MARGARET CULLEY

The Context of *The Awakening*

The 1890s in America were a decade of social tension. The depression of 1893–1896 accentuated class divisions, and urbanization and industrialization were beginning to change traditional ways of life. The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 announced the fact of the machine age in a dramatic, public fashion. Darwinism and higher criticism of the Bible were threatening traditional ways of thinking about human origins and destiny. It is not surprising that in such a period the particular Puritan-American brand of Victorian morality became an especially rigidified stronghold against social and intellectual ferment.

By 1890 "the woman question" had been a matter of public discussion for over fifty years. In that year the two national suffrage organizations merged for the final push for the vote—which would not come, however, for another thirty years. Upper-class women were attending college in record numbers, entering professions previously barred to them, and beginning to reap the benefits of improved medical care and dress reform. They belonged to innumerable women's organizations: social, intellectual, political, and philanthropic. Lower-class women came together to work long hours for low wages, and what organizing they did was into unions to combat the working conditions in the textile mills and other factories where they were employed. Women at all levels of society were active in attempts to better their lot, and the "New Woman," the late nineteenth-century equivalent of the "liberated woman," was much on the public mind.

Upper-class southern women, raised with a special sense of "woman's place" derived from some mythic age of chivalry, and then drawn by the Civil War into arenas of activity previously unknown and forbidden to them, seemed comparatively little interested in ideology. Kate Chopin was never a feminist or a suffragist; in fact, she was suspicious of any ideology. She was committed to personal freedom and defied social convention in a number of ways, including smoking cigarettes and walking out alone. Her diary records that she met one of the Claflin sisters while on her honeymoon and assured her that she would not fall into "the useless degrading life of most married ladies."[1]

1. Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 33. Tennessee Claflin (1845–1923) and Victoria Claflin Woodhull (1838–1927) were flamboyant advocates of women's rights who in their political, financial, and private involvements constantly offended Victorian sensibilities. Chopin does not record which woman she met.

Most married ladies in New Orleans, where the novel is set, were the property of their husbands. The Napoleonic Code was still the basis of the laws governing the marriage contract. All of a wife's "accumulations" after marriage were the property of her husband, including money she might earn and the clothes she wore. The husband was the legal guardian of the children, and until 1888 was granted custody of the children in the event of a divorce. The wife was "bound to live with her husband, and follow him wherever he [chose] to reside." A wife could not sign any legal contract (with the exception of her will) without the consent of her husband, nor could she institute a lawsuit, appear in court, hold public office, or make a donation to a living person. The woman's position in the eyes of the law was conveyed by the language of Article 1591 of the laws of Louisiana: "The following persons are absolutely incapable of being witness to testaments: 1. Women of any age soever. 2. Male children who have not attained the age of sixteen years complete. 3. Persons who are insane, deaf, dumb or blind. 4. Persons whom the criminal laws declare incapable of exercising civil functions." Though divorce laws in the state were somewhat more liberal than those in other parts of the country—divorce could be granted on the grounds of abandonment after one year of separation—divorce rates were much lower than in other states. Louisiana was a largely Catholic state and divorce was a scandalous and rather rare occurrence (29 divorces granted per 100,000 members of the population in 1890). In any case, Edna Pontellier had no grounds for divorce, though her husband undoubtedly did.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the repressive legal condition, the 1890s brought the first stirrings of the women's movement to New Orleans. In 1892 the first suffrage organization, the Portia Club, was formed. In 1895 Susan B. Anthony visited the city. In 1896 a second suffrage organization, the Era Club (Equal Rights Association), joined efforts with the Portia Club. Before the end of the decade women had won the right to vote on matters of local taxation. Though this concession was undoubtedly in part to insure white supremacy in the state, the women's political power was felt in two important reform efforts: the anti-lottery campaign of 1891 —before the vote was won—and later a major campaign for adequate sewage and drainage in a city especially subject to epidemic disease.

The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* was the first major American newspaper edited by a woman, and its pages supported a variety of women's causes in the 1890s. A June 1897 article recounts the occupations women in the city were pursuing: "Among other things gleaned from [the city directory] of our own city, is the fact that there are two women barbers, following the hirsute tradition in the

Crescent City. There are also importers of cigars among the fair sex, six women undertakers, one embalmer, a real estate agent, an insurance agent (it is true in partnership with a man), insurance solicitors, several practicing physicians, a box manufacturer, three drummers, a steamboat captain, several florists and a number of liquor dealers." The national census of 1890 showed that in only 9 of the 369 professions listed were women not represented.

Despite social and political advances, women in the 1890s still encountered disadvantages in almost every aspect of their lives, and a majority of the populace still believed that a woman's most sacred duty was to be "the angel in the house."

Though Kate Chopin was not a feminist, and *The Awakening* is not a political novel in the narrow sense of the term, it is important to understand the political and social context in which it appeared. A novel exploring the consequences of personal—particularly sexual—freedom for the married woman, appearing as it did in a decade much preoccupied with the New Woman in its midst, was certain to provoke strong reactions.

MARY L. SHAFFTER

Creole Women†

Creoles are the descendants of French or Spanish, born in Louisiana. Incorrectly the term is applied to any one born and living in New Orleans or its vicinity. Indeed there is a broader misapplication common in some parts of the state, where fresh eggs, Louisiana cows, horses, and chickens are called creole eggs, creole ponies, etc.

New Orleans, in reality, is two cities, the dividing line being a broad, tree-bordered avenue, running east and west from Lake Pontchartrain to the Mississippi River. "Up town," or the south side of this avenue, which is called Canal Street, is the home of the American population, while "down town," the north side, is the French or Creole Quarter. Up town the streets and the houses and many of the residents are new. It is a progressive, a self-made, a new city. Down town is the old town, with little improvement since the days when the houses were first built. Occasionally a creole family crosses the line, as it were, and goes to live up town, but they rarely become Americanized, for, above all things the creole is conservative.

† Originally appeared in *The Chautauquan*, VX (June 1892), 346–7. Footnotes are by the editor.

To-day the wealth of the city is in the American portion: thirty or forty years ago its wealth and refinement were centered in the French Quarter. Not much wealth remains there, but the people still possess what money cannot buy—the chivalry of their men and the grace and beauty of their women.

The women are called beautiful, and justly so. It is true that as the years creep on apace, they incline to *embonpoint*[1] and the down on their upper lips often darkens and deepens into a very perceptible line. Despite these facts, a creole woman grows old gracefully, she never becomes coarse looking, and her hands never lose their distinctive marks of refinement.

There live no lovelier girls than those one meets in creole society in New Orleans. Such figures, lithe yet full, such shapely heads, with crowns of glossy black hair, such a clear olive complexion, and great dark eyes, which speak before the arched red lips,—who can condemn the heart that is taken captive by the bewitching beauty of *la belle creole*?[2]

Creole women are artistic by nature; they paint and play and sing. They talk well and are good at repartee. They usually speak several languages, French being their mother tongue. They emphasize with gesture, and occasionally surprise the listener with a *Mondieu!* or O *ciel!*[3] which, with them, is no profanity.

As wives, creole women are without superiors; loving and true, they seldom figure in domestic scandals.

The creole woman entertains beautifully. Her salon, her toilet, show the refinement of her taste. In her manner there is none of the American "gush"; she receives with unaffected cordiality, which has the true ring. She is careful in the selection of her friends, for down in the *vieux carré*[4] of New Orleans money cannot purchase an entrance into society.

Creole women, as a rule, are good housekeepers, are economical and industrious. When one pauses to think that these women were reared as princesses, with slaves at their command, one realizes that noble blood has made noble women. They never speak of their poverty, or proclaim their ingenuity in supplying a dainty table from a slender larder. They have accepted their lot, they attend to their homes, they make their cheap dresses with their French taste and wear them with the grace of a *grande dame*[5]. There are many creole women who have striven hard with pride, and have wished to die rather than to acknowledge their poverty, but whose better nature conquered, and they now hold honored places among the bread winners of to-day.

1. Stoutness, plumpness.
2. The beautiful creole.
3. "My God!" or "Heavens!"
4. The French Quarter or "old city." See note 8, page 6.
5. Great lady.

Creole women have large families. This they do not regard as a misfortune, after the manner of some of their more progressive sisters. Their babies are made welcome and tenderly reared. Especially are the girls the object of much solicitude. Above all their beauty must be preserved, their hands and feet, their glossy hair and white teeth must be cared for. They must learn to dance, to sing, and to embroider. Their religion, too, must not be neglected. At ten or twelve they must go, arrayed as brides, to take their first communion. The next few years are spent at a convent, and at sixteen or seventeen the girl is ready for society. She receives with *maman*, visits with *maman*, shops with *maman*, goes to balls, the opera, and to church with *maman*. Sometimes it happens that a gentleman visits the house say five or six times; if so *papa* asks his intentions. If he expresses friendship only, he is then requested to discontinue his coming; but if, on the other hand, he declares his love, all things being desirable, the visitor becomes a suitor, the engagement is announced, the girl wears the honors as a *fiancée* but a short time, and then becomes a wife.

While there is about creole women that refinement that one admires, a *noblesse oblige* that one respects, a dependence that attracts love, it must be acknowledged that as a class they are not progressive. They are tender, loving mothers, they care for the health and beauty of their children, but they know nothing of the beauty and development that come from physical culture. They train the little feet to dance bewitchingly, but are horrified at the suggestion of a thick-soled, broad-heeled boot and a five-mile walk.

They are accomplished rather than intellectual. Women's rights, for them, are the right to love and be loved, and to name the babies rather than the next president or city officials.

Musically gifted, they prefer a gay *chansonette* to the intricate passages of one of Bach's fugues, and they would rather wander through the realms of poesie than to venture into the shadowy region of metaphysical laws.

They are not club women, they do not aspire to fame, and it is true that the average creole woman cannot compete, in some respects, with her American sisters.

When the pictures in books do not make creole women proud and pure and loving, capable of great development morally and mentally, women of whom Louisiana should be proud, then it is simply because the painters painted without a model and the writers never knew the password by which to gain admittance into the society of creole women.

WILBUR FISK TILLETT

[Southern Womanhood]†

Among the many changes that have taken place in the Southern States and among Southern people within the past thirty years, some of which are the direct result of war, and others the simple and natural development of the times, there is none more significant and worthy of notice than the change that has taken place in the condition, the life and the labor of Southern women.

* * *

We might conveniently divide our subject into these three heads: (1) the Southern woman before the war; (2) the Southern woman during the war; (3) the Southern woman since the war. Were this our mode of presenting the subject, it would be to give three pictures of the same woman, and not of three different women. The virtues that adorn and ennoble the Southern woman of to-day find their explanation and origin largely in that womanhood which for the last fifty years and more has been the product and the pride of the Southern people. No matter what may be one's sympathy with or prejudice against the institution of slavery, there is no denying the fact that American civilization has nowhere produced a purer and loftier type of refined and cultured womanhood than existed in the South before the war. Nowhere else in America have hospitality and social intercourse among the better classes been so cultivated or have constituted so large a part of life as in what is called the old South. These large and constant social demands upon Southern women, growing out of the hospitable customs of the old plantation life, made the existing conditions very favorable for developing women of rare social gifts and accomplishments. In native womanly modesty, in neatness, grace, and beauty of person, in ease and freedom without boldness of manner, in refined and cultivated minds, in gifts and qualities that shone brilliantly in the social circle, in spotless purity of thought and character, in laudable pride of family and devotion to home, kindred, and loved ones—these were the qualities for which Southern women were noted and in which they excelled. That the Southern woman of ante-bellum times lacked those stronger qualities of character and mind that are

† From "Southern Womanhood as Affected by the Civil War," *The Century Magazine*, XLIII (November 1891), 5–16. For more recent discussion of southern womanhood see Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830–1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

Kate O'Flaherty was ten years old when the Civil War broke out. She lost a beloved stepbrother who died of disease when returning from the Confederate Army. The O'Flaherty and the Chopin family were staunchly anti-Union. [*Editor.*]

born only of trials and hardships and poverty and adversity may be granted. That she contributed less in labor, especially manual labor, to the support and economy of the household than women in like financial condition elsewhere may also be granted. But this was not because she was unable or unwilling to work, but simply because it was unnecessary. Before the Southern woman had passed through the four years' fiery ordeal of war, the virtues of character, of head and heart, that are born of adversity were all richly hers.

But the Southern woman's most trying period came only after the war, terminating as it did in the loss of nearly all property, in the entire breaking up of the old home life, and in the emancipation of the slaves, who had always relieved white women of the more unpleasant duties that would otherwise have long fallen to their lot in the economy of domestic life. Thousands upon thousands of delicate and cultivated women who had never done any of the harder and more disagreeable duties of domestic and home life, universally performed by the slaves, were now compelled to enter upon a life of drudgery and hardship for which nothing in their previous training had prepared them. If in prosperity, wealth, and luxury woman is weaker and frailer than man, when adversity comes she is stronger than man, stronger in heart and purpose, stronger to adapt herself to unfortunate circumstances and to make the best of them. Indeed, it is not until adversity comes that we know how strong a creature woman is. Many a trouble that utterly crushes strong man transforms weak woman into a tower of strength. Never did woman have a better opportunity to show this strength than at the close of the war, and right nobly did she meet the emergency and set herself to her work, encouraging and inspiring with hope Southern men, too many of whom had lost heart with their lost cause. It was the heart, the hope, the faith of Southern womanhood that set Southern men to working when the war was over, and in this work they led the way, filling the stronger sex with utter amazement at the readiness and power with which they began to perform duties to which they had never been used before. The wonderful recuperative energies of the Southern people since the war, as manifested in the present wide-spread prosperity of the Southern States, is recognized and admired by all; but who can tell how largely this is due to Southern womanhood? Was it not the brave-hearted wife that inspired the despairing husband when the war had ended to go to work and redeem his lost fortune, happy enough herself that she had a living husband to work with her, since so many of her sisters had to fight the battle with labor and poverty alone, while their husbands slept in the soldier's grave? Was it not the ambitious and hopeful sister that inspired her soldier brother, the unconquered and unconquerable maiden that inspired her dis-

heartened lover, when the war was over? And was not this womanly inspiration the most potent factor that entered the problem of the white man's immediate future in the South? Nor has woman's part in the up-building of the South been one of inspiration simply. It is the work which her own head and hands have accomplished that we wish to speak of more particularly in this paper; not her influence upon other things, but the influence upon her of the changes of the last thirty years. How then has Southern womanhood been affected by these great changes?

* * *

[The author then puts this question to a number of his women correspondents, whose answers follow.]

There is no point perhaps wherein the Southern ideal of woman has changed so much as in the nobility of helplessness in woman. Before the war, so far as I have been able to learn from contact and conversation with those whose knowledge and experience antedate my own by many years, self-support was a last resort with respectable women in the South, and such a thought was never entertained so long as there was any male relative to look to for support, and men felt responsible for the support of even remote female relatives. So deeply embedded in Southern ideas and feeling was this sentiment of the nobility of dependence and helplessness in woman, and the degradation of labor, even for self-support, in the sex, that I have heard of instances where refined and able-bodied women would allow themselves to be supported by the charity of their friends rather than resort to work for self-support—and this not because they had any reluctance to work, but because livelihood by charity seemed to them to be the more respectable and honorable alternative of the two. Such instances may not have been very numerous, but they were at least of frequent enough occurrence to show the strong prejudice that existed in the South before the war with reference to white women working. Of course this does not mean that the thousands of wives, mothers, and housekeepers throughout the South did not perform the duties incident to their situation. It was single ladies, and those who had no means of support within their own homes, whom public sentiment forbade to work for self-support; or if they did, it was at the expense of injuring or entirely forfeiting their social standing, and hence was to compromise themselves and their families. Now, on the contrary, a woman is respected and honored in the South for earning her own living, and would lose respect if, as an able-bodied woman, she settled herself as a burden on a brother, or even on a father, working hard for a living, while looking to more-distant male relatives for support is now quite out of the question. As a woman is now

respected and honored, rather than discounted socially, for earning her own living when necessary, the field of labor for women is constantly widening. While she would not injure her social position by earning a living at any calling open to her sex, yet, socially, teaching and other forms of literary work have the advantage, and are to be preferred. Other callings, though not exactly tabooed by the sex, yet have such objections to them as would cause a young woman's friends to ask, "What makes her do that? Couldn't she get a place to teach?" This increasing tendency among women to earn their own living by teaching has raised the standard of thoroughness in female education to some extent, though much is still to be desired, especially in the larger schools, where girls are too often sent to be "graduated" rather than to be educated. Southern people, having passed through the financial reverses of the war, now realize as never before that a daughter's bread may some day depend upon herself, and so they want her well educated. And as a thorough knowledge of a few things is a better foundation for self-support than a mere smattering of many accomplishments, there is more tendency toward specialties in woman's education than before the war.

* * *

Woman's opportunities for work have increased. The number of single women who support themselves, and of married women who help their husbands in supporting their families, is much larger than before the war, and this class of women is more respected than in ante-bellum times. The number of vocations open to women is of course much larger than before the war, but the value in money of woman's work is shamefully depreciated. No matter what work a woman does, men will not pay her its full value, not half what they would pay a man for the very same work. There is proof of this unjust discrimination in almost every female college in the South where men and women are employed to do the same or equal work as teachers, not to speak of other callings where they are performing exactly the same work for very unequal wages.

If then we look at this question concerning Southern womanhood in the light of the present and of the more hopeful future, rather than of the past succeeding the war, I can say that in my judgment the freeing of the slaves and the changed conditions of life resulting from the war have proved a blessing to the white women of the South. It has taught them the value of actual labor with their own hands; it has taught them that the hardships and trials of life teach useful lessons, and have their rewards. It has proved to them that poverty does not necessarily degrade, that culture and refinement may preside in the kitchen, mold the biscuit and watch the griddle, turn the steak and bake the cake, but that wisdom and economy

must be constantly exercised or there will be little time for anything but these homely duties.

* * *

The growing respectability of self-support in woman is everywhere recognized as one of the healthiest signs of the times. The number of vocations open to women is constantly on the increase. Some modes of self-support are, and always will be, socially more respectable than others. In the report for 1888 of the Commissioner of Labor concerning the number and condition of working-women in the large cities is the following concerning Charleston, South Carolina:

> In no other Southern city has the exclusion of women from business been so rigid and the tradition that respectability is forfeited by manual labor so influential and powerful. Proud and well-born women have practised great self-denial at ill-paid conventional pursuits in preference to independence in untrodden paths. The embargo against self-support, however, has to some extent been lifted, and were there a larger number of remunerative occupations open to women, the rush to avail of them would show how ineffectual the old traditions have become.

A similar report of 1890 would show rapid changes and advances in public sentiment concerning the respectability of self-support in women, and would reveal that the "embargo" had, in most parts of the South at least, been entirely removed.

If we look at the South as a whole, and not at individual portions of it, it is unquestionably true that the great changes which the past thirty years have witnessed have wrought most favorably upon the intellectual life of Southern womanhood. The conditions under which Southern women now live are far more favorable for developing literary women than those existing in the days of slavery. In 1869 a volume was published by Mr. James Wood Davidson entitled "The Living Writers of the South," in which 241 writers are noticed, of which number 75 are women and 166 are men. Of the 241 named, 40 had written only for newspapers and magazines, while 201 had published one or more volumes, aggregating 739 in all. Although this book was published only four years after the close of the war, it was even then true that from two thirds to three fourths of the volumes mentioned in it as having been published by women—not to speak of the others—had been written and published after the opening of the war. They had been called forth by the war and the trying experiences following it. Whether the changed conditions under which we live have anything to do with it, it is nevertheless certainly true that there have been more literary

women developed in the South in the thirty years since the war than in all our previous history.

* * *

It is Victor Hugo who has called this "the century of woman." It is certainly an age that has witnessed great changes in the life, education, and labor of women everywhere; and these changes have all been in the direction of enlarging the sphere of woman's activities, increasing her liberties, and opening up possibilities to her life hitherto retricted to man. It is a movement limited to no land and to no race. So far as this movement may have any tendency to take woman out of her true place in the home, to give her man's work to do and to develop masculine qualities in her, it finds no sympathy in the South. The Southern woman loves the retirement of home, and shrinks from everything that would tend to bring her into the public gaze.

DOROTHY DIX†

Are Women Growing Selfish?[1]

Women have been extolled for their unselfishness so long that it comes with a shock of surprise to learn that their pet virtue has at last been called into question. Nay, it has been more than questioned. It has been positively asserted that woman is the very quintessence of selfishness. It is boldly charged that she thinks of nothing but her own pleasures, amusements and interest. She is accused of belonging to clubs that are neither more nor less than mutual admiration societies, where women meet together to glorify their own sex and formulate plans for its advancement. Worse than that, she goes off in summer to the mountains or seaside, leaving her poor down-trodden husband to swelter in the city, without even the reward of a cool smile or a frozen glance when he returns home at night after his arduous day's work. If this is not ingrained, hopeless, conscienceless selfishness, the critics would just like to know what is, that's all.

From time immemorial it has been the custom of woman to sacrifice herself whenever she got a chance, and any deflection from the course she was expected to pursue must necessarily occasion a deal of comment. Unselfishness with her has been a cult. She has

† Dorothy Dix (Elizabeth Gilmer, 1861–1951) was the first advice-to-women columnist in America. Beginning in 1895 she wrote for the major newspaper in New Orleans, *The Daily Picayune*. The items here are from her column, which was entitled "Dorothy Dix Speaks."

1. *The Daily Picayune*, August 15, 1897.

worn it ostentatiously, and flaunted it in the face of the world with a feeling that it would make good any other deficiencies or shortcomings. She has courted persecution, and gone out of her way to become a martyr. She has accounted it unto herself for righteousness to do those things she did not wish to do, and to leave undone those things she was dying to do. On the platform of pure and unadulterated unselfishness she has taken a stand, and defied competition, and now when she wishes to climb down and off, and give other people a chance to practice the virtue they admire so much, she is cruelly misjudged and assailed.

It must be admitted in all fairness that this attitude of perfect self-abnegation is one which men have never failed to praise, but seldom emulated. Men have always taken a saner view of life than women. A woman sacrifices herself in a thousand needless little ways which do no one any good, but when a man makes a sacrifice it is big with heroism, and counts. A woman thinks she is being good when she is uncomfortable. A man knows people are much more apt to be good when they are comfortable. No man with a full purse and a full stomach was ever an anarchist.

The truth of the matter simply is that women have awakened to the fact that they have been overdoing the self-sacrifice business. A reasonable amount of unselfishness is all right. It is the sense of justice with which we recognize other people's rights; it is the love that makes us prefer another to ourselves; it is the adorable grace and sweetness that softens a strong and independent character, and is as far different as possible from the lack of backbone that weakly gives away before everything and everybody.

* * *

The same thing may be said of the attitude of one's husband. The woman who makes a slave of herself, gets a slave's pay in contemptuous indifference. No man ever cared for the thing that groveled at his feet, and those women have been best loved who have stood up for their rights, and at every stage of the matrimonial journey have demanded upon courteous treatment, and a fair divide of the pleasures and perquisites of their joint partnership. It is a theory of the perfectly unselfish woman that she must bear everything without complaint. She must put up with drunkenness, and ill-temper, and abuse, and not a murmur must cross her lips. I have often wondered how much these evils were encouraged by this supineness, and that if women had the courage to kick, like men would, if they couldn't remedy them. You never catch a man bearing a thing until he has made a vigorous protest against it. A drunken woman, reeling home, is no more disgusting than a drunken man, yet nobody would expect a man to put up with such a state of affairs for a moment. A woman knows very well she isn't

going to be pitied and forgiven, and the result is she keeps sober. I have known a man who browbeat and bullied a meek, little, self-sacrificing wife into the grave, called down and terrorized into a decent and considerate husband by a determined second wife. Undoubtedly the woman who is imposed upon has only herself to blame.

Are women growing selfish? I answer, no. They are beginning to realize that there is a middle ground between being a monster of selfishness and a door mat for everybody to walk over and on that middle ground they propose to take their stand. But wherever there is a clarion call to duty, wherever love lies wounded and bleeding, and in want of succor, wherever there is need of tender nursing or pitying tears, there in the future, as in the past, will women be found, last at the cross, and earliest at the tomb.

The American Wife[2]

* * * It always seems to the American woman that the wives of other countries, who are held up for her admiration and imitation, have rather the easiest time of it. It would be comparatively simple to make yourself a decorative object to adorn a man's house, if that were all that was expected of you. It would be simple enough to accomplish marvels of cooking and housekeeping if that were the chief end of life. It is when one attempts to combine the useful and the ornamental—to be a Dresden statuette in the parlor and a reliable range in the kitchen—that the situation becomes trying, and calls for genuine ability. Yet this is what we expect of the average American wife, merely as a matter of course. She must be a paragon of domesticity, an ornament in society, a wonder in finance and a light in the literary circle to which she belongs.

In our curious social system, many things are left to her that the men attend to in other countries. For one thing, her husband expects her to assume all authority and management of the home and family. He doesn't want to be bothered about it. When he makes the money he feels he has done his whole duty, and he leaves the rest to her. When he comes home, tired out, after a day's work, he wants to rest, to read his paper, to think out some scheme in which he is interested. If his wife has any idea of leaning on his superior judgment and asking his advice about domestic problems she is very soon undeceived. "Great Scotts, Mary," is the impatient reply, "can't you manage your own affairs? I haven't got time to see about it. Settle it yourself."

It is the same way about the children. The American father is generally a devoted parent, but he wants his wife to do the manag-

2. *The Daily Picayune*, January 23, 1898.

ing and disciplining. In the brief hours he is at home, the little ones are his playthings, and he spoils them, and indulges them with a happy sense that he has no responsibility about it and that their mother will have to do the subsequent disciplining. She is responsible for their mental and physical well-being. She decides on the schools, and what they shall study, what colleges they shall attend, and all the rest of it. The average American John has a well-founded belief that his Mary is the smartest woman in the world, and knows what she is about, and so, at last, when she announces that the children need to go to Europe to study this or that, he consents through mere force of habit. He is so much in the way of letting her decide things it doesn't occur to him he could raise a dissenting voice.

To her, too, he leaves the matter of society. She dominates it, and runs it, and an American married man's social position depends entirely on his wife. If she is ambitious he climbs meekly up the social ladder in her wake; if she is not ambitious, they sit comfortably and contentedly down on the lower rungs, and stay there. He feels that he would be a bungler in the game of society, and he simply backs her hand for all it is worth. He pays for the house in the fashionable neighborhood of her choice, and for her entertainments, but he leaves all the rest to "mother and the girls." They must attend to the intricate social machinery, that he admits is a necessity, and is perfectly willing to support with anything but his own presence.* * *

Summer Flirtations[3]

* * * But did you ever think that among all the inexplicable vagaries of human nature there is none so peculiar as the latitude we lend ourselves in the summer? Is dignity, common sense and even plain decency a matter of the thermometer? You see women such prudes they will hardly raise their frocks two inches to keep them out of the mud in the winter, posing around on the beach at the seaside in summer in clothes that would bring a blush to the cheek of a wooden Indian. You see women who are the pink of propriety at home drinking mixed drinks in public places that are none too proper, and you see women noted for exclusiveness, recklessly making acquaintances with strangers of whose antecedents they know absolutely nothing. What, one might ask, has brought about such a revolution? Nothing at all. It is merely summer, and we have let ourselves go. With the first cold weather madame will resume her stiff tailor-made frock, and with it her perfectly correct ideas of deportment. She will also resume her previous attitude towards the church and society, and when she meets the pleasant, though socially undesirable men and women with whom she was on such delightful terms of bon commaradie during the summer, she will simply look through them as if she was gazing at vacancy, with nothing to intercept her view. We have all seen it a hundred times, and we will see it again as long as summer follies and winter repentance continue to follow each other.

3. *The Daily Picayune*, August 13, 1899.

But by far the most amazing part of the whole thing is the summer flirtation. Why summer should be given over to sentiment more than other seasons of the year is one of the things nobody understands. That it is, is a fact no one will deny, and it is probably the reason that we call the summer season the silly season. The summer flirtation, at any rate, is a recognized institution, and an accessory just as much as the hop and tennis courts, and golf links, and no matter what other diversions a girl had during her summer outing she would consider the whole thing a dead failure if it did not include a flirtation. It is this that makes the presence of man such an event. Of course, we all recognize that at times everywhere man is a necessity, and at all seasons a convenience to have about the house, but at a summer resort he becomes a gilt-edged luxury.

* * *

The married flirt—the woman who has achieved a kind of temporary widowhood by going off for the summer—is even more dangerous. Like the widow, she knows all the ropes and possesses all the advantage that the professional always has over the amateur, with this further point in her favor, that there is a definite time limit to the flirtation. She knows, and the man knows, that when the vacation is over and the time comes to part, he will look down upon her and sigh, and she will look up and sigh, and both will murmur, "If we had only met sooner," and that will end it. No tears, no future making good of reckless promises and vows, no scenes, nothing more expected of either one, nothing to sneak out of and feel mean about, which men hate. It was a game played on top of the table between evenly matched players, and it ends in a draw.* * *

A Strike for Liberty[4]

There comes a time in the life of almost every woman when she has to choose between a species of slavery and freedom, and when, if she ever expects to enjoy any future liberty, she must hoist the red flag of revolt and make a fight for her rights. It counts for nothing that the oppressor is generally of her own household and is blissfully unconscious of being a tyrant. One may be bound just as securely and as fatally with silken cords as with iron fetters, and the

4. *The Daily Picayune*, October 29, 1899.

fact that our jailer happens to love us does not offer adequate compensation for being in prison. No amount of gilding ever made a cage attractive to the poor wretch within.

All of us have sufficient spirit to repel the attacks of the enemy from without. We are armed and prepared for them, and their first act of aggression rouses our fighting blood, but there is nothing else on earth that takes so much cool nerve and determination and courage as to make a stand against those we love and whom we dread to wound. The thought that we will hurt them or anger them, makes cowards of us, and we keep giving in, and giving in, to their demands and whims and caprices until some fine day we find out that we have not a vestige of personal liberty left, and are nothing more than bond slaves to the tyrant on our hearth.

Chief and foremost among these oppressors are children. In her desire to be a good mother, and to do everything possible for her child's welfare, the average mother permits herself to be made a martyr before she realizes it. It doesn't take a baby but three days to develop all the amiable traits and the despotic power of a Nero and a Caligula,[5] and there are plenty of women who never draw a single breath of freedom after their first child is born. They may have the very best of nurses, but angel Freddy howls like a Commanche unless his mother sits by his side and holds his hand until he goes to sleep, or darling Mary won't let the nurse undress her, and so no matter how interesting the conversation downstairs, or how important the guest, the poor mother has to leave it all, and spend her evening in solitary confinement in a dark room to gratify the whims of a selfish and unreasonable little creature.

* * *

Sometimes—and it is one of the cruelest situations of untoward fate—it is against her husband that a woman must make a stand, unless her whole married life is to degenerate into a kind of purgatory. She loves him and is sure of his affection for her. She respects all the sterling worth of his character, his honor, his honesty, his truth and goodness. She appreciates all his hard work and his sacrifices to support his family in comfort. For a long time it has made her bear many things with patience. She has made the excuse of "overwork" and "nerves," those convenient packhorses on which we lay to much ill-temper and brutality, hoping that time would cure the fault. It may be that he has fallen into a way of petty nagging. She cannot express an opinion without having him sneer it down. He ridicules her efforts at self-improvement, and derides her church and clubs, and she feels insulted and outraged before her children and servants; or he flashes out impatient speeches that sear her

5. Emperors of Rome: Nero from 54 to 68 A.D., Caligula from 37 to 41 A.D. [*Editor.*]

heart like a redhot iron. Often and often it is the money question. He doles out a quarter here and there, and grumbles over the bills until she feels herself as much a mendicant as the very beggar that asks alms on the street corner.

A woman in such a position, and her name is Mrs. Legion, feels that she is the most helpless creature living. There's no question of divorce for her. With all his faults she loves her tyrant still for the good and the lovableness that is in him. She wouldn't leave him if she could, but none the less the bitterness of death is in her soul, all the crueler and more desperate that she sees nothing for it but endurance. My dear sisters, if you have got the courage to make a fight, you can conquer. Make your stand on your right to be treated with the courtesy your husband would show a lady, and you take an unassailable position. Assert your right to a share in the finances of the partnership of matrimony. Refuse to be any longer a beggar. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred a woman has only to make one stand against oppression to gain a victory that lasts a life time, and she not only wins for herself decent treatment, but respect and admiration, for it is one of the unalterable principles of human nature that we despise those who permit us to impose on them. Contemporary history does not show one single meek woman whose husband treated her with ordinary civility.* * *

Women and Suicide[6]

The claim recently put boldly forth by a distinguished lawyer that a person has a right to die, when by means of disease or misfortune life becomes a burden, has provoked renewed discussion of the suicide question, and it is interesting, in this connection, to note that by far the larger number of suicides are among men. Women seldom take their own lives, and so we have the curious and contradictory spectacle of the sex that is universally accounted the braver and stronger, flinging themselves out of the world to avoid its troubles, while the weaklings patiently bear theirs on to the bitter end.

Nothing is more common than for the man who has speculated with other people's money and lost, and so brought ruin and disgrace on his family, to commit suicide. In fact, after reading of the trusted cashier going wrong, in one column, we almost expect to read in the next that he shot himself. No thought apparently comes to him of having any duty to stay and help lift the misery he brought on innocent people. In times of great financial stress, when a rich man has everything swept away, he, too, often solves the

6. *The Daily Picayune*, October 8, 1899. Appeared unsigned on the woman's page, which was under the editorship of Dorothy Dix.

question of the future for himself by suicide, leaving his wife and little children to face a situation for which they are wholly unprepared. You never hear of a woman committing suicide and leaving her little children to the cruel mercies of the world, because she has lost her property. Instead, she feels more than ever that they need her care, and her help, and that she would be incapable of the unmentionable baseness of deserting them in such a crisis.

Yet if suicide is ever justifiable, it is for woman far more than men. She is always handicapped in the race of life. Sometimes with bodily infirmities, sometimes with mental idiosyncrasies, always by lack of training and business experience. Hard as poverty is for a man, it is harder still for a woman. Desperate as the struggle for existence is for him, it is still more desperate for her, limited by narrower opportunities, and rewarded with lesser pay. Terrible as are the tortures suffered by many a poor wretch, they are no worse than the life-long martyrdom that many a woman endures with never a thought of doing anything but bearing them with Christian fortitude and resignation until God's own hand sets her free.

There are many reasons why this state of affairs should exist. Woman's whole life is one long lesson in patience and submission. She must always give in. Men feel that they are born to command, to force circumstances to their will, and when circumstances can no longer be forced or bent, and they must yield to untoward fate, too many yield to the desire to avoid the misery they see before them by sneaking out of life. It is always a coward's deed. The babe salutes life with a wail, and the dying man takes leave of it with a groan. Between there is no time that has not its own troubles, and cares, and sorrows, and it is our part to bear them with courage, and it should be part of our pride in our sex that so many women sustain this brave attitude towards life under circumstances that might well tempt them to play the coward's part.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS STETSON (GILMAN)

From *Women and Economics*†

* * * Our thrones have been emptied, and turned into mere chairs for passing presidents. Our churches have been opened to the light of modern life, and the odor of sanctity has been freshened with sweet sunny air. We can see room for change in these old sanctuaries, but none in the sanctuary of the home. And this temple,

† From *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1899).

with its rights, is so closely interwound with the services of subject woman, its altar so demands her ceaseless sacrifices, that we find it impossible to conceive of any other basis of human living. We are chilled to the heart's core by the fear of losing any of these ancient and hallowed associations. Without this blessed background of all our memories and foreground of all our hopes, life seems empty indeed. In homes we were all born. In homes we all die or hope to die. In homes we all live or want to live. For homes we all labor, in them or out of them. The home is the centre and circumference, the start and the finish, of most of our lives. We love it with a love older than the human race. We reverence it with the blind obeisance of those crouching centuries when its cult began. We cling to it with the tenacity of every inmost, oldest instinct of our animal natures, and with the enthusiasm of every latest word in the unbroken chant of adoration which we have sung to it since first we learned to praise.

And since we hold that our home life, just as we have it, is the best thing on earth, and that our home life plainly demands one whole woman at the least to each home, and usually more, it follows that anything which offers to change the position of woman threatens to "undermine the home," "strikes at the root of the family," and we will none of it. If, in honest endeavor to keep up to the modern standard of free thought and free speech, we do listen, —turning from our idol for a moment, and saying to the daring iconoclast, "Come, show us anything better!"—with what unlimited derision do we greet his proposed substitute! Yet everywhere about us to-day this inner tower, this castle keep of vanishing tradition, is becoming more difficult to defend or even to keep in repair. We buttress it anew with every generation; we love its very cracks and crumbling corners; we hang and drape it with endless decorations; we hide the looming dangers overhead with fresh clouds of incense; and we demand of the would-be repairers and rebuilders that they prove to us the desirability of their wild plans before they lift a hammer. But, when they show their plans, we laugh them to scorn.

* * *

Worse than the check set upon the physical activities of women has been the restriction of their power to think and judge for themselves. The extended use of the human will and its decisions is conditioned upon free, voluntary action. In her rudimentary position, woman was denied the physical freedom which underlies all knowledge, she was denied the mental freedom which is the path to further wisdom, she was denied the moral freedom of being mistress of her own action and of learning by the merciful law of consequences what was right and what was wrong; and she has remained, perforce, undeveloped in the larger judgment of ethics.

Her moral sense is large enough, morbidly large, because in this

tutelage she is always being praised or blamed for her conduct. She lives in a forcing-bed of sensitiveness to moral distinctions, but the broad judgment that alone can guide and govern this sensitiveness she has not. Her contribution to moral progress has added to the anguish of the world the fierce sense of sin and shame, the desperate desire to do right, the fear of wrong; without giving it the essential help of a practical wisdom and a regulated will. Inheriting with each generation the accumulating forces of our social nature, set back in each generation by the conditions of the primitive human female, women have become vividly self-conscious centres of moral impulse, but poor guides as to the conduct which alone can make that impulse useful and build the habit of morality into the constitution of the race.

Recognizing her intense feeling on moral lines, and seeing in her the rigidly preserved virtues of faith, submission, and self-sacrifice, —qualities which in the Dark Ages were held to be the first of virtues,—we have agreed of late years to call woman the moral superior of man. But the ceaseless growth of human life, social life, has developed in him new virtues, later, higher, more needful; and the moral nature of woman, as maintained in this rudimentary stage by her economic dependence, is a continual check to the progress of the human soul. The main feature of her life—the restriction of her range of duty to the love and service of her own immediate family —acts upon us continually as a retarding influence, hindering the expansion of the spirit of social love and service on which our very lives depend. It keeps the moral standard of the patriarchal era still before us, and blinds our eyes to the full duty of man.

An intense self-consciousness, born of the ceaseless contact of close personal relation; an inordinate self-interest, bred by the constant personal attention and service of this relation; a feverish, torturing, moral sensitiveness, without the width and clarity of vision of a full-grown moral sense; a thwarted will, used to meek surrender, cunning evasion, or futile rebellion; a childish, wavering, short-range judgment, handicapped by emotion; a measureless devotion to one's own sex relatives, and a maternal passion swollen with the full strength of the great social heart, but denied social expression,—such psychic qualities as these, born in us all, are the inevitable result of the sexuo-economic relation.

It is not alone upon woman, and, through her, upon the race, that the ill-effects may be observed. Man, as master, has suffered from his position also. The lust for power and conquest, natural to the male of any species, has been fostered in him to an enormous degree by this cheap and easy lordship. His dominance is not that of one chosen as best fitted to rule or of one ruling by successful competition with "foemen worthy of his steel"; but it is a sovereignty based on the accident of sex, and holding over such helpless and inferior dependants as could not question or oppose. The easy superiority that needs no striving to maintain it; the temptation to cruelty always begotten by irresponsible power; the pride and self-will which surely accompany it,—these qualities have been bred into the souls of men by their side of the relation. When man's place was maintained by brute force, it made him more brutal: when his place was maintained by purchase, by the power of economic necessity, then he grew into the merciless use of such power as distinguishes him to-day.

Another giant evil engendered by this relation is what we call selfishness. Social life tends to reduce this feeling, which is but a belated individualism; but the sexuo-economic relation fosters and developes it. To have a whole human creature consecrated to his direct personal service, to pleasing and satisfying him in every way possible,—this has kept man selfish beyond the degree incidental to our stage of social growth. Even in our artificial society life men are more forbearing and considerate, more polite and kind, than they are at home. Pride, cruelty, and selfishness are the vices of the master; and these have been kept strong in the bosom of the family through the false position of woman. And every human soul is born, an impressionable child, into the close presence of these conditions. Our men must live in the ethics of a civilized, free, industrial, democratic age; but they are born and trained in the moral atmosphere of a primitive patriarchate. No wonder that we are all somewhat slow to rise to the full powers and privileges of democracy, to feel full social honor and social duty, while every soul of us is reared in this stronghold of ancient and outgrown emotions,—the economically related family.

So we may trace from the sexuo-economic relation of our species not only definite evils in psychic development, bred severally in men and women, and transmitted indifferently to their offspring, but the innate perversion of character resultant from the moral miscegenation of two so diverse souls,—the unfailing shadow and distortion which has darkened and twisted the spirit of man from its beginnings. We have been injured in body and in mind by the too dissimilar traits inherited from our widely separated parents, but nowhere is the injury more apparent than in its ill effects upon the moral nature of the race.

Yet here, as in the other evil results of the sexuo-economic relation, we can see the accompanying good that made the condition necessary in its time; and we can follow the beautiful results of our present changes with comforting assurance. A healthy, normal moral sense will be ours, freed from its exaggerations and contradictions; and, with that clear perception, we shall no longer conceive of

the ethical process as something outside of and against nature, but as the most natural thing in the world.

Where now we strive and agonize after impossible virtues, we shall then grow naturally and easily into those very qualities; and we shall not even think of them as especially commendable. Where our progress hitherto has been warped and hindered by the retarding influence of surviving rudimentary forces, it will flow on smoothly and rapidly when both men and women stand equal in economic relation. When the mother of the race is free, we shall have a better world, by the easy right of birth and by the calm, slow, friendly forces of social evolution. * * *

THORSTEIN VEBLEN

[Conspicuous Consumption and the Servant-Wife]†

* * * In what has been said of the evolution of the vicarious leisure class and its differentiation from the general body of the working classes, reference has been made to a further division of labour,—that between different servant classes. One portion of the servant class, chiefly those persons whose occupation is vicarious leisure, come to undertake a new, subsidiary range of duties—the vicarious consumption of goods. The most obvious form in which this consumption occurs is seen in the wearing of liveries and the occupation of spacious servants' quarters. Another, scarcely less obtrusive or less effective form of viracious consumption, and a much more widely prevalent one, is the consumption of food, clothing, dwelling, and furniture by the lady and the rest of the domestic establishment.

* * *

With the disappearance of servitude, the number of vicarious consumers attached to any one gentleman tends, on the whole, to decrease. The like is of course true, and perhaps in a still higher degree, of the number of dependents who perform vicarious leisure for him. In a general way, though not wholly nor consistently, these two groups coincide. The dependent who was first delegated for these duties was the wife, or the chief wife; and, as would be expected, in the later development of the institution, when the number of persons by whom these duties are customarily performed

† From *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1899).

gradually narrows, the wife remains the last. In the higher grades of society a large volume of both these kinds of service is required; and here the wife is of course still assisted in the work by a more or less numerous corps of menials. But as we descend the social scale, the point is presently reached where the duties of vicarious leisure and consumption devolve upon the wife alone. In the communities of the Western culture, this point is at present found among the lower middle class.

And here occurs a curious inversion. It is a fact of common observation that in this lower middle class there is no pretence of leisure on the part of the head of the household. Through force of circumstances it has fallen into disuse. But the middle-class wife still carries on the business of vicarious leisure, for the good name of the household and its master. In descending the social scale in any modern industrial community, the primary fact—the conspicuous leisure of the master of the household—disappears at a relatively high point. The head of the middle-class household has been reduced by economic circumstances to turn his hand to gaining a livelihood by occupations which often partake largely of the character of industry, as in the case of the ordinary business man of to-day. But the derivative fact—the vicarious leisure and consumption rendered by the wife, and the auxiliary vicarious performance of leisure by menials—remains in vogue as a conventionality which the demands of reputability will not suffer to be slighted. It is by no means an uncommon spectacle to find a man applying himself to work with the utmost assiduity, in order that his wife may in due form render for him that degree of vicarious leisure which the common sense of the time demands.

The leisure rendered by the wife in such cases is, of course, not a simple manifestation of idleness or indolence. It almost invariably occurs disguised under some form of work or household duties or social amenities, which prove on analysis to serve little or no ulterior end beyond showing that she does not and need not occupy herself with anything that is gainful or that is of substantial use. As has already been noticed under the head of manners, the greater part of the customary round of domestic cares to which the middle-class housewife gives her time and effort is of this character. Not that the results of her attention to household matters, of a decorative and mundificatory character, are not pleasing to the sense of men trained in middle-class proprieties; but the taste to which these effects of household adornment and tidiness appeal is a taste which has been formed under the selective guidance of a canon of propriety that demands just these evidences of wasted effort. The effects are pleasing to us chiefly because we have been taught to find them pleasing. There goes into these domestic duties much solicitude for

a proper combination of form and colour, and for other ends that are to be classed as æsthetic in the proper sense of the term; and it is not denied that effects having some substantial æsthetic value are sometimes attained. Pretty much all that is here insisted on is that, as regards these amenities of life, the housewife's efforts are under the guidance of traditions that have been shaped by the law of conspicuously wasteful expenditure of time and substance. If beauty or comfort is achieved,—and it is a more or less fortuitous circumstance if they are,—they must be achieved by means and methods that commend themselves to the great economic law of wasted effort. The more reputable, "presentable" portion of middle-class household paraphernalia are, on the one hand, items of conspicuous consumption, and on the other hand, apparatus for putting in evidence the vicarious leisure rendered by the housewife.

The requirement of vicarious consumption at the hands of the wife continues in force even at a lower point in the pecuniary scale than the requirement of vicarious leisure. At a point below which little if any pretence of wasted effort, in ceremonial cleanness and the like, is observable, and where there is assuredly no conscious attempt at ostensible leisure, decency still requires the wife to consume some goods conspicuously for the reputability of the household and its head. So that, as the latter-day outcome of this evolution of an archaic institution, the wife, who was at the outset the drudge and chattel of the man, both in fact and in theory,—the producer of goods for him to consume,—has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory; for the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the unfree servant. * * *

Criticism