

Victorian Women and the Piano: Domesticity and Transgression

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Kelsey Kathleen Gorder

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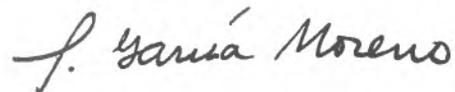
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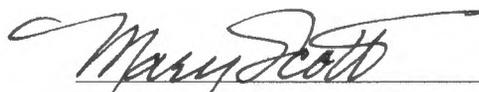
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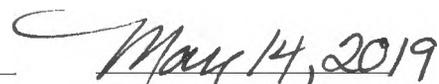
Victorian Women and the Piano: Domesticity and Transgression

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San Francisco, California
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This paper aims to explore the contradictory role of the piano in the lives of Victorian, middle-class women. The piano was both a potent symbol of middle-class prosperity and separate spheres ideology, and a dangerous object that enabled Victorian women to transgress prescribed gender boundaries and gain access to the forbidden worlds of art and sexual desire. The first objective of the paper is to examine the history of the piano, and the various sociopolitical factors which contributed to the rising demand for the instrument in the nineteenth century. The piano was closely linked to ideals surrounding middle-class identity in both England and America in the nineteenth-century, and piano-playing was central to the proper moral education of young women of the middle class. However, the piano also had a disruptive potential because it allowed women to access transcendent realms, which were outside of their socially-ordained duties. I then wish to further expose and explore the contradictory nature of the piano in the lives of Victorian women, and the harsh reality of the imposition of separate spheres and the Cult of Domesticity, by engaging in a close reading of visual and literary texts of the nineteenth century that feature women and pianos, specifically Thomas Eakins' *Elizabeth at the Piano* and *Home Scene*, William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*, and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. By exposing the role of the piano as an instrument of contradictory associations, this paper ultimately reveals the frustrations felt by Victorian women at the oppressive constraints imposed on them by nineteenth-century society.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.


Chair, Thesis Committee


Date

“The pianoforte is the most important of all musical instruments; its invention was to music what the invention of printing was to poetry.”

George Bernard Shaw, “The Religion of the Pianoforte,” 1894

“The piano is more than just an instrument...it is a ‘wondrous box,’ filled as much with hopes, yearnings, and disappointments as with strings and hammers and felt. It has been a symbol as mutable as the human condition, representing refined elegance in a Victorian home and casual squalor in a New Orleans brothel.” –Stuart Isacoff, *A Natural History of the Piano*

By the nineteenth century, the drawing rooms of most middle-class households in England and America were home to large, decorated pianos. The piano was an essential component to the successful functioning of middle-class homes, from the entertaining of guests, to the domestic training of young women. Closely associated with femininity, womanly charm, and duty, as prescribed by nineteenth-century, middle-class, separate spheres ideology, the piano was the ultimate symbol of prosperity, virtue, and domesticity. The piano was even believed to be a tool that could regulate the emotional life of women, and playing the piano was “akin to a good cry” (Isacoff 50). However, the piano was also dangerous, for it permitted these virtuous and domesticated Victorian women to transgress normative nineteenth-century gender roles, and access a transcendent and erotic realm—that of art and music. In this paper, I will examine the history of the piano, and the various sociopolitical factors which contributed to the rising demand for pianos in the nineteenth century. The piano was ultimately an object of contradictory associations; while it symbolized the ideal, prosperous, middle-class home, it also allowed confined, middle-class women access to art that was outside of their socially-ordained duties and capabilities. Thomas Eakins’ *Elizabeth at the Piano* and *Home Scene*, William Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience*, and Kate Chopin’s

The Awakening all reflect the various tensions surrounding the piano in the nineteenth century, and its role as an object of contradictory meanings and associations.

The piano was invented in Florence in about 1700 by the keyboard technician Bartolomeo Cristofori, with the patronage of Ferdinando de' Medici (Isacoff 20). The two met during a chance encounter in Venice during Carnival, and Cristofori's inventiveness, combined with the Medici's unlimited resources, resulted in the two of them joining forces to create this new instrument. Prior to 1700, the only instruments comparable to the piano were the harpsichord and the clavichord. The harpsichord, an earlier keyboard instrument, was the closest to the piano in form and function, but it was incapable of changing volumes when played; "no matter how hard a harpsichord's keys are struck, the instrument's quills pluck their assigned strings at a single, consistent volume, unleashing an unchanging, biting sonority" (20). The clavichord, while stroke-responsive, was a small, "folksy" instrument, which was not appropriate for larger performances. The musical world longed for an instrument to solve the problem of expressive volume. Cristofori produced a series of instruments for Ferdinando de' Medici in the following years, and eventually he created an action mechanism which forms the basic mechanism of the modern piano. The solution was "a sophisticated apparatus—an 'action'—that thrust the hammers against the instrument's strings when the keys were depressed, and then allowed them to fall back immediately into their resting positions so they would be ready to strike again. Pressing the keys with greater force caused the hammers to strike with more energy, bringing about an increase in volume" (Isacoff 23). The invention of this mechanism changed the world of music forever; the piano was born.

The piano slowly made its way across Europe in the years that followed. By the 1740s, upright pianos were being produced in various other places across Europe, including Germany, Spain, and France. The first public performances on pianos also occurred during these years, and live piano performances “took hold first in Paris and London” (Newman 15). The first notable composers to write for the piano, Christian Bach and Eckard, were also from Paris and London. In the late eighteenth century, the piano made its way across the Atlantic Ocean to America, brought over by John Behrent, a German immigrant and piano-maker. By the nineteenth century, the piano was the instrument of choice for most composers in Europe and America, as well as the most popular recital instrument. The piano also began to occupy a space in the domestic realm, and the demand for pianos rose steadily throughout the nineteenth century as the emerging middle-class identity became closely associated with the instrument.

The creation of the middle class was a key catalyst to the rise in the popularity of pianos during the nineteenth century. The middle class began to form in England in the late-eighteenth century, as a product of numerous major sociopolitical factors, including industrialization, religious revivals, and the French and American revolutions. “It was the crises of these decades which brought out common interests and drew the disparate membership together; the vicissitudes of war and trade cycles, the near breakdown of the old Poor Law, [and] the pressure from the growing body of wage labourers” resulted in the creation of a new middle class in England (Davidoff 18). The Industrial Revolution, and the integration of the factory system into British society, resulted in a shift from an agrarian to an urban society. Mass production, commodification, and consumerism resulted in more opportunities for people to amass small fortunes for themselves, as small

business owners or factory owners. Simultaneously, the revival of the Christian faith, specifically Puritan and Evangelical sects, promoted “particular ideas about families, proper work relations between the sexes, and the nature of men’s and women’s work” (59). Additionally, the French and American Revolutions’ cries for liberty and equality echoed among those in the “middling ranks,” and they strove to assert themselves in opposition to both the lowly working class, as well as the immoral aristocracy. All of these various sociopolitical events were simultaneously working together to mold what would become the middle-class identity.

The rise of the middle class, and the material and ideological culture that came along with it, resulted in a surge of families striving to display their level of wealth and prosperity. Keyboard instruments had been considered symbols of wealth and luxury long before the invention of the piano. “In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, harpsichords adorned with beautiful paintings—of Orpheus charming the animals, or of battle scenes on horseback—were choice trophies of a charmed life, and essential accessories in any fine home” (Isacoff 52). As middle-class families strove to display their higher status, they adopted the newest keyboard instrument as a symbol of their “charmed life”; the piano became *the* symbol of prosperity for the typical nineteenth-century middle-class home. “The piano was such a potent social symbol that many bought one simply to broadcast what they hoped was their perceived social status. A piano in the parlor, and the ability to play at least a little, said worlds about a family’s respectability” (Steinbach 8). Pianos became an essential component to the successful functioning of a respectable middle-class household, and industrialization allowed for pianos to be mass-produced in factories and widely available on the market, something

that was not possible a mere century earlier. An 1854 edition of Godey's Lady's Book, a nineteenth-century American women's magazine published in Philadelphia, even featured an article that explored the process of piano manufacturing:

Perhaps we cannot present our readers a more interesting article on manufacturing, than to give an idea of piano-forte making. Piano-fortes, in these days, making an almost indispensable article of furniture in every dwelling; adding so much to the pleasures of home, and being so much of a companion in all home hours; contributing so largely to the enjoyments of society, that some little knowledge of the processes of making, and the materials used, must be not only interesting to all, but valuable to those who may wish to know how good piano-fortes should be made. (Godey's Lady Book, Vol. 48, January 1854, page 5)

This article was the first of a multiple-part series on piano-forte-making, in a magazine that was marketed towards middle-class women. Pianos were clearly a subject of great interest to middle-class society, and women, in particular, because the piano was ultimately an object intended for the women of the household.

Essential to our understanding of nineteenth-century, middle-class British and American culture is the idea of separate spheres. Striving to separate themselves from the working class, middle-class families emphasized the importance of the separation of the public and private realms of life, known as separate spheres. Separate spheres ideology dictated that men should inhabit the public realm of society, and should thus take part in public activities like business and politics, while women should be confined to the private realm, handling domestic affairs like housekeeping and child-rearing. According to separate spheres ideology, "men were naturally formed for 'the more public exhibitions of the great theatre of human life'. Women, by contrast, were best suited to the smaller scale of the domestic, seeing the world 'from a little elevation from her own garden' where she had an exact survey of home scenes" (Davidoff 169). Thus, women were

confined to the private sphere of life, and restricted from participating in activities that were outside of the typical domestic duties circumscribed by separate spheres ideology.

Central to separate spheres domestic ideology was the idealized position of women as guardians of the home. Women were believed to be the epitome of religious virtue, and the home “was strongly associated with a form of femininity which was becoming the hallmark of the middle class, although much of it derived from a traditional inheritance” (Davidoff 25). Women’s place in the home was even believed to be ordained by God, according to Evangelical and Puritan doctrines. These Christian sects emphasized virtue, order, and duty above all else, and “women partook equally of the religious framework of order and duty” by maintaining the household to the standards of the middle class (27). Despite this idealized position of women in the domestic realm, they were nonetheless subordinated in the public sphere by various legal and social practices, which left them disadvantaged in society and unable to thrive outside of the typical wife-mother-housekeeper role.

In much the same way that the piano traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to America, so did industrialization, the ideology of the new middle class, and ideas about women’s position in society. In America, this middle-class ideology became known as the Cult of True Womanhood, or the Cult of Domesticity. Central to this ideology was the idea that women were not only expected to be the caretakers of the home and all aspects of the private sphere, they were also expected to adhere to four key attributes that made her a true woman—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. “Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was

promised happiness and power” (Welter 152). Separate spheres ideology and the Cult of Domesticity were the dominant cultural belief systems of the middle class in England and America, and they were underpinned by various social infrastructures, including religious doctrines, and various prominent medical and scientific theories of sexual difference.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the rise of Darwinian biological theory, which reinforced nineteenth-century ideals of femininity and separate spheres. By defining the physical differences between men and women, and attributing these differences to specific mental processes and personality traits, biologists used “science” to show the ways in which women were different to men in both body and mind, and to thus circumscribe women’s roles to the private realm based on their fundamental biological differences. In 1871, Darwin methodically laid out the fundamental physical differences between men and women in *The Descent of Man*, and the ways in which these differences were directly correlated to the mental capabilities of the sexes. Through the process of natural selection, “he explained, man had become superior to woman in courage, energy, intellect, and inventive genius, and thus would inevitably excel in art, science, and philosophy” (Showalter 122). Therefore, women were deemed naturally unartistic, and their exposure to art-making objects like the piano was limited and for a specific purpose: it was not intended to be music for music’s sake.

Moreover, while men were regarded as independent and sexually predatory by nature, women were viewed as naturally dependent and sexually passionless. Therefore, women were the ultimate symbols of virtue and goodness, and they were the guardians of the middle-class family and home. Because the piano was the paramount symbol of a successful middle-class household, which was maintained by the women, they were thus

central to the proper moral education of young women. “Most of these keyboards were intended for the women of the household,” Isacoff writes, and “musical accomplishment was critical so that young ladies could ‘amuse their own family, and [foster] that domestic comfort they were by Providence designed to promote’” (53). Piano-training was an essential component to the education of young women, and was even closely linked to these girls’ marriageability. Women were supposedly encouraged to learn to play the piano for pleasure, but this “pleasure” was geared towards finding a potential male suitor and domestic entertainment, as is evidenced by this quote by French playwright and composer, Henri Blanchard, in 1847:

Cultivating the piano is something that has become as essential, as necessary, to social harmony as the cultivation of the potato is to the existence of people... The piano provokes meetings between people, hospitality, gentle contacts, associations of all kinds, even matrimonial ones... and if our young men so full of assurance tell their friends that they have married twelve or fifteen thousand francs of income, they at least add as a corrective: “My dear, my wife plays piano like an angel.” (Isacoff 54)

Rather than encouraging aesthetic engagement and creativity, piano instruction for women was restricted to domestic and moral purposes, which were in adherence with patriarchal society’s established sex and gender roles.

However, because of the impossibility of neat categorization of something as ambivalent and creative as music, the piano was also a source of anxiety for the nineteenth-century middle class. Music had a disruptive potential because it defies binary categorization; it is intellectual and creative, rational and emotional, requires the body and the mind, and blurs the lines between the public and private realms that were so fundamental to separate spheres ideology. The piano, as the instrument most accessible to middle-class women, was therefore an object of contradictory associations: it symbolized the ideal, prosperous, middle-class home, but at the same time, it allowed confined,

middle-class women access to art that was outside of their socially ordained duties and capabilities. By resisting hierarchical ordering and categorization, and breaking the rigid boundaries prescribed by separate spheres ideology, music and, more specifically, the piano, was a source of cultural anxiety and tension that was manifested in works of art and literature of the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-century paintings of women and pianos reflect the contradictory associations of the instrument. In Thomas Eakins' *Elizabeth and the Piano* and *Home Scene*, and William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*, the piano reinforces typical Victorian ideas about femininity, while simultaneously occupying the status of an object that allows, and even encourages, transgressions of nineteenth-century norms and expectations about femininity.

Thomas Eakins was an American realist painter of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His most famous works are paintings of typically masculine activities, including *The Gross Clinic*, a grand painting that features a surgeon presiding over an operation in an auditorium, along with his series of rowing paintings and male nudes. While his portraits of men generally take place in public settings, either outdoors or in various other public arenas, his less studied portraits of women all focus on their existence within the space of the domestic interior. In most of these paintings, the women are engaged in some sort of creative or educational pursuit, such as reading, singing, sewing, writing, or playing an instrument, like the piano. Eakins' portraits of women playing the piano reflect prevalent nineteenth-century attitudes and discourses on women, femininity, and proper moral education, but they also offer a more nuanced view of gendered spheres than first meets the eye.

Thomas Eakins was the product of an unorthodox upbringing, by nineteenth-century, middle-class standards. The first of five children born to Benjamin and Caroline Eakins, he grew up in a middle-class home in Philadelphia. While the home would be qualified as middle class, the inner-workings of the household were far from typical. Caroline suffered from severe mental illness, which worsened as she got older, and Thomas himself suffered from a less severe mental condition, probably depression. Despite these issues, Eakins did well in all subjects of his schooling at Central High School, and “excelled in his drawing classes; his drawings foretell the marriage of an artists’ eye to a scientific mind” (McFeely 22). After graduating, he worked in his father’s calligraphy shop for a few years, but did not enroll in University, despite his great success in all subjects in school. Thomas wished to be an artist. His family was supportive of his ambitions and a few years later, after the end of the Civil War, Thomas traveled to Europe to attend the *École Des Beaux-Arts*.

Determined to become a famous painter, Thomas went to the prestigious art academy in Paris in 1866, where he became a student of the famous French artist, Jean-Léon Gérôme. It was during his time in France that Eakins allegedly became more sexually open and experimental. He formed a friendship with the Bonheurs, a family of well-known artists, who “opened Eakins’ eyes to a far wilder, wackier world than he had ever known, one with a much more open attitude toward sex” (49). It is unclear whether Thomas was homosexual or bisexual (he was married to a woman later in life), but he purportedly engaged in homosexual relationships while he was in Europe, as is suggested by various letters to and from close friends and family. In one letter to Eakins from a friend named Emily, she writes: “To my sorrow after only two years of absence I find

you laughing at things you should censure, excusing your companions for their vices, and even joining with them, making yourself like them...you should be ruined, body and soul” (McFeely 50). While his sexual activities and preferences are not explicitly stated, these letters, along with the knowledge of his circle of artist companions in Paris who were openly homosexual, suggest that Eakins was a part of this scene. In the very least, “there were many dimensions of Eakins’ life that seem incompatible with conventional masculinity” (50). After nearly four years in Europe, Thomas finally returned to Philadelphia in 1870, where, in the following years, he would paint his domestic images of women and pianos.

Despite his tendency to paint images of women engaging in artistic endeavors, Eakins himself did not believe that women were capable of creating true and meaningful art. A product of nineteenth-century beliefs, which were heavily influenced by separate spheres and Darwinian theories on the evolution of genders, Eakins once stated in a letter to a close friend that:

I do not believe that great painting or sculpture or surgery will ever be done by women, yet good enough work is continually done by them to be well worth their doing, and as the population increases, and marriages are later and fewer... so increases the number of women who are or may be compelled at some time to support themselves. (quoted in Hanson 52)

This revelation about his true views of women’s limited artistic and intellectual capabilities makes Eakins’ decision to continually paint women engaged in artistic pursuits throughout his career somewhat puzzling. However, if the paintings are read merely as depictions of the quintessential or stereotypical Victorian woman, who would have undoubtedly played the piano in the parlor of her home for family and friends, then these depictions are still aligned with his viewpoints. However, I argue that, despite his

personal beliefs and stereotypical gender biases, Eakins' piano paintings reveal a deeper, more troubling view of women and femininity in Victorian society.

Elizabeth at the Piano is a large-scale portrait that depicts one of Eakins' family friends playing the piano. Elizabeth is featured alone in the dimly lit space of the Victorian parlor. She is featured in full profile, and she is gazing downward at the



Figure 1: Thomas Eakins, *Elizabeth at the Piano*. 1875.

keyboard of the piano, focused intently on her music. The space is very dark, and there are large areas of shadow, but glimmers of light serve to enhance the drama of the painting and highlight specific features, such as the sheet music, the keyboard, and Elizabeth's face. Other than the figure of Elizabeth with the piano, there are few other objects in the room. All we see are the woman, the piano, the ornate piano seat, the sheet music, and the floral rug on the floor. "Like the painting's dramatic

chiaroscuro, this lack of extraneous detail directs attention to the main figure as it subordinates other elements of the composition" (Hanson 124). Elizabeth is pictured focused intently on her piano-playing, and she appears to be either unaware of or unconcerned about the presence of the viewer/artist.

The piano in this scene is used as a tool to reinforce typical Victorian gender roles and expectations, along with ideas about separate spheres. Elizabeth is clearly a middle-class woman, which is made obvious by her typical Victorian, middle-class attire, as well as the space she is depicted in: a quintessential Victorian parlor. She is pictured in the confines of the home, engaging in what is considered socially acceptable and expected behavior for a young woman. She is all at once defined and circumscribed by the walls of the home that are shown in dramatic chiaroscuro in Eakins' painting. Thus, this seemingly simple image of a woman playing the piano in the parlor becomes an image that profoundly reflects nineteenth-century values, and expectations of women.

It is important to note the dramatic scale of this painting. The painting is grand in size, measuring over four by six feet, and the scale, combined with the play of light and dark, creates a heightened dramatic effect. The woman who sat for this portrait, a family friend of the Eakins family named Elizabeth Crowell, "was in training to become a professional musician at the time she posed for Eakins and was thus an exception to the rule of female amateurism in the arts" (Hanson 142). The fact that Eakins chose to paint a grand portrait of a woman who was actively going against stereotypical expectations of women in the nineteenth century is significant, especially because his representation paints her in a very positive light. The scene is calm, tranquil, and peaceful; she appears to be contemplative and focused, but also relaxed and comfortable. Elizabeth, who was using the piano as a tool to outwardly rebel against Victorian gender constraints, is celebrated and immortalized in this painting, and "through her music, she is projected beyond the confines of the domestic space she occupies" (144). Therefore, the piano was

Elizabeth's vehicle for transcendence in a society that circumscribed women's roles and possibilities to the domestic realm.

Eakins' slightly earlier painting, *Home Scene*, features another depiction of a woman at the piano, but it is very different from *Elizabeth at the Piano* in both tone and content. *Home Scene* is a portrait of Eakins' younger sisters, Margaret and Caddy, in the parlor of the family's home in Philadelphia. Seventeen-year-old Margaret is seated at the piano, but she is not playing. She has a serious expression on her face, and her head is



Figure 2: Thomas Eakins, *Home Scene*. 1871.

resting awkwardly on her hand as she gazes down at Caddy. Many other features in this room may seem familiar, because this parlor is the same as the one pictured in *Elizabeth*, as is evidenced by the floral carpet and the same large, grand piano. Once again, the scene is dramatized by the use of chiaroscuro, much like *Elizabeth at the Piano*. Eakins' pallet consists primarily of brown, black, and red tones, which "contrast strongly with the highlighted passages of white and flesh tones, throwing portions of figures and objects into sharp relief" (Hanson 27). Once again, the piano keys and sheet music are highlighted, along with the faces of both Margaret and Caddy.

In *Home Scene*, Eakins once again depicts a scene from everyday life in a nineteenth-century, middle-class household. The girls are pictured in the parlor, and they

are engaged in typical activities for young women's moral and intellectual training: chalk-writing and piano-playing. The continued depiction of women in the parlor in Eakins' piano paintings is also of particular significance in that it is reflective of their expected place in society. Elaine Scarry discusses the relationship between the room and the body in her book, *The Body in Pain*:

In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is, on one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps safe and warm the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the person within; like the body, its walls put boundaries around the self. Yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the world and allows the world to enter. But while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization. (qtd. in Hanson 80)

If rooms are like bodies, and they shield and protect individuals from the outside world, then the parlor of a Victorian home would be the most fitting place to depict the women of the household, who were thought to be synonymous with middle-class domesticity and the private sphere. "Situated within the protective bounds of the family parlor, this configuration suggests the stability and order that characterized the ideal Victorian home" (Hanson 30). With the intimate portrayal of these two girls in this quintessentially Victorian (and feminine) interior space, Eakins reinforces nineteenth-century attitudes towards gendered spheres, and the idea that their aspirations and duties were limited to the domestic realm.

However, despite the apparent celebration of domesticity in this painting, there are also a few details that suggest a darker, more layered view of middle-class women and the domestic realm. On the left side of the painting, towards the top of the frame, there is the faint outline of a doorknob; the door itself is indecipherable in the shadows. In most cases, a door represents a passage, a moving from one space to another. When

the door is closed, it has the opposite effect, symbolizing enclosure or entrapment. In this case, the Victorian home, which is on the one hand their private haven, is simultaneously like a prison cell, keeping them trapped within the confines of its walls. "What protects and shelters the younger sibling may confine and limit the older, as Margaret's posture and facial expression seem to suggest" (Hanson 80). Moreover, at a time when femininity was thought to be synonymous with domesticity, the enclosure of the girls in this space also reflects the limited opportunities for women to break free of their expected domestic roles.

Another defining characteristic of this painting is the fact that it has a distinct tone of unease and discomfort. Unlike *Elizabeth at the Piano*, which has an overall mood of peace and tranquility, *Home Scene* conveys strong feelings of anxiety and distress. The distress radiates from the figure of Margaret, who is seated at the piano. Margaret is gazing downward at the figure of Caddy, who is intently drawing on her chalkboard. Margaret appears to be in distress, or concerned for her younger sister. It is as if Margaret, who is of marriageable age and facing a future in which marriage is probably her only option, is looking at her sister's childish freedom of artistic expression and realizing that she has come to the limits of her own. Moreover, Margaret is not engaging in any artistic pursuits, despite the close contact of her body with the piano, and the fact that parts of her body seem to meld with the instrument in portions of the painting. In this way, "Margaret's musical pursuits do not appear to be the key that can open, permeate, or transcend the parlor's closed door" (Hanson 82). The piano, which was a vehicle of agency for Elizabeth, is no more than a prop for Margaret. Margaret sits at the piano because it is her duty to do so as a middle-class, Victorian woman, not because she is

particularly talented or interested in pursuing musical interests. In this respect, the piano symbolizes her lack of ability to permeate the gendered boundaries of nineteenth-century society.

Moreover, Margaret's body appears very awkwardly shaped and positioned, specifically her hands, which are pictured resting against her head and body at odd and unnatural angles. While her right hand's positioning can be explained by her touching the small kitten resting on her shoulder, her left hand is inexplicably bent at a sharp 45-degree angle. Not only does this positioning look uncomfortable, it actually looks like her hand is disjointed from the rest of her body, and it suggests her discomfort in the space of the Victorian parlor. It is important to note that one of Eakins' specialties was the human form, and he created hundreds of drawings, paintings, and photographs depicting nudes of men and women. Thus, we can assume that the unnatural poses and angles of Margaret's body were purposefully done, and have a deeper, more nuanced meaning.

According to Chapter One of Hanson's dissertation, "Thomas Eakins' Home Scenes," the positioning of Margaret's hand against her forehead is also significant, symbolically, because "it is also a traditional sign of melancholy, as seen in images ranging from the ancient world to the twentieth century" (49). While melancholy was at times associated with creative capabilities and the idea of the frustrated or tortured artist, under these circumstances, Margaret's melancholy is far more troubling than it is inspiring. "Although she has access to a potentially creative tool...all visual evidence indicates that Margaret's experience of melancholy is disabling rather than empowering. In this respect, she conforms to most nineteenth-century assumptions regarding the creative and intellectual abilities of women" (52). Margaret's distress appears less related

to her desire to create (in fact, she appears to be completely uninterested in musical pursuits), and more suggestive of a troubling dissatisfaction with her circumstances, possibly alluding to her circumscribed existence within the domestic realm.

This connection to melancholy is also significant when one considers nineteenth-century views on women's mental health, specifically the phenomenon of hysteria. According to nineteenth-century medical professionals, hysteria was a female malady, which had biological links to women's uterine functions. However, hysteria was not a real medical or psychiatric illness; it was a socially-constructed condition that was projected onto women who failed to adhere to the typical mother-wife role circumscribed by Victorian society. Moreover, women of the middle class were believed to be the most prone to hysteria. The prominent nineteenth-century English physician, F.C. Skey, describes how middle-class women were the most likely to experience hysteria. "We know...that it is most prevalent in female members of the higher middle classes, of such as live a life of ease and luxury...persons easily excited to mental emotion, of sensitive feeling, often delicate and refined. Such are among the mental attributes of hysteria" (Skey 61). Women of the upper and middle classes were the most fundamentally liable to suffer from hysteria because their social circumstances allowed them the time and leisure to indulge in pleasures, and their lack of occupations or obligations had the potential to promote general rebelliousness. Moreover, women who strayed from nineteenth-century gender roles by refusing to submit to patriarchal expectations of womanhood and femininity were punished with the label of hysteric. "Mental breakdown, then, would come when women defied their 'nature,' attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or additions to their maternal functions" (Showalter

123). Hysteria was also utilized as a tool to regulate and oppress women's sexuality—middle-class women were supposed to be pure, and this purity was foundational to middle-class identity. Women who were blatantly and openly sexual or promiscuous could be labeled as a hysteric and thrown into mental institutions. In addition to all of this, nineteenth-century understandings of true mental illness were extremely limited, and women suffering from mild forms of anxiety or depression would oftentimes be labeled as hysterics, and “treated” with diverse and bizarre methods, or committed to psychiatric institutions.

This link to mental health issues is especially interesting when one considers the Eakins family's own experiences of nineteenth-century female nervous disorders. Eakins' mother, Caroline, suffered from what was most likely depression or anxiety for many years, but was clinically diagnosed with hysteria. This painting was completed the year before Caroline's death, and “the death certificate cited ‘exhaustion from mania,’ a phrase that only hints at the mother's anguish, the terrible lurching around the house, the frantic swirling of terror in a body that finally gave way” (McFeely 64). The Eakins home was undoubtedly a place of unrest during this time, and this painting captures those feelings of anxiety and distress, through the figure of Margaret, who is seated at the piano, but refuses to play.

William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* is another nineteenth-century painting that features a woman with a piano, although this image is radically different from Eakins' portrayals, in both style and content. Hunt was a famous nineteenth-century English artist, and one of the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in 1848 by seven young artists who were eager

to create a new British art, which was in opposition to the Realism that dominated art academies of the time. Hunt is known for his elaborate, vividly-colored paintings that are highly allegorical and narrative-driven.

In *The Awakening Conscience*, Hunt depicts a woman seated on the lap of her lover, who is playing the piano. She is his mistress, not his wife, as is indicated by her lack of a wedding ring. The painting is depicting the moment of her spiritual awakening to the immorality of her ways, hence the title, “The Awakening Conscience.” She is pictured half-rising from the gentleman’s lap, as she gazes out of the window and into the garden, reflected in the mirror behind them, with a look on her face that conveys her internal revelations. This painting is full of symbolic narrative elements, and is intended to be read like a piece of literature.



Figure 3: William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*. 1853.

Scholars and art historians have most often read *The Awakening Conscience* as an admonishment of femininity gone wrong, especially due to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’s tendency to depict women who are getting destroyed, in one way or another, by romantic love gone wrong. “The subject of the woman who is getting demolished by love, deceived by one-sided love, seduced by false ideals or false lovers,

or victimized by tragic love dominated the practices of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and poems of the nineteenth century” (Azam 71). Pre-Raphaelite artists, including William Holman Hunt, would frequently depict images of the fallen woman, led astray by her uncontrolled passions. Thus, Pre-Raphaelite art is generally thought to be in adherence to Victorian ideas about unbridled passion and sexuality, which were considered deviant and dangerous by the nineteenth-century middle class.

Unbridled passion was an attribute that was also associated with hysteria during the Victorian era. The doctrine of separate spheres ideology and Darwinian biological theory dictated that differences in sexuality were inherently gendered, and sexuality was also closely linked to hysteria; “men were by nature sexually predatory; women were sexually passionless” (Steinbach 166). Because of this, women were the ultimate symbols of virtue and goodness by Victorian standards. It follows logically, then, that women who exhibited signs of independent sexuality were often labelled as hysterics. Henry Maudsley, a prominent nineteenth-century physician and expert on hysteria, wrote: “that their perverted moral state is somehow connected with the action of the reproductive organs on an unstable nervous system seems probable because it is mostly met with in unmarried [women], is prone to exhibit erotic features, and is sometimes cured by marriage” (Maudsley 42). Unmarried, sexless, or sexually promiscuous women were considered morally perverse because they were not adhering to Victorian standards or femininity by fulfilling their maternal functions and embodying virtue and goodness. It follows logically, then, that the woman depicted in this painting would have been considered hysterical by Victorian society, due to her clear violations of nineteenth-century normative gender roles; she epitomizes the fallen woman.

The Awakening Conscience “is replete with objects and iconography reflecting and reinforcing the narrative of the fallen woman” (Vorachek 35). The woman is depicted in a sexually explicit pose, seated on the lap of her lover, which would have been considered both improper and immoral, and would have undoubtedly shocked Victorian viewers. Hunt’s detailed symbolism reflects the themes of seduction and sexuality, in everything from their poses, to the expressions on their faces. Every detail in the painting was thoughtfully placed by Hunt, from the sheet music to the cat playing on the floor. Even the details on the embroidery and the wallpaper are meaningful, containing classic symbols of fertility and chastity, and alluding to the loss of virtue of the fallen woman in the painting. The wallpaper pattern features birds eating ears of corn, a symbol of fertility, which symbolizes the destruction of her youthful and chaste virility. The embroidery that she has been working on contains the image of a rose being pricked with a needle, another symbol of the painful reality of her improper deflowering, and what it means for her place in society. The frame surrounding the painting was also crafted with narrative elements that connect to the subject matter of the painting, with bells symbolizing warning, and marigolds symbolizing sorrow. According to Ruskin’s 1854 reading of the painting in *The Times*, “There is not a single object in all that room—common, modern, vulgar, but it becomes tragical if rightly read” (qtd. in Casteras 140). Ruskin even notes the “terrible lustre” of the furniture, due to its “fatal newness,” symbolic of the abandonment of old values. Everything in this room alludes to themes of sexuality and the woman’s unfortunate fall from grace.

In the original version of the painting, the woman wore an expression of overwhelming pain and horror. A few years later, “Hunt worked again on the painting,

apparently repainting the woman's face at the wish of the owner Fairbairn, because her original expression was too pained" (tate.org.uk). Despite the condemnation of the fallen woman, Victorians were nonetheless preoccupied with the aesthetics of a more pleasing image, one that was more reflective of ambiguous hopefulness, as opposed to disturbing self-loathing and pain, which led to Hunt repainting a more serene and hopeful expression on the woman's face. It is also important to note that the model for this, and many of his paintings, was Annie Miller, "Hunt's fiancée at the time, a rather willful but beautiful young lower-class woman with decidedly lax morals" (Casteras 140). Annie Miller engaged in a number of affairs with other men while she was with Hunt, most notably with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, another famous Pre-Raphaelite artist and close friend of Hunt. Hunt's overt condemnation of the fallen woman with loose sexual morals in this painting can therefore be read as not only a reflection of Victorian society's views on morality and sexuality, but also as imbued with autobiographical meaning.

Further, it is significant that the man and woman are depicted at the piano, for several reasons. First, the piano, being the paramount symbol of nineteenth-century Victorian womanhood, functions as a reminder that she has fallen from grace. She is no longer the proper woman that she was intended to be; she has strayed from the path of virtue and is now a fallen woman. As noted in Laura Vorachek's article, "placing the woman and her lover at the piano further emphasizes that she has lost her virtue by raising the specter of her sexual desire. Significantly, the gentleman is playing her instrument while she sits in his lap, indicating that he exerts sexual power over her and that her fall likely was due to his seduction" (35). Moreover, despite the title of the painting, and the depiction of the woman's moment of spiritual awakening, the moral

ending of the narrative is ambiguous. It is unclear whether this awakening will lead her to change her ways, or whether she will once again be seduced by the piano-playing gentleman.

Nineteenth-century depictions of women with pianos are full of symbolic meaning and layered narratives. Due to the piano's contradictory associations as both a symbol of middle-class values and femininity, as well as a tool that allowed women to transcend gendered boundaries, visual representations of women and pianos are similarly contradictory and nuanced. In Thomas Eakins' *Elizabeth at the Piano*, the piano reinforces middle-class ideas about femininity and womanhood, but it also functions as a tool that allows the woman depicted to rebel against Victorian expectations of women. In *Home Scene*, the distressed figure of Margaret seated at the piano conveys feelings of dread, anxiety, and melancholy, all of which speak to her discomfort with her circumscribed existence within the confines of the domestic realm. William Holman Hunt's highly sexualized image, *The Awakening Conscience*, depicts the piano as both a reminder of proper Victorian womanhood, and as the scene of an illicit sexual affair. Contradictions abound in visual representations of women with pianos in the nineteenth-century, which speaks to the tension surrounding the piano, and the many layers of meaning associated with this seemingly simple instrument.

Kate Chopin also challenges the rigid boundaries prescribed by separate spheres ideology through the utilization of the piano in her 1899 novel, *The Awakening*. In the novel, Chopin rejects the prevailing nineteenth-century notion of the piano as a symbol of domesticity, instead challenging the rigidity of separate spheres by depicting the piano as

a disruptive force in the lives of middle-class women, whose access to the transcendence of music allows them freedom from traditional sex and gender constraints.

The novel takes place in Louisiana at the turn of the twentieth century, and it tells the story of Edna Pontellier, a middle-class woman who experiences a spiritual and sexual awakening while on holiday with her family on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana. Edna's transformative experience "unsettles any fixed notion of reality and suggests that music, and musicians, have the power to draw listeners out of traditional ways of seeing and into a more fluid sense of self and context" (Ruotolo 66). Edna's transformation is initiated by the piano music of Mademoiselle Reisz, whose true artistry allows Edna the opportunity to see beyond traditional sex and gender constraints imposed upon her by nineteenth-century patriarchal society.

Edna had never truly fit the mother-wife ideal prescribed by separate spheres ideology, as is displayed in the early pages of the novel when she is talking about Adèle Ratignolle, a woman who is the absolute personification of these ideals. "[O]ne of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute deserving of death by slow torture. Her name was Adèle Ratignolle" (Chopin 15). Adèle represents complete and perfect femininity and virtue in her absolute devotion to her husband and children, while Edna is the foil to Adèle's womanly grace and charm. She is described as "not a mother-woman" from the onset of the novel; she is an independent and outspoken woman who strays from the typical ideals of femininity and motherhood (14). Edna even admits to living a sort of double life, which consists of "that outward existence which conforms, [and] the inward life which questions" (27). However, despite Edna's tendency to stray outside of the rigid boundaries of separate

spheres ideology internally, she remains physically confined to her roles in the beginning of the novel without much resistance. That is, until she hears Mademoiselle Reisz play the piano towards the end of the summer at Madame LeBrun's hotel.

Chopin reveals the tension between appropriate and inappropriate piano-playing early in the novel; there is a clear distinction between domestic piano-playing and true piano artistry. Adèle Ratignolle embodies the ideal nineteenth-century, middle-class wife and mother, and so it is no surprise that she also plays the piano. "She played very well, keeping excellent waltz times and infusing an expression into the strains which was indeed inspiring. She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said, because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive" (46). In the case of Adèle Ratignolle, the piano enforces separate spheres ideology and ideals of womanly charm. The piano, and her proper domestic playing of it, function as a symbol of her womanly virtue and middle-class family values. Her music is pretty, but it is music for domestic training purposes, and nothing more. For Edna, Adèle's piano-playing is pleasant and allows her imagination to roam free; the music has a way of "evoking pictures in her mind" (49). Edna listens to Madame Ratignolle play the piano with a feeling of complacency and pleasure, while her mind conjures up images of landscapes and people in distant lands. Adèle's music thus enables her imagination, but it does not elicit any emotional response from Edna Pontellier.

Mademoiselle Reisz's first piano performance at Madame LeBrun's hotel is the moment when Edna's awakening truly begins. "The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was

the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth” (49). Mademoiselle Reisz’s piano-playing unleashes something within Edna that had been kept at bay prior to this experience. Mademoiselle Reisz does not play waltzes and popular songs, like Adèle, she plays piano compositions from the romantic era, by composers like Chopin and Wagner. While she plays, Edna waits for the usual imaginative impressions to play out in her brain, as they do when Adèle plays the piano, but her response is markedly different to this new type of music:

She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (50)

Mademoiselle Reisz’s piano-playing ignites strong passions within Edna akin to a force of nature, in part because of her pure artistry, and in part because of her rejection of conventional patriarchal standards of normative feminine behavior. Mademoiselle Reisz does not play the piano appropriately (for domestic purposes) like Adèle Ratignolle, because she is not a typical nineteenth-century woman: she plays the piano for music’s sake alone. This form of piano-playing was considered inappropriate and dangerous in nineteenth-century society, because it gave women the opportunity to transgress established gender roles, as we will soon see with Edna Pontellier.

Interestingly, it is not Edna’s own playing of the piano that incites her awakening; *listening* to another woman play the piano is what elicits her emotive response. Her physical reaction from listening to the piece is so strong that it overwhelms her. She cries and is unable to even speak after the performance when Mademoiselle Reisz approaches her; she can only “press[] the hand of the pianist compulsively” (50). Her silence

“compounds her difference from those around her and from her own prior listening self: she finds herself without a verbal or visual language with which to express, represent, translate, or create distance from her experience” (Ruotolo 56). Edna’s inability to express her feelings through outward expressions of feverish joy and delight like those around her separates her from the other party-goers. According to Cristina Ruotolo, Edna accepts her role as a passive listener, but “nonetheless experiences, through her relative passivity, an otherwise impossible *language* of expression that breaks free of bourgeois, patriarchal convention” (57). Edna is irreparably separated from conventional nineteenth-century, middle-class society the moment she allows herself to feel the power of Mademoiselle Reisz’s piano music, which ultimately transforms her outlook on life forever. It is as if, in this moment, Edna’s access to musical transcendence causes the invisible boundaries between the separate spheres to shatter.

Later that night, Edna and the other party-goers walk out to the ocean for a night swim. Edna, a self-described poor swimmer, decides to swim haphazardly out to the depths, as far as she is able to go. “A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin 53). Edna’s rebellious nature intensifies just moments after she listens to Mademoiselle Reisz play: she is already outwardly transgressing normative feminine behavior. In a moment that mirrors the final scene of the book, Edna swims out into the depths of the ocean, and is overwhelmed by “a quick vision of death” as she struggles to regain land.

That same night, Edna challenges the rigid boundaries of a proper wife's behavior by ignoring Mr. Léonce Pontellier's requests to come inside of the house, choosing instead to remain on the porch. "Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which had been portioned out to us" (59). Edna emerges from the fog of complacency with patriarchal society, and begins to question her place in this world. Edna's startling realization that she has the power and agency to transgress the rules laid out by patriarchal society by denying her husband's requests is a direct result of her witness to Mademoiselle Reisz's piano-playing earlier that night. Her access to the transcendent realm of music provided by Mademoiselle Reisz gives her the strength to rebel outwardly against the constraints that she had felt internally for years. She resists his requests throughout the night, remaining on the porch to spite him until she becomes too tired. "The physical need for sleep began to overtake her; the exuberance which had sustained and exalted her spirit left her helpless and yielding to the conditions which crowded her in" (61). Despite her exaltation in a few moments of outward rebellion against nineteenth-century society's expectations, she is brought back to the reality of her situation, and is forced to yield to its weight. After she finally decides to go inside and go to sleep, Léonce remains on the porch after her. Despite her attempt to make a display of power by staying outside on the porch in direct disobedience to her husband's wishes, he still manages to overpower her demonstration by outlasting her.

In the days and months following Mademoiselle Reisz's piano performance, Edna begins to stray even further outside of conventional feminine behaviors prescribed by

nineteenth-century culture. Her inner rebelliousness is manifested outwardly after the experience of musical transcendence, which allowed her to see beyond the roles that society had imposed upon her. She even goes so far as to say, “I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (90). By stating this out loud, and to none other than Adèle Ratignolle, the embodiment of the wife-mother ideal, Edna is outwardly rebelling against normative middle-class gender roles, and rejecting the “mother” identity imposed upon her by nineteenth-century society. She separates her own internal life from the one that she is expected to live, rejecting the notion of an identity that is inseparable from the role of wife and mother. The piano performance of Mademoiselle Reisz had a profound effect on Edna, inciting an awakening that forever altered her perspective of her place in the world,

Later on, after they return to New Orleans, Edna continues to actively rebel against these constraints. She stops taking visitors on Tuesdays, which had been “the programme which Mrs. Pontellier had religiously followed since her marriage,” and she begins neglecting the other duties around the house that were her responsibility as the wife, mother, and domestic guardian, instead choosing to wander about the city aimlessly and take up painting full time in lieu of maintaining the household (95). Despite Mr. Pontellier’s objections to this change in behavior and negligence of responsibilities, Edna continues to reject these roles. In a stunning moment of rebelliousness and frustration, Edna even takes off her wedding ring, throws it on the ground, and tries to crush it with her feet, “but her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet” (100). Edna attempts to destroy her wedding ring, the ultimate symbol

of her bondage, which circumscribes her life to the domestic sphere, but she is unable to even tarnish the object. Despite Edna's internal transformation, the realities of the external world's restrictions remain.

Edna's lack of interest in the domestic world grows deeper and becomes more pronounced as time moves on. "She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic" (102). The world, to which she had belonged complacently for years, becomes a prison for Edna. Her exposure to the true art of Mademoiselle Reisz lifts the veil that was covering the reality of her oppression and resulted in her disillusionment with the static façade of patriarchal control and separate spheres ideology. Edna chooses to leave her domestic life behind her, symbolically and physically, and she moves out of the large family home on Esplanda Street and into a small "pigeon-house" down the street. In doing so, she rejects her responsibilities as wife, mother, and domestic guardian. Although she feels that she has lowered herself socially with the move, she feels more liberated as an individual through this transgression of normative duties. "Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expression as an individual" (181). Mademoiselle Reisz's piano piece had an irreparable effect on Edna, causing her to reject prevailing nineteenth-century societal expectations and transgress the established gender roles. Thus, the piano, which should play the role of the domestic harmonizer according to nineteenth-century, middle-class culture, instead causes chaos and disrupts the order of the Pontelliers' middle-class home. Edna has been irrevocably transformed

by her experience of musical transcendence, and she is unable to return to the complacent, domestic life she knew before.

Moreover, Edna's awakening is not purely a realization of her inner dissatisfaction with separate spheres restrictions, it is also a profound sexual awakening. Not long after Mademoiselle's performance at Madame LeBrun's hotel, Robert, Edna's companion for the summer, leaves suddenly for Mexico. While Edna had always been fond of Robert, the awakening incited by the piano-playing of Mademoiselle Reisz allows her to truly experience her deep feelings for Robert after his sudden departure. Months later, back in New Orleans, "she was still under the spell of her infatuation...it was his being, his existence, which dominated her thought, fading sometimes as if it would melt into the mist of the forgotten, reliving again with an intensity which filled her with an incomprehensible longing" (103). Edna, desperate to connect with Robert, goes to Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment, where she experiences another stunning moment of intense awakening passions while listening to her play Chopin's Impromptu and pieces of Wagner:

The shadows deepened in the little room. The music grew strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive, and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. The music filled the room. It floated out upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air.

Edna was sobbing, just as she had wept one midnight at Grand Isle when strange, new voices awoke in her. She arose in some agitation to take her departure. (104)

Mademoiselle Reisz's music ignites passions within Edna that are akin to a force of nature. Her music echoes with promises of erotic and physical liberation, but these moments are only fleeting glances of what could be, which are ultimately unable to come to fruition because of the constraints of nineteenth-century society. For Edna, "music's erotic and liberatory promises are real, powerful, and illuminating," but they "inevitably

come up against social strictures that, outside the concert hall or music studio, offer no respectable place for awakened subjectivity” (Ruotolo 52). Edna’s awakening sensuousness is kept at bay by the reality of societal constraints and expectations.

After Edna physically breaks out of her domestic imprisonment and leaves the family home on Esplanda Street, she proceeds to break free emotionally and sexually. Once again, Mademoiselle Reisz’s music provides Edna with the strength and passion to rebel: “the music penetrated her whole being like an effulgence, warming and brightening the dark places of her soul. It prepared her for joy and exultation” (Chopin 154). She finally admits to Mademoiselle Reisz that she is in love with Robert, and then proceeds to enter into an affair with Alcée Arobin. Edna’s access to the piano’s music results in her rejection of traditional middle-class roles and her profound sexual liberation. Despite the fact that Edna is not in love with Arobin, she allows herself to be sexually liberated by him; this erotic awakening dissociates Edna from nineteenth-century patriarchal society even further. By this point, “all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference” (199). However, as Edna becomes further removed from the reality of her social world, she becomes more in tune with her own desires.

Towards the end of the novel, Robert returns to New Orleans from his stay in Mexico, and Edna and Robert’s long-awaited reunion takes place in Mademoiselle Reisz’s apartment. Interestingly, their first encounter with one another after all of these months occurs in the same room as the piano, which was the very source of Edna’s spiritual and sexual awakening at Grand Isle. Edna and Robert finally confess their love for one another a few days later, and enjoy a few moments of long-awaited romantic

embrace and tenderness. Robert explains that he left for Mexico because he was in love with Edna, but she was married, and thus belonged to Mr. Pontellier. Edna replies that “[she] is no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not,” and that she belongs to only herself, displaying her newfound independence and liberation (212). A few moments later, however, Edna is called away to attend to Adèle Ratignolle, who is giving birth to her next child. Despite Edna’s attempts to reject nineteenth-century, middle-class values by asserting her independence, her socially-ordained domestic duties are what ultimately bring her fantasy to an end. While Edna is attending to Adèle, Robert departs, leaving a note that says only, “I love you. Good-by—because I love you” (215). Edna’s attempt to free herself from traditional gender constraints fails; society’s impositions prevail as Robert chooses to leave Edna, due to the reality of the obstacles they would face because of her marriage to Mr. Pontellier.

The piano music of Mademoiselle Reisz had a transformative effect on Edna Pontellier, which allowed her to see outside of the traditional gender boundaries of nineteenth-century, middle-class society, and envision a new life for herself. In this imaginary new life, she had independence and agency, and was the master of her own destiny, free from the restrictions of patriarchal society. However, despite Edna’s attempts to construct this new life for herself, the reality of the sex and gender constraints of nineteenth-century separate spheres remained, and Edna was left with no way to reconcile her desires with the restrictive nature of Victorian society. Edna chooses to leave her life and the world around her, and to swim out into the ocean at Grand Isle, the place where her awakening originally began. She allows herself to be seduced by the sounds of the ocean, and lets the waves envelop her. “The voice of the sea is seductive,

never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude...The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (221). Edna's awakening, which was described as a force of nature, overtook every fiber of her being, just as the real force of nature, the ocean, overtakes her in the end. Self-destruction becomes Edna's only alternative to living with the unbearable weight of Victorian society's constraints. Unable to swim in the waves of passionate feeling and emotion that was awakened within her by the music of Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna's only option is to drown herself in it.

As readers, we are left wondering who or what was the victorious force in this situation. Did nineteenth-century, middle-class separate spheres ideology and patriarchal society's enforcement of gender ideals prevail, resulting in Edna giving up and taking her own life? Or was Edna's suicide the ultimate act of rebellion against a society that could no longer contain her fierce desire for agency and independence? These questions remain, but one thing is certain: it was the music of the piano that gave Edna Pontellier the ability to see beyond the static façade of control and complacency, and it was this same music that gave her the strength to speak out and rebel against these rigid boundaries, irreversibly transforming her outlook on life.

The overarching ideology of the nineteenth-century middle class was harmfully restrictive and oppressive for women, who were expected to adhere to impossible standards of femininity and morality. Women who strayed from the typical wife-mother-housekeeper role were openly criticized and persecuted by Victorian society, with sometimes dire consequences. However, there was clearly a tangible, outward frustration about these constraints, which is reflected in the work of Victorian painters and novelists,

male and female alike. The piano, the instrument which was the symbol of the virtuous middle class, was also a unique tool that granted women access to the transcendent realms of art and Eros. Thomas Eakins' *Elizabeth at the Piano* and *Home Scene*, William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*, and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* all highlight the integral role the piano played in both defining the constraints of middle-class women in domestic ideology, and granting them unprecedented access to the transcendence of art. This seemingly innocuous domestic instrument thus allowed women to see past the constraints of separate spheres domesticity, liberating themselves in the process.

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How did you get interested in this subject? Are you a musician yourself?

What's your sense of what it meant for a man to be a good pianist in the 19th century? (cf William Holman Hunt's picture.)

What instruments were not considered suitable for women to play, and why? What does that tell us about expectations for women's bodily decorum?

What was the significance of the piano as a piece of furniture? (It was not movable, it was ornate,...etc.)

Player pianos?

What was the piano repertoire for 19th century women? Was that gendered too? Waltzes and pop songs. (Adele Ratignolle) Mmme. Reisz is Chopin and Wagner.

Do you think the different settings—London, Philadelphia, New Orleans—make any difference to the significance of the piano for women?