of the nineteenth century. As T. J. Jackson Lears describes, the

"weightless" period [was] marked by hazy moral distinctions and vague spiritual commitments. Gradually personal identity itself came to seem problematic. Part of the difficulty was that individual will and action were hemmed in by the emerging iron age of a bureaucratic market economy. But the trouble ran deeper: the rationalization of urban culture and the decline of religion into sentimental religiosity further undermined a solid sense of self. For many, individual identities began to seem fragmented, diffuse, perhaps even unreal. A weightless culture of material comfort and spiritual blandness was breeding weightless persons who longed for intense experience to give some definition, some distinct outline and substance to their vaporous lives.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 32.

The Awakening recounts Edna's struggle to overcome such a life. The Pontelliers are a family of some means. This in itself is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the Pontelliers' economic standing enables Edna to experience a life of leisure, to spend time at the beach and to learn to swim. Indeed, only those women with money could afford servants, such as Edna's quadroon, who freed them from some of their domestic duties, and enabled them to participate in recreation.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the Pontelliers' economic standing influences all of Leonce's decisions so that he works diligently to present an image of wealth to the public eye. His family spends a summer at Grand Isle, because this is the fashionable thing to do. Likewise, his house in New Orleans reflects the wealth and style of the day.

It was a large, double cottage, with a broad veranda, whose round, fluted columns supported the sloping roof. . . In the yard, which was kept scrupulously neat, were flowers and plants of every description which flourish in South Louisiana. Within doors the appointments were perfect after the conventional type [underline mine]. . . . The softest carpets and rugs covered the floors; rich and tasteful draperies hung. . . . There were paintings, selected with judgment and discrimination. . . . The cut glass, the silver, the heavy damask which daily appeared upon the table were the envy of many women whose husbands were less generous than Mr. Pontellier. [He] was very fond of walking about his house examining its various appointments and details. . . . He greatly valued his possessions, chiefly because they were his. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Helen Lenskyj. Out of Bounds (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1986) 18-19; John Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, Saga of American Sport (Philadelphia: Lea & Gebinger, 1978) 253.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Chopin, The Awakening and Selected

Mr. Pontellier's greatest possession, however, and that most taken for granted by him, is his wife Edna. When Chopin first introduces the reader to Edna, the latter is returning from the beach. Mr. Pontellier looks at his sunburned wife "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (44). She too is an example of what Thorstein Veblen would call Pontellier's "pecuniary strength" and as such, she should act according to the cultural conventions<sup>6</sup> which mandate that Edna be frail, dependent upon her husband - - especially economically - - and devoted to a life of motherhood. Even the early feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman claimed that, "Motherhood [was] not a remote contingency, but the common duty and the common glory of womanhood."<sup>7</sup> Motherhood was considered feminine. In The Awakening it is fixed and becomes the standard against which every woman is measured.

Chopin makes it clear from the start, however, that Edna is not the typical feminine woman. Her hands are described as "strong" (44) and her physique as "rather handsome than beautiful" (46). This constant tension - - between Edna's identity as either mother-woman or masculine-woman -- impels the plot of the

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Stories (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986) 99.

<sup>6</sup> Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class (New York: New American Library, 1953) 107.

<sup>7</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Women and Economics (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 246.

novel. Mr. Pontellier believes there is no choice. He is the father-man who provides financially for his family, thus his wife must be the mother-woman and as such should meticulously care for the children. As T.J. Jackson Lears notes, " 'work' became radically separated from 'home' and that separation reinforced another: between productive adult males and nonproductive women and children. According to the conventional wisdom, the male world of work was tough and demanding; the female world of home was comfortable, reassuring, and adorned by 'the finer things of life'. "<sup>8</sup> One sees this when, upon returning late from Klein's, a male refuge on the island, Mr. Pontellier awakens his wife and announces that his son has consumption merely because Raoul starts to kick and talk in his sleep after his father moves him in the bed. Leonce proclaims that his child needs to be taken care of, yet then leaves to smoke a cigar. When Edna refuses to check upon the boy, Mr. Pontellier asks, "If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them" (48). This passage reveals Leonce's belief in "separate spheres."

Nowhere is Edna's lack of autonomy more blatantly obvious than on her Tuesday reception day where she serves as an economic extension of her husband.

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<sup>8</sup> Lears 15.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman laments these days, saying

Our present methods of association, especially for women, are most unsatisfactory. They arise, and go to "call" on one another. They solemnly "return" these calls. They prepare much food, and invite many people to come and eat it; or some dance, music or entertainment is made the temporary ground of union. But these people do not really meet one another. They pass whole lifetimes in going through the steps of those elaborate games, and never become acquainted. There is a constant thirsting among us for fuller and truer social intercourse; but our social machinery provides no means for quenching it. (307)

For Mr. Pontellier the only goal of such games is not social intercourse, but social advancement. As he tells Edna, "we've got to observe les convenances if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession. . . . It's just such seeming trifles that we've got to take seriously; such things count" (101). It's interesting that Mr. Pontellier uses the word "procession" for it implies a march in which everyone is uniform, is part of the status quo. Such mentality led to a loss of individual autonomy. As Lears writes,

For most Americans urban living increasingly meant entanglement in the web of the market. As market relations spread, they undermined individual autonomy and promoted social interdependence. Ordinary people's livelihood depended increasingly on decisions made in distant cities, on circumstances largely beyond the individual's control . . . .people in ever narrower occupational specialties grew more dependent on others to supply their basic needs. (34)

Lears goes on to recount one socialist's lament, "'under our present manner of

living, how many of my vital interests must I entrust to others! Nowadays the watermarsh is my well, the trolley car my carriage, the banker's safe my old stocking, the policeman's billy my fist."<sup>9</sup> For Leonce, Edna was a tool he needed to advance socially and economically.

Indeed, it is his own "financial integrity" (150), not Edna, which Mr. Pontellier worries about following Edna's move to the pigeon house. In his mind and in the social structure in which he lives and works, Edna has no autonomy; she belongs to him. Hence, her every action reflects on his economic status. She is a token of his wealth. No wonder then that he fears no scandal - - objects have no ability to have love affairs.

Mr. Pontellier is not the only one who believes that such a role suits women, for, "the mother-woman seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle" (51). One of Edna's closest friends, Adele Ratignolle, embodies the very concept. She constantly thinks about her children, perhaps because she is constantly pregnant, bearing a child every two years. She first appears making a winter night gown for her coming child. Madame Ratignolle exemplifies the role so well that Chopin remarks,

There are no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams. . .the spun-gold hair that comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them. .

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<sup>9</sup> Lears 34.



. .Never were hands more exquisite than hers, and it was a joy to look at them when she threaded her needle or adjusted her gold thimble to her tapered middle finger as she sewed away on the little night-drawer or fashioned a bodice or a bib. (51)

Adele the fictional mother-woman completely blots out Adele the individual. This loss of a "real" identity was common at the turn of the century. As Lears notes, "In the emerging social system, the autonomous self seemed no longer Promethean but fragmented, defined according to the needs and demands of others. By the turn of the century, more than a few Americans had begun openly to declare that independent selfhood was an illusion. . . ." (34). Adele herself, a type of mother-woman conscience, comes to Edna to warn the latter about spending time with Alcee Arobin, and Chopin states that Edna's friendship with Adele had continued to grow, so one sees that Edna's feelings about the role are mixed. Although she attempts to put off the role at times, she also enjoys taking it up again when it suits her, just as she does when she visits her children who were staying at her mother-in-law's farm.

Near the end of the text, Edna is called upon to help Madame Ratignolle have her baby. Edna's presence at Adele's birthing bed is important because it allows Edna to see for herself what she had missed, because she was drugged, when she had given birth to her own children: the biological experience underlying the mother-role. Edna may not want to be a mother-woman; biologically, however, she has no choice.

The role need not consume her, but the mere existence of Raoul and Etienne forces her to confront motherhood. Hence confusion in Edna's rhetoric: "I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right -- except children, perhaps -- and even then, it seems to me -- or it did seem -- " (171) and, "I don't want anything but my own way. That's wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others -- but no matter -- still, I wouldn't want to trample upon the little lives" (171). Adele begs her to "think of the children" (172) and for the first time Edna must. Before, as a woman of leisure, she could leave them to the quadrone, but her experience with Adele has removed all blinders. As Chopin states, "She meant to think of them; that determination had driven into her soul like a death wound. . ." (172). The death wound was to her illusion that she could live a life absolutely free from the social role given to her. Witnessing Adele's giving birth makes Edna realize that she has a responsibility to her children -- that in giving birth, she also gives in to a new set of responsibilities as well.

Edna also feels hemmed in by her relationship with her father. Chopin alludes to this in her description of Edna's excursion to the horse races with Alcee Arobin.

There were possibly a few track men out there who knew the race horse as well as Edna, but there was certainly none who knew it better . . . . The race horse was a friend and intimate associate of her childhood. The atmosphere of the stables and the breath of the blue grass paddock revived in her memory and lingered in her nostrils. She did not perceive that she was talking like her father as the sleek

geldings ambled in review before them. (128)

As the passage begins, Edna seems to be the masculine-woman, knowledgeable about race horses. Then, however, it seems as if Edna becomes one with the race horse. They were "intimate" associates. Earlier in the text when looking upon Edna, the doctor is "reminded. . . of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (123), and even earlier when Chopin compares Edna to Madame Ratignolle, the latter "possess[es] the more feminine and matronly figure" while Edna's body was described as "long, clean and symmetrical" (58).

Both Thorstein Veblen and Charlotte Perkins Gilman write about horses in their works, texts which were published in the same year as The Awakening. Veblen points out that race horses are "items of conspicuous consumption" through which their master "express[es] his own dominating individuality."<sup>10</sup> When looking at the remainder of the passage from The Awakening, it seems as if Edna's father is the dominating master since it's his voice that proceeds from her lips. Gilman adds that while a horse is naturally free, man has made it economically dependent upon him. She equates this with what has been done to women,<sup>11</sup> and one can see this in Edna's relationship with both her father and Leonce. Almost all of her finances come from them. Finally, if Edna is somehow connected with the horse, is her masculine-woman in a sense castrated like the gelding, symbolically cut off from power and

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<sup>10</sup> Veblen 102,104.

<sup>11</sup> Gilman 7, 13.

authority?

Edna attempts to alter this reality and gain some autonomy by removing her wedding ring in a fit of anger and stepping on it, yet the futility of this gesture is suggested by the fact that, "her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet" (103). To change her circumstances, Edna must change society, which would be almost impossible, for as Edna realizes, "The street, the children, the fruit vendor, the flowers growing there under her eyes were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic" (104). Because she cannot change her circumstances, she decides to change herself, to take up the role of artist, a role which produces something besides babies. Thus Edna attempts to find her own position in society and not one mandated to her. Chopin writes, "She was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (108). As Edna makes the choice to do what she wants, when she wants, it is her world which becomes reality and not that which she lived in with Leonce. Becoming an artist demands that Edna be "courageous" and "dare and defy" the cultural norms (115). Lears notes that artists of the time period created out of a "longing for individual identity and measurable accomplishment in a culture where all meanings seem to be evaporating into weightlessness."<sup>12</sup> George Cabot Lodge, a poet at the turn of the

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<sup>12</sup> Lears 95.

century, believed that "the artist's quest for transcendence required the dissolution of family ties."<sup>13</sup> Edna's beginning to paint is a step in that direction.

Leonce, however, cannot understand why Edna would want anything except what he has provided for her, or would want to be anything besides a wife and mother. Consequently, he consults the family doctor. Helen Lenskyj points out that, "by the late 1800s, doctors were expanding their professional influence and their moral leadership on the questions of women's health and women's place in society. Public health movements, through school and community programs, were bringing mothers, infants and school children under medical influence."<sup>14</sup> Thus a woman who did not follow her "prescribed" role was labelled as sick or mad. Edna rejects that role. She refuses to hover over the children; she refuses to stay at home for the Tuesday reception day; she criticizes marriage when Leonce discusses her attending her sister's wedding. For Leonce, this can only be a sign of madness. How could a woman reject her given sphere?

To gain some authority, Edna must cast off her social role, especially that of Leonce Pontellier's wife. Hence she decides to leave their house, the shrine of all Pontellier's possessions. Revealing her plan first to Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna explains, "The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine. . . .I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence" (134). Yet even some of the

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<sup>13</sup> Lears 239-240.

<sup>14</sup> Lensky 17.

money which Edna wants to use to rent a smaller house, while legally an inheritance from her mother, is controlled by her father who sends her only a little at a time.

Mademoiselle Reisz understands the gravity of Edna's move. While placing her hands on Edna's shoulder blades she warns her that, "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (138). Edna's "wings", however, are untested. For, while relating the story to Arobin, Edna admits, "I'm not thinking of any extraordinary flights. I only half comprehend her" (138). Indeed Edna's conflicting actions throughout the text demonstrate that she doesn't fully understand her thoughts or feelings, nor has she determined who she is if she is not the mother-woman. She tells Alcee, "I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think -- try to determine what character of a woman I am; for candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it" (137-138). Note Edna's use of the word "character." Although the word in one respect refers to her moral character, the word also builds upon the idea of fictional selves which runs through the text. Edna is not the mother-woman, but the self she has taken on is equally fictional. By using the word "wicked" to describe this new self, Edna unconsciously adheres to the code she tries

to escape.

Nevertheless, Edna does move, but not before throwing an elaborate dinner party. Sandra Gilbert argues that in this scene Edna, "'becomes' the powerful goddess of love and art into whose shape she was first 'born' in the Gulf near Grand Isle. . . ." (20). Gilbert notes the romantic descriptions of Edna's clothing as well as of her surroundings. I would argue, however, that while the scene attempts to develop Edna as the "regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (145), it actually dramatizes her entrapment as Leonce Pontellier's wife and her father's daughter. All of the furniture belongs to Leonce's collection or was bought by Edna with his money. The cocktail they drink to toast her move is "composed" by her father.<sup>15</sup> Even Arobin proposes that they drink to Edna's father who "invented" her (143). While Alcee proposes the toast in jest, there is much truth to it. Without Mr. Pontellier or her father, Edna could not hold such an extravagant dinner party. They provide the means for her leisure.

No matter what avenue Edna chooses to pursue to escape her weightless life, each path seems romantic or fictional. This element of fiction permeates every relationship Edna has desired outside of her "real" marriage to Leonce. During her recounting of her "meadow swim", she recalls that around that same time in her life she had a crush on a "sad-eyed cavalry officer" who reminded her of Napoleon. Then

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<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Professor Richard Lowry for this detail concerning the cocktail.

she was attracted to a man who was engaged to her next door neighbor and who was friends with her sister Margaret. Edna admits, "he, too, went the way of dreams" (62). Her last infatuation before she married Leonce Pontellier was with a tragedian whom she had never met, yet whose picture she had which, "when alone she sometimes picked . . . up and kissed the cold glass passionately" (62). All these infatuations show Edna's desire to form relationships outside the role in which society has attempted to position her. Notice also the progression away from an established norm of reality in these relationships. The first is too old for her. The second is betrothed to another as well as being too old. The third makes his living by playing fictional roles and it is he, who is least established in reality, whom Edna regards most passionately. Edna's new-found relationship with Robert, which is also outside of acceptable social mores, takes on this same fictional quality. One sees this when Robert relates his newly created myth of the Gulf spirit which arises every August 28 to empower "worthy mortals" (75). Later on she "blindly follow[s] [the] impulse [that] moved her" (79) as she had done when a little girl traversing the meadow, and invites Robert to sail to the *Cherniere Caminada* with her. During their sail, Robert invites her to Grande Terre where they will search for pirate gold. Later at the *Cherniere Caminada*, Edna rejects the church service calling it "stifling" (83) and goes to Madame Antoine's house where, according to Robert, she sleeps for "one hundred years" (85). There is even one point where



Roberts' voice reminds Edna of a "gentleman on stage" (90).

Edna's relationship with Robert differs from her previous infatuations in several ways, however. First, the feelings are mutual. Second, in this relationship Edna attempts to replace her outward self with the inner self she was discovering and also to replace her "reality" with this new relationship. Chopin suggests that Edna's actions are at this point subconscious: "She could only realize that she herself -- her present self -- was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect " (88). Although subconscious, Edna's actions imply that she can actually change her position within society. Chopin does not consistently hold this position throughout the text, thus demonstrating the tensions between mother-woman/ masculine-woman identified earlier. Later, when Edna learns of Robert's plan to go to Mexico and of his imminent departure, Chopin writes, "For the first time she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her early teens, and later as a young woman. . . . [Yet] the past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed" (94). Here the author seemingly warns that Edna's place within the social structure cannot change and any attempt to change it is doomed to fade into "nothingness" just as Edna's previous infatuations

had.

This point is driven home when Robert, returning from his business trip to Mexico, is reunited with Edna. She has fantasized about the moment believing that Robert will come straight to her house and declare his love for her just as a man might do in a sentimental love story. Instead, she meets him accidentally at Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment, and although he walks her home, he gives her no great pronouncement of his love so that Edna thinks, "She had been with him, had heard his voice and touched his hand. But some way he had seemed nearer to her off there in Mexico" (161). What had been near to Edna was her fantasy of her relationship with Robert, similar to that she had had of the young men with whom she was infatuated when she was younger. During the summer at Grande Isle, they spent most of their time talking about fantastic things -- spirits, pirates, fool's gold -- and now placed under circumstances where Edna's dream may become reality, only her fantasy remains.

Their second meeting, also by chance, still does not fulfill Edna's fantasy. Even though Robert avows his love for her, he then declares his desire to make her his wife, though he is ashamed of wanting Mr. Pontellier to let her go. Edna replies, "You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he

were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy, she is yours,' I should laugh at you both" (167). Robert does not understand. He, like Leonce, has seen her as an object -- his object -- yet she refuses to be so. This passage also reveals that while Edna may fantasize about Robert, he still, like her husband and Adele Ratignolle and most characters within the text, is an integral part of the social make-up.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Chopin develops swimming as a means by which Edna attempts to free herself from her social role. Yet it is only as a woman of leisure that Edna has the time and money to spend the summer at Grande Isle where she learns to swim. Her life of leisure is a result of her husband's successful business adventures. Throughout the text, however, Edna attempts to separate swimming from its place in the life of leisure. Near the beginning of the text, while at the beach with Adele, Edna is reminded of "a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. . . . just following a misleading impulse without question. . ." (60-61). It is interesting that the young Edna chooses to mimic swimming rather than horseback riding, especially considering that she grew up in Kentucky. It seems Edna chooses this activity for several reasons. First, horses are associated with Edna's father. To ride would bind her even closer

to her father. Second, her ocean meadow is limitless. "I felt as if I must walk on forever, without coming to the end of it" (60). Third, Edna's choice of swimming remains consistent with her role of masculine-woman. Whereas horseback riding was considered an "acceptable" female sport, swimming was considered masculine.<sup>16</sup> Annette Kellerman, a championship swimmer in the early 1900s, discusses this in an article in The Ladies' Home Journal for July 1915: "Why girls should face less confidence in the water than is possessed by boys I do not know. It is their instinctive timidity, however, that keeps so many women in this country from learning to swim, and so it has been considered a sport for boys rather than girls."

<sup>17</sup> This points to the final reason why Edna chooses swimming. To swim successfully, one must master the ocean and use it to buoy one's self. This sense of autonomy and unlimited possibilities is what the young Edna longed for. As Sandra M. Gilbert points out in the introduction to the novel, Edna recalls that during that scene she thought she was probably running from church and her father's reading of the prayers or what Gilbert calls "patriarchal theology" (26). Edna runs not just from organized religion, but from a whole system, of which the church is merely a

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<sup>16</sup> Lenskyj 57; Margery A. Bulger, "American Sportswomen in the Nineteenth Century," Journal of Popular Culture 16 (1982): 2.

<sup>17</sup> "The Girl and Her Sports: the Women Who Are Most Expert in Them Tell Her How," Ladies Home Journal 32(1915): 10.

subset, which attempts to define and confine her. Earlier in the text Chopin states, "At a very early period [Edna] had apprehended instinctively the dual life -- that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (57). Her trek across the field seems to be an early attempt to throw off that "outward existence." Yet , as she sits at the shore with Adele Ratignolle while the quadroon cares for the children, one realizes that she is deeply entrenched in the system and resigned to her plight. Edna recalls what she was thinking when she decided to marry Leonce: "As the devoted wife of a man who worshiped 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" (63). Edna's life as mother-woman is "real". Any other role is fictional.

Chopin next mentions swimming when, after an evening of entertainment, Edna and the other vacationers head down to the ocean for a swim. Despite the help she has received, Edna had failed in all her previous attempts to swim. "At that mystic hour and under that mystic moon" (72), however, Edna takes her first strokes:

A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her. But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence. She could have shouted for joy. She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water. A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant

import had been given her to control the working of her body and soul. She grew daring and reckless, over-estimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (73)

By swimming Edna takes control of herself. She places her "body and soul" where she chooses, not under the title of mother-woman nor under the prayers of her father, nor with the rest of her husband's possessions. She defines a new place where women can function as they never have before. The place she seeks is one of solitude (74). This is the same word Edna gives to a piece of music that she heard Madame Ratignolle play. "It was a short, plaintive, minor strain. . . .When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (71). Is the naked man a representation of the masculine-woman Edna and the bird a symbol of the artistic talent which Edna desired but had not achieved? Or is Edna the bird freeing itself from man, going where he cannot follow? This latter interpretation seems to align itself more closely with the solitude which Edna searches for in her first ocean swim, for it's there that she can "[reach] out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (74). It's also a place where, like the bird, she can free herself from Leonce who is left standing on the beach. In fact, when Edna returns from her first true swim, Leonce squelches some of her emotion by

commenting, "You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you" (74). Edna's first swim has not freed her. She is still within her husband's grasp. However, as when she was a young child, Edna's swim represents her search for that place where there are no boundaries. Yet when Edna realizes how far she has gone, she fears for her own life. When all boundaries are cast aside, so is all security. And the night takes on a fictional quality. As Edna contends, "It is like a night in a dream" (75). She returns to Grand Isle for her final, fatal swim. Once again the promise of solitude draws her to the sea. Solitude provides Edna with a way out of her confusion for it takes away all of society's standards by which she is measured. Without Leonce, the children, and Adele there, she no longer must measure up to the mother-woman.

As Edna begins her final swim, a conveniently contrived "bird with a broken wing [is] beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (175). Throughout the text Edna has been equated with the bird. Earlier the bird flew far from the man standing on the shore. Here, however, the bird returns broken. The image alludes to Mademoiselle Reisz' warning about what it takes to defy tradition and Edna's inability to do so. Although Edna has attempted to create a new reality for herself, one with some personal independence, she has been unsuccessful, mainly because the rest of society is unwilling to change. Chopin implies that personal meaning is unattainable in a weightless society. In an attempt

to cast off her weightless feeling, Edna removes her bathing suit and stands naked facing the sea.

One must remember that, as an 1890s woman, Edna's disrobing takes on symbolic significance, for clothes reminded the woman of her purpose in life. Even changing from her "street" clothes to a bathing suit meant removing long skirts, high necked blouses and corsets. As Harvey Green asserts, the corset made the woman into a "caricature; for if the corset crunched the waist, it also accentuated the bosom and hips, the areas of nurture and generation of children."<sup>18</sup> Dr. Dudley A. Sargent, director of the Hemenway Gymnasium of Harvard during the early 1900s, concurred that such outfits served to remind women that they were female while also restricting their physical movement,<sup>19</sup> and Veblen maintained that such attire proved that a woman was "still. . . the economic dependent of the man. . . still . . . the man's chattel."<sup>20</sup> In removing not only her clothes, but her bathing suit as well, Edna attempts to put off all such vestiges. The scene also returns to the image of solitude which Edna had imagined much earlier in the text in which the man stands naked on the shore watching the bird fly away from him. Yet now, Edna stands naked while her dream of some other station in life flies off, forever

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<sup>18</sup> Harvey Green, Fit For America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) 257-258.

<sup>19</sup> Dudley A. Sargent, "The Physical Development of Women," Scribner's Magazine 5 (1889): 183.

<sup>20</sup> Veblen 127.



unreachable.

The images which arise in Edna's mind as she begins her final swim sum up her whole life and show the tensions that exist in her as she attempts to create a new definition of and for herself. First, there is the meadow which she believed limitless and where she first "swam" as a child. Yet even as she thinks of this limitless field, she acknowledges that "her arms and legs were growing tired" (176). Even if there were other roles available to Edna, she no longer has the strength to pursue them. To be a masculine-woman took great strength. Yet Edna has played along as a mother-woman for so long that her "muscles" of defiance and independence and fortitude, if ever developed at all, have atrophied. Consequently her dream is overshadowed by images of Leonce and her sons and then of Mademoiselle Reisz chastizing her for her failed attempt, only to be followed by visions of Robert, so entrenched in the society that he cannot understand her position, and then of the doctor who "perhaps" could have understood her, but could be of no help now to a woman on the verge of drowning.

The text ends with a culmination of familial images, primarily those linked to the mother-woman: Edna's father who through "authority" and "coercion" "managed" his wife "into her grave" (125) yet never realized it, Margaret her "matronly" sister (61) who took over their mother's duties after the latter's death,

the chained dog who represents Edna's inability to escape such a life and the less than pleasant association of Edna with a dog and the cavalry officer who is symbolic of the fictional life Edna sought to live. It is the final image in the text, however, which provides the most ironic twist: "There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (176). One might argue that because of this image, the text ends on a positive note, that the "bees" and "the musky odor of pinks" represent procreation and hence some kind of birth or fruit from Edna's suicide. While I would agree that the images do stand for procreation, I would argue that they're a verbal slap in the face to Edna, referring back to her biological function as a mother-woman which, even in the ocean, even in death, she cannot escape. Once Edna has her sons, society locks her into the sociological position of mother-woman where she becomes an object responsible for taking care of other objects. Any opportunity for personal development is cast aside. Hence The Awakening ends much as it began, with the question, "What alternate role is there for a woman in society?" still in the forefront, and even more importantly, still unresolved.

It is interesting that Chopin has Edna rebel against being a mother-woman by swimming, for motherhood was central to the arguments of both proponents and opponents of women's involvement in athletics. On one hand, athletics would strengthen women for their future roles. The Ladies' Home Calisthenics (1890)

claimed, "The Health of coming generations and the future of a nation depend in great part upon the girls. They are to be the coming mothers, and as such, obligations for the formation of a new race are incumbent upon them. These obligations they can by no means fulfil unless they are sound in body and in mind."<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, while some doctors echoed this sentiment, others followed Dr. Arabella Kenealy, who argued, "My experience leads me to regard any extreme of muscle-power in a woman as in itself evidence of disease."<sup>22</sup> Any woman who desired to increase her strength was actually attempting to become more masculine. Most importantly, the athletic woman sacrificed her most important organ -- the womb. As Kenealy argues, "Nature had no vainglorious ambitions as to a race of female wranglers or golfers; she is not concerned with Amazons, physical or intellectual. She is a one-sided uncompromising old person, and her one idea is the race as embodied in the Baby. . . . She [Nature] knows it is the birthright of the babies. . . [female] athletes are squandering."<sup>23</sup> Athletics prepared men for their role as "hunters and fighters". Women, on the other hand, took care of the home. Hardening their muscles could lead only to a symbolic hardening of their hearts, rendering them ineffectual in the very role for which they were made.<sup>24</sup> If Edna Pontellier had

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<sup>21</sup> quoted in Green 225.

<sup>22</sup> Arabella Kenealy, "Woman as an Athlete," Nineteenth Century 45 (1899): 641.

<sup>23</sup> Kenealy, 642-643.

<sup>24</sup> Allen Guttmann, A Whole New Ball Game (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina

been a real woman, critics would have used her to prove their point. The more self-indulgent Edna became, the more she swam and the more she ignored and eventually rejected her own family. Yet the mixed message in the medical community served only to strengthen the tension and mixed messages seen in The Awakening. In 1899, the athletic woman in fiction and in fact was still an anomaly.

## Chapter 2: The Divided Self

"It's really awfully queer not to know what one is," writes Jerusha "Judy" Abbott, the heroine of Daddy-Long-Legs. She continues, "[It's] sort of exciting and romantic. There are such a lot of possibilities. I may be straight descended from the ancient Romans, or I may be a Viking's daughter, or I may be the child of a Russian exile and belong by rights in a Siberian prison or maybe I'm a Gipsy."<sup>25</sup> Miss Abbott spends most of the novel attempting to define who she is, and while Daddy-Long-Legs may be read as a rags-to-riches, sentimental love story of a young woman who comes of age -- for Jerusha does change from a poor orphan to a rich young college graduate who eventually marries a man from an elite family -- I would argue that the text really reveals the story of a young woman who, in attempting to achieve success and independence, is actually swallowed by a social system that demands assimilation, that demands wives and not women writers. Jerusha's struggle recalls Edna's musing on what she is in The Awakening. The role which athletics plays in defining the two, however, is extremely different. Athletics, while seeming to provide a means for self-definition, also serves as a means of assimilation, placing the heroine in a particular social class. Nowhere is

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<sup>25</sup> Jean Webster, Daddy-Long-Legs (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1912) 125.

this conflict more blatant than in the names by which the main character calls herself. At times she is "Jerusha", the author, while at other times she is "Judy" the Plain Girl. The circumstances under which she is named and then renames herself reveal her motivation and the effect which social status has on her. Judy is the asylum-college-group girl, while Jerusha is the potential woman who does not want to be shaped by the institutional asylums that impress on her the value of group identity.

The reader first encounters the heroine, Jerusha Abbott, when she is seventeen, the oldest of all the orphans at the orphanage, or "asylum" as she calls it. Indeed, it is not until the end of the introductory chapter that any character in the novel calls the orphanage by its correct name, the John Grier Home. The use of the word "asylum" suggests that while the orphanage may be a place of safety for children, it may also be a place where the "ill" are sequestered from society. As a "foundling" (208), Jerusha Abbott fits into this latter category; for as a child of unknown lineage she is a nobody, and in a society consumed by class status she has little option but to be put away. Her seventeen years at the orphanage reinforce this idea that she has been put away, discarded, as does the fact that when the text opens, Jerusha has been there so long that she functions as a mother figure for the other orphans, making food for the Trustees whom the orphanage "entertained" once a month, dressing and wiping the noses of the orphans, teaching them proper etiquette

and cleaning the home (4). Her name, given to her by Miss Lippett, the overseer at the orphanage, plays with this idea as well. Jerusha writes her benefactor Daddy-Long-Legs, "[Miss Lippett] gets the names out of the telephone book -- you'll find Abbott on the first page -- and she picks the Christian names up anywhere; she got Jerusha from a tombstone" (33). An abbot is one who heads "an abbey of monks"<sup>26</sup>, Jerusha was the mother of the biblical king, Jotham, and the daughter of the priest Zadok.<sup>27</sup> Thus the heroine seems to be a woman of nobility, cloistered away. Her writing and the wealth of a benevolent Trustee are the keys which unlock doors and set her on the road to "freedom". It is her in class essays which attract the trustee to Jerusha's potential as a student, but it is his money which enables her to go to college. The only stipulation is that she must write to her benefactor (whom she has never met but whose shadow reminds her of a daddy-long-legs spider, hence the title of the text), once a month and report on her academic progress. Consequently, the rest of the text is written from Jerusha's point of view and contains only her letters, which trace her progress through college, to her anonymous benefactor.

Freed from the asylum, Jerusha attends a women's college which is made up of women from the elite class. One of her dorm mates, Julia Rutledge Pendleton,

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<sup>26</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, ed. David B. Guralnik (Ohio: William Collins and World Publishing).

<sup>27</sup> 2 Kings 15: 32-33.

comes from a first family of New York (26). Since most of the young women at the college are concerned with social status, Jerusha hides the fact that she came from the orphanage (38). Women's colleges in the early 1900s were reserved for the elite -- the middle and lower classes were too poor and too busy working to attend. Jerusha is given a monthly allowance of thirty-five dollars a month to "enable [her] to enter on the same standing as the other students" (14). Like Edna's, her social position is determined by a man who holds the purse strings which direct her future. Her new living quarters demonstrate her move upward. No longer is she an inhabitant of the asylum, but a resident of the tower. Yet the tower used to be the old infirmary's "contagious ward"(25) , even though it now provides a spectacular view overlooking all for the senior and three freshmen who live there. Thus Jerusha and her college peers are still in a sense set apart from the rest of society, and hence, in some ways still part of an asylum; but for Jerusha it is now on the opposite end of the social spectrum. As Jerusha writes, "After you've lived in a ward for eighteen years with twenty room-mates, it is restful to be alone. This is the first chance I've ever had to get acquainted with Jerusha Abbott"(26). As with Edna, wealth provides an opportunity for self-discovery. Yet, as we shall see throughout the text, her upper class status will lock her into a social position from which she cannot escape unless she gives up all her money. To do so at this point



would mean to give up college and to return to the John Grier home. Neither is a desirable position for a freed orphan.

As Jerusha becomes more involved in college life, she decides to change her name to "Judy". As she herself admits, "It's such a silly name. It belongs to the kind of girl I'm not -- a sweet little blue-eyed thing, petted and spoiled by all the family, who romps her way through life without any cares. Wouldn't it be nice to be like that? Whatever faults I may have, no one can ever accuse me of having been spoiled by my family! But it's sort of fun to pretend I've been"(33-34). While she argues that "the aim of the John Grier Home. . . is to turn the ninety-seven orphans into ninety-seven twins"(34-35), in her assuming the name Judy she makes herself a twin of the upper class girls with whom she attends college. As Judy, she can pretend that the elite life which she now leads has been the one she has lived since childhood, that instead of toiling away at the John Grier Home, she has actually been brought up in the life of leisure. She confesses to Daddy-Long-Legs, "I do want to be like the other girls, and that Dreadful Home looming over my childhood is the one great big difference. If I can turn my back on that and shut out the remembrance, I think I might be just as desirable as any other girl. . . . Their jokes seem to relate to a past that every one but me has shared. I am a foreigner in the world and I don't understand the language"(37,36).

That language is taken from what Judy considers "plain books"(46) (versus

college textbooks) and "necessary novels"(62) such as Cinderella, Jane Eyre, Vanity Fair, and Little Women which all the other girls had read while growing up. The selection of texts is interesting, for they parallel Jerusha's life. In the first three, the heroine rises from poverty to a place of wealth and status. Cinderella and Jane, the orphan, both get to marry their Prince Charming, and in Little Women Jo becomes a successful writer and marries the older father figure, Professor Bhaer. Cinderella, Jane and all the Marches embody the traits of the perfect plain girl. No wonder Judy states, "I feel like a made-up heroine in a story-book"(147).<sup>28</sup> Jerusha is, literally of course, but also figuratively, a story-book heroine. She embodies in real life what the rich girls experience only vicariously. She must paradoxically, to become one of the girls, make it her fantasy life as well, for as she reads the novels she comes to understand the cultural literacy of the day. Not only does she begin to understand that language which had been foreign to her earlier, but she begins to speak it as well. One sees this when she writes, "One can't help

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<sup>28</sup> This is important, for as Catherine Belsey writes, "literature as one of the most pervasive uses of language may have an important influence on the ways in which people grasp themselves and their relation to the real relations in which they live. The interpellation of the reader in the literary text could be argued to have a role in reinforcing the concepts of the world and of subjectivity which ensure that people 'work by themselves' in the social formation." Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (New York: Routledge, 1990) 66-67.

thinking, Daddy, what a colorless life a man's forced to lead, when one reflects that chiffon and Venetian port and hand embroidery and Irish crochet are to him mere empty words. Whereas a woman, whether she is interested in babies or microbes or husbands or poetry or servants or parallelograms or gardens or Plato or bridge - is fundamentally and always interested in clothes" (209-210). Her upper class station has opened up to her a world of material goods which weren't even in her vocabulary at the John Grier home. The clothes become a sign of status, for when she writes to Daddy-Long-Legs she also mentions the price of her friends' dresses.

Even Judy's involvement in athletics is motivated by status. Upon trying out for the Freshman basketball team, she writes Daddy-Long-Legs, "It's loads of fun practising . . . . These are the happiest girls I ever saw -- and I am the happiest of all" (27)! As was Edna's experience with swimming, Jerusha's playing basketball gives her a sense of personal satisfaction. But in Judy's case, that happiness stems not merely from a personal quest for autonomy, but from joining a team with other girls. In part, this is because women's participation in athletics had become, in 1912, more acceptable than it was at the turn of the century, at least in the asylum of womanhood -- the women's colleges. Fanny Garrison, an actual basketball player at Smith College during the late 1890s, echoes Jerusha's sentiment in letters she writes to her family, "Basket-ball always exerts a sort of fascination and when

one has played on a class team, she is looked upon with a little awe. That carries farther than you would think. . . . Last Wednesday's game was a success for me at least. All the sophomores and lots of the juniors were present and I feel rather proud as the only two plays they applauded, I made."<sup>29</sup> As rewarding as such activity was, however, it was strictly circumscribed by the codes of femininity adopted by women's colleges. Both Jerusha and her live counterpart, Fanny, play for their class teams. There was no interschool competition for it was felt that competition led to aggressive masculine behavior, that it led to "nervous collapses" and even worse, that it injured women's reproductive organs.<sup>30</sup> Senda Berenson, the inventor of Women's Basketball and creator of the Physical Education department at Smith College, wrote in the text Basket Ball for Women,

unless a game as exciting as basket ball is carefully guided by such rules as will eliminate roughness, the great desire to win and the excitement of the game will make our women do sadly unwomanly things. . . . Rough and vicious play seems worse in women than in men. A certain amount of roughness is deemed necessary to bring out manliness in our young men. Surely rough play can have no possible excuse in our young women.<sup>31</sup>

Athletics were also used to keep a woman from straining herself intellectually.

Jerusha herself admits to experiencing this intellectual strain and having it

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<sup>29</sup> Fanny Garrison personal letters, 1898.

<sup>30</sup> Green 226-228; Lucas and Smith 360.

<sup>31</sup> Basket Ball for Women, ed. Senda Berenson (New York: American Sports Publishing Co., 1903) 37,39.

relieved through athletics -- "when your mind gets tired, you have the gymnasium and outdoor athletics"(216). A. K. Fallows writes in "Athletics for College Girls," "this out-of-door young person, glorying in her strength and muscular skill, is frankly welcomed at any woman's college. Her influence is recognized as a balance that keeps the intellectual emphasis from swinging past the danger line."<sup>32</sup> Thus, while women's sports achieved some acceptance in society, women's participation in the sports, and the sports themselves, were adapted to maintain the strict definition of femininity and motherhood. They became part of the institution of women's colleges, part of the training for proper womanhood. Therefore, Judy's inclusion on the team contrasts with Edna's swimming. Judy is part of the team; Edna searches for solitude. Judy's selection serves as a means of social advancement which she uses to deflate Julia Pendleton's status and ego since the latter did not make the team (39). Edna uses swimming to break away from her prescribed social status.

Yet the rewards of sport and Judy's attempt to become a plain girl counter her attempts to become an author. Jerusha had been an excellent writer before she ever left the John Grier home. It is her essay "Blue Wednesday" which attracts her benefactor and causes him to pay for her college (12-13). Jerusha continues her writing in college, not only in letters to Daddy-Long-Legs, but also in articles for

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<sup>32</sup> A.K. Fallows, "Athletics for College Girls," Century 66 (1903):58.

publication both in school and outside the college. When the heroine speaks of herself as an author she calls herself Jerusha Abbott, but when she is just a girl, just a part of the basketball team, part of the group of college girls, she calls herself Judy. The requests which come from Jerusha and those which come from Judy show the dichotomy. For example, she asks Daddy-Long-Legs if it would bother him if she didn't become an author because in the spring she preferred being outdoors to writing: "It's much more entertaining to live books than to write them, " she declares as she signs her letter "Judy" (74). Again, after attending a cotillion, wearing fancy clothes, and dancing with boys, Judy writes to her trustee asking if it were acceptable for her to turn out to be a Plain Girl and not a Great Author (120).

Judy, the made-up story-book heroine, like Jo March, must forego publishing to become a Plain Girl", a true "little woman". Jerusha faces the responsibility of publishing, not of consuming, but of producing something, namely a text. It's the independent Jerusha Abbott who refuses the check for an extra fifty dollars to buy a hat, but it's Judy who apologizes for the brusque manner in which she does so (144-147). It's Judy, reminding Daddy-Long-Legs that she's just a girl, who writes requesting permission to spend the summer with Sallie Macbride. It's Jerusha Abbott who responds with a curt reply when her request is denied. As Jerusha Abbott, the self-proclaimed great author to be, the heroine has a voice. She asserts her own autonomy, although not always successfully. As Judy, she must beg

and is no different from any other girl. More importantly, as Judy, she is just a compilation of the novels she has read and the directions given to her by her benefactor and a product of elite girls'-school education, but as Jerusha Abbott, the Great Author, she becomes a producer.

One sees this in the progression of Jerusha's attitude towards pecuniary reward for her writing. At first she delights in merely being published as she was when her poem "From My Tower" was published in The Monthly (60), the school publication. As the text progresses, Jerusha writes more and more and money comes to define when one becomes an author. She laments Robert Louis Stevenson's only receiving thirty pounds for the serial rights to Treasure Island and questions whether or not writing is worth it (190), and even though she wins twenty-five dollars in the college's short-story writing contest, it is not until one of her stories is accepted by an outside publisher and she is paid fifty dollars that she declares, "Alors! I'm an AUTHOR"(194). Ironically, advised to write about what she knows, Jerusha writes about "When the Sophomores Won the Game"(195). Jerusha writes about Judy, the team member, the group player. Thus Jerusha helps perpetuate her made-up self through her own writing.

Jerusha's writing also leads to some economic independence as her skill is rewarded with scholarships enabling her to decrease the amount of money she receives each month from Daddy-Long-Legs. Writing also provides the opportunity

for Jerusha to create other fictional selves, yet she laments, "I'm having a dreadful time with my heroine -- I can't make her behave as I want to behave"(169). This is vital, for if Jerusha can manipulate texts instead of their manipulating her as they have done since she came to college, it opens up opportunities for her own positioning in society. Instead, she continues to develop Judy and dreams of one day writing her own autobiography, "The Life and Letters of Judy Abbott," not Jerusha Abbott. Thus, like athletics, writing serves only to assimilate Jerusha into the acceptable status quo.

Writing also fulfills a maternal instinct. One sees this when after having her book rejected by the publisher and throwing it in to the furnace she remarks, "I felt as though I had cremated my only child"(252). Writing provides that alternate productive role that eluded Edna's grasp in The Awakening. Later, one of Jerusha's novels has been published and she is able to pay Daddy-Long-Legs one thousand dollars. All that Jerusha has desired is beginning to be fulfilled. She is an author. Her book enables her to earn a large sum of money. She can finally begin to be financially independent. Yet, upon achieving this role, she is not fulfilled. Unlike Edna, Jerusha believes the productive and reproductive roles can be merged. As she writes when confessing her love for Master Jervie and her desire to marry him, I suppose I could keep on being a writer even if I did marry. The two professions are



not mutually exclusive" (293). She finally decides she would rather be married to Master Jervie than be independent. Here the text turns. She writes Daddy-Long-Legs for advice. Upon visiting him, she finds that he is Master Jervie. The door is opened for him and Plain Girl Judy to get married. Judy states, "Always before I could be frivolous, and care-free and unconcerned, because I had nothing precious to lose. But now -- I shall have a Great Big Worry all the rest of my life"(298). Is Judy's worry the possible loss of her husband or the loss of her freedom, the loss of those alternate productive roles? After all, the girl who scoffed at organized religion because of its limitations, who wrote of the need for another pronoun in the English language instead of just "he" when referring to "one", now decides to marry the man who had the "ability to set things right" (300), the same man whom she earlier describes as "an arbitrary, peremptory, unreasonable, invisible Providence"(167). She gives no thought to the fact that she has been his puppet ever since he donated money for her to go to college. All her summer vacations have been planned by him. As Harvey Green notes, "Marriage was still considered a more important goal than education, and even those with enough money were not necessarily convinced that post secondary training was important or even proper for a young woman."<sup>33</sup> The heroine's decision to marry shows her immersion into the accepted prescribed order. Like Jo March, she lives out Little Women. "Daddy? -- Jervie? What must I call you? Just plain Jervie sounds disrespectful, and I

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<sup>33</sup> Green 228.

can't be disrespectful to you!" she exclaims (303). Perhaps Master Jervie as she previously called him? Gone are her lectures about women's rights or the domination of men by women as the heroine becomes a plain girl who takes on the role of the economically dependent child or servant to her sugar daddy. Given the opportunity to become, she has become what society taught her to be. Athletics, along with the famous literature of the day, had become a part of the apparatus to assimilate her into such a character.

### Chapter 3: The Dangers of Riding on Impulse

Although Edith Wharton's The Fruit of the Tree can be read as a Progressive novel extolling the virtues of the working class and the success of Progressive reform, I would argue that it's actually a text about the destruction of women, caused once again by the tensions between class, gender roles, and women's involvement in sports and leisure. From the moment the text opens, the lines are carefully drawn. John Amherst, the assistant manager of Westmore Mills, a clothing factory, has clearly defined the roles of the sexes. Males are meant to produce economically. Women are meant to be sentimental. John does not approve of the merging of roles or reversal of these roles. This conflict drives the novel and is not settled until John achieves his role. It also molds the relationships among John Amherst, Bessy Westmore and Justine Brent.

John's feelings are evident from the beginning of the text, when, reflecting on his mother's dealing with the suffering she saw at the mill, he thinks, "Much as he admired, in theory, the woman who kept a calm exterior in emergencies, he had all a man's desire to know that the springs of feeling lay close to the unruffled surface."<sup>34</sup> He felt uncomfortable if a woman, even his mother, did not show her

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<sup>34</sup> Edith Wharton, The Fruit of the Tree (New

emotions. John's perceptions of male and female roles influence his thoughts and consequently his actions throughout the text. Women are emotional and, in his mind, lack depth. One can see how they think and feel because their emotions are constantly brimming over. As a male, however, John sees his role as producer, one who acts rather than one who feels. Such a role provides a sense of power and wholeness. Hence his great love for the mills:

Amherst's zeal. . . was always quickened by the sight of the mills in action. He loved the work. . . and he longed to see on the operatives' faces something of the ardour that lit up his own when he entered the workrooms. It was this passion for machinery that at school had turned him from his books, at college had drawn him to the courses least in the line of his destined profession; and it always seized him afresh when he was face to face with the monstrous energies of the mills. It was not only the sense of power that thrilled him -- he felt a beauty in the ordered activity of the whole intricate organism, in the rhythm of dancing bobbins and revolving cards, the swift continuous outcome of doublers and ribbon laps, the steady ripple of the long ply-frames, the terrible quashing play of the looms -- all these varying subordinate motions, gathered up into the throb of the great engines which fed the giant's arteries, and were in turn ruled by the invisible action of quick thought and obedient hands, always produced in Amherst a responsive rush of life. (56-57)

Wharton's use of words such as "love", "passion" and "beauty" show the sensual relationship between Amherst and his work which fulfills him. Yet there is a catch.

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York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 27.

The mills cannot continue to operate under their present dangerous conditions or else they will harm the workers themselves. One sees this in the opening scene where Amherst has come to check the condition of Dillon, whose right hand had been crushed in the mill (4). Safety reforms require cash, yet in his pursuit of a job at the mills, John had rejected "the gentlemanly professions" (54) which other men in his family had pursued. His grandfather had "followed a profession" while his father was a mechanical genius who created great unnamed mechanical devices (28). He, on the other hand, had become a worker. Consequently John does not have the funds to fulfill this role of producer.

Bessy Westmore, the wealthy, recently widowed owner of Westmore Mills where Amherst works, does, however, have the funds. For John Amherst, she is the answer to his problems, or so he thinks. Bessy, however, is the embodiment of leisure. She loves to ride horses and to sled, not to worry about millhands and factories. Yet John is attracted to her, so that from the outset, the clash between a life of production and a life of leisure is evident. Indeed, one major question which the text attempts to answer is what place do leisure and work have in society. After John takes her on a tour of "the nondescript thoroughfares, half incipient street, half decaying lane," Bessy replies, "What a good day for a gallop!" (50) As a woman of leisure, Bessy has no understanding of what Veblen calls "productive work",<sup>35</sup> so John prevails upon her by talking a language of production which she does

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<sup>35</sup> Veblen 46.

understand, that of motherhood. John desires that the working conditions improve for those at the mill, so to touch Bessy's heart (since all women are sentimental), he begins by mentioning the plight of the seven-hundred plus women who work there and their children. When Bessy argues that her lawyer Mr. Truscomb handles most of her business affairs, Amherst queries, "Do you leave it to your little girl's nurses to do everything for her?" (51).

As a woman, Bessy Westmore does not understand economics. Wharton makes this point over and over. For example, when John first points out the problems at the mill, Bessy finds a time to be alone with him and states, "I don't suppose I care as much as a man would -- a lawyer especially -- about the forms that ought to be observed. All I want is to find out what is wrong and how to remedy it " (99). Later on, after their marriage, when John tries to convince Bessy that she should invest her money in improvements at Westmore, she states, "You know I am so ignorant of such things." "Most women are," he replies. "I never pretended to understand anything about -- economics, or whatever you call it," she counters. "When we married I never expected you to care or know much about economics. It isn't a quality a man usually chooses his wife for" he concludes (200-201). Herein lies the second catch in John's achievement of his role as a producer. He cannot attain it without Bessy's financial contributions, yet his manly honor prevents him from

simply taking the money from her. John does not control the purse strings. Yet for Bessy to understand economic factors pushes her out of her feminine role of wife as prescribed by both John and herself. Pushing her into the realm of economics also forces her to acknowledge the world outside her world of leisure, and as Amherst admits after looking around Bessy's room, she "had. . . chosen. . . [everything] to the minutest requirements of a fastidious leisure," which he then labels as "the evil influence that [was] separating his wife's life from his" (283).

Bessy's love of sport is considered part of that evil influence. Why would she want to play instead of improve the mills? For Bessy, athletics is therapeutic. Every athletic act she participates in is a response to the inactivity which constitutes the rest of her life of leisure. "Bessy combined great zeal in pursuit of sport -- a timeless passion for the saddle, the golf-course, the tennis-court -- with an almost oriental inertia within doors, an indolence of body and brain that made her shrink from the active obligations of hospitality, though she had grown to depend more and more on the distractions of a crowded house" (219). As her marriage to John grows more strained, her physical activity, particularly horseback riding, increases.

Her craving for occupation had increased as her life became more dispersed and agitated, and the need to fill every hour drove her to excesses of bodily exertion, since other forms of activity were unknown to her. As she cantered along under the twilight sky, with a strong sea-breeze in her face, the rush of air and the effort of steadying her nervous thoroughbred filled her with a glow

of bodily energy from which her thoughts emerged somewhat cleansed of bitterness. (261-262)

Riding provides a catharsis through which Bessy can expel her emotions, thus enabling her to think more clearly. After riding, Bessy realizes that she does not hate her daughter Cicely (whom Bessy had previously thought responsible for her strained marriage), and that Justine is not trying to steal Bessy's daughter's affection. As Donald Mrozek notes in his book Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910, "Women of upper-class instincts. . . did exchange muscular for "nervous" strength, and their conscious cultivations of bodily health through sport gave evidence of a 'delight in action' . . . ."36

Like Edna Pontellier's, Bessy's delight comes in her attempt to achieve some sort of control over her self and her circumstances through sport. Like Edna's, Bessy's athletic endeavors also are the result of impulse. In fact, in The Fruit of the Tree, Bessy literally as well as metaphorically rides her impulse. Her horse's name is Impulse. Naturally Impulse is the most difficult horse to ride and yet Bessy informs John that, "She's the only horse I care for -- the others are all cows" (268). Implying that a man can control impulse, John informs her that she should take him with her when she rides. Indeed, later when John reflects on the

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<sup>36</sup> Donald Mrozek, Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910 (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983) 113.



tensions between him and his wife, he chastises himself: "as the stronger of the two, with the power of a fixed purpose to sustain him, he should have allowed for the instability of her impulses, and above all for the automatic influences of habit" (282). Hence from the moment of Bessy's first ride, Wharton begins a didactic treatise on the dangers of women following their impulse. The more Amherst desires to get Bessy to focus her money and attention on reforms at the mill, the more she rides the horse. Thus what started out as a form of therapy turns into a form of revolt, retreat and escape. As Wharton writes, "The seeds of disaster were in [Bessy's ] soul. . . Even when she appeared to be moved, lifted out of herself, her escaping impulses were always dragged back to the magnetic center of hard distrust and resistance that sometimes forms the core of soft-fibred natures. As she had answered her husband's previous appeal by her flight to the woman he disliked, so she answered this one by riding the horse he feared" (383). Earlier Bessy had gone to visit Blanche Carbury, a woman who pulled Bessy further into a life of leisure, rather than be at home when John returned from a trip to another mill (352-353). Bessy knew he did not approve of Blanche. She follows the same tactic when she rides Impulse.

Bessy's athletic act, like Edna's, ends tragically as Impulse throws Bessy from the saddle where she fractures her fourth vertebra and injures her spinal

cord (392). Thus paralyzed, Bessy is left to linger agonizingly between life and death. The very backbone of Bessy's life had been leisure and sports, yet when she uses it as a means of protest, she injures herself instead. But the fault lies not completely with Bessy, but also with the society which, because of her wealth, limits her to the role of an ornament. Mrs. Ansell says it best when she proclaims, "Isn't that precisely what Bessy is? Isn't she one of the most harrowing victims of the plan of bringing up our girls in the double bondage of expediency and unreality, corrupting their bodies with luxury and their brains with sentiment, and leaving them to reconcile the two as best they can, or lose their souls in the attempt?" (281). Bessy had been trained to lead a life of leisure, and although John believes in the sentimentality of women, he does not realize that Bessy's becoming economically minded is impossible in the social class in which she lives. As with Edna, Bessy and wealthy women are forced into roles which are difficult to transcend. Like Jerusha they can become Judy and channel their leisure and energy into a role of subservience, or like Edna and Bessy, they can destroy themselves. Thus The Fruit of the Tree seems to fix women in roles and claim those roles immutable. Even Bessy's husband cannot change her role.

Were Bessy's death the end of the novel, one might believe that the acceptable woman is merely the opposite of Bessy; yet her death, aided by Justine (a nurse and longtime friend), comes only two-thirds of the way through the text, leaving the

reader to focus on Justine Brent. Justine is the nurse whom Amherst meets at the beginning of the novel when he goes to visit Dillon in the hospital. She is a substitute and, therefore, not tainted like the other staff at the hospital who regularly change their diagnosis of injured mill hands because the chief doctor is related to the mill manager (8-9). Justine and Bessy had gone to school together at the Sacred Heart in Paris, but Justine's family had "lost their money" since then (107). Justine and Bessy are reunited at a garden party three years after the Dillon incident (166-167) and the contrasts are evident.

Unlike The Awakening or Daddy-Long-Legs, in Wharton's novel, it is not the female involved in athletics who possesses the masculine traits, but her childhood friend. Whereas Bessy is beautiful, Justine is described as "handsome" (168). Indeed, Justine can be seen as the female version of John. Like John, she has an "interest in social problems" (19). Like John's, her economic status has been reduced so that she no longer holds a place in upper class society (68, 107, 141); nor does she desire such a spot, for it seems that Justine understands that by taking on such an economic position, she would be severely limited. One sees this when Justine allows Mrs. Dressel to outfit her in one of the latter's dresses so Justine can attend the Gaines' garden party. Mrs. Dressel exclaims, "You look like a phoenix risen from your ashes. But slip back into your own plumage, and you'll be no more than a little brown bird without a song!" Justine replies, "I've always been afraid

good clothes would keep my wings from sprouting" (146, 148-149). The bird imagery recalls how, in The Awakening, it represents the chance for growth and freedom. Yet the masculine-woman role which describes Edna during her attempts at freedom ends up being fictitious. So Justine, equated with the marsh-bird, seems mythical as well. This idea is reinforced when Justine and John take Cicely for a hike in the woods:

Cicely dragged down a plummy spray of traveller's joy and wound it above her friend's forehead; and thus wreathed with her bright pallour relieved against the dusky autumn tints, Justine looked like a wood-spirit who has absorbed into herself the last golden juices of the year. She leaned back laughing against a tree-trunk, pelting Cicely with witch-hazel pods, making the terrier waltz for scraps of ginger-bread, and breaking off now and then to imitate, with her clear full notes, the call of some hidden marsh-bird. . . . (302)

Like Edna's, Justine's crowning moment is one based in romanticism. When Amherst first considers proposing to her after Bessy's death, he thinks, "In spite of Justine's feminine graces, he had formerly felt in her a kind of elfin immaturity, as of a flitting Ariel with untouched heart and senses; it was only of late that she had developed the subtle quality which calls up thoughts of love" (449). Although Wharton never informs the reader what that "subtle quality" is, I would argue that John is attracted by her rejection of the life of leisure. John himself admits, "Here was a woman who judged life by his own standards" (335)[underline mine]. What

John wants in a wife is someone to value his role as a producer, to echo his thoughts and desires and plans. The best wife for John would be John. In Justine, he finds the female version, for as she admits, "her whole life was centered in Amherst" (525).

Justine's position as the female version of John is important for several reasons, all tied to her aid in Bessy's death. Exhausted from her watch at Bessy's death bed, Justine retires to the Amhersts' sitting room to read and think. It is there that she remembers what Amherst had said he would do when he realized that Dillon would lose his arm from the mill accident, and thus be unable to work, leaving his wife and family to starve. John states, "I know what I should do if I could get anywhere near Dillon -- give him an overdose of morphine, and let the widow collect his life-insurance, and make a fresh start"(15). These words along with Amherst's notations in the book Justine is reading convince her to aid Bessy in her death when Bessy cries out in pain to Justine. "The little instrument lay at hand, beside a newly-filled bottle of morphia. . . . [Justine] rose and filled the syringe -- and returning with it, bent above the bed. . . ."37. John had written, "We perish because we follow other men's examples. Socrates used to call the opinions of the many by the name of Lamioe - bugbears to frighten children" (429).

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<sup>37</sup> Wharton 433. Pages 426-433 record Justine's struggle and her analyzing Amherst's ideas which lead her to take such drastic action.

Justine, motivated by a desire to set Bessy free from her pain, also believes that John would choose to do the same thing if he were there.

Herein lies a major difference between John and Justine, however. John wants to be a man of action. Justine acts. Her actions are important, for they reveal that although John is progressive in his labor views, he is not in his gender views. After telling him what she has done, Justine "perceive[s] that, like many men of emancipated thought, he had remained subject to the old conventions of feeling. And he had probably never given much thought to women till he met her -- had always been content to deal with them in the accepted currency of sentiment. After all, it was the currency they liked best, and for which they offered their prettiest wares!" (525-526).

Later on Wharton reveals the conflict that this produces in Amherst's mind. Although Justine has masculine traits, John defines all women as sentimental and basically empty headed. Justine, however, had not acted on impulse when she aided Bessy in her death/suicide, but had weighed Bessy's pain and requests against the opinions of others whom Justine knew would disagree with her actions. When Justine defies John's version of femininity, he no longer knows how to deal with her and her part in bringing about Bessy's death.

Women. He had vaguely regarded them as meant to people that hazy domain of feeling designed to offer the busy man an escape from thought. His second marriage, leading him

to the blissful discovery that woman can think as well as feel, that there are beings of the ornamental sex in whom brain and heart have so enlarged each other that their emotions are clear as thought, their thoughts as warm as emotions --this discovery had had the effect of making him discard his former summary conception of women as a bundle of inconsequent impulses, and admit her at a stroke to full mental equality with her lord. The result of this act of manumission was, that in judging Justine he could no longer allow for what was purely feminine in her conduct. (559-560)

The use of words such as "manumission" and "lord" in the same paragraph reveal Amherst's views on women. They are slaves to be set free at the discretion of their owners. From this point on, John's marriage to Justine is strained.

Ironically, like Bessy, Justine is trapped by John's definition of feminine conduct. Because Justine exhibits the "masculine" traits of autonomous thought and action, her "purely feminine" emotional side is no longer accepted. This is what caused the problem between John and Bessy - she, not he, literally owned everything - and it is what disgruntles John about Justine. He understands why Justine helped Bessy die, but he does not understand why Justine took so long to tell him. He fears the "locked chamber in her mind" (561) and believes she may be keeping other secrets from him. Justine may have her own thoughts, but must reveal them to John -- a rule which John believes Justine should follow, but which he himself does not.

Finally, Justine's aiding in Bessy's death is important for it still places John

at the economic mercy of a woman. John realizes that, "all he had received from the one woman had been won for him by the deliberate act of the other" (556). Just as Amherst's role as a producer was limited by the amount of money Bessy allowed to go to Westmore; so now, even though he has inherited all, he cannot feel free to act knowing that Justine has been the cause of his inheritance. The only way for John to achieve his role as producer is through Justine's destruction. Justine realizes that she has limited him and, therefore, leaves John that he might be free to pursue his career without the constant reminder of Justine's role in his first wife's death. In paving the way for John's success, Justine seems to have destroyed herself. One sees this when, after finding out about Justine's deal with Mr. Langhope, Bessy's father, Amherst goes to reclaim his wife from whom he had been estranged for over a year because Mr. Langhope believes John and Justine may have collaborated in bringing about Bessy's death. Justine convinces Mr. Langhope that it was solely her decision and she agrees to leave so that John may not lose his inheritance. John meets her at the hospital where she has resumed her nursing and takes her hands in his. "When her fingers met his he recalled having once picked up, in the winter woods, the little feather-light skeleton of a frozen bird -- and that was what her touch was like" (615). Gone are both the phoenix whom Mrs. Dressel had seen and the marsh-bird of the woods. Justine's spirit is destroyed but John has achieved his



economic success. He has brought about reform at the mill. Nowhere is this better seen than at the end of the text where, although John and Justine are reunited, their relationship is based only on the commitment to the mills. Yet John, having finally achieved his role, goes about creating an "Utopian vision" (628) around him.

First, he dedicates a new recreation building at Westmore to Bessy, whose plans for the building he had found. Yet the plans were for a gymnasium which Bessy had hoped to build at Lynbrook as a sign of rebellion against Amherst. Her plan would have succeeded except that John had already used her funds for other changes at the mill. Second, and more depressing in his Utopian world, is the life that now is left for Justine. As they look out over the new building, John asks, "do you remember how we said that it was with most of us as it is with Faust? That the moment one wanted to hold fast to was. . . the kind that would have seemed grey and colourless at first. . . when one could look out at last over the marsh one had drained?" Justine reminds Amherst that he had said that, not she. John responds, "But didn't you feel it with me? Don't you now?" Justine "murmurs" her assent and John takes her to "look at the marsh we have drained" (633) as the text closes. Recall that Justine is associated with the marsh-bird. "Draining the marsh" removes the habitat crucial to her survival and as she had feared when talking to Mrs. Dressel, economic advancement, namely that of her husband who has destroyed her potential, has prevented her wings from growing. Justine's future seems bleak.

John Amherst, like Leonce Pontellier, had achieved his role, but in the process had destroyed both of his wives.

#### Chapter 4: Jordan Baker: the True Sportswoman?

"She was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless, and with her chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall. If she saw me out of the corner of her eyes she gave no hint of it -- indeed, I was almost surprised into murmuring an apology for having disturbed her by coming in."<sup>38</sup> Thus Nick introduces the reader to Jordan Baker, whose characterization Christian Messenger claims is "the first serious portrait of a female American athlete."<sup>39</sup> As one will see, however, her experiences don't differ that much from those of her predecessors Edna, Jerusha and Bessy. Nor is the portrayal of an athletic woman any more flattering. Just as Edna did, Fitzgerald's "balancing girl" (6) must struggle to find and maintain a place of autonomy within a society which believes that she should act a certain way, and in some ways Jordan is as blind as Bessy to the destructiveness of a life of leisure.

In many ways Jordan also parallels Tom, Daisy's husband, who was also an avid sportsman. Messenger notes that the two "are . . . staunch representatives of

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<sup>38</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) 6.

<sup>39</sup> Christian K. Messenger, Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 194.

competition and power, rooted in athletic life."<sup>40</sup> Yet the ways in which they compete and strive for and use power show a marked difference. Tom depends completely on his physical size and strength to rule. Fitzgerald describes him at the opening of the text:

He was a sturdy straw-haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body -- he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage -- a cruel body.  
(5)

Tom is a member of the leisure class, or that aristocratic class whose members inherit their money instead of working to earn it. As Nick states, "[Tom's] family were enormously wealthy -- even in college his freedom with money was a matter of reproach." He and Daisy spend their life "unrestfully drift[ing] here and there wherever people [play] polo and [are] rich together" (4). Like Bessy's in The Fruit of the Tree, his life of leisure bores him. One sees this in the word "unrestfully" and in the preceding passage. Indeed, throughout the text Tom, as well as the other characters, is described as restless, thus showing the lack

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<sup>40</sup> Messenger 195.

of fulfillment of a life of complete leisure. Hence Tom's conspicuous consumption of common women. All of Tom's affairs are with lower class women, from the maid at the hotel where he and Daisy spend their honeymoon, to the common girl Daisy alludes to at Gatsby's party, to Myrtle, the wife of a garage attendant. It's as though through his "wasteful consumption"<sup>41</sup> of these various women Tom proves he is a man of leisure, and proves, in his leisure, that he is a man of potency. His affairs provide a means by which he can prove his pecuniary strength. He can afford to keep a woman on the side at any time. In a perverted way, these relationships unite Tom with the world of work and production. While he does not daily go to his job, he does show success in conquering women. That becomes his "job". The affairs also reinforce Tom's role as the dominant male in a society where women of his own social class are beginning to experience some autonomy both through their own athletic endeavors and through the right to vote.

When sexual prowess will not prevail, Tom reverts to violence. One sees this when, with "a short deft movement" (25), Tom breaks Myrtle's nose after she refuses to obey Tom's command to stop saying Daisy's name. The use of "deft" implies skill, that Tom has practice in beating women. The reader knows this is true, for earlier Daisy alludes to the fact that Tom is the cause of her "black and blue" knuckle. She states, "You did it, Tom. . . . I know you didn't mean to, but you

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<sup>41</sup> Veblen 74.

did it. That's just what I get for marrying a brute of a man, a great, big, hulking physical specimen. . ." (8). Finally, Tom's fear of losing his dominant role is demonstrated in his concern over maintaining a dominant white race. "If we don't look out the white race will be -- will be utterly submerged. . . . It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things" (9). Tom embodies those qualities which were considered important in the twenties. Size was important. As Harvey Green notes, "By the 1920s rotundity no longer singled an individual out as endowed in the wallet as well as in the flesh. To have muscles and not work with one's hands had come to mean that one had the leisure time and discipline to train. Leanness in women and muscular bulk in men were new virtues." He adds, "Once the 'immigrant threat' was under control. . . the body-building emphasis began to reveal concern for gender relationships. The stress on size, which connoted power and perhaps even implied violence, was a product of gender role changes occurring in the 20th century."<sup>42</sup> Thus one sees that this new emphasis on muscle was motivated by the native-born white American male's desire to maintain some sort of dominance in a changing society. Until immigration laws were passed in the early 1920s, people from Slavic and Southern European countries were flooding into America. They took jobs and their mere numbers seemed a threat to white culture. Likewise, women had just gained the vote

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<sup>160</sup> Green 323, 255.

in 1920, and, consequently, were gaining some political power and a voice in society. Both changes reduced the power of the ruling class. Throughout the text, Tom works to maintain a position of power.

Jordan, like Tom, desires only the dominant role. As Nick writes when justifying Jordan's dishonesty, "She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage" (39). Like Tom she has a "masculine" build. "She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accented by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet. [She had] gray sun-strained eyes . . . [and] a warm charming, discontented face" (8). Like Tom she is restless and aggressive. Nick records the mere action of her standing up as forceful: "Her body asserted itself with a restless movement of her knee, and she stood up" (13). Unlike Tom, however, Jordan cannot physically injure those who would place her at a disadvantage. It's here that Nick's initial description of her comes into play, for to maintain her position of control, Jordan must truly become the "balancing girl" (6) whom Nick first admires. After being introduced by Daisy, "Miss Baker's lips fluttered, she nodded. . . almost imperceptibly, and then quickly tipped her head back again -- the object she was balancing had obviously tottered a little and given her something of a fright." Nick describes this scene as her "exhibition of complete self-sufficiency" (6). And indeed, that's exactly what it is, an exhibition, a public

show to create a public image of Jordan as a self-sufficient dominating woman. This exhibition, however, is merely part of the larger "subterfuge" (38-39) which Jordan, like Edna, uses to hide her true self while presenting an acceptable face to society. For if society knew what she was really like, she would fall from her regal position. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her golf game.

As a golf champion, she is well known. In the 1920s golf, along with tennis, was one of the favorite sports among women. Stars in the sport were the new moral crusaders. They upheld and exemplified the morals of the culture. Jordan's live counterpart, Glenna Collett, an amateur golfer, was considered one of the most famous women athletes of the twenties.<sup>43</sup> In an article in Woman's Home

Companion Collett writes:

The increasing popularity of sports among women also means, in my opinion, a distinct ethical gain, for the sporting spirit is a part of the code of every true sportswoman. "The Sporting Spirit" is a phrase as difficult to define as the word "gentleman," but it includes qualities, standards, scruples which are desirable everywhere, not merely in the playing field. Women who participate in sport learn to be broadminded and magnanimous; to be not merely honest but unwilling to snatch too graspingly at personal advantage. . . .<sup>44</sup>

The ideal of the sporting spirit abounded during the twenties as sportswomen took

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<sup>43</sup> Lucas and Smith 344.

<sup>44</sup> Glenna Collett, "Sports for Women," Woman's Home Companion 51 (1924): 21.



over the role once held by mother-women as keepers of the morals. In another article for Women's Home Companion Molla Bjurstedt Mallory writes, "The sporting spirit also means, of course, that you must never cheat to win, never take an unfair advantage."<sup>45</sup> During her first major golf tournament, however, Jordan exhibits how far she is from the sporting spirit as she supposedly "moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round" (138). The fact that the charge was never proved adds to the duality of Jordan's nature. Like Edna she knows there is one acceptable face she must present to the world and one which must remain hidden. Although she does not break other people as Tom does, she breaks the rules. Interestingly, Jordan's golfing scandal does not bother Nick even though other illegal and/or immoral acts in the text do. Nick blames it on Jordan's gender. "It made no difference to me," he states. "Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply -- I was casually sorry, and then I forgot"(139). Thus, while actual female athletes were writing articles extolling their virtues as sportswomen, this fictional woman was portrayed, if no longer physically weak, then morally weak -- unable to adhere to the code of honor in sport [battle].

Living a life of leisure, apart from meaningful work, Jordan, like Tom takes on a sensual nature. Whereas Tom expresses his through dominating women,

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<sup>45</sup> Molla Bjurstedt, "Shall We Encourage Athletics for Girls?" Woman's Home Companion 49 (1922): 13.

Jordan's sensuousness, like her dishonesty, remains simmering under the surface. Jordan takes life literally lying down. When Nick first meets her, she is "extended full length at her end of the divan," and when Nick ends their relationship one sees her "lying perfectly still" in the chair (6, 118). Her reclining may be interpreted in several ways. First, it may be a sign of the boredom, of the lack of productiveness inherent in the life of leisure. This idea is reinforced through Jordan's constant yawnings. She yawns frequently at the dinner party when she first meets Nick and then later after hearing Gatsby's tale about his search for Daisy (7,8,35). Here Jordan's yawning also provides a front behind which she can hide her amazement over Gatsby's story.

Jordan's lying down also serves to develop her role as a goddess of leisure. When Nick and Gatsby come to visit at Daisy's, "Daisy and Jordan lay upon an enormous couch, like silver idols weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans"(76). One may read "idol" in its archaic sense as "anything that has no substance but can be seen,"<sup>46</sup> as both Jordan and Daisy present a superficial front to the rest of the world. The word also plays on the "idle" lifestyle which Jordan leads. This image also conjures up visions of Jordan as a goddess lying down waiting to be served clusters of grapes while others serve her

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<sup>46</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition.

beck and call. One sees this same sentiment in Jordan's love for New York. She states, "I love New York on summer afternoons when everyone's away. There's something very sensuous about it -- overripe, as if all sorts of funny fruits were going to fall into your hands" (83). Jordan's sensuality lies in wait, near the surface, perhaps because she realizes the consequences of fully exposing it.

Myrtle is the only other character in the text associated with sensuality. "She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some woman can. . . . There was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering"(16-17). Unlike Jordan, Myrtle flaunts her sensuality and pursues her own desires. Yet, this results in her sensuous body being ripped apart, her vitality completely drained. She flees from the garage towards Gatsby's car which she thought was driven by Tom. Instead, it is driven by Daisy, who accidentally strikes her. "Her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for her heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long" (92). Like Edna's, Myrtle's pursuit of sensuality destroyed her. Thus, Jordan's sensuousness remains below the surface, although Fitzgerald alludes to it frequently. She "sit[s] down at the table as if she were getting into bed" (8). She facetiously refers to herself as a "good girl" and a "lady" (13,77), and even Nick acknowledges that she turns to

subterfuges, "to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard, jaunty body" (39). Jordan's dishonesty builds a wall around her which enables her to survive in a way that Myrtle cannot.

Jordan is corrupt before she ever moves East, yet to place her in a setting where people come to earn money, to get richer, serves only to corrupt what few Western values she holds. Although Jordan has achieved fame, she still lacks substance. As Nick notes when he goes to end the relationship, "she looked like a good illustration, her chin raised a little jauntily, her hair the color of an autumn leaf, her face the same brown tint as the fingerless glove on her knee" (119). In pursuing a life of sport and leisure Jordan has become a divided, shallow person, caught like Bessy in the game of economic advancement, caught in the promise of an "orgiastic future" (121) which is always one step out of reach.

### Conclusion

Over twenty-five years passed between the publication of The Awakening and The Great Gatsby, yet the portrayal of women involved in athletics varied little. While it's true that sports heroines had begun to emerge, the very wealth which had given them the freedom to become involved in sports tied them all the more to leisure, channelled their athletic activity into a mere temporary escape outlet and refused to release them from prescribed social gender roles. In the novels, those who attempted to make a larger statement through sport ended up destroying themselves.

But what about actual sportswomen from the time period? Did they experience some of the same hindrances to achieving their athletic goals? A brief look at three of the most prominent sportswomen of the time reveals some of the same tensions dealt with in the previous texts.

"For a full generation she has been the spectacular epitome of an aristocratic United States Sportswomen,"<sup>47</sup> read the Time article referring to Eleanora Sears. Indeed, Eleanora Sears could do and did everything. Her accomplishments included racing cars, flying airplanes, winning the women's national tennis championship

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<sup>47</sup> "Lady From Boston," Time 16 Mar. 1936: 38.

four times, captaining the United States international squash team, walking forty-four miles in somewhere between nine hours and fifty-three minutes to fifteen hours (sources conflict) and boxing "when things got dull."<sup>48</sup> Yet like her fictional counterparts, she was able to participate in a variety of sports because of her wealthy background. Her great-great grandfather was Thomas Jefferson and her family's money supposedly came from "shipping and New England real estate."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, on most of her walks, the Time article states, "Mrs. Sears is usually followed by her chauffeur, with Thermos bottle and sandwiches."<sup>50</sup>

Unlike most of her fictional counterparts, however, Eleanora Sears took Mademoiselle Reisz's advice and "dared to defy." She frequently dressed "masculinely" in breeches and a man's hat, and was one of the first women to ride horse Western style. This last escapade made headline news as the newspapers printed "Eleanora Sears, in Man's Garb, Shocks California";<sup>51</sup> it brought about a resolution by the California Mother's Club condemning her actions,<sup>52</sup> and caused

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<sup>48</sup> Maury Z. Levy and Barbara June Walder, "Eleanora Sears," Women Sports I (1974): 31-32. "A Horseless Lady Paul Revere," Literary Digest 88 (1926): 60.

<sup>49</sup> Levy and Walder 31. "Lady" 38.

<sup>50</sup> "Lady" 38.

<sup>51</sup> "Paul Revere" 62.

ministers to preach sermons against her. Sears' response? She just laughed.<sup>53</sup>

Known as the "mother of basketball for women", Senda Berenson's actions demonstrate the tensions present as athletics became more of a woman's life. Brought to Smith College in 1892, Berenson not only created women's basketball, but also created the first Physical Education department and a system of physical education designed to assess a girl's physical fitness and help her to improve at her own rate. On one hand, Berenson saw physical activity as preparation for the changing role of woman in society. As she writes in Basket Ball for Women: "Now that the woman's sphere of usefulness is constantly widening, now that she is proving that her work in certain fields of labor is equal to man's work and hence should have equal reward, now that all fields of labor and all professions are opening their doors to her, she needs more than ever the physical strength to meet these ever increasing demands. And not only does she need a strong physique, but physical and moral courage as well."<sup>54</sup> Yet, her adaptation of the rules for basketball demonstrates a desire to keep women "feminine". No player was allowed to hold the ball more than three seconds; no player was allowed to grab the ball out of another

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<sup>52</sup> "Lady" 38.

<sup>53</sup> Levy and Walder 32.

<sup>54</sup> Basketball 33.

player's hand; no player was allowed to dribble the ball more than three times in succession, and the court was divided into three sections with each player assigned to a certain section of the court.<sup>55</sup> Berenson's rule changes received wide support from women's physical educators at women's universities. Women could progress, but only within the confines of the culturally accepted definition of femininity.

Gertrude Ederle's achievement surpassed not only those of any woman, but those of any man as well when, on August 6, 1926, she became not only the first woman to swim the English Channel, but also the new record holder, beating the previous record, set by Sebastian Tirabocchi by almost two hours.<sup>56</sup> The response to her achievement demonstrates the variety of views held during "The Golden Age of Sports"<sup>57</sup> as the twenties were known. Some claimed a feminist victory. The Literary Digest records,

[Swimming the channel] is a big thing in the news; [it] will find its place in the athletic records. But it is even more important for the girls of today and to-morrow. Miss Ederle has summoned them to a greater respect for their own powers, on the land as well as in the sea. . . she stands to-day as the Champion Extraordinary of her sex, and its unanswerable refutation of the masculinist dogma that woman is, in the sense of physical power

<sup>55</sup> Lucas and Smith 262-264.

<sup>56</sup> "How a Girl Beat Leander at the Hero Game," Literary Digest 40 (1926): 52.

<sup>57</sup> Document on Ederle from the International Swimming Hall of Fame II7.



and efficiency, inferior to man.<sup>58</sup>

Yet pictures accompanying an even more recent article on Ederle read, "Handsome young Amazon [underline mine]. . . became sixth person -- and first woman -- to conquer Channel."<sup>59</sup> As the writer of "How a Girl Beat Leander at the Hero Game" lamented, "It often happens, that the woman of achievement, no matter what the field of her success, is set down as unique. If she manages a business, people say that she has a man's knack of administration. If she becomes eminent in science or in literature a masculine brain is ascribed to her. If she attains a new athletic record those on the side lines declare that she is strong or skillful -- for a girl."<sup>60</sup>

Gender roles and sport were intricately connected during the period from 1890-1920, both in fiction and in fact. Only those women who had the money and the time could participate in athletics. Yet the social standing which opened up this door also closed it if a woman's athletic development pushed against the prescribed gender definitions of the day. Hence, while actual female athletes could achieve some limited success, those heroines of fiction only destroyed themselves while pursuing

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<sup>58</sup> "Girl Beat Leander" 56, 52.

<sup>59</sup> Bob Cooke, "Miracle of 1926," Modern Maturity Aug. - Sept. 1976: 14.

<sup>60</sup> "Girl Beat Leander" 52, 54.

their athletic goal. The prescribed, fixed order of the text left no room for growth or change.

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## VITA

Kristi Marie Vera

Born in Washington, D.C., January 11, 1961. Graduated from Washington-Lee High School in Arlington, Virginia, June 1978. B.A., College of William and Mary, 1982. In August of 1990, the author entered the College of William and Mary as a candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in the Department of American Studies.