

Aesthetics and Politics of Feminist Tragic Narratives

At the Turn of the Nineteenth Century into the Twentieth

By

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Abstract

My dissertation focusses on American feminist tragic novels between 1890 and 1925, which deal with women's tragic lives in a patriarchal society. I will show that the thematic and structural similarities among them are evident to the extent that they seem to build a particular literary tradition different from other similar genres, such as sentimental novels, naturalist novels, and classic tragedies. Based on the field of generic criticism, I define the new tradition as the genre of feminist tragic novels in which a feminist consciousness is manifested in terms of tragic vision and contentious structure. The specific generic approach to these novels leads to an analysis of their genre-unique aesthetic values, which justify their status as artistic works.

For this purpose, I clarify the historical long-held aversion of critics to women writers' realistic work through the variety of critical and aesthetics lenses. I explore how the male dominated process of American literary canonization, centering on Romance theory and masculine myths on one side and traditional aesthetics such as Genius theory and Disinterestedness on the other, have hindered women's tragic novels from being interpreted aesthetically or rhetorically. These clarifications show how these feminist tragic novels, and their authors, create counter-discourse to previous genres by making gendered claims not only on the patriarchal society they live in, but also on the genre they write in. To show this, I begin with two novels that end with the suicide of the female protagonists: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). In the first chapter, I will show how women's suicides serve as a vehicle to let readers experience the emancipation of ethics, rather than that of emotion. In the second chapter, I deal with the issues of women's mental breakdown in feminist

tragic fiction by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), and Gertrude Stein, “Melanctha” (1909), focusing on the way linguistic devices and narratology draw attention to the chasm between women’s desire and social oppression. In the third chapter, by closely reading Edith Summers Kelley’s *Weeds* (1923) and Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* (1925), I show how women’s adversities in the feminist tragic novels are depicted in a way that raises readers’ social consciousness, rather than allowing them to transcend or sublimate it, drawing on the aesthetic of dissensus. In each case, I define the feminist tragic novels as cultural products that represent their materiality, while simultaneously becoming a source from which new meaning is produced in both a dialectical and a revolutionary way.

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Introduction

This study focuses on American feminist tragic novels between 1890 and 1925, proposing the feminist tragic novel as a new literary genre with aesthetically induced politics. When the feminist tragic novel is viewed through the prisms of aesthetics and politics, conflicting powers can be seen. It goes without saying that, in traditional male-centered tragedies, women were not featured as subjects, and the relationship between tragedy and the novel on one side, and between traditional aesthetics and feminist politics on the other, was hostile. Since the misogynist perspectives inherent in the tragic genre, realist novel, and aesthetics have hindered the feminist tragic novel from being interpreted aesthetically, this study aims to understand the internal dynamic of conflicting gender-related traditions, and to reveal the feminist aesthetics embodied in realist tragic novels as a counterbalance to other critical approaches.

Critics such as Linda Kornasky and Donna Campbell argue that there are commonalities among the novels of Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Edith Summers Kelley, and Ellen Glasgow in that they all attempt to show how women's tragic lives are susceptible to the deterministic power of the patriarchal society. According to these critics, the thematic and structural similarities among them are evident to the extent that they seem to build a particular literary tradition. Meanwhile, in *The Female Imagination and the Modernist Aesthetic* (1986), Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert argue that the women writers at the turn of the century such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, Chopin, Kelley, and Gertrude Stein disrupted the law of the father by speaking of their mother tongues in their literary texts. Specifically, regarding Kelley's *Weeds*, they also argue that there are "the heroic images and tragic implications that endow a working-

class heroine with dignity” (10). In this respect, I will also draw on Barbara Lootens’s assertion that “a struggle for survival” itself provides a heroic moment to support my argument that they are tragic heroines with dignity. Although most critics focus on the determinism and naturalism in those texts, my analysis ultimately will show that these novels should belong to the genre of the tragic novel because of their thematic and structural traits, focusing on Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905), Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha” (1909), Edith Summers Kelley’s *Weeds* (1923) and Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* (1925).

Evolution of Tragedy into Feminist Tragic Novels

The term “tragic novel”¹ indicates a genre hybrid in which traditional tragedy² and the modern novel are merged. However, this means more than that tragic novel is a modern genre replacing or following traditional tragedy. The relationship between classic tragedy and the feminist tragic novel should be manifested in terms of multidimensional processes such as secularization, prosification, and feminization. In other words, traditional tragedies of magnitudinous action, poetic language, and masculinity have changed into tragedies of common people and language along with incorporation of heroic female characters. The change resulted from the fact that

¹ The term “novel-tragedy” is already widely acknowledged by many scholars, but I use tragic novel because I think novel-tragedy might not reflect that novel is evolved out of classic tragedies rather than simply follow them.

² In this dissertation, following Richard Sewall’s division of tragedies into the Hebraic tragedy, the classic Greek tragedy, the Elizabethan tragedy, and the modern tragedy, I designate the Hebraic tragedy, the classic Greek tragedy and the Elizabethan tragedy as “traditional” in that they share the Aristotle’s formalism of tragedy.

modern society couldn't provide the fundamental materials for tragedy. As Joseph Wood Krutch explains, the classic tragedy was "a profession of faith and a sort of religion" (86): In Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, there existed a direct correlation between characters' actions and a Greater Plan and, therefore, their existence had some significance on a higher plane. According to Krutch, the native faith in the greatness of man and the power of destiny needed to create tragedy becomes obsolete because modern man sees himself as nothing more than an isolated individual separated from a higher plane. Likewise, George Steiner declares the "death of tragedy" due to the "decline of the organic world view and of its attendant context of mythological, symbolic, and ritual reference" (292) with the advent of liberalism and empirical thought. However, it is better to say that loss of a highly religious and mythological world view brought about secularization of tragedy rather than death thereof without falling into the generic fallacy.³

As a subordinate phenomenon to the secularization of tragedy, the prosification of tragedy had followed because, in classical times, prose was the language of the everyday while verse was reserved for expression of the greatness in men and fate. The transformation of the language of tragedy implies that the common and everyday language has superseded the artistic and lofty language in tragedy. Clarifying the transformation as "the decline of tragedy," Steiner says, "narrative verse [was] restored to the common of language domains of rhetoric and invention once reserved to the dramatist and the poet (266). It is also related to the secularization of tragedy because verse was thought fit for noble man while prose for isolated individual in a

³ John Gassner in "The Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy" defines the generic fallacy as "the error in assuming that a genre" must remain what it was at its inception" (5).

world of without universal significance. Any Shakespearean play can illustrate that point. The noble hero declares in iambic pentameter, while his humble servant draws in no meter at all.

It was at this point that the rise of the novel played a crucial role in the prosification of tragedy. Tragedy had been the monopolized product of aristocrats, until it made way for the novel with the advent of the eighteenth-century civil society and the industrial revolution. Many critics contend that the era of realism was the turning point for tragedy and its evolution into a new genre. For example, Erich Auerbach asserts in *Mimesis* (1968) that the growth of individualism and the loss of significance of Christian myths led to the creation of “tragic realism,” the personal tragedy. According to him, the novel, given the scope of setting, description, and psychological realism unavailable to the dramatist, has the capacity to create a self-enclosed universe where specific actions may elicit their own tragic repercussions. The novel, less controlled by literary antecedents than drama, is more susceptible to the demands placed upon it by the tragic writer. Similarly, in *Tragic Realism and Modern Society*, John Orr argues that the novelist, unlike the dramatist, “cannot create tragedy out of myth but must find it within reality itself” (12). As a result, the tragic novelists of nineteenth century inevitably situated the tragic action in a social context, which enables “the return of the tragic in fiction” (Newton 63). As much as tragedy existed as public performance in a feudal system while the novel becomes the private world of the reader in an individualist society, the prosification of tragedy resulted from an emphasis on human freedom of common people.

Along with the prosification of tragedy, the feminization of tragedy is essential to the emergence of the feminist tragic novels because tragedy was historically a product monopolized by men. When Aristotle defined tragedy in *Poetics* in terms of magnitude and completeness, he

emphasized that “the protagonist should be renowned and prosperous so his change of fortune can be from good to bad” (68). When the significance and greatness of humanity was emphasized in tragedies, it was needless to say that humanity meant exclusively male characters. Although some traditional tragedies involved women protagonists, women were usually depicted as insignificant in tragedy, both in quantity and quality. Exceptionally, there have been a few tragedies in which women appeared as central in plays such as Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), Thomas Middleton’s *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* (1611), and John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613). Since then, Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights’ frequent representations of manly women as protagonists in tragedy gave rise to a series of women-centered tragic forms in the drama. However, they were disparaged due to their unheroic heroines. Regarding John Webster’s popular tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, Norman Rabkin laments what he calls the “loss of faith” in old order that had once celebrated heroic individuals (4), for which he declares “She-tragedy” to indicate tragedy’s decline as a genre.

It was in the fledgling industry of professional theater from the Renaissance period that women started to be considered as central to an audience and spectators as much as men. Regarding the change, Linda Woodbridge argues that female theatergoers were able to exert some influence over the content of the plays they attended, and that this influence led, at least in some cases, to “less overtly misogynistic productions” (258). Such inclusion of women in tragedy was gradual as it started by responding to changed material conditions. Various social changes such as huge immigration, change of employment, war effort, and outbreaks of the plague, aroused debates about the status of women. The theater and its plays served as sites of

cultural change, creating new perspectives on gender, subjectivity and genre, precipitating the feminization of tragedy.

The inclusion of women in a tragic genre, however, does not necessarily mean that tragedy was instantly feminized. Rather, it should be understood to be gradual evolution that happened to women's novels. Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977), clarified women's literature in terms of feminine, feminist, and female. Showalter argues for a specifically "female framework for the analysis of women's literature," focusing on British women novelists and their novels. To apply her theory to American women's tragic novels of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century, "feminine novels" in which the women writers perpetuated the patriarchal social values would be Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) in that they conform and emphasize the patriarchal ideology in terms of the feminine protagonists' repenting their lack of femininity through epistolary form. Needless to say, the feminist tragic novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) would belong to "feminist novels" while Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990) exemplify "female novels" because women writers' search for her own voice and identity is their main theme. In other words, reflecting each social atmosphere and a new set of gendered perspectives, a part of tragic novels evolves into a different genre, centering on women's perspectives and identities.

In an effort to view the feminist tragic novel as a product of evolution from traditional tragedy, I will discuss what the former inherited from the latter as well as their differences because, if only differences exist, we have no reason for discussing its evolution. I ultimately

define both tragedy and tragic novel as structurally characterized by contradicting dichotomies, which are thematically related to a tragic vision and consciousness. With the term “contradicting dichotomies,” I indicate the binary conflicts that run through classic tragedies to modern ones. It was Hegel who claimed the contradicting conflicts as essential to tragedy. He tells of world history as a Bildungsroman, or a series of painful but productive conflicts through which world and human spirit develop in terms of a dialectics of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. For Hegel, the tragic conflict is between family and state, and between ethical life and spiritual universality. Influenced by Hegel, Friedrich Schelling asserted that the essence of tragedy is a conflict between freedom in the subject on the one hand and necessity on the other. The idea of tragedy portrays the victory of fate and the defeat of will. The power of fate is overcome by the will and becomes the symbol of the great sublimity. More recently, Slavoj Žižek advanced his own theory of tragedy in terms of parallax gap. For Žižek, what makes Sophocle’s *Antigone* a great tragedy is the conflict between the Anti-Habermasian existence and the disrupter of the Habermasian world because she represents an unconditional fidelity to the Otherness of the Thing that disrupts the entire social edifice. With his analysis of *Antigone*, Žižek shows that great tragedy should deal with an irreconcilable conflict. What is at stake here is irreconcilability because tragedy always rejects dialectical or metaphysical reconciliation. In this respect, K.M. Newton encompasses a wide range of tragedies from tragic drama to tragic novel. He defines authentic tragedy as “conflicts between opposed ethical principles” (13) and maintains this approach in regards to modern literature: D.H. Lawrence’s male and female forces, Hardy’s human characters struggling within an amoral Darwinian world, Ibsen’s individuals versus societal norms, and Harold Pinter’s irreconcilable brothers in *The Caretaker*. To wit, whether the

conflicts are ethical or psychological, the binary structures have to be sustained in the tragic genre.

Other than the formal structure of the tragic genre, tragedy and the tragic novel also share the common thematic features of tragic vision and consciousness. These refer to the belief that human beings are supposed to live with unanswerable questions and painful situations. Many theoreticians and philosophers use their own terms to illustrate this. The representatives are Karl Jaspers' "the boundary-situations", Richard Sewall's "the vision of tragedy", and Murray Krieger's "tragic vision," which can be recapitulated into an expression of man only in an extreme situation. Particularly, clarifying the four great periods of the tragic vision in literature as the Hebraic Period, the classic Greek period, the Elizabethan period, and the modern period, Sewall shows that the tragic vision is constant. He argues that the tragic vision transcends time and space, as Greek and Hebraic tragic vision appears in Hawthorne, Melville, and Dostoevsky. According to Sewall, the tragic vision is not a systematic view of life. It admits wide variations and degree, but he tries to define it: "it recalls the original un-reason, the terror of the irrational. It sees man as questioner, naked, unaccommodated, alone, facing mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and the irreducible facts of suffering and death" (197). As such, each age has different tensions and terrors, but they open on the same abyss. Direction and focus may change, but the tragic vision is constant.

The aforementioned formal and thematic features become an interface between tragedy and tragic novels, whereby tragic novels can be differentiated from other similar genres. In other words, what makes a novel a feminist tragedy is its form and plot, both of which are different from those of other novels that deal with women's tragic situations. According to genre theories

by Robert Scholes and Northrop Frye, the main characteristic of the tragic novel is the protagonist's heroism and resistance, which sharply contrasts with the un-heroic protagonist of the sentimental novel and his or her conformism. These features provide important clues whereby feminist tragic novels can be distinguished from both epistolary novels and the so-called sentimental novels with which feminist tragic novels have often been confused. Epistolary novels such as Susanne Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) seem very similar at surface level in that they end with female protagonists' deaths, but virtually they are polar opposites because the female protagonists Eliza Wharton and Charlotte Temple reinforce the patriarchal ideologies by directly admonishing their readers to avoid their follies and depravities, by being a scapegoat for the androcentric society.

In addition, the feminist tragic novels are also different from the sentimental novels such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854), Maria Susanna Cummins's *Lamplight* (1855), E.D.E.N. Southworth's *Hidden Hand* (1859), and Augusta Evans' *St. Elmo* (1866). Most sentimental novels popular in the nineteenth century have similar themes and narrative structures described by Nina Baym as "an overplot in which all the novels participate" (12). The theme of women's misfortune and struggle was such popular material of sentimental novels to the extent that Baym sees this overplot as imposing a "formulaic restraint" on the individual works produced in the genre. Despite the similar theme, however, the sentimental novels can't be classified as a tragic genre due to their seeking conflict resolution inherent their happy endings. In a similar vein, Robert Scholes, who distinguishes sentimental novel from tragic, says, "what is important is not whether a fiction ends in a death or a marriage, but what that death or marriage does about the world" (105). What is important to

him is the relationship between protagonists and their fictional surroundings because we, as audience, derive our sense of the dignity or baseness of the characters and the meaningfulness or absurdity of their world from the relationship. Tragic novel offers us heroic figures standing against the world while, in sentimental fiction, the characters have conformist traits or unheroic virtues, conforming to the world.

A third genre, naturalism, helps us to better understand the characteristics of the feminist tragic novels through comparison. Feminist tragic novels emphasize the female characters' resistance, rather than the destructive power of the environment in the naturalist novel. The feminist tragic novels of this period tend to not only represent the irreconcilable conflicts between the heroines' individual desire and social constraints in terms of tragic situations of female characters, but also reveals the protagonists' indomitable resistance. The plot of the women's plight alone is not a necessary and sufficient condition for a novel to be considered a feminist tragic novel; it also embodies women's resistance to social oppression under the irreconcilable conflict. From the generic criticism, it becomes evident that the feminist tragic novel inherited the tragic vision from the larger genre of tragedy, but also inherited the idea of trust in the power of the public and the individual from the larger genre of the novel. To illustrate, the representative novels of naturalism such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: a Girl of the Street* (1893), Frank Norris *McTeague* (1899), and Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy* (1925) help draw a distinction between the feminist tragic novel and the naturalistic novel. Although they all deal with women's tragedy, there is no room for heroic resistance in that the tragic heroines in the naturalistic tragic novels are nothing but puppets controlled by circumstances. All in all, the feminist tragic novel requires an opposition to both the androcentrism and the

formalism of the classic tragedy and to the determinism of the naturalistic novel.

The Social Background of Emergence of Feminist Tragic Novels

The background of the emergence of the feminist tragic novels can be explained in terms of nineteenth century American social and literary atmosphere. Due to the forces of industrialization and the great migration, women in this era faced both many opportunities and challenges. Throughout the Progressive Era, more and more women took new jobs created by economic growth or by technological change. A remarkable transformation of civil society and government also occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century as public education systems expanded. The numbers of schools proliferated and the enrollment of girls increased, and it accelerated the entrance of women into fields of social life beyond the domestic sphere (Pisapia 24). Women's employment not only brought women's work out of the home, but also provided women with a collective experience that supported their participation in the world of broader social reform. Women became involved in anti-slavery, moral reform, pacifism, labor reform, prison reform, and women's suffrage. They came to oppose the growing inequality evident in American society and to demand for themselves as workers and as women greater rights and rewards in that society. Other middle-class and well-off young women were presenting society with a new cause for hand wringing in the shape of the "New Woman," who emerged about 1890 (Woloch 269). With more formal education than their mothers, they started exploring their individual freedom, enjoying swimming, horseback riding, golf, tennis, and even smoking and drinking. In this way, they "exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic" (Bordin 2). Although the role of New Woman was reserved for a relatively few women privileged by birth, education, race, or their own efforts, the symbol of the New Woman

both reflected and created new modes of conduct in the society, arousing the hope and optimism of the age.

However, the socio-economic development throughout the Progressive Era had not brought as much improvement to women's social status as was expected. The industrializing process that seemed to provide a mechanism for reducing the difference between women's and men's work turned out to be much less dramatic than had been supposed, and rather than being a vehicle for liberation, modern capitalism further subjugated women by excluding them from the production process (Cohen 291). Most of women's new jobs, like the old, missed "even the bottom rung of the ladder of upward mobility and most working women during the Progressive Era labored at jobs with severely limited prospects" (Schneider 15). In most cases, women's employment sentenced many more to long hours and dull, repetitive labor in dead-end jobs that kept them far below the poverty level. It transformed the lives of housewives, moving production of clothing and many foods out of the home, depriving them of household help, and taking their husband away throughout the day (Schneider 5-6). As a result, at the turn of the century, women's roles remained severely limited by society's concepts of male supremacy and female inferiority and confined many women to housewifery, the raising of children, deference to men, and financial dependency on the husband.⁴ Under the circumstances, most women experienced a large gap between the high expectations for equality the Progressive Era offered and the repression of the still restrictive society. Reflecting such realities, a group of women writers grappled with their frustrations in terms of subjects that had been taboo or silenced, focusing on

⁴ The traditional role of homemaker was not always available for poor, immigrant, or women of color.

the conflicts between women's desires and social constraints. In other words, having witnessed the discrepancy between their desire for freedom and the restrictions of patriarchal society, women writers turned to the tragic mode.

The Literary Environment

Along with the social atmosphere of the time, the literary trends greatly influenced the emergence and reception of feminist tragic novels at the turn of the twentieth century. After the Civil War (1861-1865) and with the advent of Gilded Age (1870s-1900), people started to seek more realistic and ethical narratives rather than absurd and improbable ones due to serious social problems being masked by superficial gilding. Reflecting this change, William Dean Howells⁵ created the first theory of American realism, declaring that "fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature" (5). Howell's put his realist theories into practice in his novels. The theme of *A Modern Instance* (1882) shocked the public because it was about divorce, a subject which was not yet talked or written about openly. Along the same lines, a group of women writers started to deal with the forbidden issues openly in their literary works, which Susan Harris says indicates "thematic radicalism." Analyzing women's novels of late nineteenth-century America, Harris contends that a group of women's novels of the time radically incorporated new themes including "adultery, free love, interracial marriage, female rule, and withdrawal from society" (6). This change implies that the fertile ground for growth and appreciation of feminist tragic novels was paved. In other words, literary realism served as a driving force for women's novels to depict women's plight as it actually was, leaving

⁵ As the editor of *Harper's Monthly* which was a weapon against literary "romanticism," Howells made realism become the "mainstream" of American literature (High 85).

behind the long-prevailing tradition of happy endings in the sentimental novels of the early nineteenth century.

However, it is noteworthy that the rise of literary realism became a double-edged sword, providing reasons for both the proliferation of tragic novels and disparagement thereof. As the male-dominated process of American literary canonization in the mid-twentieth century centered its attention on male-authored Romanticism, women's tragic novels were underestimated for their realistic features. Literary studies such as F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), Charles Fiedelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), R.W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), and Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) contributed to the formation of the American canon, centering on romance theory and masculine myths. The theory of the American Romance defines the fictive world as a "Neutral Territory"⁶ between fact and fancy, allowing entrance only to less worldly fictions of white male novelists such as Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, and Twain. The author of *The Romance in America* (1969), Joel Porte, describes well the trends of the time, emphasizing the significance of American romance:

It no longer seems necessary to argue for the importance of romance as a nineteenth-century American genre. Students of American literature have provided a solid theoretical basis for establishing that the rise and growth of fiction in this country is dominated by our authors' conscious adherence to a tradition of non-realistic romance sharply at variance with the broadly novelistic mainstream of English writing. (ix)

⁶ This expression is concocted by Nathaniel Hawthorne and widely accepted as a term indicating the main characteristic of romances. With this term, Hawthorn implies that romance, different from the novel, should describe something between the real and the imaginary out of ordinary cause.

Regarding the American romance theory and its exclusion of realist women writers, many revisionist historians⁷ observed that Cold War nationalism was a strong reason for the persistence of the theory of American Romance because the theory gave Americanists a counter-theory of the American novel which justified the separate study of American fiction at a time of great expansion in higher education. Consequently, the American romance theory that was widely accepted has excluded women writers whose works showed highly realistic features from the discussion of American canonization.

Moreover, male-centered American myths contributed to the exclusion of women's realistic novels from the literary canon. The key terms of mid-twentieth century literary criticism, such as "American Adam," "Virgin Land," and "Democratic Literature" are the masculine myths, defining American literature as defined by young male protagonists in the case of Natty Bumppo, Whitman, Thoreau, Ishmael, Young Goodman Brown, Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, and so forth. In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors (1981)," Nina Baym argues that, in pursuit of making the nineteenth century male writers' fiction distinct from those of England, the masculine myths precipitated the exclusion of women's literature as a "double bind" because of the oversexualized images of the myths. According to Baym, the American novel seemed content to explore the remarkable territories of life in the New World, to discover a new place and new

⁷ See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History* (Cambridge, 1986), Russell Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the study of American Literature* (Routledge, 1986), Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary* (Knopf, 1971) and Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1985), and Donald Pease, *Revisionist Intervention into the American Canon* (Duke Univ. Press, 1994)

state of mind as Adam, an original namer of experience. One can see here the transformation of the American myth from the Adamic hero in the story, to the Adamic creator of the story, and the reinterpretation of the American myth as a metaphor for the American artist's situation. What is at stake here is that there is no place for a woman author in this scheme. Her roles in the drama of creation are those allotted to her in a male melodrama: "either she is to be silent, like nature; or she is the creator of conventional works, the spokesperson of society" (Baym 138).

Consequently, the melodramatic and misogynistic myths give a sexual character to the protagonist's story that limits its applicability to women. In this locus, women's novels were disparaged because of their realistic worldly tendencies and eventually dismissed as unaesthetic works.

Aesthetic Frameworks for Feminist Tragic Novels

It is remarkable that the history of aesthetics was at odds with realist art or realism. Throughout the twentieth century, and earlier, many philosophers have attempted to defend the idea that art should not be something intended to deliver social knowledge and understanding in terms of the demarcation of art and non-art: The theory of disinterested pleasure and aesthetic formalism does not preclude representational artworks, but it does imply that their realistic content is fundamentally distant from their artistic function and from our appreciation of the work. For these reasons, Noel Carroll argues that "realism is at theoretical loggerheads with an influential tradition in philosophy" (458). Meanwhile, the theory that artworks are produced by men of unique and transcendent genius excludes women. Given that "the genius was first of all simply the spirit and later the personification of patrilineal and patriarchal power" (Battersby 53), the origin and effects of the genius theory are imbued with misogynist perspectives by creating

the distinction between male spirit and female matter.

In this context, scholars have emphasized the importance of feminist aesthetic concepts or theories. Blaming the disinterestedness of the aesthetic tradition as a possible reason for alignment against feminist art due to the political and ethical values, Hilde Hein asserts that “women’s subjectivity toward art is nullified by that theory and a feminist theory that would rectify this wrong is surely desirable” (12). Disinterestedness is an aesthetic form and belief which confines attention exclusively to the internal relations of a work of art. In *Art in Three Dimensions*, Carroll writes,

The dominant notion of aesthetic experience with respect to art, as it is generally articulated in the Western tradition, comes to the fore and begins to be consolidated in the eighteenth century. It evolves from, among other things, Francis Hutcheson’s characterization of the experience of beauty and Immanuel Kant’s analysis of the aesthetic judgment. In both authors, the requirement of disinterested pleasure is paramount, though, since not all aesthetic experiences are pleasurable, in the usual sense of that word, this condition has been subsequently sometimes modified to the more minimal condition that aesthetic experiences are valued for their own sake. (119)

Art became detached from its reality or its source of production because art began to be esteemed for the subjective pleasure. After the decline of feudalism, the bourgeoisie sought beautiful things to brighten their lives. Taste became a maker of social capital for the rising middle class. Due to the emphasis on purely idiosyncratic responses, the aesthetics excluded women’s art, with its realistic and political messages, from the category of aesthetics.

Responding to the axiology of the traditional aesthetics from a feminist perspective,

Josephine Donovan asserts that Western aesthetic theory, especially since Kant, has viewed art as material that has been extracted from the real world, emphasizing that an “alternative theory should be developed from feminist and Marxist theory” (53). Meanwhile, as an alternative to traditional aesthetic formalism which is apolitical and ahistorical, Philip Goldstein supports reception aesthetics, which emphasizes each reader's reception or interpretation in making meaning from a text, contending that “readers construct the text in keeping with their aesthetic ideals and cultural values” (10). These scholars have played the role of pathfinders in that they criticize the male-centeredness of the classic aesthetics and emphasize the creation of aesthetic concepts and theories that can interpret women’s art in a justifiable way. However, they don’t provide a proper explanation of how this feminist aesthetics can be applied to the interpretation of literary works, by resolving the contradiction between aesthetics and politics. In this regard, Felski argues that feminist critics such as Baym succeeded in exposing and challenging the male prejudices which have trivialized texts dealing with female concerns and centering on the domestic sphere, but is unlikely to provide “a convincing argument for the gender-based nature of all aesthetic judgment” (177). More recently, in *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism* (2012), Ziarek Ewa explores “feminist aesthetics beyond feminist critiques of philosophical aesthetics” (2), applying it to the interpretation of some women’s novels. However, by focusing on literary modernism or modern women writers with Adorno’s modernist aesthetics, her theory of feminist aesthetics may reinforce the distinction between realism and modernism, which has perpetuated the misogynist perspectives about women’s art and aesthetics.

What I ultimately assert is the possibility of a feminist aesthetics that resists the long-

held aversion to realism and women's art and embraces women's realistic tragedies. To this end, I use the expression "feminist aesthetics," as distinct from the singular "feminist aesthetic" because I believe that there is no singular feminist aesthetic. To support the possibility of feminist aesthetics without depending on essentialism, I draw on Rosi Braidotti's concept of Woman. By accepting Braidotti's assertion that sexuality is just a social construct but we have to consider women as a collective group because "feminists need to resist the dissociation of 'the feminine' from real women of the empirical or of the material from the discursive, or of sex from gender" (177), I formulate a feminist approach to aesthetics without presuppositions of female identity or a uniquely feminine style of writing. In this fashion, I maintain that there is no fundamental connection between certain styles and political resistance because my study of feminist aesthetics has nothing to do with any ahistorical or apolitical approaches that negate the specificity of diverse contexts. In this respect, I approach the feminist tragic novel in terms of its relationship with various social and political ideologies and the political authority of any given literary articulation of forms and meanings. In this process, the commonalities and similarities in their writing style and theme are considered to be derived from not their universal corporeality but gender-based community. In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Felski contends,

The process of identity formation in feminist literature is crucially indebted to a concept of community. The individual subject is viewed in relation to and as a representative of a gendered collective which self-consciously defines itself against society as a whole. Feminist literature thus reappropriates some of the concerns first addressed by bourgeois subjectivity while rejecting both its individualism and its belief in the universality of male bourgeois experience. (154)

Insofar as women acquire a gendered identity by means of the very culture and ideology that they seek to challenge, it is justifiable to analyze the feminist tragic novel in its relational context with the masculine genre of tragedy and androcentric social ideologies.

To be more specific, the category of feminist tragic novels is shaped by relatively autonomous aesthetics and political potentials at the antipode of the sublime aesthetic traditionally associated with the tragic genre. Theories regarding tragedy and its aesthetics have mostly engaged in the concept of sublime aesthetics and its transcendence. First coined by Friedrich Longinus, the sublime aesthetic was further revisited by Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Edmund Burke. By the concept of the sublime, these thinkers commonly mean that there exists an art that creates awe and pleasure simultaneously. Longinus means by the sublime that there exists an art work which creates awe and pleasure at the same time.⁸ Afterwards Kant suggests that the sublime involves conflict related with disparity between agent and circumstance resulting in pain and pleasure:⁹

Since in contrast to this standard everything in nature is small, we found in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity. In the same way, though the irresistibility of nature's might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical

⁸ The ancient philosopher, Longinus, wrote the treatise *On the Sublime* on the effect of good writing. He explains sublimity as an alienation leading to identification with the creative process of the artist and a deep emotion mixed in pleasure and exaltation. See Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Trans. W. Rhys Roberts. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1899)

⁹ Kant distinguishes the sublime from the beautiful. While the appeal of beautiful objects is immediately apparent, the sublime holds an air of mystery and ineffability. Kant said that feelings of the beautiful is a pleasant sensation while feelings of the sublime arouse "enjoyment but with horror." See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Trans. John T. Goldthwait. (University of California Press, 2003)

impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature. (271)

Schiller develops a Kantian sublime into the aesthetic response to the tragic situation where the conflict of the dual instincts of man is shown. For Schiller, tragedy should represent both the unconquerable forces and a moral autonomy untouched by the forces, as well as the possibility of the moral freedom to which such autonomy gives rise (29). Also for Burke, the sublime is the dual emotion of fear and delight which results from the removal of the fear derived from the sublime object.¹⁰ Through this delight, Burke emphasizes the greatness of the human mind:

It gives me (Burke) pleasure to see nature in those great tho' terrible Scenes, it fill the mind with grand idea, and turns the Soul in upon herself. This together with the sedentary Life I lead forc'd some reflections on me which would not otherwise have occurred. I consider'd how little man is yet in his own mind how great! (qtd. in Gibbons 3)

It is interesting that the dual structure of the sublime aesthetic leads to emphasizing the power of human reason, given the overwhelmingly deconstructive power of nature. When the sublime generates two contradicting feelings, terror and awe, the feeling of terror is caused by the fact that human reason cannot grasp the innate order or system of the object and a feeling of awe or pleasure is evoked by an uplifted state of mind that defines the object as the sublime, mastering the ineffable. Thus, Rodolphe Gasche maintains that sublime aesthetics reflects innate human transcendental desire (50). Ultimately, what becomes sublime is not the object but human reason as the feeling of

¹⁰ See Edmund Burke "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" In *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*. Ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998)

the sublime renders intuitable the supremacy of our faculties on the rational side of the greatest faculty of sensibility.

Many modern philosophers also regarded such association as theoretically plausible and related the tragic genre to the sublime. The tragedy necessarily takes the structure of the sublime because, as Terry Eagleton writes, “in both tragedy and the sublime, the infinite is made negatively present by throwing the limits of finitude into exposure” (*Sweet Violence* 121). Pain and pleasure coexist in the fall of the main character, as death and desire struggle in the psyche of the tragic hero / heroine. In the process of pursuing the infinite, and in failing to attain it, the tragic protagonist is supposed to exercise his or her freedom and experience great power through the sublime. In this way, great tragedies were considered to arouse positive sentiment by separating readers or audiences both from the protagonist’s painful situation and our corporeal reality.

The sublime, however, cannot be applied to the aesthetic interpretation of feminist tragic novels, especially considering that the concept has served to exclude women in terms of transcendence and masculine reason¹¹ at the expense of nature and carnality. As in the analysis of Kantian sublime, when the nature of great power becomes feminized only by castration, the human being emerges as a manifestation of masculinity or as a conqueror. As Val Plumwood argues, it is highly problematic due to “the treatment of moral concern for nature as the completion of a process of masculine universalization, moral abstraction, detachment and

¹¹ In Kant’s *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*, the sublime object often is described as “active,” “powerful,” “forceful,” and so forth and the book “characterizes the human male as especially capable of experiencing the sublime” (Gould 72).

disconnection, involving the discarding of the self, emotions and special ties (all of course associated with the private sphere and femininity)” (171). In short, since the subject of the sublime regards the body as antithesis of the spirit by negating the subject’s materiality or carnality, the sublime fosters the dichotomy between male spirit and female body. Due to the male-centered perspective of traditional aesthetics as above, the feminist tragic novel was appreciated as neither art nor part of the tragic genre, widely accepted through the lens of the sublime aesthetic.

In opposition to the sublime aesthetics, I draw on Marxist aesthetics to analyze feminist tragic novels because they emphasize social implication of tragic genre. Since Marx and Engels argued that art is derived from economic and social conditions, aestheticians like Theodor Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, Raymond Williams, and Terry Eagleton have accepted this Marxist perspective about tragedy. As a committed Marxist, Brecht explores the theatre as a medium for political ideas and the creation of a critical aesthetics of dialectical materialism. He is famous for his theory of "defamiliarization effect" which helps remind reader of the fact that, like the play, the audience's reality was equally constructed and changeable. Meanwhile, in *Modern Tragedy* (1966), Williams approaches tragedy both in terms of literary tradition and in relation to the tragedies of modern society, of revolution and disorder, and of individual experience. As a modern Marxist, he emphasizes the revolutionary power of tragedy. In *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2002), Eagleton also explores the religious and socio-political implications of the idea of the tragic from the leftist perspectives. As such, they all explore the genre of tragedy from the leftist perspectives based on the Marxist critique of culture and emphasize its political resistance to the society. With their fundamental interpretation of the tragedy in mind, I argue

that to a large extent the aesthetics of the feminist tragic novels can also be explained in terms of art as cultural product and its revolutionary power.

In addition, I will also draw on some theories that emphasize cognitive or ethical dimensions instead of emotional or spiritual ones to support the ethical and political values of feminist tragic novels. Unlike Kant,¹² Hegel, as a cognitive aesthetician, asserts that a great tragedy must have not merely a tragic conflict, but also the necessary reconciliation, a resolution that manifests the essential harmony of ethical substance and unity of ethical life. What is significant in his reconciliation is not the settlement of the conflict, but the recuperation of ethics and totality. Based on this belief, he argues that *Antigone* is an exemplary tragedy in which the reconciliation happens in the minds of the audience in spite of the tragic ending. In line with this ethical concern, Arthur Miller and Slavoj Žižek develop a modern version of Hegelian tragic aesthetics. Miller asserts that the tragic effect is a moral lesson to that extent that all tragedies are positive as far as they provide us with something to learn. Žižek agrees with the possibility of political resistance through tragedy as he defines Antigone as the anti-Habermasian existence.¹³ Despite their differences, their common belief that tragedy plays the role of edification is suggestive to study of the feminist tragic novels.

¹² From a broader perspective, Aristotle's theories of tragedy in *Poetics* should be considered as one of the Kantian aestheticians because of his emphasis on catharsis, the aesthetic pleasure that arises from emotional detachment from what happens in the text and its tragic feelings. Along with Aristotle, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Lacan also follow the Kantian approach to tragedy.

¹³ Drawing on Jurgen Habermas's concept of 'communicative rationality' and the 'discourse ethics,' with the term 'the anti-Habermasian' Žižek implies that Antigone makes "no attempt to convince Creon of the good reasons for her acts through rational arguments, just blind insistence on her rights" (10). With this assertion, Žižek implies that he is opposed to Lacan's psychological approach to Antigone by emphasizing Antigone's ethical concern on her rights.

At the intersection of cognitive and emotional interpretations, my approach focuses on how the feminist tragic novel produces revolutionary force as both cultural product and emotional source at the crossroads of aesthetics and politics because an artwork can neither be essentially social criticism nor completely autonomous, detached from society. Therefore, I clarify the aesthetics of the feminist tragic novel through the lens of materialist aesthetics in terms of realist representation of women's plights of turn-of-the-century America on one side and metaphysical approaches to their language, structure, style, and theme on the other. In this process, it becomes evident that the women writers I deal with here, despite their stylistic differences, make a series of overlapping gendered claims not only on the patriarchal society in which they live, but also on the genre in which they write. In relationship with the tradition and history, the feminist tragic novel produces its artistic values because "artistic creativity is not identified in terms of the effectively occult operation of genius, but by how the artwork behaves against the background of tradition" (Carroll 73). In other words, not as a tragedy but as a tragic novel, not with an "overplot" but with "thematic radicalism," and not as a representation but as an Adornian mimesis,¹⁴ the feminist tragic novels embody the unspeakable and the unknown, exerting their resistance.

Specifically, Adorno's dialectic aesthetics will be drawn here in order to explain how the metaphysical autonomous art values of the feminist tragic novels engage in social dimensions because it is only through the Adornian unintentional truth that we can approach a politics that

¹⁴ Unlike other aestheticians and philosophers who use mimesis as simple imitation or representation, Adorno understands mimesis as an illusory appearance in autonomous works of art, through which "what artworks hides- like Poe's letter-is visible and is, by being visible, hidden" (1997: 121).

undercuts identity thinking. According to him, there is no art works purely realistic or purely illusory. Rather, even the most illusory art works are closely related with their reality in that they are at the antipodes with the reality they want to distance themselves from. For this reason, Adorno argues, “By their presence art works signal the possibility of the non-existent; their reality testifies the feasibility of the unreal, the possible. More specifically, in art longing, which posits the actuality of the non-existent, takes the form of remembrance” (192). The truth of art can be found in the art’s indirect participation in history. In this way, the art works help us understand reality as an active process in which otherness can emerge as an image of unrealized possibilities. This kind of Adornian concept strikes “resonances with contemporary feminist such as Min-ha and Braidotti” (O’Neill 29) in that they emphasize the concrete dimensions of phallogentric culture, experiencing domination and oppression in our lived experiences in concrete ways but also in unseen and unspoken ways. Along the same line, the feminist tragic novel accepts and subverts established aesthetic practices and ruling ideologies and, at the same time, resists its masculine literary tradition and social repression.

Most importantly, feminist tragic novels seek not transcendence, but desublimation. From the aesthetic perspectives, thematic issues such as women’s mental breakdown, suicide, free love, and abortion can be categorized as ugliness. The embodiment of ugliness as an aesthetic category in the feminist tragic novel should be interpreted as a means of overcoming the limitations of the Kantian sublime and its ideology. As Leslie Higgins shows, the cult of ugliness has displaced misogyny. Ugliness has been neglected in traditional aestheticism, where it was seen as simply inferior to beauty. Established as a category of beauty by August Schlegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Theodor Adorno, ugliness can be used to analyze the melancholy,

hysteria, madness, death, or homosexuality of the feminist tragic novel, so as to reveal hidden areas that have been repressed, yet still perceived by women. In this process, the feminist tragic novel shows that the reality in which most women live is filled with contradiction and schism, not characterized by the idealistic sublimation of reason, in terms of the impulse in the feminist tragic novel to reveal fragmentary reality rather than to forge integration or reconciliation. By revealing this state of affairs, the feminist tragic novel can criticize the domineering totality of the classic sublime and restore otherness and dissociation to their rightful places.

To show this, I start with two novels that end with the suicide of the female protagonists: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). In the first chapter, I will show how women's suicides serve as a vehicle to allow readers to experience the emancipation of ethics, rather than that of emotion. Instead of sublimating the negative emotion, the novels garner attention on the gendered reality by drawing on melancholy, homosexuality, and suicide as the main topics, ultimately yielding the contradicting emotions and embodying desublimation. Next, in the second chapter, I deal with the issues of women's mental breakdown in feminist tragic fiction by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives* (1909), focusing on the way linguistic devices and thematic issues draw attention to the chasm between women's desire and social oppression. Throughout the chasm, the contradictory sensations and reception emerge, enacting the aesthetic of distraction by dissolving naturalized perceptions and inducing feminist awareness. In the third chapter, by closely reading Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* (1923) and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925), I show how women's adversities are depicted in ways that raises readers' social consciousness, rather than allowing them to transcend or sublimate it.

In each case, I define the feminist tragic novels as cultural products that represent their materiality, while simultaneously becoming a source from which new meaning is produced in both a dialectical and a revolutionary way.

Chapter One¹⁵ :

Aesthetics of Desublimation in Feminist Tragic Novels:

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

Focusing on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, this chapter illuminates how feminist tragic novels that end with the suicide of the female protagonist establish a new literary tradition. In accordance with the generic characteristics of tragic genre I defined in the introduction, both novels can be regarded as feminist tragic novels in which a feminist awareness is manifested in terms of tragic vision and contentious structure. Keeping alive in their common sensuality and homoeroticism running counter to the ideologies of patriarchal society, the resistant power is consummated by the suicides of the female protagonists. The aesthetic dimensions of both texts are examined as the main means of reinforcing the tragic vision and feminist resistance. Specifically, these novels garner attention on the gendered reality by drawing on melancholy, homosexuality, and suicide as their main topics, ultimately embodying desublimation in terms of the aesthetics of the ugly. In this process, suicide is interpreted as the act of a willful subject and the novels are defined as feminist tragic novels with genre-unique aesthetic values.

While traditional tragedies embody the sublime aesthetics in terms of the catharsis that derives from the forceful integration of contradicting emotions, the feminist tragic novels enact

¹⁵ Part of this chapter was published in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* Vol. 21. 1 under the title "Aesthetics of Desublimation in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*."

the desublimation in which irreconcilable conflicts and emotions coexist unrepressed, and the feminine subjectivity, nature, and sensuousness can be recuperated, calling attention to social inequalities. In this process, sensuousness and corporeality serve as catalysts for mimesis, which functions as a significant aesthetic principle. Following Adornean mimesis, which is an illusory appearance of the hidden as a “response to the faulty irrationality of the rational world as an overadministered world” (*Aesthetic Theory* 53), this study focuses on the elusive and ineffable rather than the concrete reality and its dominant ideology by showing how the patriarchal structure is maintained superficially while being challenged by these women at the same time. It is through the embodiment of the unspeakable, the mimetic, the sensual, and the non-conceptual that Chopin and Wharton create a counter-discourse to previous genres by making gendered claims not only on the patriarchal society they live in, but also on the genre they write in. This process can be elucidated as a manifestation of the ugly through the lens of aesthetics in that the novels reveal hidden areas that have been repressed, yet are still perceived by women in terms of women’s homoeroticism, depression, sensuality, and suicide.

The aesthetics of the ugly derives from the incorporation of what is sensual, vulgar, or ugly, which has long viewed with contempt in the aesthetic tradition. Schiller and Friedreich von Schlegel and Karl Rosen Kranz attempted to clarify theoretically what is sensual or vulgar in artworks with its political power. Following them, Theodor Adorno highlights the aesthetics of the ugly, criticizing the dichotomy between man/ woman, spirit/ body, reason/ emotion, etc., inherent in traditional aesthetics and the forceful integration of the two by repressing the latter. Adorno’s assertion that “it is beauty that originated in the ugly, and not the reverse” (50) implies that beauty is created as an antithesis to ugliness in the process that dominant social ideologies

are reinforced in order to sustain the status quo by alienating woman, body, nature, and emotion. However, the embodiment of the aesthetics of the ugly cannot be epitomized by simply drawing on subjects such as women's suicide, depression, desire or homosexuality. Rather, it should be the aestheticization of the relationships of the conflicting powers in terms of mimesis.

In a way that Adorno seeks an illusory appearance of what is hidden in artwork, I assume that those subjects should be illuminated from their relationship with tradition, convention, or history. Thus, the tension between woman as sign and woman as corporeality in the two novels and their distance from other literary generic conventions become the mimesis for the return of the repressed in such a way that an unnatural or indescribable thing appears vaguely through the parchment. Therefore, women's senses, desire, sexuality, and suicides become heresy and aberration to their opposites in terms of Benjaminian "constellational thinking"¹⁶ and thus have inherent resistant values within the tragic genre which has been male-centered historically. So, we should consider the relationship between ideas or concepts and objects, especially the way in which the object retains its particularity in resistance to the universalizing tendencies of the idea or concept. This also serves as a reminder of Deleuzian aesthetics that emphasizes a becoming that has a component of flight from formalization. Given the criticism of its playful flight, however, it is valid from a feminist perspective as far as it serves as a momentum for the

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin uses this term to indicate that the ideas embedded in history and tradition should not be considered as systematic knowledge, undermining the relationship between ideas. Our knowledge and our understanding of ideas should be considered in both a discursive and an analytical way. In line with the constellation thinking, I suggest that the feminist tragic novel be approached in terms of its relationship with tragic conventions, focusing on both the commonalities and differences. For more detailed information for this term, refer to Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1920).

tragedy of the protagonists of the feminist novels to create a counter-discourse to the patriarchal ideology. The distance created by the flight objectifies the familiar and eventually contributes to feminist ethics and aesthetics. Maggie O'Neil explains the objectification of feminist aesthetics:

The function of aesthetics is to reveal the unintentional truths of the social world, to uncover the meaning of objects, to preserve independent thinking. Analysis of artworks can be achieved through interpretation, commentary, and criticism via immersion, objectification and dissociation. Immersion is the same as getting the feeling of the piece, giving oneself over to the work. Objectification and dissociation are about distancing oneself, witnessing the objective moments of form. The tension between immersion and objectification is similar to that between mimesis and constructive rationality- between sensuousness/playfulness and constructive rationality. (33)

By revealing the tension, the feminist tragic novel can criticize the domineering totality of the classic sublime of masculine tragic genres and restore otherness and dissociation to their rightful places. The otherness defies systematic thinking by reflecting the problem of a world in fragments, standing against Platonic Logos, Hegelian Totality, or Kantian unity as indicated in the introduction because “the ugliness and dissonance are reflective also of genuine contradictions and problems in the unity of the socioepistemic whole external to the artwork” (Hulatt 178). As the irreconcilable and the ineffable, women’s sensuousness, desire, and suicides make the feminist tragic novel a Deleuzian “Literary Machine”¹⁷ that produces certain effects of

¹⁷ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 1, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). In this book, Deleuze and Guattari defines “Literary Machine” as a work that produces signs of different orders, and thus capable of functioning effectively, without unity or totality.

different orders. The difference is necessarily derived not from an opposition to a patriarchal world, but a world where all relationships are a sheer difference by revealing something that cannot be reconciled. Ultimately, such passion for contradiction makes the novels a site of a paradoxical form of truth. Adorno argues with his dialectic aesthetics that a novel reveals an aporia in which a resistant power emerges while, at the same time, it is constituted and influenced by social experiences. In feminist tragic novels, the aporia embodies women of dual compartments that cannot be reconciled because both novels highlight the lives of two female protagonists who experience the split between reality and hope and suffer from contradicting impulses to be passive/ feminine and to be active/ feminist. The aporia, however, does not imply that the novel simply represents the materiality as the non-identity or as a counter-discourse to the patriarchal ideology. Rather, with this contradiction, the feminist tragic novel can gain the strength with which to break through the fallacy of the constitutive subjectivity.

The literary effect of the feminist tragic novels, therefore, is different from that of the traditional tragic genre in that they do not seek catharsis through which the negative emotion is to be repressed and integrated into pleasure. Given that the pleasure is derived from that fact that readers are distanced from the tragic situation and can be emotionally distanced from the negative emotion with the power of rationality, the feminist tragic novels deny the integration of the contradictory emotions by resisting catharsis. Adorno's criticism of catharsis justifies the rejection:

The purging of the affect in Aristotle's *Poetics* no longer makes equally frank admission of its devotion to ruling interests, yet it supports them all the same in that his ideal of sublimation entrusts art with the task of providing aesthetic semblance as a substitute

satisfaction for the bodily satisfaction of the targeted public's instincts and needs:

Catharsis is a purging action directed against the affects and an ally of repression.

Aristotelian catharsis is part of a superannuated mythology of art and inadequate to the actual effects of art. (*The Aesthetic Theory* 238)

Consequently, representing and revealing the split self and irreconcilable emotions in an ambiguous way can be a means of embodying women's resistance and revolutionary power. It lays the groundwork for clarifying the novels as tragic novels and embodiment of feminist aesthetics. Ethically, feminist novels attack the dichotomy of man and woman while, aesthetically, they focus on the binary of the beautiful and the ugly. Moreover, ethics and aesthetics have been considered incompatible, due to the concepts of disinterestedness and autonomy of art, which are obstacles to be overcome before discussing the integration of ethics and aesthetics. Fundamentally, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics is reciprocal as they are interrelated with each other: Even a modernist artwork that appears detached from society is inherently social as far as the artworks can function against the society. Therefore, no artwork can be solely social or solely artistic. As such, even if the feminist tragic novels depict women's lives realistically, there can be an internal autonomy¹⁸ derived from a space or chasm that cannot be attributed solely to writer, text, or reader. Though the internal autonomy is created ambiguously, it eventually leads to the integration of ethics and aesthetics in terms of women's sense and desire. More specifically, the aesthetics of the ugly is embodied, seeking emancipation

¹⁸ The concept of internal autonomy is different from the Modernist concept of artistic autonomy in that it implies not societal autonomy but an autonomous space in the artistic work mediated by the nonidentity, dissolving the conflict in feminism between strategically appealing to aesthetic autonomy and theoretically rejecting it.

of ethics rather than that of emotion by blurring the dichotomy that has caused social inequalities. As a result, it becomes evident that the embodiment of the ugly in both novels is interrelated with a “politics” that undercuts identity thinking, refusing to engage in the binary identification.

In this context, the female body plays a double agent in *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*. A woman’s body is an ideological arena where male-centered language and concepts have been inculcated, and at the same time a site of protest where women can challenge the dominant ideology at a personal level. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz presents the philosophical history of the body’s role as signifier and signified, a concept that empowers women writers. Thus, a woman’s personal sensuousness can have socio-cultural and political implications as it disrupts the existing images of woman and the female body. Indeed, Chopin and Wharton accept images imposed on women’s bodies on one hand while utilizing the body and its senses to foreground the specificities of female desires and identities existing outside the images of women’s repressed sexuality and motherhood. Considering that “women have been linked with, reduced to, and projected as the body” (Lee 135), a woman’s liberation has an ambivalent relationship with the body as something simultaneously to get free from and to draw on. For this reason, Edna’s and Lily’s bodies and sensuousness articulate their specific subjectivities and have feminist implications. In this fashion, some nineteenth-century American female writers create new structures, new style, new forms, and new genres. In *Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-century American Women’s Writing*, Dorri Beam argues that many nineteenth-century American female works such as those by Chopin and Wharton seek “a borderline status as material and expression, embodiment and sign which is quasi-materiality in a

determinedly semi-opaque representation of feminist politics” (19). She maintains that their writings reconstruct what was excluded and negated as essential, and that, “such style calls for social and aesthetic engagement rather than transcendence, and it endorses the contingency rather than self-sufficiency or unity of form” (192). The contingency itself is represented in the novels in terms of the aesthetics of the ugly in a way that women’s desire, body, sense, homosexuality, and suicides appear in a mimetic way. The resistant power of the ugly lends support to their heroic deaths and feminist resistance and therefore proves they are feminist tragic novels. All in all, this study analyzes the two novels from both generic perspective and aesthetic dimension, which in turn they have reciprocal effects: aesthetic analysis provides the groundwork for a generic study while the generic study becomes the foundation for an aesthetic analysis.

Revealing the Discrepancy

Written in 1899 with the emergence of the New Woman, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* presents its protagonist, Edna Pontellier, as someone who suffers under the constraints to female freedom that exist in a repressive, patriarchal, Creole society. Despite her conventional roles as spouse and mother, Edna struggles with romantic and sexual desires that ultimately lead her to seek her own independence. Initially, Edna appears to be the last person who would take a stance against society. Her husband Mr. Pontellier is steeped so deeply in the patriarchy that he thinks of Edna as “a valuable piece of property” (4). Rather than only depicting Edna conforming to social convention, however, the novel juxtaposes the external reality with Edna’s internal search for a new self that is no longer bound to her social reality. The irreconcilable spirit leads to Edna’s movement toward rebellion, causing her to behave irresponsibly in the roles of mother and wife.

Her relationships with Madame Adele Ratignolle, Mademoiselle Reisz, and Robert Lebrun lead Edna on a path of self-discovery. Edna's awakening illuminates a chasm existing between the gendered expectations of her society and her unfolding desire for self-possession and the conflict ultimately provides the momentum for her suicide.

Edna's suicide engenders a variety of perspectives due to its inherent ambiguity. Margit Stange, in her 1989 essay "Personal Property: Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*," observes that motherhood and ownership were intertwined at the time Chopin wrote the novel. Perhaps Edna wishes to avoid becoming a mere commodity as a result of "extreme maternal giving" (117) and be an autonomous subject by committing suicide after she witnesses Adele giving birth and thus sacrificing herself for the sake of her family. Meanwhile, Donald Pizer argues in his essay "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Naturalistic Fiction" that Edna dies because "she has not been able to overcome the hold which the biology of motherhood and the social codes of marriage have had both on her emotions and on the beliefs and actions of others within the areas of life in which she functions" (5). Another critic Judith Fryer argues that Edna "chooses to die; her suicide is part of her awakening, the ultimate act of free will" (257). Their interpretations vary, but all focus on whether Edna's death is defeatist or resistant. Regarding the dichotomy, I define Edna's suicide as a measure of defiance rather than defeat. This, along with the irreconcilable conflicts between repressive ideology and women's sensuous desire, places this novel within the genre of the feminist tragic novel.

Seen through the lens of aesthetics, what makes her death ultimately heroic is the fact that her suicide is the embodiment of the aesthetics of the ugly. At surface level, her suicide derives from not destiny but loss of love and not spiritual desire but sensuous desire, but it is

revolutionary due to the paradoxical truth that the latter leads to Edna's spiritual awakening, be it strong feeling of despair or happiness, despite the fact that they have been considered vulgar and trivial in the aesthetic tradition. Given "the otherness of woman's body," Arleen Dallery argues, through women's writing about their sensuous bodies, "woman's distinct bodily geography and forms are progressively disclosed, blurring the categories of binary thought and the signifying practices of male perception" (58). Similarly, as a counter-discourse to the masculinist ideologies, women's sensuousness often appears in an analogy between women and nature throughout *The Awakening*. It is the sea that unleashes and embodies Edna's desire. Precipitated by the voice of the sea and more importantly, love with Robert, Edna's search for a new self is generated by a spontaneous and sensuous desire:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (15)

Edna hears the "voice of the sea" and feels an inexplicable attraction to its seductive and deadly but liberating potential, which epitomizes the conflicting entities inherent in Edna's consciousness. It is no accident that, in the following chapter, Edna develops an insightful relationship with Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Given that their relationship is introduced right after the luring sensuousness of the sea, they appear to be a "human counterpart to the seductive sea that beckons to Edna's soul" (Lant 115). In short, the sea is the material embodiment of Edna's split self as the sea manifests both birth and death, horror and emancipation.

Awakened in a sensory way, her desire takes on a homoerotic¹⁹ form. To be accurate, the attempt to expose women's sexual desire hidden and repressed is extended in terms of homosexual relationships in the novels, epitomizing the ethics and aesthetics of the ugly. Initially, as Edna watches Madame Ratignolle sew, she "likes to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna"(11). One day, Edna confesses that "the excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty" (14). Then she asks herself, "Who can tell what metals the gods use in forging the subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love." When they walk to the beach arm in arm, Edna removes her collar and opens her dress at the throat; a wind rises, and the two fight to keep their skirts from billowing up and their hair from blowing down. Madame Ratignolle lays her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier. Mrs. Pontellier too "clasped it firmly and warmly and even stroked it a little, fondly" (17), murmuring "pauvre chérie."²⁰ One day Edna also confesses, "Madame Ratignolle looked more beautiful than ever there at home, in a negligé which left her arms almost wholly bare and exposed the rich, melting curves of her white throat" (53). It is this moment that Edna feels an impulse to paint Madame Ratignolle. In addition, regarding Edna's sketches, Madame Ratignolle says, "your talent is immense, dear" (53). Edna feels complacency, "realizing its (her praise) true worth" (53). Edna's homoerotic relationship with Madame Ratignolle serves as a momentum for Edna's consciousness of her

¹⁹ Homoeroticism is sexual attraction between the same sex. I use this term, differentiating it from the concept of homosexuality which implies a more fixed state of identity or sexual identity. It refers to the desire specifically whereas "homosexuality" implies a more permanent state of identity. Given the time when the novels were written, I choose homoeroticism rather than homosexuality in order to insinuate the women writers' conservative perspectives.

²⁰ It means "poor darling."

talent as an artist.

Such homoerotic attraction is also present in the relationship between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz. At the antipode of Madame Ratignolle, she embodies a strong single soul and artistic life. When Robert requests Mademoiselle Reisz to play Chopin's Impromptu for Edna, Mademoiselle glides from the Chopin into the quivering love-notes of Isolde's song, then back again to the Impromptu with its "soulful and poignant longing" (61). Mademoiselle Reisz also stimulates Edna's dormant desire: As the music plays, "the very passions themselves were aroused with 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" (27). Mary Biggs has previously described Mademoiselle Reisz's musical communication as being homoerotic in nature: "From her first to her last, she is shown as someone who has compressed all of her emotion, warmth, kindness, and sensuality into her music, which has become her safely wordless voice" and "only through her music does she make love" (167). As such, Edna's awakening is primarily instigated by her attraction to other women and their sensuous desires, influencing her autonomy. Considering that both homoeroticism and woman's sexual desire were the ugly and vulgar in patriarchal ideologies²¹, Edna's awakening as a creative and autonomous subject through homoerotic relationships with the two women is paradoxical and thus revolutionary.

Likewise, Edna's extramarital affairs with Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin function as a rite of passage to sexual autonomy and feminist awareness. The significance of Edna's relationships with them lies in that they trigger her awareness of sensuous desire, experiencing

²¹ Formerly, the notion of passionate female friendships was not questioned because it was not believed that women experienced sexual desire (Faderman 1981).

independent spirit as the subject of her desire, not as the object of male desire. After she happens to get along with Robert, she spends most of her time with him, developing feelings for him. Despite Madame Ratignolle's warning not to flirt with Edna, he also develops his love for her. When he leaves for Mexico, Edna is greatly hurt. However, it is not the loss of love that she laments. Rather it leads to her self-awakening:

For the first time, she recognized anew the symptoms of infatuation which she had felt incipiently as a child, as a girl in her early teens, and later as a young woman. The recognition did not lessen the reality, the poignancy of the revelation by any suggestion or promise of instability. The past was nothing to her; offered no lesson which she was willing to heed. (44)

As she earns a "conviction that she had lost that which had held, she had been denied that which her impassioned, newly awakened being demanded" (44), she becomes more independent to the extent that she declares, "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (46). Her awakening as a sensuous sexual entity furthers her autonomy.

The culmination of her awakening occurs when Edna learns how to swim in Grand Isle. Her olfactory senses trigger the power of her new self. She feels "there were strange, rare odors abroad—a tangle of the sea smell and of weeds and damp, new-plowed earth, mingled with the heavy perfume of a field of white blossoms somewhere near." Then she was like a child "who of a sudden realizes it powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (27). "Despite several failures, she eventually wants "to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (27), feeling as if she were "reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose

herself' (28). This is the moment when Edna's sensuality catalyzes her gendered awakening. Although Edna tries to move on with her life while Robert is gone, spending most of her time at the beach arousing her new senses, the sea, ironically, becomes the place where she finds a sense of independence.

Aesthetic Embodiment of Women's Sensual Desire

The current of her sensuous desire is derived from absence of proper language and the contamination of patriarchal language. Thus, a woman's use of senses and absence of language are two sides of the same coin. A woman like Edna cannot express herself linguistically and utilizes her senses as an alternative. Indeed, throughout *The Awakening*, many words such as woman, motherhood, and mother-woman make real what is in fact fabricated for the purpose of sustaining the patriarchal status quo. Looking at his wife "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property" (3), Mr. Pontellier reproaches "his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children" and asks naturally, "if it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (7). In his use of words like woman, wife, or mother, there is no room for a woman's individuality or other self. Even the narrator reinforces the concept naturally:

The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (10)

When a woman goes beyond such concepts, she is considered to have mental problem. As Mr. Pontellier watches Edna's changes, he wonders "if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced

mentally” (75). Such prejudice about womanhood is also reinforced by Doctor Mandelet when he says, ‘most women are moody and whimsical’ (87). Analyzing the language of *The Awakening*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff refers to Edna’s “un-utterable longings” (295). Patricia S. Yeager sees the novel’s “most radical awareness as Edna’s habitation of a world of limited linguistic possibilities, of limited possibilities for interpreting and reorganizing her feelings, and therefore of limited possibilities for action” (274). Trapped in the masculinist language, Edna's only way to express herself is through her sensuality, by addressing her sexual desires which women were not supposed to have. In so doing, she not only questions and destabilizes these hegemonic images, but also actively senses the body in order to reimage herself as an autonomous subject.

As an alternative to patriarchal language, Edna’s painting becomes an instrument for channeling and expressing her own sensuous desire. More importantly, as a painter, Edna often uses her artworks as a means of visualizing the images that arise in her minds, dreams, and everyday life, and discovering a new self. She draws not only Madame Ratignoll and Robert but also her distant life memories in her mind. As she draws, she learns how to be an active subject who touches, sees, and interprets rather than a passive object that is seen and objectified. So, when Edna is told by Mademoiselle Reisz that “the artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies,” she shows great resistance to what she is forced to do as a wife and a mother. Edna shows up looking quite different from how she had looked before and, unlike when she had lived a dull life complying with the routines and conventions demanded by her society, she begins to destruct one by one the social constraints that have oppressed her. The ‘Tuesday Meeting,’ which had previously been the most important role for her to play in her routine,

becomes a hotbed of her resistance. It was considered very rude for a hostess not to be at home on Tuesdays, the one day a week on which she was to receive the local ladies of standing. The fact that Edna is intentionally absent from home on Tuesday makes her husband so angry that, after a quarrel, he leaves home. Edna “stamped upon her wedding ring and smashed the crystal vase” (54): she yearns to lead an independent life of her own.

On the other hand, Edna’s painting often creates an aesthetic register, by evoking her homoerotic emotions mingled with other senses. When Edna decides to take up painting at the Pontellier’s house in New Orleans, Edna finds that the house-maid’s back and shoulders were “modeled on classical lines” and her hair “became an inspiration” (64). While Edna works, she sings a song titled “Ah! si tu savais!”²² which reminds Edna of other memories of the boat ride with Robert where he sang Balfe’s “Ah! si tu savais” to her. During the recollections, she hears the water rippling and sail flapping. She also feels the glint of the moon upon the bay and the soft, gusty beating of the hot south wind. At that moment, a subtle current of desire passes through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn (64). In this scene, her senses such as seeing, hearing, and touching help liberate her autonomy, as a subject who gazes and creates. Edna’s body accounts for these emotive flows.

Similarly, woman’s sense and body provide a catalyst for self-discovery in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, like Edna, is an ambivalent character who strives to be an “arresting” (5) figure, beautiful and marriageable, but challenges the conventions of her society. As a twenty- nine-year-old unmarried woman, Lily is well aware

²² It means “if you knew.”

of the necessity to marry for money as she lives with Aunt Julia after her father died. But at the same time, she wants to live an independent life by earning a living herself. Elizabeth Ammons asserts, “On the surface, she perfectly embodies society’s ideal of the female as decorative, subservient, dependent, and submissive; the upper-class norm of the lady as a nonassertive, docile member of society. But only on the surface. In fact Lily has merely learned to suppress and camouflage her own impulses and ambitions” (349). Her struggle with such a dualistic pursuit is delineated in a way that she strives for a sensual power with which to go beyond the object of masculine gaze while internalizing the male gaze. Despite having been controlled and defined in terms of the male gaze, Lily seeks the power to define herself with her body and its desires. It is the contradiction that drives Lily to death as she chooses to die in order to sustain her ethical world.

Retrieving the Autonomous Self

The male gaze not only reflects the patriarchal ideology but also shapes womanhood, undermining female individuality. At the outset, *The House of Mirth* begins with Lily waiting for a train, and it is Selden’s gaze that defines Lily’s position and identity as a “beautiful mount.” This explains how women are possessed by men’s gaze and why men such as Percy Gryce and Gus Trenor are not interested in knowing her real self. Although only Selden gets closer to her inner world, he remains in the male-centered framework, believing the worst of her when he witnesses Lily leaving Gus Trenor’s house. Filtered by Selden’s male gaze, Lily is trapped; she must be either the perfect image of femininity or the worst courtesan. Matching Selden’s limited purview, Lily also sees herself only through the male gaze. In this way, the male-centered, institutionalized gaze generates both the masculine and feminine consciousness. Since the gaze

implies an authoritative judgment within Western society, it perpetuates the patriarchal ideology. This emphasis on gazing within the patriarchy has served to reinforce the woman's place as an object. As Laura Mulvey explains, “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (19). Thus, the power to gaze creates and perpetuates the patriarchal hegemony.

Resisting the male gaze and its hegemony, Lily strives for the autonomy of her vision. Such resistance reminds that human vision is derived from not a sensory organ but power-knowledge. Our knowledge and awareness have us see only acceptable and categorized concepts, dominating our visionary organs. Michel Foucault explains how power-knowledge operates on our bodies, inculcating ideologies. Foucault argues that, with the advent of the social sciences, and the disciplinary advances in science, medicine, and psychiatry, sovereign power changed from the right of death to power over life. His genealogical studies in *History of Sexuality* (1987) show how individual bodies are trained to be social bodies in terms of biopolitics. Although he does not incorporate gender issues in his argument, it is assumed to be useful for feminist arguments because “feminists have concern about the way that social norms, especially patriarchal norms, affect bodies” (McLaren 82). The power of the biopolitics and power-knowledge lies in that they make us believe that we, as individuals, can choose our own preferences, identities, and sexualities on our own. To overcome the repressive dominance, Rosi Braidotti emphasizes being the embodied subject who can resist the symbolic sign and totalitarian power, referring to a great extent to Deleuzian nomadism and becoming theory.²³ Along the same line, Deleuze and Guattari

²³ See Rosie Braidotti’s *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). As a materialist feminist, she emphasizes

argue, “‘senses’ function to limit what language can do by ruling out some effects as impermissible, and this restrictiveness both belongs to ‘the hierarchic and imperative system of language as a transmission of orders,’ and masks the ‘social factors, relations of force, and diverse centers of power’ at work in language” (*Kafka* 20-3). These are relevant to Edna’ and Lily’s aestheticization of sense and desire as they counter the domineering ideology of modern society and emphasize female individuality.

Lily’s status as an object of the male gaze changes into an autonomous subject of her vision in terms of tableaux vivant, a living picture. At a party Lily was invited to, she is supposed to perform Mrs. Lloyd as an artistic presentation. As she literally “stepped, not out of, but into Reynold's canvas” (106), Lily becomes a work of art. Thus, in her *A Feast of Words*, Wolff defines Lily not as “the woman as productive artist, but the woman as self-creating artistic object” (111). Fueled by the realistic state in which “one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard, to seat one's self in one of the damask-and gold arm-chairs to be sure it was not painted against the wall” (127), Lily intentionally chooses “a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings, a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds's canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace” (106). More importantly, Lily makes herself a beautiful object and utilizes her power “to look and to be what the occasion required” (86) to the extent that she becomes an ideal woman who is innocent, knowing, refined and spirited. People praise her performance, saying that it is

women’s corporeality and material conditions, while following Deleuzean post-structural conception of gender and subjectivity.

“simply the portrait of Miss Bart.” As if spellbound by her expression, Selden thinks that the picture is the real Lily Bart, “divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part” (129). She just seems to be “poetry,” “grace,” and in “eternal harmony.” By showing that Selden sees Lily in the tableaux vivant and reflects his desire onto the picture, Wharton challenges patriarchal ideologies by dramatizing and parodying how the male gaze constitutes the female subjectivity. Under the circumstances, this becomes an alternative reality in which Lily has the power to envision and express by displacing the gaze in a way that Edna’s painting serves as an index for her ability to express herself.

Such a challenge is also witnessed in Wharton’s depiction of the relationship between Lily and Gerty. As in the relationship between Edna and Madame Ratignolle, Wharton depicts the friendship of Lily and Gerty with homoerotic overtones. Their relationship culminates as they share one bed:

Two girls lay down on it (bed) side by side when Gerty had unlaced Lily's dress and persuaded her to put her lips to the warm tea.... Tonight every fiber in her body shrank from Lily's nearness: it was torture to listen to her breathing, and feel the sheet stir with it. As Lily turned..., a strand of her hair swept Gerty's cheek with its fragrance.

Everything about her was warm and soft and scented: even the strains of her grief became her as rain-drops do the beaten rose. But as Gerty lay with arms drawn down her side.... Gerty felt a stir of sobs from the breathing warmth beside her, and Lily flung out her hand, gropes for Betty's, and holds it fast. (133)

This night takes place right after Lily is almost raped by Gus Trenor. In this context, their

homoeroticism becomes a threat to the patriarchal ideologies that suppress females because women in homoerotic relationships represent uncontained or uncategorized sensuality. Moreover, the multisensory descriptions such as “listen,” “feel,” “fragrance,” “warm and soft,” “scented,” “groped,” and “held” reflect their sensuous desire at opposite ends of male reason.

Fundamentally, it indicates that Lily becomes the autonomous subject of her sexual desire, not the object of the male gaze.

In accordance with the highly conservative social atmosphere, however, their relationship is counterbalanced by their moderation and restraint: “Knowing that Lily disliked to be caressed, she (Gerty) had long ago learned to check her demonstrative impulses toward her friend” and “avoid contact with her bed-fellow” (133). Due to the ambivalent attitudes, their relationship appears ambiguous. According to Kathryn Kent, “it is often the tension between the homosocial and the homosexual that distinguishes women's culture as a demarcated space and thus sustains it” (15). In other words, this tension actually functions to create a safe space of their own, existing outside of the roles of wife and mother that the male phallogocentric culture typically constructs for them. Thus, Wharton’s incorporation of a homoerotic relationship becomes a challenge to the patriarchal ideologies in that the female body is masked in metaphorical or abstract language mediated by senses, images, and vision outside the conventional representations.

Having come to accept the reality of her existence, but finding no place to preserve her desire for an independent self, Lily is at a crossroads. She realizes that her inner self, mediated by her sensuous body, cannot exist in this society and can only reside in her own vision. When Lily sees Selden last, she says:

‘There is someone I must say goodbye to. Oh, not you- we are sure to see each other again- the Lily Bart you knew. I have kept her with me all this time, but now we are going to part, and I have brought her back to you-am going to leave her here. When I go out presently she will not go with me. I shall like to think that she has stayed with you- and she’ll not go with me. I shall like to think that she has stayed with you-and she’ll be no trouble, she’ll take up no room.’ (240)

Once she has awakened her own gazing and sensing, she realizes there is no way out for her in the society that forces Lily to be a mere sign or concept. She takes an overdose of a sleeping draught and dies. Due to the ambiguity inherent in her death, critics offer a myriad of perspectives on Lily's death, with some seeing it as suicide and, others as an accidental death. Ammons interprets Lily's death “on the symbolic level, as murder by her culture”: — “and its ghastly triumph is to make her its agent, its last enforcer of a literal and permanent passivity on Lily Bart” (42). Meanwhile, refusing to give Lily any status as a subject, Wolff maintains that the death scene is “a retreat to the velvet embrace of infancy, the identity that lives at the core of this notion of the feminine nature and Lily is returning wearily to the Valley of Childish Things” (131). Interpreting Lily’s death, however, has entered a new phase with the discovery of a letter written by Wharton.

In a recently found letter that Wharton sent her friend at the point of writing *The House of Mirth*, she writes “I have heroine to get rid of, and want some points on the best way of disposing of her” (McGrath 1). Later she also asks, “What soporific, or nerve-calming drug, would a nervous and worried young lady in the smart set be likely to take to, and what would be its effects if deliberately taken with the intent to kill herself?” Even without the letter as evidence

of Wharton's intention, many clues suggest Lily's death is a suicide: Lily makes promises to get together again with Nettie, and she asks Rosedale to visit her often. She also tells Selden that she will see him again, but not for a long time, as though she plans to be absent for a long time. Most importantly, she knew that "she took a slight risk in doing so-she remembered the chemist's warning. If sleep came at all, it might be a sleep without waking" (250). All things considered, Lily's death derives from not an accident but her determination, which serves as a foundation for generic clarification of the novel.

Along with her willful death, it is important that Lily wishes to be a moral person to the extent that she would not use Bertha's letter to redeem her social reputation. The fact that she relinquishes the last possibility on her own implies that Lily's death has both ethical and aesthetical dimensions. At the last moment, other challenging conditions appear manageable and frivolous compared with her psychological predicament derived from her split self because "she had a sense of deeper impoverishment of an inner destitution compared to which outward condition dwindled into insignificance" (248). However, she suddenly recognizes that she is with someone:

It was odd-but Nettie Struther's child was lying on her arm: she felt the pressure of its little head against her shoulder. She did not know how it had come there, but she felt no great surprise at the fact, only a gentle penetrating thrill of warmth and pleasure. She holds her breath lest a sound should disturb the sleeping child. ... The tender pressure of its body was still close to hers: the recovered warmth flowed through her once more, she yielded to it, sank into it, and slept. (251)

The vision of baby here epitomizes Lily's pre-entity with a life but without any social

implication. The baby is depicted as an entity, not as a sign or image but as a concrete substance with warmth. More importantly, the baby is described as a non-gendered and uncategorized entity, with the pronoun “it.” It is such a material entity even with “tender pressure” that replaces abstraction of human resistance against the Great Plan with the lofty language of traditional tragedies. Moreover, her heroic death that seemingly follows those of classical tragedy turns out to be imbued with ethical and aesthetic values. The ambiguity between vision and reality, abstraction and materiality, and the ethical and aesthetic enables readers to bodily confront the contradictions by delaying or denying the catharsis that integrates the contradiction by repressing negative emotions and grasping pleasure.

Returning to Edna’s death at this point, a similar pattern appears as it is also fully laden with contradictory images and emotions, integrating ethics and aesthetics. She feels both “awful” and “delicious,” when she walks into the sea. Moreover, her senses reflect the duality of birth and death, through images of a new-born creature juxtaposed to coiling serpents:

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (109)

Considering that the protagonist’s willful act is essential for a tragic genre, the ambiguities of Lily’s and Edna’s deaths may hinder clarifying the novels as tragic novels with aesthetic values. Particularly, Marco Portales argues that the opposite is true in “The Characterization of Edna

Pontellier and the Conclusion of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." Far from painting Edna as a creative artist or existential rebel, Portales contends that Edna avoids responsibility and lives in a state of ignorance, "as she chooses to live self-forgetfully in the moment [and] knowingly places herself in a position where the consequences of her swimming out are inescapable" (436).

According to Portales, Edna should be regarded as a coward. Despite the criticism, I consider her as a hero who synthesizes existential meaning out of her own death. Showing that Lily's and Edna's deaths are not accidental but heroic is essential to the argument that these novels are the feminist tragic novels, and aesthetic artworks because the heroic resistance along with the irreconcilable conflicts is a necessary condition for the genre of the tragic novel. Their suicides result from the incompatibility of the two impulses in a patriarchal society. While suicide in traditional tragedies is mostly an act of human defiance against fate, the suicides of these female protagonists are directed at a patriarchal society that constrained the lives of those women. Thus, these novels seek integration of ethics and aesthetics.

What is more interesting and far more problematic is that their suicides serve as an impediment to clarification of the novels as the feminist tragic novel. Their deaths are considered "feminine suicides" at the antipode of "masculine suicides," which are thought to be "tragic deaths." Indeed, their deaths are distanced from the traditional ones in classic tragedies in that they have different causes: the feminist tragic novels focus on the relationship between man and woman rather than that between human and a Great Plan. In this regard, Margaret Higonnet asserts that "the very notion of suicide as an intentional act dissipates in the course of its scientific reassessment" to the point that by the nineteenth century, suicide has been completely "feminized" into a passive act (70). Furthermore, she concludes that in the depiction of women

in feminine tragedies, “their self-destruction is most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as loss of self but as surrender to an illness” (71). Considering that the gender-specific generic assumptions on the tragic genre is something Chopin and Wharton strives to stand against, however, it becomes evident that their deaths are the result of their resistance to the patriarchal ideology, not of loss of love, because these novels develop as woman’s subjective gaze and senses flow, creating a chasm between the concept of femininity and the fluid self.

Such a resistance and irreconcilable conflicts ultimately make the novels feminist tragic novels based on the generic criticism discussed in the introduction. Within this generic criticism, their autonomy inherent in their suicides become a victory, not defeat, and resistance, not conformity, which differentiate them from the un-heroic and compliant protagonists of the sentimental novels.²⁴ In addition, their deaths are also different from those of female protagonists in the novels of naturalism²⁵ in that they emphasize the female characters resistance rather than the destructive power of the environment, standing against the Grand Narratives and the systematic thinking in the patriarchal society. The significance of the generic approach to the novels lies in the fact that the generic criticism, as an alternative to the traditional method of criticism, provides us with a better understanding of their meaning and values. Additionally, the aesthetic approach to the novels provides a crucial groundwork for the generic clarification.

²⁴ Refer to deaths of Charlotte Temple in Susanne Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), Eliza Wharton in Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), and Eva St. Claire in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).

²⁵ Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: a Girl of the Street* (1893), Frank Norris’ *McTeague* (1899), and Theodor Dreiser’s *American Tragedy* (1925) are examples.

The Aesthetics of the Ugly

A further examination of Edna's death through the lens of aesthetics shows that *The Awakening* embodies the desublimation through the aesthetics of the ugly whose revolutionary power eventually makes the novel belong to the genre of feminist tragic novel. Edna's last moment is riddled with the constant tension between Edna's sensual joy in her temporal surrounding and the disparaging belief that she can control very little of her life except her choice to end it. In the final pages of the novel, Chopin juxtaposes Edna's liberating resolve against a sense of what she is forfeiting. Immediately following her emancipatory statement about eluding the children, Edna walks to the beach and there identifies the broken-winged bird whose injury moves it in a slow death-spiral to the sea. At some inarticulate level, Edna recognizes the paradox of her choice that poses freedom but no future. She strips off her clothes and enters the water where she will concomitantly feel the sensuous exhilaration of rebirth and the terror of death.

Her arms and legs were growing tired. **Exhaustion** was **pressing** upon and overpowering her. . . . She looked into the distance, and the **old terror** flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard **the barking of an old dog** that was chained to the sycamore tree. The **spurs** of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was **the hum** of bees, and **the musky odor** of pinks filled the air. (109, emphasis added)

This last paragraph draws new attention to nature and the physical body, instead of being converted into one-sided pleasure by ideological rationality. Going further than merely offering the readers a triumphal rapture, Chopin depicts Edna's death in a way that demands close

attention to the incarnated entities and social realities that contextualize such death. This is the reason why *The Awakening* cannot be interpreted through the sublime aesthetics which has been considered a fundamental aesthetic framework inherent to tragic genres. The sublime denies the senses and the body but affirms the extrasensory and the rational; it dichotomously separates androgenized rationality and sense-experience from feminized nature; however, the sublime in *The Awakening* defies schematization. Although *The Awakening* seems to embody the sublime aesthetics in that the displeasure caused by the limitations of the object as well as the pleasure given by the rationality transcending it, it is converted into the sublime of otherness itself, by picturing realistically not the sublime but the trivial, not beauty but the ugly. And so the desublimatory realism²⁶ that aesthetically shapes what is sensual, vulgar, or ugly- long viewed with contempt in the aesthetic tradition- is the means by which *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* embody the aesthetic suicides that evoke, through negation, the contradictions of a woman's social reality.

Psychological expressions such as exhaustion, terror, pressing, and so on, refer to the negative image inherent in Edna's death impulse, which adds a social significance to her deathward trajectory when connected to her father and her sister Margaret. After the early loss of her mother, Edna's father, a strict Presbyterian, played a decisive role in the oppressive feminization of Edna, and her sister was a tacit role model who never revealed her emotions while doing household chores in her late mother's stead. Their voices, heard just before Edna's

²⁶ Felski demonstrates, in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, that realist works of feminist fiction have largely helped to construct and express a genuinely oppositional political space, which she calls the feminist counter-public sphere. Along the same line, I suggest desublimatory realism as a counter-discourse to the male-centered aesthetics.

death, do not reflect her recollections but rather her contemplation of the cause that drove her to this marginal situation. Furthermore, auditory imageries, such as the barking of a dog, the sound of a horse's hoofs, and the hum of the bees, as well as the olfactory imageries of musky odors, represent the evocation of sensations as opposed to ideas, as well as an emphasis on nature, which had been rejected in the traditional aesthetics of the sublime. Such imageries imply that Edna's death is not an ideological and affirmative momentum, but a negative death of the physical body. More importantly, they interrupt readers' catharsis and emotional immersion with distraction or embarrassment and create internal autonomy²⁷ where epistemological differences can be made.

Consequently, the validity of the aesthetics of the ugly for feminist novels stems from the momentum it lends to stand against the patriarchal ideology in terms of artworks and the illumination of both the ethical and aesthetical values of the ineffable and unspeakable immanent in the realist novels. To achieve this goal, it is imperative to establish a new conception of the autonomy of the artwork by reinterpreting and reclaiming it as internal autonomy in which the irreconcilable and inexpressible coexist with convention in an abstract way. As a product of evolution from traditional tragedy, but as a resistance to the convention, the feminist tragic novel establishes new aesthetics that centers on materiality, sensuality, and their dissociation, rather than the forceful working of rationality and its reconciliation. Eventually, we can define *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth* as the feminist tragic novels in which the conflicting values

²⁷ The concept of internal autonomy is different from Modernist concept of artistic autonomy in that it implies not societal autonomy but an autonomous space in the artistic work mediated by the nonidentity, dissolving the conflict in feminism between strategically appealing to aesthetic autonomy and theoretically rejecting it.

and perspectives are manifested in a mimetic way, arousing feminist awareness.

Chapter Two:
Aesthetic Distraction in the Tragic Feminist Short Fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's
"The Yellow Wallpaper" and Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha"

This chapter analyzes American feminist tragic short fiction at the turn into the twentieth century through the lens of an aesthetic of distraction. Aesthetics of distraction offers an interesting lens toward understanding American tragic feminist short fiction at the turn of the century, which rather than a short version of the tragic feminist novel is a sub-genre of the feminist tragedy with its own literary characteristics intertwined with the formal properties of short fiction. More specifically, I focus on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" as tragic feminist short fiction that arouses feminist consciousness both aesthetically and politically in terms of new perceptions and sensations. The two narratives enact the aesthetic of distraction by means of their focus on contradictory faculties and modes of reception. Connecting aesthetic sensation and materialization to pre-existing discursive perception, these stories draw on readers' new apperception of and participation in meaning-making. In other words, these works of American feminist tragic short fiction become both aesthetic and political art works, embodying aesthetics of distraction by dissolving naturalized structure and allowing new tasks of apperception and thereby inducing feminist awareness.

The two narratives that end with respectively, their female protagonist's madness and

death are tragedy in their subjects and short fiction²⁸ in their form and style. In addition, they are both feminist fiction, arousing feminist awareness in terms of the tragic lives of women who suffer from patriarchal ideologies. Due to inherent discord among each classification, it might seem to be arbitrary and even temerarious to establish a genre of the feminist tragic short fiction: The genre of tragedy has been male-centered for a long time as women were rarely featured as subjects in tragedy, and the relationship between tragedy and the short story was also hostile as the short story has been considered an “outlaw form” (Harrington 9) in literary history and inappropriate for the sublime effects of tragedy. With the hostility in mind, I illuminate how the ideologically uncomfortable coalition of the contradictory properties is embodied in the feminist tragic short fiction in terms of an aesthetic of distraction. To put it differently, although inheriting the structural and thematic characteristics from traditional tragedy, the feminist tragic short fiction establishes its own literary genre with distinct tragic effects and ultimately expands the tragic genre, incorporating women’s perspectives.

Short Fiction as Women’s Genre

As a means of expressing their marginalized condition, Gilman and Stein utilize the

²⁸ Short fiction comes of age during the nineteenth century, with the resulting emergence of two different categories based on formal and thematic properties: the novella and the short story. The problem of generic classification is further exacerbated in regard to short fiction when one attempts to isolate and circumscribe a class of narrative works which are too long or too elaborate in plot, character, etc. to be considered short stories, but which are not sufficiently complex to qualify as novels. The difficulty of classifying the novella is succinctly pointed out by Howard Nemerov: “For the term ‘short novel’ is descriptive only in the way that the term ‘Middle Ages’ is descriptive – that is, not at all, except with regard to the territory on either side” (231). In line with Nemerov’s argument, I use the term “short fiction” comprehensively to indicate narratives whose brevity and ambiguity are main generic features, regardless of actual word counts. For further reference regarding the relationship between women writers and short fiction, see Ellen Burton Harrington’s *Scribbling Women & the Short Story Form* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

brevity and implications inherent in short fiction and represent their repressed feminine identities, voices, and silences in an allusive way. As feminist critics illuminated how women writers were excluded and disparaged, the relationship of the woman writer to the form of short fiction has claimed scholarly attention.²⁹ When Frank O'Connor argues that "always in the short story, there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (19), the image of the "outlaw" story stems from notions of it as a form that has been marginalized in the literary tradition. Notably, Clare Hanson focuses on the connection between the genre of short fiction and women's 'alienated' perspective: "The short story has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the ex-centric, alienated vision of women" (3). Indeed, some American women writers at the turn of the century such as Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Sui Sin Far and Zitkala-Sa published a myriad of short fiction regarding their alienated and repressed lives under patriarchal and racist culture. In their stories, the short story form becomes "a site of resistance in each of these interpretations, the stories undermining and redefining genre as they explore the complexities of women's identities" (Harrington 11). At the intersection of race, gender, and class, the short fiction highlights the tragic lives of women who suffered from repressive ideologies.

Accordingly, at the turn into the twentieth century, short fiction is a natural option for feminist writers because their "outlaw" status in the literary world resonates with that of short

²⁹ Refer to Brown, Julie. *American Women Short Story Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Routledge, 2014), Burgan, Mary. "The 'Feminine' Short Story in America: Historicizing Epiphanies" (*American Women Short Story Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays* 1737 (1995): pp.267-280), and Lohafer, Susan. *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983).

fiction to the literary tradition. Regardless of the differences of writers' concerns about class or race, short fiction for women writers at the turn of the century can be considered a feminist form, one that is "hospitable to women writers" (Harrington 8) due to the brevity and marginality³⁰ in the literary tradition along with the potentially subversive feature. Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" deals with the tragic life of a woman of color while Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is written from the perspective of a privileged white middle-class woman as an allegory of American second wave feminism. Both stories constitute particular tragic effects and create epistemological transfiguration, which is depicted both aesthetically and politically in terms of an aesthetic of distraction. The brevity and epiphanic closing of short fiction serve as a ground for the aesthetic of distraction.

The Aesthetic of Distraction

The aesthetic of distraction is an aesthetic theory which shows how the contradictory images and perspectives in art works create the tension and dissension in which readers experience counter-hegemonic transformation and eventually participate in political meaning-making. Influenced by Siegfried Kracauer who finds distracting images of the photography and film conducive to overcoming human alienation in capitalist society³¹, Walter Benjamin

³⁰ While the story might seem to be an "outlaw" in the long scope of the literary tradition, by the late-19th century, it was one of the most popular forms, especially in periodicals.

³¹ Kracauer asserts in *The Mass Ornament* (1927) that, witnessing the collectivism where there is no room for individuality in early twenties, the possibility of overcoming transcending rationality in terms of critical awareness and "active reading of the mass ornament by penetrating through it" (326). Focusing on the homogenizing power of mass culture in the capitalist society and naming it "the mass ornament," Kracauer finds the aesthetic moment in the photography and film that amalgamate "the dead and ghostly fragments of things with the incongruous assertion of living presence" (Hansen 34) and, from the distracting images of the photography and film, he finds an antidote of human alienation in a

establishes the aesthetic of distraction and illuminates the way that the highly contrasting images and senses arouse new relationships, leading to the creation of the new sensations and perceptions. For these reasons, Miriam Hansen notes that Kracauer and Benjamin draw on phenomenological experiences that move between conscious and unconscious life in relation to everyday surface objects “as the matrix of conflicting temporalities, of memory and hope” (13). In Benjamin’s theory of distraction, therefore, distraction implies more than the lack of attention. Rather, it is “physical, psychological, and physiological phenomenon” (Benjamin “Theory of Distraction” 141), involving the transformation of our attention, mind and senses. In this line, Paul North also argues that “distraction is a physiological response with political consequences” (169). They commonly imply that the aesthetic of distraction engages in the production of artwork and its social effect. Particularly, considering capitalism as a collective dream-state, from which we can awaken through a dialectical reading of the conflicting images, Benjamin explicates the new mode of aesthetic attention in terms of “reception in distraction” as an antidote of dominant ideology. Reception in distraction serves to create a space for the social dream at the moment of reception through an insistence on its unruly, embodied presence, functioning to generate contradiction in the dominant cultural form. When applied to feminist tragic fiction, the dominant ideology the women writers stand against is an androcentric one.

Despite the socio-economic development throughout the Progressive Era³², women’s

homogenized totalitarian society, by confronting our alienated disassociation rather than just accepting this as a normative story.

³² The progressive era is a period of widespread social activism and political reform across the United States that lasted from the 1890s to the 1920s. Throughout the Progressive Era, more and more women took new jobs created by economic growth or by technologic change. A remarkable transformation of civil society and government also occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century as public education

social status had not improved as was expected. The industrializing process that seemed to provide a mechanism for reducing the difference between women's and men's work turned out to be much less dramatic than had been supposed, and rather than being a vehicle for liberation, modern capitalism further subjugated women by excluding them from the production process (Cohen 291). As a result, at the turn of the century, women's roles remained severely limited by society's concepts of male supremacy and female inferiority and confined many women to housewifery, the raising of children, deference to men, and financial dependency on the husband.³³ Under the circumstances, most women experienced a large gap between the high expectations for equality the Progressive Era offered and the still restrictive society. The historical discrepancy had resulted in a catalyst that had created a new form of feminist artworks in a way that enabled Kracauer and Benjamin to find the seed of aesthetic distraction from the tension between the mechanical reproduction of art and the loss of aura. The authority of an artifact due to its conventional originality is deconstructed by virtue of the mechanical reproduction technology. As much as the aesthetic distraction performs the politicization of art at this historical turning point as a way of both reflecting and dissolving the conflicts, the feminist tragic short fiction enacts the aesthetic of distraction, by disclosing and politicizing the

systems expanded. The numbers of schools proliferated and the enrollment of girls increased, and it accelerated the entrance of women into fields of social life beyond the domestic sphere (Pisapia 24). Women's employment not only brought women's work out of the home, but also provided women with a collective experience that supported their participation in the world of broader social reform. Women became involved in anti-slavery, moral reform, pacifism, labor reform, prison reform, and women's suffrage. They came to oppose the growing inequality evident in American society and to demand for themselves as workers and as women greater rights and rewards in that society.

³³ The traditional role of homemaker was not always available for poor, immigrant, or women of color.

contradictions. The aesthetic of distraction in the narratives, however, does not seek a female antithesis to male sovereignty or phallogentrism, but new sensations and perceptions through which critical awareness can be activated. Due to the inherent revolutionary and resistant register, the theory serves to explicate how the two narratives become feminist art works with both aesthetic and political values in the society where women are doubly alienated from both capitalist and patriarchal society.

More specifically, the two women's narratives enact a revolutionary aesthetic, creating gaps that undermine the reader's common worldview and spark revolutionary consciousness in the reader's mind. To illustrate, they basically show the generic characteristics of traditional tragedy, concerning the downfall of the protagonist at a surface level, but they also deconstruct and extend the generic boundary at a deeper level. In this process, the seemingly contradictory and incompatible attempts appear, leading to readers' physical and psychological distraction by incorporating submissive but resistant women and descriptive but experimental language. In this way, the oppression of any hierarchy between genre and characters, of any principle of consonance between a subject and a style or character, is deconstructed. At stake here is not the emergence of new images or styles but the relationship among the contradictory images and new sensations arising therefrom. The narratives become political with the new sensations because aesthetic practices that transform perception and sensibility are also political practices of emancipation and participation. For the rationale behind this assertion, Benjamin declares, "the manner in which human sensory perception organizes itself is not only naturally conditioned but also historically conditioned" (qtd. North 145). Definitely, consolidations of the tragic genre and unheroic female protagonist, and the sublimity of tragedy and levity of language and brevity of

short story produce new sensations with which to penetrate through the repressive ideologies relating to the genre³⁴, language, and woman.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” and “Melanctha” as Tragic Fiction

Accordingly, at the outset, it is imperative to classify the narratives as feminist tragic short fiction, presupposing the main characteristics of feminist tragedy in terms of dichotomous structure and feminist resistance³⁵. Basically, the main conflicts between man and woman constitute the contentious structure. Their female resistance is manifested in both content and linguistic style, as “Stein’s rebellion was channeled from content to linguistic structure itself” (DeKoven 331). Although the two narratives delineate obedient and submissive women at the surface level, as the narratives develop, the female protagonists speak with split subjectivity, standing against patriarchal ideology. Against the ideology repressing women’s desire, the respective narratives highlight women who surreptitiously act on a desire associated with writing and sexual relationships. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a nameless female narrator depicts her descent into madness, and, standing against her husband’s efforts to dissuade her not to write, she nonetheless writes her own story and finally identifies herself with an imaginary woman who finally escapes from confinement. Losing her mind, she feels a sense of triumph and exclaims, “I’ve got out at last,...in spite of you and Jane?” (15), and her husband faints as she continues to creep around the room, stepping over him as she passes. In this context, what ultimately drives

³⁴ In this case, Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the exemplary case of an arrangement of sensibilities and perceptions on the tragedy.

³⁵ Based on the thematic and structural similarities among a group of novels at the turn of the century, I define them in the introduction as tragic feminist fiction in which a feminist consciousness is manifested in terms of tragic vision and contentious structure.

her crazy is the conflict between a woman's desire to act upon her own will and patriarchal ideology repressing the will. As Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert emphasize, "Women writers of nineteenth century projected their rebellious impulses into mad or monstrous women" (78). Ultimately, Gilman's story reveals the resistance implicit in female insanity.

Analogous to the rebellious protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper," Melanctha seeks to fulfill her own sexual desire, which patriarchal ideology does not allow for women either.³⁶ As a desiring subject rather than a desired object of the patriarchal society, Melanctha channels her sexual desire in an active way. During her sexual coming of age, she "begins as a woman" (54), attracts a married coachman, and has a homosexual relationship with the older alcoholic Jane Harden. Next, the story moves to Melanctha's relationship with Jeff, then briefly with Jem and Rose. This series of sexual explorations centers on the relationship of Jeff and Melanctha. Jeff leaves Melanctha due to her promiscuous behavior, which is neither appropriate nor "regular" under patriarchal ideologies. Moreover, Rose, with whom Melanctha has a lesbian relationship, leaves her as Rose chooses to stay with her husband for more conventional stability. Afterwards, debilitated by her search for a form to give her desire, "Melanctha was lost, and all the world went whirling in a mad weary dance around her" (139). As if she had been entirely consumed by others, without having an object for her desire, Melanctha dies of consumption tragically and in isolation. As with "The Yellow Wallpaper," "Melanctha" has a dichotomous structure of reflecting profound contradiction and conflict.

In a sense, the conflicts between genders in the narratives depict rational men with

³⁶ For theoretical references on this topic, refer to Baumeister, Roy F., and Jean M. Twenge, "Cultural suppression of female sexuality" (*Review of General Psychology* 6.2 (2002): pp.166- 203).

emotional women. The contrasting features are evinced particularly in terms of the relationship between male doctor and female protagonists of both narratives. The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” introduces her husband John as “a physician of high standing” (Gilman 1), and her brother as “a physician, and also of high standing, who he says the same thing” (1). At the antipode of their intellectual and rational male doctor, the female narrator appears as an imaginary, fanciful, and emotional woman. John keeps criticizing her for her imagination, saying “nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies” (4), and suggests that she must use her “will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me” (8). Furthermore, his admonishment appears with his authority as a physician, negating her fancifulness when he says, “it is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?” (9). Gilman’s narrator admits, “It is so hard to talk with John about my case because he is so wise” (8). Juxtaposition of rationality and fancifulness leads to a lack of communication, exemplifying the contentious structure.

Likewise, the narrator of “Melanctha” introduces Jeff Campbell as a man who is “a serious, earnest, good young joyous doctor” (63) and notes, “he always found life very easy did Jeff Campbell, and everybody liked to have him with them” (63). Contrary to Jeff, Melanctha embodies an emotional woman who “was always full with mystery and subtle movements and denials and vague distrusts and complicated disillusions” (50), and “mysterious and uncertain, and a little wandering in her ways” (52). As a result, their antagonistic relationship goes far deeper to the extent that they can’t communicate with each other: Jeff says to Melanctha, “you don’t know very well yourself, what you mean, when you are talking” (68), and she replies, “it ain’t much use to talk about what a woman is really feeling in her” (78). Jeff’s inability to

understand Melanctha eventually makes her ask, “Did I ever do anything but just let you do everything you wanted to me... Did I ever do nothing except just sit there ready to endure your loving with me” (102), to which he responds, “well I certainly ain’t got a word to say ever to you any more” and before “go[ing] away now forever from her” (102). Such antagonism between genders serves as a foundation for feminist tragic fiction.

Extending the Boundaries

Within the framework of the tragic novel, however, “Melanctha” and “The Yellow Wallpaper” continuously have their generic boundaries blurred and ultimately expanded by incorporating contradictory perceptions and sensibilities. In the narratives, the female protagonists are not only unheroic but also indefinite. Melanctha is a paradox, seeking out yet trying to “keep men from getting too strong in attention” (57) and occupying antithetical roles. She is “at the edge of wisdom” wanting “very much to know” until she comes to realize she has always “feared” knowledge. She struggles to temper her desire for, and fear of, the many men she entertains. Meanwhile, “Melanctha Herbert was always seeking peace and quiet, and she could always only find new ways to get excited” (52). With her conscious mind, she embraces the socially gratifying values, but on a subconscious level she seeks sexual excitement which is depicted in a figurative or indirect way. In this way, “Melanctha” enacts the aesthetic of distraction in a revolutionary way. As Benjamin explains, “this works on the sensorial level and attempt to arouse revolutionary consciousness in the reader as distractive faculties serve to abstract from the social existence of human beings” (“The Author as Producer” 11). However, they do not present the feminist consciousness at the surface or directly in a way that informative or propaganda writings do. Rather, they rely on shock and sensory disruption in order to

penetrate people's consciousness.

Likewise, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" often makes contradictory statements. First, she focuses on "contradictory style" of the wallpaper: it is "dull" while also "flamboyant," "pronounced" yet also "uncertain" and "lame" (3). These adjectives which the narrator uses are ambiguous and equivocal as they are expressions that can be applied to both person or thing. Therefore, they involve a sense of confusion about who or what is dull, flamboyant, pronounced, or lame. They are also synaesthetic as they evoke involuntary and subjective interpretations, leading to a new sensations and perceptions. Gilman also actuates the reception in distraction by virtue of contradictory statements. The narrator claims that her writing is for "dead paper" only, not to be read by a "living soul," making living readers who read her story contradictory. Her statement that "I don't know why I should write this, I don't want to" (7) sharply contrasts with her surreptitious writing against her husband John's attempts to dissuade her. This discrepancy is apparent when the narrator expresses her difficulty conversing with John: "It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise and because he loves me so" (8). In terms of the contradictory and incompatible moments, readers are distracted and more importantly transformed because "distraction becomes a tool for dissolving regimes of thought, modes of understanding, by admitting an empirical moment into the transcendental structure of apperception" (North 164-65). In short, these incompatible expressions and images prompt a new apperception in readers because they distract them to the point of new epistemological transformation.

The potentiality of feminist implication lies in the aesthetic apperception in that it inherently opposes the masculinist perspectives of traditional man-centered rational aesthetics.

Feminists have charged Kantian “unity of apperception” with being a prototype for illegitimate masculine authority and Western hubris. They have condemned “pure” reason as the sovereignty of “rational man” over feminine connectiveness (Nye 111). To illustrate, Kant contends that, “although all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises from experience” (qtd. in Schreuder 86). Kant also states that it is not the object that determines knowledge, but knowledge that determines the object, and only by knowledge of the world can we acquire knowledge about ourselves, and not the other way around (86). Kant presupposes transcendental and independent knowledge, which is not affected by experience. In this vein, Copleston explains that “no objective experience, no knowledge of objects, is possible unless the manifold of intuition is connected in one self-consciousness” (255). The notion that there is neither an experience nor an experiencer without the unifying self is implicitly masculine and, as Val Plumwood asserts, negates woman and nature. It is highly problematic, as Plumwood points out, because it frames “the treatment of moral concern for nature as the completion of a process of masculine universalization, moral abstraction, detachment and disconnection, involving the discarding of the self, emotions and special ties (all of course associated with the private sphere and femininity)” (171). In opposition to the transcendental masculine perception, the aesthetics of distraction has the feminist register with its inherently empiricist and materialist approach to apperception, admitting the sensual and empirical moment into the transcendental structure of apperception. Both as an aesthetic form and reception, distraction becomes a tool for dissolving regimes of thought and modes of understanding, and in a feminist context unlocks the counter-discursive possibilities of patriarchal ideology. However, what is received in the aesthetics of distraction in the tragic feminist short fiction is not a counter-discourse against patriarchal

ideology but suspension of political judgment out of the conventional world as the aesthetics of distraction provides a way of experience that enables a sensory recognition of self-alienation.

As an alternative to the discursive, theoretical subjectivity of woman inculcated by patriarchal culture, Gilman and Stein seek materialization and individualization of language and subjectivity. They distance language from conventional usages as a way of reflecting their material reality or characters. Stein's break with literary convention is generally described as "stylization of the prose surface in order to render directly the essence of a character's identity" (DeKoven 323). Similarly, the linguistic style of "The Yellow Wallpaper," including punctuation, typography and arrangement deviates from conventions. It resonates with a stereotypical image of a hysteric woman as "highly liable" and incapable of maintaining a coherent mind-set (Smith-Rosenberg 659). From the beginning of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's mental instability and emotion shift from confidence into hesitancy, depicting her mental status and distracting the reader's mind:

It is **very** seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer. A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I **would** say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity--but that **would** be asking too much of fate! Still I **will** proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me, **of course**, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures. John is a physician, and **perhaps**--(I **would** not say it to a living soul, **of**

course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)--**perhaps** that is one reason

I do not get well faster. You see, he does not believe I am sick! (1 emphasis is mine)

Without providing background information or introducing herself, the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” starts this paragraph with a myriad of contradicting words in bold. The narrator indicates her certainty with adverbs such as “very,” “would,” “will,” “of course,” on one side, and on the other repetitively uses adverbs of uncertainty such as “perhaps.” Moreover, the incompatibility is reinforced in term of repetitive use of exclamation and question marks. This style appears in a similar fashion in “Melanctha” when Jeff Campbell says,

“When I got rich with such a feeling, comes all that other girl, and then that **seems** more **likely** that that is really you what’s honest, and then I **certainly** do get awful afraid to come to you, and I **certainly** never do feel I could be very trusting with you. And then I **certainly** don’t know anything at all about you, and I **certainly** don’t know which is a real Melanctha, and I **certainly** don’t feel no longer.” (80-1)

In this passage, contradicting adverbs of certainty and uncertainty also coexist, making readers unsure of what they really mean or whether they are trustworthy. In this fashion, readers are distanced from the surface meaning and instead forced to focus on the topography and sound of the language. Gilman’s narrator shares her nervous mentality in statements like:

It makes me tired to follow. I will take a nap, I guess.

I don’t know why I should write this.

I didn’t want to.

I don’t feel able. (7)

Similarly, in “Melanctha,” some statements delineate her emotional status. Asked by Jem with a

question, “You don’t care about me?” and being left, Melanctha is described with quite repetitive expressions:

Melanctha never could have for this an answer. Jem Richards waited and then he went away and left her.

Melanctha Herbert never again saw Jem Richards.

Melanctha never again saw Rose Johnson, and it was hard to Melanctha never any more to see her. (140)

Stein’s use of repetition contributes to training readers’ apperception by decentralizing the meaning of words and concepts, and eventually making them all strange. To illustrate, “wandering,” “wisdom,” and “good people,” which appear repetitively in different contexts lose their fixed meaning. Readers are distracted and skeptical about their fixed meaning rather than simply accepting them as reified meaning or cliché. With regard to Melanctha’s “wandering” and “wisdom,” they turn out to be sexual excitement or a search for a meaning of life with which “to get excited” (59). Dr. Campbell’s meaning of “being good” seems to be “regular” or “social responsibility” while Melanctha’s appears satisfaction of her “excitement” (Saunders 57). Sometimes, the actual meaning of goodness seems ambiguous, as when Melanctha says, “you is so afraid you will be losing being good so easy, and it certainly do seem to me Dr. Campbell that it certainly don’t amount to very much that kind of goodness” (72). More importantly, readers confront the ambiguousness of “goodness” and thereby accept the blurred boundaries of decency and desire. In this way, readers experience the materiality and contingency of language rather than conventionality and constancy thereof.

In both narratives, repetition of particular noun, adverb, phrase, or sentence is a way

through which not only narrator's consciousness is revealed but also the readers' minds are tested. Through the repetition, readers experience the postponing of any fixed meaning and feelings. In this process, even the most ordinary or simple words become quite strange and confusing. Such decentralized and deviated language ultimately prevents readers from immersing into the text by distracting readers' attention. Readers barely recognize what is happening. They are confused and shocked by ambiguous or contradictory expressions, start doubting the surface meaning, and ultimately view the domineering ideology of patriarchal society with critical eyes.

Mental illness such as melancholy, depression, or hysteria often plays the important role of catalyst that creates such aesthetic shock in tragic feminist short fiction. Mental illness embodied in the tragic genre basically presupposes the reversal and inversion of meanings because, as Daniel Berthold-Bond notes, "both madness and tragic action involve ontologies of disunion--both are inwardly divided, doubled forms of consciousness" (73). This implies that madness and tragedy inherently represent conflict and contradiction between culture and nature, the conscious and the unconscious, and inner world and outer world. Revealing the self-contradiction, mental illness becomes an aesthetic strategy for disavowing and reconfiguring the narrative limitations of the nineteenth-century novel as well as the social restrictions of nineteenth-century women's gender roles. This begins with the fact that the female protagonists of the two narratives suffer from mental illness. In "Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator shows schizophrenic symptoms as she is afflicted with anxiety, false beliefs, visual hallucination, and lack of motivation. To be more specific, she suffers serious anxiety and phantasm to the extent that she sees a woman figure in the wallpaper and believes that the woman tries to creep out of the wall

and eventually frees herself, stripping the wallpaper off the wall.

Meanwhile, Melanctha shows symptoms of bipolar disorder, marked by extreme shifts in mood, having trouble managing desire or passion or maintaining relationships. Likewise, after introducing Henri Ey's definition of hysteria that "hysteria is an illness of the personality causing the disintegration of ideas and functions," Mark Niemeyer also claims that Melanctha has a tenuous relation to the mental illness" (78-9). However, it is not that readers are shocked at the mental illness of the female protagonists itself. Rather, the way in which mental illness is represented both psychologically and physiologically and both as a product and producer is remarkable. Indeed, in the tragic narratives, the mental illness of the female protagonists appear interrelated to their body, desire, pain, and even death because frustrated desire for writing and new relationships leads to their madness and death. As such, the dramatization of mental illness in Gilman's and Stein's narratives generates an aesthetic shock and somatically resists the tyranny of purely intellectual constructions of patriarchal society because mental illness is the body's material reality with a concreteness that cannot be denied. Against the abstract conceptual madness which had dominated modern consciousness, the mental illness of the feminist tragic short fiction involves both psychological and physiological domains, associating women's desires, corporeality, and relationships.

Connecting mental illness with the female body as a sensational process, however, is not for the purpose of essentializing feminine style of writing in Cixousian and Kristevian fashion in terms of the feminine *écriture* or pre-oedipal semiotic babble as an antithesis to the male symbolic. Rather, in terms of materialized mental illness, the narratives not only challenge the conventional concept of women's mental illness but also create new relationships between

women and literary form. Regarding the relationship, Campbell notes as follows:

The distraction is not just an account of social character but shows how the subject is always dissolved into a mimetic disassociation, which relates to the physicality of the body and the instincts. Such dissociation can exhibit our hysterical split between being and doing, but this distraction can also move to confront our alienation. (147).

Thus, their mental illness serves as both product and producer because it is both the result of the repressive patriarchal society and the means through which one might dream of escaping that society. Considering Benjamin's statement that "madness is a form of perception alien to the community" ("Perception is Reading" 92) and applying it to the feminist narratives, madness becomes a means of awakening individual perceptions in the patriarchal society. In this manner, productive distraction is enacted "as a spur to new ways of perceiving" (Eiland 60), and readers thereby counter-read the surface meaning in a dialectical way. As a result, women's immobility, lethargy, ennui, and confinement that mental illness brings about eventually imply creativity, dynamics, and mobility and, in like manner, female death becomes a way of finding a new way to get excited. Their mental illness divests women's everyday life of its familiarity and thereby renders the readers active and critical. At surface, the mental illness the female protagonists suffer from seems to be a result of limitation and confinement of patriarchal society repressing women's desire. However, Benjamin elucidates in "Theory of Distraction" that "distraction, like catharsis, should be considered as a physiological phenomenon" (141). Thus, disintegrated and distracted psychologically by mental illness, readers also experience their physiological and sensuous transformation.

In addition, female madness and death in these stories play a crucial role beyond final

events rendering them tragic, by being the momentum and the causes of the conditions by which the conflicting perceptions are confronted. Revealing the crucial contradictions within Melanctha's personality in terms of "blackness" and "paleness," she indicates the contrast of her independent, masculine power versus relationship-oriented personality. Specifically, Melanctha hates her father's blackness and his violence and loves his "power in herself that came through him" (50). The ambivalence is consummated in her relationship with Jeff, which ends up after the repetition of the affinity and estrangement, "in first seeking Jeff's love, then rejecting it" (Saunders 57). After all, Jeff acknowledges that "really he knew nothing" although he "always had thought he knew something about women" (75). To him, Melanctha appears almost to be "two kinds of girls certainly very different to each other" (80). As last, Melanctha who "wanted him (Jeff) so badly that now she never wandered" (62) also wanted Rose "more than she had ever wanted all the others" (139). In a sense, the linguistic and thematic ambivalences blur the fixed identities and boundaries of the traditional feminine or masculine, and heterosexual or homosexual stereotypes by creating new sensations in relation to women's bodies, desires, and sexuality.

Besides, in the two narratives, women's madness and deaths are depicted in a way that they exist beyond literary conventions or archetypes. The female protagonist's descent into madness at the end of "The Yellow Wallpaper" reminds readers of a particular tragic tradition in which female madness has featured. Ruth Padel argues that "the grammar of Western responses to madness is basically both Greek and tragic because, after the Greeks, tragedy went on finding madness useful" (xiii). Although the old images of madness continued, their value and resonance changed. While it may be true that melancholia and depression have often served as a

momentum for the tragic genre, “The Yellow Wallpaper” obviously goes beyond the particular tradition. In the traditional tragic genre, women who willfully violate the sexual rules are labeled mad. Further, women who are forced into sexual behavior are punished as severely as those women who are willful in their sexuality. Ophelia from *Hamlet*, the Duchess from *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Beatrice-Joanna from *The Changeling* all exemplify the case. While their madness is penalty for their anti-womanliness, the protagonists’ madness in tragic feminist short fiction appears to violate the archetype intentionally by portraying both women’s lack of language and deconstructive power.

Along with madness, women’s deaths appear in a similar fashion. Unlike the solemn and majestic deaths of traditional tragic heroes, the deaths in Stein’s story are depicted in a commonplace and indifferent way. The story begins with a death: “Rose Johnson made it very hard to bring her baby to its birth,” but Rose was “careless and negligent and selfish, and when Melanctha had to leave for a few days, the baby died” and neither Rose and her husband Sam “thought about it very long” (47). In line with the baby’s death, Melanctha’s death also happens quite suddenly in her story and appears in a sullen way. Rose spends a long time telling anyone that asked her about what is wrong with Melanctha and that she suspects that Melanctha will kill herself. This is particularly disheartening, given that “Rose Johnson had worked in to be the deepest of all Melanctha’s emotions” (140). In spite of her importance to Melanctha, Rose says, “You don’t never know the right way, any kind of decent girl has to be acting, and so Melanctha Herbert, me and Sam, we don’t never any more want you to be setting your foot in my house here” (139). This was the “blow that nearly killed her” (139). Indeed, Melanctha dies of consumption and her death seems particularly trivial, and as such, it appears to parody the death

of the tragic hero.

The parodied death epitomizes feminist resistance, breaking away with man-centered tragic conventions. Melanctha dies abruptly and her story ends all at once because no one cares that she dies. As her name implies – Melanctha is a combination of Greek words “Melancholic” and “Thanatos” – her “gloomy death” goes unremarked and unmourned. Harriet Scott Chessman notes that her death “happens quite suddenly, with almost no comment from the narrator” (29). Melanctha’s death happens quickly and the accounts in the narrative are almost clinical in its level of detachment. Omri Moses contemplates the coldness of the narrator in “Melanctha” and asserts, “The imperturbable matter-of-factness of the narrator- its curttness - once again disrupts the tragic implication by curtailing pathos” (151). Indeed, the narrator’s apathy at the death of the protagonist creates a distance, even numbness, between reader and subject. Such death ultimately distinguishes “Melanctha” from those of other genres such as modernist fiction, traditional tragedy, or even tragic feminist novels. Particularly, the experimental linguistic style might recall modernist narratives, but tragic feminist short fiction does not seek the totalitarian or elitist tendency. “Melanctha” both parodies and goes beyond the tragic genre, disrupting the conventional literary framework. Melanctha’s will or resistance appears mainly in terms of her break away and deviation from traditional deaths of protagonist in highly man-dominated tragedies.

Furthermore, despite Melanctha’s race and death, she does not fit the archetype of the “tragic mulatta.” The tragic mulatta of nineteenth-century literature is a mixed-race woman who can’t belong to white or black society and dies in isolation such as Frado in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) or Clotel in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853). Eve Raimon notes, “Tragic mulatta

stories begin with a young mixed-race woman being left without protection; she is usually “motherless.” Despite her intentions, the woman is left in a desperate situation which usually ends in “early death” (7-8). At a first glance, anyone can easily find the archetype of the “tragic mulatta” from “Melanctha,” as it is about the life of a young biracial woman with her mother who died early, leaving her daughter unprotected and miserable. But the narrative is still different from the archetype in that there is feminist resistance against patriarchal ideology in terms of Melanctha’s deviations from generic or archetypal expectation.

Notably, the break with literary convention has a political register. Given Benjamin’s understanding of aura, the aspect of traditional artworks that produces their specific social effect, “what changes is not only the effect but the historical basis of the social per se because aura is an accumulation of history, and with its dispersal the shape of history changes such that sociality can no longer constitute itself in the same way” (North 167). Applying the theory to feminist tragic short fiction, its distance from other literary conventions and traditions ultimately brings social consciousness. This is in line with Benjamin’s contention that “the theory of distraction” has a thread of connection with an “attempt to determine the effect of the work of art once its power of consecration has been eliminated” (“Theory of Distraction” 141). Simply put, the authority of tragic tradition is replaced by new perceptions brought about by the shock effect which is derived from the deviated expectations and archetypes, leading to experimental language as well.

Gilman’s and Stein’s experiments with tense, point of view, perspective, and language call for exactly the manner of reception in distraction. They write the narratives in a way that breaks most grammatical rules and conventions and intentionally create confusion with

ambiguous expressions, tense, and point of view. In this process, the linguistic boundaries of past and present, first person narration and second person narration, or monologue and dialogue are blurred throughout the narratives as their rebellion was “channeled from content to linguistic structure itself,” and its attack penetrates deeper “to the very structures which determine, within a particular culture what can be thought” (DeKoven 331). Tense changes abruptly from past to present, and frequent use of continuous present makes readers more confused with what is happening at the moment and ultimately become skeptical about unitary meaning. The skepticism is perpetuated by limited and transfiguring narrative point of view. The narrator of “Melanctha” does not convey Melanctha’s point of view and represents Jeff more eagerly. The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” shifts her point of view from first person to third person. At a distance, readers take an omniscient point of view of a camera and get confused but confront the discrepancy as a whole. From the perspectives of post-structuralists, the strange word usage, the odd syntax, the repetitions of words, phrases, and sentences that avoid typical language relationship between narrator and characters are closely associated with women’s hopes of laying claim to “female bodies that resist constructions and agendas for control” (Stockton 11-12). For this reason, the aesthetics of distraction in tragic feminist short fiction is rooted in body and sensuous values as a counter-mode of communication to the patriarchal language. Consequently, resisting discursive ideological conceptions of language and subjectivity, tragic feminist short fiction utilizes corporeality and materiality of entities in a manner equivalent to close ups, high angle shots, and time jumps, and contradictory point of views in movies, from which Benjamin finds the seed of aesthetics of distraction at the beginning. The basic rationale behind the aesthetics of distraction in tragic feminist short fiction is that political action derives from the

restoration of the ability to feel sensation, which is the aestheticization of the material reality and the reified human body because our sensory perception is historically and politically conditioned and naturalized. In this sense, their violation of language rules and conventions are anti-patriarchal due to the revolutionary overturning of hierarchical conventions that both reiterate and reinforce that patriarchal self. The totalizing systems of rationality which dominated both men and women are deeply inscribed within language, and therefore, sensory experience that is a primal mode of communication offers the possibility of resisting the patriarchal ideology. Thus, the experimental language style of the two narratives represents feminist resistance by distracting the repressive patriarchal language system.

Being driven away from the phallogentric conventions and interrupted by distraction, readers are more than distracted as they get more attentive in a dialectical way and become critical enough to counter-read the surface meaning. As a result, the thematic and linguistic interruptions in the tragic stories force the reader to see critically the situation in question rather than being absorbed in the catharsis. Defining Benjamin's aesthetic as "an aesthetic of redemption," Richard Wolin maintains that the strategy of interruption which aims at disseminating an effect of distraction "makes seemingly ordinary events strange and thereby provoke the astonishment of the recipient in the hope that he would cease to regard them as natural and acceptable" (152). Thus, the principle of interruption has a pedagogic function and not just the character of a stimulus although the process happens not explicitly but implicitly. Definitely, as much as it is ambiguous and distracting, it brings about readers' attentiveness and epiphany.

The moment of epiphany becomes the place where the feminist politics and the form of

short story are intermingled, interacting and collaborating with each other to form the particular genre of the feminist tragic short fiction. Reinforced by the density of the form of short story and the resistance of feminist literature, the two narratives embody women's tragedy aesthetically and politically at the same time. Harrington's statement regarding the epiphany of women's short story is noteworthy:

The closing epiphany allows the reader to apprehend the meaning of the whole, enabling the reader to move beyond normal perception and inviting the reader to consider as well as experience the metaphysical world. The experience of the short story marks a departure from the readers' typical experience of reality, ideally offering a perception heightened by the density and complexity of the form. (Harrington 6)

The newly offered perception through distraction and epiphany renders the stories political in that it distributes and redistributes the perceptible that was once imperceptible. In *The Politics of Literature*, Jacques Rancière elucidates that literature becomes politics when it "reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible," making "visible what was invisible" (Rancière 10). This presupposes that our perceptions and sensations are "signs of so many laws and ideas" (Rancière *Mute Speech* 155), and therefore the production of new sensations has a revolutionary register.

Davide Panagia explicates the argument more precisely:

One's sensibilities and perceptibilities play a leading role in one's disposition to the world and to others, and that the work of politics is the work of arranging and adapting, if not transforming altogether, world-making sensibilities and perceptibilities. (Panagia 1)

The epiphanic closing triggered by madness and death opens up the gap between the frivolity of

women's sensations and the significance of their implications. In other words, women's voice, desire, and sensuousness that were negated and disparaged become visible and audible as new objects and subjects. In this way, the aesthetic practices enact literary politics.

At first glance, the aesthetics of distraction of fiction might seem akin to Nietzsche's tragic effect³⁷ in that both emphasize spiritual intoxication. Being carried away – which is what distraction and intoxication have in common, and which is what links them to the concept of madness – does not necessarily exclude a certain profane illumination (Benjamin SW 2:209). Nietzsche's tragic effect is mainly focused on the eruption of the hidden emotion and energy; it is rather metaphysical and there is no room for moral or ethical implication. Although it is true that he finds an explanation of the pleasure peculiar to tragedy, nevertheless “he wants to avoid any moral account of the pleasure” (Miranda 6). Moreover, the aesthetics of tragic feminist short fiction is also distinguished from that of Brecht's tragic theory³⁸ despite the commonality that both pursue readers' estrangement from the protagonists' tragedy because it works through a gender-specific prism. Benjamin's aesthetics of distraction in feminist art presupposes “the affinity with a disposition attributed to female readership” (Hansen 219), whereas Brecht

³⁷ Nietzsche emphasizes the integration and harmony of the Dionysian and Apollonian in his discussion of art with a focus on the tragedy. He implies the sensible individuation and the savage instincts respectively in terms of the Apollonian and the Dionysian and asserts that tragedy brings us the pleasure through which we can experience our loss of self momentarily and at the same time the emancipation of our instincts.

³⁸ Standing against the conventional tragic effect, catharsis, Brecht insists on a radical separation of the elements and explains the intentions of epic theatre in terms of negation of the bourgeois culture and radical critique of fetishistic illusionism. For the productions of epic theater, he asserts that “words, music, and setting must become more independent of one another” (200), resulting in the “separate constellations of the action, and even the distances between them” (214). For Brecht, it has dramatic significance because “the spacing out of the elements, their emerging disparateness, makes for a recurrent shock effect through which social contradictions are revealed” (214).

assumes his audience is individualized without sensuous unification. In other words, aesthetics of distraction contains both the possibility of losing oneself and of integrating women in terms of a discontinuous sequence of sense impressions derived from their physical and material commonalities. Thus, the aesthetics of feminist tragic short fiction sharply contrasts with post-Kantian tragic aestheticians such Schelling and Schopenhauer because, although all of them focus on the conflicting emotions such as pain and pleasure in tragedy, most post-Kantian aestheticians pursue negations of negative emotion, rather than confronting it by avoiding immersion.

Ultimately, feminist tragic short fiction has unique aesthetic characteristics and tragic effects separated from those of other similar genres. Feminist narratology intertwined with brevity and allusive implication of the form of short fiction along with feminist violation of patriarchal language draws upon the aesthetics of distraction by sequencing contradictory modes of reception and faculties of discursive and sensuous entities. Put differently, the two narratives enact aesthetic distraction by distributing a patriarchal discursive self on one side and drawing on sensuous images of women's desire on the other. Facing the conjunction of seemingly incompatible tenses, images, and statements in terms of multi-sensory or extrasensory descriptions, distracted readers confront epistemological and ontological contradiction, which conveys the inconsistency and problematic nature of patriarchal society. This is revolutionary from the feminist perspective because it is at the extreme of both Hegelian reconciliation and Aristotelian or Kantian forceful repression of negative emotion from tragedy. Consequently, readers assume an autonomous epistemological position by engaging, decoding, and making meaning in an active way rather than simply exercising their freedom through rational power.

This is how the aesthetic distraction of feminist tragic short fiction establishes its aesthetic and political potential.

Chapter Three:

The Aesthetics of Dissensus in Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*

In this chapter, I illuminate the ways in which women's common sufferings perform the aesthetics of dissensus in tragic novels by analyzing Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* (1923) and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925). I also aim to clarify the relationship between aesthetics and politics which both confront and supplant each other. To this end, I situate the novels in the continuum of the tragic genre while revealing their aesthetic distinctiveness and at the same time define them as feminist novels in which women become aware of the irresolvable conflicts caused by the patriarchal ideologies. The sufferings of the female protagonists in the novels serve to reveal the intersectionality and chronicity of women's tragic lives as closely related to social, economic, and cultural systems. In other words, their suffering is not a temporal event but an essential part of everyday life that cannot be sublimated by the conclusive deaths or downfall. Due to the lack of resolution to suffering in these novels, they represent an alternate tragic aesthetic, embodying a materialistic aesthetic that is an antipode to the sublime aesthetic traditionally associated with the tragic genre.

I bring together *Weeds* and *Barren Ground* due to their thematic and generic commonalities. In addition to depicting rural life and Southern womanhood, they both deal with the feminist consciousness that arises within the patriarchal social environment, and to so via a tragic framework. Both novels counter the demand of the turn-of-the-century American reading public for regionalist novels, the peaceable rural life as "an antidote to the trauma of urban life"

(Foote15). Further, unlike the theme of women's misfortune and struggle that many American women's novels of the nineteenth century³⁹, the two novels reject happy endings or conflict resolution. They are also distinct from the novels of naturalism such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: a Girl of the Street* (1893), Frank Norris *McTeague* (1899), and Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy* (1925), in which women are victimized by their environment; in contrast, these feminist tragic novels emphasize the female characters' resistance, rather than overwhelming destructive power. Put another way, the feminist tragic novels of this period tend to not only represent the irreconcilable conflicts between the heroines' desire and social constraints in terms of tragic situations of female characters, but also reveals the protagonists' indomitable resistance. Such distances from the contemporary genres means the feminist tragic novel requires a distinctive critical approach attuned to its identity as counter-discourse to both the androcentrism and formalism of the classic tragedy, the determinism of the naturalistic novel, and even the conformism of the nineteenth-century sentimental novels.

The distinctive features of the two novels accordingly accompany idiosyncratic aesthetic values. In opposition to the sublime aesthetic, the feminist tragic novels make their readers focus on the sufferings and their social-cultural context, retrieving the negative emotion that was once repressed and purgated by a cathartic experience. In so doing, they negate the Cartesian

³⁹ Regarding the nineteenth century American women's novels such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854), Maria Susanna Cummins's *Lamplight* (1855), E.D.E.N. Southworth's *Hidden Hand* (1859), and Augusta Evans' *St. Elmo* (1866), Nina Baym argues that there was "an overplot in which all the novels participate" (12) about the thematic commonality that many women's novels shared happy endings.

perspective by including the body and nature rather than the transcendental reason which has excluded them. To illustrate the process, I draw on the aesthetics of dissensus, showing how the two novels embody dissension or manifestation rather than sublimation or transcendence.

The term ‘aesthetics of dissensus’ was coined by Jacques Rancière in the book with the same title, indicating that what is seemingly aesthetic is political insofar as a literary text engages the reader’s senses, modifying and redistributing new sensations. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière says that the political is aesthetic because they both involve the distribution of the sensible, “determining what can be seen and said” (13). In the novel, the aesthetic has an ambivalent relationship with the political as it both reflects and challenges the perception of the society by distributing and redistributing the sensible. Especially given that our perceptions and sensations are “signs of so many laws and ideas” (Rancière *Mute Speech* 155), the political implication of the aesthetics of the two novels in *Weeds* and *Barren Ground* derives from the fact that both Kelley and Glasgow create the new senses as they delineate the lives of the two female protagonists as excessive existences, over and above the normative.

The sensations of woman has been a main object of both aesthetics and politics. As Marc Redfield argues, “as a discourse involving the senses, and thus a subordinate helpmeet to the sterner realms of ethics and epistemology, aesthetics has enduring associations with femininity” (35). Meanwhile, the concept of woman has political implications as it has served as an essence of male identity, beauty, and legitimacy while the binary opposition of man and woman has occupied our epistemology for a long time. Therefore, the new sensations of the woman as expressed in the novels act as a catalyst to revolutionize our epistemic standards both aesthetically and politically. To illustrate, the childless woman, unscrupulous woman, unfaithful

wife and working woman are the excessive existences that have been excluded from the traditional category of woman. They are outlaw but powerful existences, redistributing the new senses and revolutionizing our way of thinking. In fact, the protagonists of *Weeds* and *Barren Ground* embody the conflict and disparity, oscillating between the socialized self and the self-created self. Their dissonant voices are sustained until the end of the novels, calling attention to social background without being negated by sublimation and transcendence. Eventually, the unresolved conflicts in the two feminist tragic novels arouse the political skepticism on the consensus of our society.

On the surface, such political implications begin from the feminist awareness that both of the protagonists' sufferings and resistance are caused by man-centered ideologies. The two novels demonstrate how the traditional image of woman and sex-roles make women have different social experiences from men and suffer from injustices due to their sex. As a strong woman, Judith Pippinger (aka Judy) in *Weeds* is at odds with her role as housewife and mother imposed by the patriarchal society. To her, marriage is entrapment in which she should focus only on her domestic life, without a chance for self-activation or self-fulfillment. After many years of struggling, she empties her emotional world so that she can avoid any further sufferings and ultimately becomes deadened psychologically and emotionally. Likewise, Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground* is a victim of the patriarchal society as she is forced to internalize the traditional woman image inculcated by the society and encounters the tragic situations such as her lover's desertion, a car accident, a miscarriage and the loss of her husband. Specifically, due to the false image of gender, she projects her own fantasy onto Jason Greylock, believing that he would satisfy her romantic quest and make her dreams come true. Mostly the dreams involve marriage,

domesticity, and motherhood. The fantasy, however, leads only to Jason's desertion of her once she is pregnant with his baby. Fearing the criticism of community and feeling desperation, she leaves for the city in which she can get a job and live alone. Although she seems to achieve her successful life as a farmer, she feels sheer loneliness and meaninglessness, only achieving a half-success.

The novels' ambiguous endings serve as a feminist antithesis to the man-centered literary tradition, rendering the two novels both political and aesthetic. That the two female protagonists are interpellated tragically by the patriarchal ideology and at the same time experience the feminist awakening signifies the aesthetic dynamic from which the new sensations emerge. The fact that aesthetics involves our sensations and the distribution of sensations has political import indicates that, insofar as our life engages in the formation of the new sensations, we can aestheticize and revolutionize our lives, enabling political change. In *The Politics of Literature*, Rancière also elucidates that literature becomes politics when it "reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible," making "visible what was invisible" (10). This lies at the heart of what I see as the political aesthetics of *Weeds* and *Barren Ground*. In short, dissensus plays an important role in literature because it constitutes a critical attitude that inoculates fiction of the real with disagreement and re-articulates "connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given commonsense (*Dissensus* 23). In line with such belief, I will illustrate in what follows how the two novels enact an aesthetics of dissensus by redistributing the sensible that was invisible and unspeakable, so that it critiques both oppressive ideologies of women and a man-centered literary tradition.

The Tragic Responses to the Ideological Interpellation

In *Weeds* and *Barren Ground*, the sufferings in the context of patriarchal oppression are the main theme, sustaining the dichotomous thematic structure, resulting from the discrepancy between the original self and socialized one. While the socialized self both comes from and reinforces the ideological consensus, the original self involves in disintegrating the consensus, bringing along heteronomy involved in women's senses. Aesthetic intervention in *Weeds* and *Barren Ground*, therefore, critical and subversive, engaging in our senses and perceptions as they challenge the historically established senses of women and community in an empirical way. Virtually, Judy is fairly healthy and energetic and "the qualities of elusiveness and boldness seemed bafflingly interwoven in her character" (13). Her father's remarks on her personality-- "little gal's life enough for a dozen sech-- too much life, too much life for a gal!"-- foreshadow the irreconcilable conflict between her personality and social image of a woman. Such conflict is reinforced by the fact that Judy has a special talent for drawing pictures, usually comic, satirical, or derisive. Her father Bill "was proud of his girl's ability to draw, but felt it his duty to discourage her choice of subjects" (26) because the talent might be bewildering to the eyes of the community. The rationale behind this anxiety lies in the notion that a woman should be in the boundary of the social imposition of a woman to be submissive and inactive. Henceforth, her artistic talent resulting from her free and imaginative mind prefigures the conflict between her nature and the social image of a woman.

Her nature also shows inherent disparity with family life. Unlike her sisters Luella and Lizzie, Judy cannot enjoy being shut up in the house, playing with sisters or doing domestic work and practicing the roles of wife and mother. Judy rejects doing any domestic work, which

she finds only tedious and boring. Moreover, Judy cannot agree with her sisters, who think only women should be in charge of the domestic work. Recognizing that her brother Craw “was safe and aloof in his masculinity,” Judy asks why he is free from the chores, to which her sisters say, ““boys don’t wash dishes”” (27). Forced to accept the feminine code, however, Judy shows only her boyish character, by breaking dishes and ruining pans. Judy’s tomboy personality makes her identify more with her father, Bill, than her mother. She enjoys working with her father “when he had a job of carpentry to do, a bench to make, or a shelf or some new chicken coops for the spring broods” (30). Unlike when she does the women’s work, she fully enjoys laboring outdoors and shows her talent. Meanwhile, Judy cannot identify with her mother, Annie Pippinger, who is an archetype of a traditional selfless mother. Described as “a small, inconsequential woman and “a bit of drab insignificance,” Annie exists only to serve her family, by cooking, serving, and cleaning. She appears detached from others’ lives, remaining mostly in the kitchen and working on the house chores. She eventually draws people’s attention only after she dies of pneumonia due to the hard working and malnutrition: “The mouse-like little” Annie was claiming “more attention now than she had ever done in all the forty-odd years of her drab existence” (50). After the funeral, Judy’s sisters take over their mother’s duties but Judy was “such poor help about the house” (56). Judy’s tomboyish traits foreshadow her sufferings in marriage as she lives the life of a mother and a wife.

In a sense, marriage serves as a catalyst that forces Judy to change her personality. For women in Scott County, marriage is the only vocation without which women have no other way of surviving financially. Indeed, Judy makes four times less than what a hired man would have made for the same work despite her hard working and good skills. Such financial vulnerability

forces women to choose marriage as a way of surviving. Actually, other women her age try to be ladylike and domestic all the time in order to make themselves good candidates for wife. With others' warning and advice to reform, Judy eventually learns "to smile at the young men, and to practice whenever occasion offered the arts of banter and coquetry," developing "an interest in clothes, and brought to the neat" (59). Such change is surprising, given that she has previously said that performing "prim niceness" and "sitting quietly in straight-backed chairs" like a girl is "a deadening negation of life" (57). Her changed personality leads to her marriage with Jerry Blackford, triggering the successive sufferings.

Throughout Judy's marital life, the negation of her own nature and forced acceptance of social ideologies appear in a full-fledged way. It is not that she gives away her own personality from the beginning of the married life. Judy and Jerry think that they will be happy as erotic bliss enables them to forget and ignore their poverty and hard work. After a while, Judy realizes that she needs to be changed. No longer an independent autonomous individual, she becomes Jerry's wife who "cannot appear in the company of any man other than her husband without making talk" (180), and she cannot enjoy outdoor life freely anymore. In addition, the hard work in the tobacco field deprives them of any romantic atmosphere, making them always worn out and exhausted without "no energy left to laugh or even talk" (127). Besides, due to additional housework Judy must do as a housewife, she cannot find pleasure in outdoor activities that she enjoyed before marriage.

Their hardship, moreover, doubles after she has children. When Judy gives birth to her first baby Billy, many people visit and compliment her baby. Jabez was the only one of the visitors who shows melancholy moods toward Judy and her baby. His statement foreshadows

Judy's tragic future:

You'd otta be out over the hills a-stalkin' turkeys or a-fetchin' up the caows, or a-ridin' hoss back over the roads up hill an' down dale, or else jes' a-runnin' wild with the res' o' the wild things: grass an' wind an' rabbits an' ants an' brier roses an' woodchunks an' sech. That's where you'd otta be, Judy. But I expect you won't never git back there no more waal, I s'pose the world has gotta be kep' a-goin'. (351)

Indeed, Judy's life becomes tougher as her first baby Billy "irritates and harasses" Judy, and the burden of childcare responsibility debilitates her physically and mentally. She is mentally drained because she always has to be conscious of "the prying eyes" and "oppressive aura" (157) of community people who expect intensive motherhood from her. Besides, she is also physically restless because of the domestic work. Even when Judy needs Jerry's help the most, he will not take on any domestic responsibilities. It is not easy for her to "break the monotony and loneliness" (159) although she was "shut up in the little house in the hollow" (170). Moreover, the baby changes the relationship between Judy and Jerry: Jerry views her only as a mother and caregiver and afterward they find they share no common interests. Realizing this on their first trip to Georgetown, Judy feels cold and dreary. When she finds Jerry talking about her in a derogatory way before his friends, she feels "rage and burning sense of insult" (182). Her frustrating and tragic situation derives from the biological fact that she is a woman rather than just single factors such as bearing, caring, working, or mating. In other words, the images and prejudices the society imposes on a woman, daughter, sister, wife, or a mother, force women to forfeit their nature, personality, dream, and self-activation.

Such traditional gender-assumptions also plays an important role for Dorinda in *Barren*

Ground. Her inner life is merely a hidden field in the landscape, neglected, monotonous, abandoned to solitude, and yet with a smothered fire, like the wild grass, running through it (12). Socialized into the masculinist bias in terms of education and community, Dorinda becomes occupied by the man-centered romantic fantasy that women's happiness belongs only to marriage with men. As she indulges in reading romantic books such as the *Waverley* novels and *The Lives of the Missionaries*, she internalizes the false images of women, which are mostly of passive and inactive. As feminist critic Judith Fetterley argues, "women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view" (xx). Dorinda, through the books, internalizes patriarchal standards and assumptions about marriage and romantic love, which she just applies her fantasy to Jason Greylock right away when she meets him (12). The main problem of the romantic fantasy is that it naturalizes not only women's passivity and dependence but also men's masculinity and priority. As a result, as Margaret Donovan Bauer adds, "Dorinda falls in love with her 'idea' of Jason Greylock, transforming the young doctor into a man worthy of her adulation" (67). She also becomes passive when she encounters Jason. Her passivity appears when she interacts with Jason and reacts to his desertion; "after he had driven away, she stood gazing after him" (35), dwelling on what he says. Jason leads the conversation and forces his opinions on her: He expresses his thought and makes questions freely, but she keeps her opinions to herself, listening to his talk and making short answers and imperative sentences.

Dorinda's passivity becomes reinforced through her mother. Like Judy's mother, Dorinda's mother Eudora Oakely is self-abnegating as she always sacrifices herself, particularly for her husband and two sons. Even though she is suffering from a critical state of neuralgia and seems "to have neither bone nor muscle" (56), she denies having enough food in case that

anyone might want more food. Although Dorinda sometimes “scolds at a martyrdom that seemed to her unnecessary,” she acknowledges that, “like the doctrine of predestination, there was nothing to be done about it” (54). Realizing that domesticity and subordination are women’s destiny, Dorinda becomes more and more passive and dependent because there are no options for her but the two: housewife and spinster. Because being a spinster means a failure of woman’s life and an object of sympathy, Dorinda becomes obsessed by her appearance and beauty because they are an important commodity with which she can marry Jason. To further her cause with Jason, Dorinda decides to buy an extravagant dress despite her low income and frugality. Her community teaches her the female way of being. Women in her community every day reinforce the notion that it is women’s job to be a ‘proper’ commodity for a man. The existence of a spinster named Miss Texanna serves as an exemplary case. It is not a coincidence that Dorinda decides to spend the money for the dress right after she encounters pathetic Miss Texana who “had a lover killed in the war and never married,” saying that “I’m going to have one good dress, I don’t care what happens!” (72). In this way, Dorinda immediately responds to the interpellation of the man-centered ideology by being a passive and dependent commodity because being a spinster means a failure of woman’s life in the Pedlar’s Mill community.

However, Dorinda’s dream to be Jason’s wife comes to nothing as Jason has an affair with Geneva Ellgood and marries her, leaving Dorinda pregnant with his baby. What makes her abandonment tragic is that she pays all her attention to him, sacrificing her relationship with her family and friends. She purchases the extravagant dress with the money she saved for her father, and she turns away from her friend Rose Emily Pedlar, who is suffering from critical tuberculosis. Although Dorinda feels miserable about her family’s poverty and Rose’s illness, she

ignores them after she encounters Jason. Because heterosexual relationships are perceived as more important for women than female friendships, she shifts her main emotional energies to Jason. All that is left after her abandonment is the community's disapprobation and a harsh reality, so she leaves her community for a city where she can live alone. She happens to arrive at New York and has a miscarriage.

The tragedy of female protagonists in *Weeds* and *Barren Ground* derives from their identification with traditional gender expectations. Judith in *Weeds* suffers the discrepancy between her own nature and the woman's role and lives a tragic life as the result. Likewise, Dorinda in *Barren Ground* experiences a myriad of tragic events such as her abandonment and miscarriage, which also arises from the gender socialization. Despite of the differences in their environment and status, their tragedies are similar in that marriage serves as their central event in which women become subordinated and passive. Around the compulsory heterosexual marriage, the ideological apparatuses such as religion, education, family, and community reproduce and reinforce the man-centered ideologies, ultimately leading to their tragic lives.

The Feminist Resistance

In addition to the tragic plots, what makes *Weeds* and *Barren Ground* feminist tragic novels is the fact that they portray resistance to masculinist ideologies. Based on the thematic and structural similarities among a group of novels at the turn of the century, in the introduction to this dissertation, I define tragic feminist fiction as narrative in which a feminist consciousness is manifested in terms of tragic vision and contentious structure. Unlike other female characters who are sacrificed and defeated by the environment and destiny, Judy and Dorinda perform their resistant wills, exhibiting feminist awareness. When it comes to Judith in *Weeds*, she first realizes

that the compulsory marriage results in harsh labor and frustrating domesticity she suffers. As a way of resistance, she demystifies motherhood. As many scholars point out, motherhood is not an ideologically neutral term but an oppressive assumption regarding proper mothering.⁴⁰ To wit, the ideology presses false ideal images onto women and children. The problem of the images is that women are supposed to suffer from guilt due to the false expectations and become more subordinated through the forced domesticity without self-activation. As a way of resistance, Kelley demystifies the ideology of motherhood by describing the scene of Judy's childbearing in a frank and disparaging way: Judy makes "a deep-toned, guttural, growling sound that ended in a snarl," giving "vent to the prolonged, wolfish noise," and "her gums were fleshed in the snarl like the gums of an angry wolf" (544). When Kelley tried to publish *Weeds* in 1923, she confronted critic's suggestion to get rid of the childbirth section.⁴¹ When Kelley disagreed with the suggestion, Alfred Harcourt insisted that she cut the section entirely, writing, "We don't think you need all of the first obstetrical incident. It is a powerful piece of writing and is what thousands of women go through, but-almost therefore- it is not peculiar to the story of Judith" (qtd. in Berg 89). It is memorable that there has been no women writer until that time who depicted such ordinary experience as frankly as Kelley did. To most publishers at that time, her frankness seemed to be excessive and immoderate enough to derogate from the mother myth. Such dysphemism also

⁴⁰ Sharon Hays argues in *The Cultural Contradiction Motherhood* (1998) that the mothering ideology requiring women to be a selfless mother when engaging in childrearing in the house was so prevalent in the nineteenth century that it sharply contradicts the working ethics asking women to be a hard-worker in the society. Her argument has also been supported by other sociologists such as Benjamin Spock, T. Berry Brazelton, and Penelope Leach.

⁴¹ The section had been excised until it reappeared in the Feminist Press edition in 1982 titled "The Unpublished Scene: Billy's Birth."

appears in describing Judy's first-born baby Billy:

It was over, and the doctor triumphantly held up nature's reward for all the anguish: a little, bloody, groping, monkey-like object, that moved its arms and legs with a spasmodic, froglike motion and uttered a sound that was not a cry nor a groan nor a grunt nor anything of the human or even the animal world, but more like a harsh grating of metal upon metal. (348)

Using animal imagery, Judy desecrates the sanctified images of a mother and a baby, and thereby distances herself from the sacred image of woman as an immaculate reproducer and unconditional lover of children. Judy's decision not to give birth at a certain point, therefore, is a form of a political resistance as it begins from the feminist awareness as follows:

Her flesh recoiled and her spirit rose in fiery protest against any further degradation and suffering. Too long she had been led along blindly. Now her eyes were open and she would be a tool no more of man's lust and nature's cunning. She would see her path and choose it, and she would be mistress of her own body. She would order her future life as it seemed best to herself. (299-300)

From this, it is indisputable that what she seeks desperately is not avoidance of childrearing but autonomy. Therefore, her decision is based on her feminist awareness that she has been a victim of "male vitality" and "his aura" (209) and she "wants to be unnatural" (240). In this regard, she does not want to have another baby. Realizing that the concept of the natural is loaded with a myriad of unequal perspectives, she seeks to transgress the natural in order to retrieve her autonomy.

Judy's adultery can be seen as an act of autonomy and freedom. She goes to a church

meeting not because she is a religious person but because she wants to get out of her domesticity and have social interactions. There, for the first time, Judy feels passion for being a subject of gaze, not an object thereof and enacts such autonomy, overwhelming the minister:

Once, by an effort of will, she met his look with her own dark, level gaze and did not turn her eyes aside. He started and turned abruptly away; and in the dim light she thought she saw a dark red flush pass across his face. Having found that she had this power, she was constantly prodded by the urge to exercise it. ... It was not mere coquetry but an irresistible force stronger like a keen sword into the dark turmoil of the evangelist's smoldering eyes. (270-71)

Her gaze on the minister is the counterpart to the male gaze through which women have been subordinated and victimized, losing their individuality and corporeality. According to Susan Bordo, "male spectatorship" is critical to the social hierarchies and distribution of resources. Through the male gaze, the female body becomes a territory, a valuable resource to be acquired. Thus, the socially defined and culturally mediated forms to which the female body is expected to conform serve the political and economic struggle over the determination and possession of available resources (Ponterroto 147).⁴² Given that the male gaze causes women's multi-dimensional oppressions, Judy's gaze becomes personal but political behavior, retrieving her autonomous power and agency.

With the power she gains from the autonomous gaze, Judy becomes conscious of an aspect of her physical self as if she had become aware of her own body for the first time.

⁴² For further reference, refer to Conboy and Medina & Stanbury.

Now the beauty of her body lived and moved with her continually, a part of her consciousness. She gazed long into the little looking glass at her cheeks, radiant with a warm flush, her eyes softly luminous. Something of the cool, level quality had gone out of the eyes leaving a deep radiance. Looking into the glass she laughed little soft, shivery laughs and felt the blood rise tingling into her cheeks. (272)

Judy's recognition of her body in an unfamiliar way signals her feminist awareness of women's subordination under the male gaze. Therefore, Judy's awakening to her own body implies the discovery of her autonomous self who, for the first time, experiences "an ecstasy transcending anything that she had ever felt in her life" (272) in terms of her affair with the minister. After the affair, Judy feels revitalized to the extent that she performs all the tasks, feeling that "she comes forth strangely fresh and unwearied" (272). Her agency and sexuality undercut patriarchal gender myths and her rejection of motherhood challenges the concept of maternity and female sexuality.

The sense of autonomy and triumph, however, brings another hardship into Judy's life when she becomes pregnant by the minister. After many efforts, she decides to have a self-abortion. After many efforts such as inserting a needle into her vagina, drinking a noxious herb, and attempting suicide, she eventually ends the pregnancy. The miscarriage brings her critical hemorrhaging. While Judy suffers "writhing and screaming" on the bed, many women in Scott County visit her house and help her. However, their concern turns out to be for their "self-righteousness and the joy of scandal" (289). Feeling frustrations and a sense of sheer loneliness, Judy silently sorts out her emotions, greeting Jabez "with a shadow of the old flashing smile," but she does "not smile once for the women" (291). Women's hostility toward women is the result of their identification with male gaze and misogynous perspectives. Thus, promiscuous

women who exist outside of patriarchal ideology provide a chance for other women to convince themselves to be faithful and good wives and mothers. Unable to see herself as anything other than “mother” or “whore,” Judy decides to resign herself to her tragic destiny. She gets a “spirit of resignation” (330), as she realizes that to fight her lot only produces more pain and suffering.

In the same fashion, Dorinda in *Barren Ground* drains her emotions as a means of distancing herself from oppressive patriarchal ideologies. Jason’s betrayal devastates Dorinda and makes her turn against men and the God who was her mother’s consolation. She becomes a barren ground from which no emotional response arises as she chooses her life without any romantic love and dependence. Dorinda’s changes, like Judy’s, are derived from her feminist consciousness that is triggered by Jason’s betrayal. As Jason tells her that people around him “brought pressure” on him and made him marry Geneva, a rich woman who is more valuable to him, it becomes apparent that he is just “weak, vain, wholly contemptible” and she cannot even hate him (169). It seems to Dorinda that he betrays her “not from brutality, but from weakness” (169). It makes her turn away from him, with a “stern beauty in her face” (170), rather than regret or resentment. After a while, Dorinda is determined to leave the Scott County not to avoid possible criticism but in response to a realization:

Through all her misery there persisted a dim, half-conscious recognition that she was living with only a part of her being. Deep down in her, beneath the rough texture of experience, her essential self was still superior to her folly and ignorance, was superior even to the conspiracy of circumstances that hemmed her in. (184)

The recognition is proto-feminist in that it presupposes Judy’s essential self, which was suppressed and hidden by the image of woman inculcated by the patriarchal society. From the

discovery, she finds out “the vein of iron held in her soul,” which encourages her to leave the Pedlar’s Mill for an independent life. As she finds her new self, she feels herself “as strange and far away as Africa,” and people “separate like the stars in a vast emptiness” (185). The psychological distance serves as momentum to understand everything from a new perspective and ultimately contributes to the formation of a new self. Accordingly, her decision to leave her community should be understood as her attempt to avoid scorn and criticism and to find an arena in which she can activate herself regardless of the women’s role imposed by the community. Indeed, the female way of being is a married woman or spinster, and being a spinster is considered as a failure. Therefore, leaving her community both physically and psychologically is essential to her journey for the independent self.

As part of the journey, she also distances herself from religion. In doing so, she sheds the morality that would make her feel guilty, and she also rejects any law or authority repressing her inner self. Conspicuously, having lived an unhappy and troubling life, her mother Eudora depended on her religion to the extent that “without her religion, she would have been lost” (43) because she reconciled herself with the role of selfless mother at every crisis in her life caused by her suicidal impulse and depression. Right after her decision to leave the community, Dorinda, however, rejects religion, telling her mother Eudora that “I’m not coming, I’m never coming to prayers again” (171). To Dorinda, religion is no more than an oppressive ideology, precipitating misogyny and moral laws, forcing her into being a submissive and sacrificial woman. For the same reason, she rejects the existence of her mother who is as restrictive and oppressive as her religion. Her mother’s way of being itself is a threat to Dorinda because her mother typifies selflessness and powerlessness, which Dorinda wants to throw off. Therefore, Dorinda sustains

the ambivalent relationship with her mother because Eudora is the closest and the remotest person to her. Sustaining the distance from both religion and her mother has inherent feminist implications in that she defends herself from the androcentrism they represent.

In a sense, Dorinda's emotional remoteness contributes to her independent life in New York. Whereas her emotions are involved in her romantic love, religious passion, and human relationships, her denial of emotions serves as a momentum to live her new life, and eventually contributes to her success in the masculine arena in terms of her rationality rather than emotion. As she leaves Pedlar's Mill, she thinks that "she is finished with romance forever and she would die before she would seek it" (184). In New York where Dorinda sees everything new and strange, and "every emotion--affection, tenderness, sympathy, sentiment--all these natural approaches to experience had shriveled up like nerves that are dead" (203). New York, as Shawn Miller elucidates, "is a miraculous place where unwed expectant mothers may conveniently miscarry and be cared for by kind doctors who later employ them as nannies and eventually lend them the capital necessary to start diaries" (89). Beyond anguish to survive, "there was nothing but ashes" (203). This situation in which she sees the reality as it is in terms of her own experiences brings her a new realization:

Her self-confidence returned when she found how easy it was to pursue her individual life, to retain her secret identity, in the midst of the city. She discovered presently that when nothing matters the problem of existence becomes amazingly simple. ... Her courage proved to be as vast as her wretchedness. (204)

Acquiring her confidence and courage, she begins her new way of life as a woman farmer, leaving her emotions behind. Dorinda thinks that "ever-present sense of sin," which made the

female mind more depressing, was “entirely absent from her reflections” (202). At the time of her spiritual transformation, she also experiences physical change, having a miscarriage by a car accident. Though not induced on purpose, the miscarriage enables Dorinda to lead an independent life without a burden. It is the result of Glasgow’s negotiation at the intersection of Dorinda’s independent life and patriarchal oppression. Put differently, Glasgow appropriates the repressive patriarchal ideology on womanhood and motherhood by implying that Dorinda acknowledges and concedes that she would have not lived her independent life in New York without miscarriage.

Now that Dorinda is no longer interested in romance and fantasy, and without the fatherless baby, she seeks financial independence. After the accident, she works for Dr. Faraday to look after his office and his children. Her working for two years brings great satisfaction to both Dr. Faraday and Dorinda. She becomes a confident and efficient woman whose “efficiency is really remarkable” (248). As indicated by Dr. Faraday’s compliment that Dorinda is “practical,” unlike “girls of your age,” her efficiency is the result of breaking herself of femininity. In the same vein, she approaches agriculture and farming scientifically and logically in terms of modern technology. Utilizing such a masculine way of thinking that was not supposed to be hers also enables her to consider her marriage with Nathan, whom she thinks helpful to her farming. Although she rejects Nathan’s proposal, she changes her mind because she thinks “the only marriage she could tolerate” is “one which attempted no swift excursions into emotion” (366) and thinks her marriage with Nathan would be the one. Dorinda marries him under the two conditions: he should make no sexual demands on her, and Dorinda should run her dairy in the way she wants. As such, she lives her passionless and sexless marriage and achieves

her success as a woman farmer, by purchasing Jason's Five Oaks and restoring its fertility.

However, the seemingly successful life does not bring Dorinda sheer happiness, as she finds herself lonely. She feels as if "she was encased in wounded pride as in defensive armour" (382). Eventually, she realizes that "she is still lonely," and her marriage is "not a remedy for isolation of spirit" (390). However hard she tries to console herself, reminding herself of an axiom, "You can't have everything" (388), she cannot stop her emotion from erupting at a moment. Further, her tragic feeling becomes consummated when Nathan dies from a train accident. Although Nathan's death is not a loss of love to Dorinda, she suffers from losing her soul mate and a good companion, not knowing how she could live her life without him. This seems a contrast to Jason's death that does not arouse any emotions from her:

So at last he was dead. He was dead, and she could never know whether or not he remembered. She could never know how much or how little she had meant in his life. And more tragic than the mystery that surrounded him at the end, was the fact that neither the mystery nor his end made any difference. The passion that had ruined her life thirty years ago was nothing, was less than nothing, to her to-day. She was not glad that he was dead. She was not sorry that he had died alone. (516)

As she has lived her life since Jason's desertion without emotion in order to protect herself against further hurt, Dorinda has given up on love, hatred, and even sympathy. The tragic sense of futility evolves from her realization that her apathetic but struggling life turns out to be as fictitious as her youth in which she is occupied by men-centered fantasy. Dorinda's life after her abandonment is so goal-oriented and apathetic that there is no room for her real self. Her last remark with which the novel ends, "I am thankful to have finished with all that" (526)

epitomizes the exhaustion of her life as a woman without a chance to be herself.

The transgressive natures of Judy and Dorinda and the negative representation of their marital relationships, coupled with their repudiation of the socio-cultural expectations of the maternal ideal, render the novels a significant revision of the concept of femininity and that of motherhood as an institution. Kelley and Glasgow depict sexuality, reproduction and community as tightly interwoven with economic structures and political systems. By drawing attention to the ways in which economic exigency, social institutions and cultural conditioning suppress female self-fulfillment, the authors challenge the essentialist ideology of the feminine and the maternal, suggesting that maternal desire and gender consciousness are not a naturally given essence but a construct in authoritative institutions.

The Aesthetics of Dissensus

The challenge posed by *Weeds* and *Barren Ground* can be both political and aesthetical due to the new sensibility and the way it counters repressive ideologies and literary tradition. Through the lens of aesthetics, this can be explained in terms of the aesthetics of dissensus. As reflected in Rancière's "distribution of the sensible," the new sensibility embodies the emergence of new women who were invisible and unsayable in the category of women in the common sense of the male-centered society. Their emergence is not accidental in that they are created through intentional transposition and rearrangement of our senses, time, and space. This does not simply mean that they are standing against the patriarchal ideology, by attacking the masculinist perspectives or creating a counter-discourse to the oppressive ideology. Rather, it involves the transformation of the sensible and its perception. Specifically, the two novels depict the dynamics of the shifting standpoint from a victim of the repressive ideology to an autonomous

self and create the new concept of woman, womanhood, and motherhood by associating the conservative ones with new feeling, activity, time, and space. In doing so, the distinctions between the fiction and the real, the personal and the collective, and life and art become blurred, and as a result, a new configuration of our perspectives on nature appears in terms of the dynamic between the signifying woman and the signified object.

Particularly, Kelley and Glasgow draw on the sensible through the aberrant woman figure in a way that affects our perceptions and ultimately demand the modification of the way of thinking. Throughout the novels, for instance, the ideology of motherhood is doubted and denied through sharp portrayals of resentment and even filicidal impulses. In *Weeds*, Judy appears to be a callous and vicious mother based on the highly demanding ideology of the motherhood. Many women in her community were “aghast at the sacrilege” of Judy’s plan to make her baby’s clothes “in a day on the old machine at dad’s” and asked, “hain’t you ‘shamed of yerse’f” (156). Behind their responses, lies the ideology of intensive mothering that, according to Hays, institutionalizes “expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, and labor-intensive child rearing” (54) and ultimately makes women domesticized and repressed. Unable to reconcile herself to the ideology, however, Judy becomes antagonistic towards other women who give advice on mothering, finding them “vile and disgusting” (153) to the extent that she “locks the door and hides in the bedroom when she saw a female figure approaching,” due to their “dominating and forceful” attitudes (156). Even after she gives birth to her son, she is distant from the selfless and angelic figure of the mother ideology. She often feels irritated and becomes violent toward her children, identifying them with vampires who drinks her blood:

She would slap him (Billy) savagely and force him to blubber into silence, gasping and

choking and catching spasmodically at the heaving surges of breath that rose in him like tidal waves... In such moments she hated them both, the born and the unborn, two little greedy vampires working on her incessantly, the one from without, the other from within, never giving her a moment's peace, bent upon drinking her last drop of blood, tearing out her last shrieking nerve. (208)

It is remarkable that such unmotherly attitudes stem from her domesticity when she tells her husband Jerry, "Mebbe you'd act mean too if you was shet up with im all day long, like you was in a jail" (208). Rather than ascribing her violence to the boy or feeling guilty about her unmotherly character, she associates her uncaring and unfeeling rearing with the oppressive domesticity she was forced to accept as a married woman.

Such unmotherly character reaches an extreme as Judy reveals her filicidal impulses.

Taking care of her sick daughter Annie, Judy is struck by the idea that Annie should die:

And yet at the same moment that she yearned over the sick child, another set of thoughts, strange and sinister, came forward with startling boldness, thoughts that had come to her at other times and before which she had quailed, as, in the darkness of a wakeful night, one quails before thoughts of approaching death. ... and following them out to the end they brought her relentlessly to the conclusion that it would be better that the child should die. (321-2)

Her filicidal impulse, however, is not as impulsive as postpartum depression, but seems purposeful as she thinks, "She would live only to endure, to be patient, to work, to suffer, ... without knowing that she had never lived" (321). It is noticeable that she wants Annie to die given the life she is supposed to live as a woman as evidenced by the miserable lives of Judy and

Judy's mother after whom Annie was named. Furthermore, Judy induces an abortion. Without remorse or guilt, Judy reveals the filicidal impulse and it runs counter to the ideology of motherhood that has typically required women to sacrifice themselves for their children and viewed other alternatives as not viable or as morally reprehensible.

Like Judy, Dorinda in *Barren Ground* is a woman who loses her baby. Although Dorinda does not show her filicidal impulse purposefully, she reveals her filicidal instinct indirectly as she feels a sense of relief after she has a miscarriage due to a car accident. When she regains consciousness after the car accident, she neither asks about her baby nor feels a sense of loss. Recognizing her miscarriage implicitly and responding to the nurse's repetitive question, "Is there anything that worries you" (216), Dorinda shakes her head and says, "it won't hurt me," to which the nurse responds, "Well, I thought you'd take it sensibly" (218). Seen from a traditional perspective on motherhood, Dorinda's nonchalant attitude toward the loss of her baby seems aberrant and atypical. More importantly, being situated in the context that her status as a single mom becomes a huge obstacle in her journey to be spiritually and financially independent, Dorinda's miscarriage arouses a relief in readers' minds, counterposing motherhood and self-realization. Indeed, right after she goes out of the hospital, she works in a professional manner and strives to concentrate on her business as a woman farmer, leaving behind her past memory completely. In this context, it makes it clear that pregnancy can be an obstacle to women's self-realization and social success and the motherhood ideologies are not naturally essential to every woman.

In addition, Dorinda counters the essentialist and biological features of the ideology of motherhood in terms of her relationship with John Abner. Although he comes into her life as a

stepson, she feels a motherly sense of attachment toward John. His “limp never failed to awaken a sympathetic feeling in her bosom.” Further, “for John Abner, Dorinda felt no anxiety beyond the maternal one which arose from his lameness and his delicate health. He had been a comfort to her ever since he had come to the farm” (390). Dorinda consummates her maternal affection with her decision to hand down all her farms to John, saying “When I am gone, both farms will be yours” (526). In contrast with her apathy toward her own baby, Dorinda’s sympathetic and affectionate attitude toward John Abner becomes a counterexample to the mother myth that women have inherent unconditional affection toward their biological offspring.

Meanwhile, the two novels appropriate the traditional role of the wife, by depicting women’s desire for asexual relationships, which runs counters to traditional gender ideology. Standing against the dominant discourse that objectifies female sexuality and perpetuates female desire driven by the need to gratify men, Judy and Dorinda seek sexless relationships with their husbands at a certain point. Particularly, Judy decides not to have another baby, estranging her husband, and Dorinda seeks her marriage without any sexual relationships. When Nathan proposes to her, Dorinda says, “I couldn’t stand any love-making” because “sex-emotion was as dead as a burned-out cinder in her heart” (373). With the promise that Nathan will not make any sexual demands on her, they are married. Their relationship after marriage brings Dorinda “an incalculable advantage in merely liking Nathan while he loved her” because it is “the best substitute for love” (387). Such desexualization also appears in the relationship between Judy and Jabez in *Weeds* as they embody real friendship without any sexual implication. Even when Judy travels with Jerry for the first time, she “found herself wishing that it was Uncle Jabez who was sitting beside her instead of Jerry” (170). Kelley values such friendship above the marital

relationship of Judy and Jerry by bestializing and dehumanizing the relationship; Jerry's courtship before marriage is compared to the mating of turkeys "growing up quick an' lay eggs an' make more little turkeys" (68) and furthermore Kelley simplifies and dehumanizes their romance, writing that it was "a speedy, simple, natural courting, like the coming together of two young wild things in the woods" (102). What is at stake in the juxtaposition is that women's asexual bodily existence violates their 'proper roles,' rejecting their submission to male lusts and women's passivity which derive from their reproductive role.

It is notable that their violation and transgression are not for opposition's sake but from the transposition of seemingly discordant sensations, feelings, moments, and spaces. The transposition enables the political and aesthetic appearance of new women who were excluded from the community in terms of its redistributions and ruptures. As distribution of the sensible that seems to be only aesthetic and personal becomes political as it involves our languages, bodies, and institutions and ultimately induce social and collective transformations. Rancière's definition of "political community" is relevant; "a political community" is "the sharing of what is not given as being in-common: between the visible and the invisible, the near and the far, the present and the absent" (*Disagreement* 138). In *Dissensus*, he also argues that "the aesthetics of politics consists above all in the framing of a *we*" (141) as the fictitious "people" exist always in a space where it should not be. Based on his definition of the political, the aesthetics of appearance of women as a conglomeration of incompatible sense, acting, and space in the novels is inherently political in that it is the inclusion of "a visible into the field of experience, modifying the regime of the visible" (*Disagreement* 99). In the same fashion, the aesthetics of dissensus embrace the political by redistributing the sensible in everyday lives of Judy and

Dorinda. Accordingly, the aesthetics of the new sensible is revolutionary insofar as it reveals the ineffable and the invisible. As extraneous and redundant existences crossing the normative boundaries of femininity, Judy and Dorinda promote the criticism of ideology by drawing attention to the demarcations of normality and normativity.

In this process, women's sufferings become a powerful language, by which women's existence is historicized and materialized. Women can be realized and sensed rather than conceptualized and thought. In this way, their suffering is a corporeal struggling against the ideological repression and a proof of their individual self. Women's sufferings cause the shift from the collective to the personal and from the abstraction to the entity. Put differently, the shift makes them a historical existence, leading to the quest for identity and self-exploration, by illuminating the sufferings the marriage and motherhood exact on women. To this extent, both Kelley and Glasgow depict women's sufferings in a realistic way rather than sentimentalizing or romanticizing women's physical, spiritual, and emotional sufferings. It is also applicable to Dorinda's mother, Eudora:

She had worked so hard for so many years that the habit had degenerated into a disease, and thrift had become a tyrant instead of a slave in her life. From dawn until after dark she toiled, and then lay sleepless for hours because of the jerking of her nerves. She was, as she said of herself, "driven," and it was the tragedy of her lot that all her toil made so little impression. Though she spent every bit of her strength there was nothing to show for her struggle. (39)

Eudora gets up early in the morning before sunrise every day to do the domestic chores and to be a "good" wife and mother. There is no room for her long-cherished missionary dream or

religious comfort as is evidenced in her depression and suicide-impulse. In such manner, she becomes a religious but frustrated woman.

Similarly, Judy's desentimentalized suffering appears in Judy's childbearing in *Weeds*. Viewed from the perspectives of the laboring mother, the depiction of the childbearing is not only frank about the physical components but also the emotional aspects involved:

There were hours upon hours of this, dragging endlessly into eternity. Like the ever-recurring drive of some great piston which went on its way relentless and indomitable, the irresistible force drove through her quivering body, drew back and drove again. At first, there was a moment or two of breathing space between the drives when she could look up at Jerry declaring that she could not bear it a moment longer, begging him frantically to save her, bring the doctor, do something. But as time passed the great drives became as regular and as incessant as clockwork, with no stop, no slightest pause, no abating of the terrific, invincible energy. (344)

This depiction serves as a counter-narrative to the ideology of motherhood in that it is not typical and second-handed. The sheer suffering indicates the movement away from the myth of the selfless mother and the enduring woman and emergence of a new sensation that creates a discourse of dissensus. Unlike the heroic tragic hero who is individualized and separated from the world, the female protagonists of the feminist tragic novels exemplify intersubjectivity of solitude and community. It is significant that women's suffering in the two novels becomes a tool for their active voice while it leads to self-exploration, shifting from the collective to the personal. Given that suffering is a mightily "powerful language to share in common, one in which many diverse life-forms can strike up a dialogue" and "a communality of meaning"

(Eagleton xvi), the women's sufferings across time and space horizontally and vertically integrate women as a communal force, eliciting revolutionary values.

The Aesthetic Appropriation of the Tradition of the Tragedy

The discourse of dissensus ultimately serves to counter androcentrism and the androcentric tragedy, appropriating the tragic convention. Specifically, the lower working class female protagonists of the two novels provides a domestic sphere for a collective subjectivity and create a new tragic aesthetic that stands in opposition to the sublime, constituting critique of a patriarchal literary tradition. As Linda Kintz argues, "the specific generic requirements of Greek tragedy continue to function as the hidden structural model for theories of subjectivity as well as for theories of drama in general" (1) and presuppose a universal subject who is gendered male. As a counter-discourse to the magnitude and purity of tragedy, the feminist tragic novels embody the poetics of the ordinary and heteronomy. Such deviation from the literary convention eventually enacts the aesthetics of dissensus, creating a new sensation of tragedy.

Feminist tragic novels constitute a powerful critique of literary conventions mandating the proper ending for contemporary literature and, more importantly, anti-discourse to the inherent masculinist ideology in the tradition of tragedy. In opposition to "the legacy of Aristotelian tragedy that "privileges purity and Oneness" (Kintz 98) and emphasizes the androcentric rationality, the feminist tragic novels embody ambiguity and equivocation. Women's sufferings in the two novels appear to be ambiguous enough to be negated and neutralized by a seeming reconciliation rather than resistance, contrasting to the sublime aesthetic that yields both sympathy and cathartic moment. Indeed, Judy in *Weeds* comes to realize "the uselessness of struggle" (330) because fighting against her destiny as a woman only

causes more suffering and pain and she thinks that resignation allows her peace. At first glance, therefore, the ending of the novel might seem to be happy, but it turns out to be tragic because she feels the whole world turns into a “vast, gray, spiritless expanse” as Jabez’ death “fills her world with emptiness” (332). The deep sadness over the death implies both how she depends on him and how void her life has been. At the end of *Weeds*, as if out of desperation, Judy only forces herself to get caught on “the daily treadmill” (332) of the tragic life, obeying “the inevitable summons” (333) to prepare the meal for her husband, Jerry. Likewise, Dorinda, at the end of *Barren Ground*, reveals her ambivalent emotions toward her life. Although Glasgow depicts Dorinda’s middle years in a positive way, there is also another side to her life because, albeit she is content with what she has achieved for the most part, she also feels “the failure of elasticity” and “the tyranny of detail” makes her recoil “from disappointments” (461). Despite her success as a farmer, she often feels it meaningless as she thinks that everything is nothing “before the inevitable triumph of time” (506). In this way, she signifies “the barren ground” without “the pathos of life worse than the tragedy” (505). In the final scene, she says that she is just “thankful to have finished with all that” (526) to John’s suggestion to marry again. As such, their endings seem ambiguous without marriage or death. Regarding such an ending, Raymond Williams’ remarks are apropos: “To conclude that there is no solution is also an answer. ... The fact that life does come back, that its meanings are reaffirmed and restored, after so much suffering and after so important a death, has been, quite commonly, the tragic action” (55-6). The unhappy ending is not a necessary and sufficient condition for a tragedy although most tragedies end unhappily.

The ambiguous endings of the two novels work toward both aesthetic and political ends.

Although they end without the protagonists' fall or death, the novels are tragic because their resignation presents a doomed defiance. However, their seeming passivity or compromise with reality is revolutionary to the extent of powerful action, leading to resistance, autonomy, and self-exploration as it comes from their will of discord. Concretely, Glasgow's use of *New Women*, as Jamie Marchant maintains, is "to challenge traditional endings for female characters, critiquing a woman's exclusive focus on romance and presenting personal quest or development and female bonding as options" (64). Undeniably, if they end up with a happy ending, there is no room for criticism of the evils of the society that cause their tragedy because of the satisfied poetic justice. On the contrary, if their suffering turns to their fall or death, they would be a derivative of traditional tragedy, arousing catharsis and eventually compromising with social ideologies. By denying both, however, the two novels perform the tragic negation thereby to offer a counter-example to the naturalized assumption on both women's literature and tragedy. In other words, caused not by a particular event or crisis but by the day-by-day women's indignities, their sufferings and tragic lives require the reconsideration of the whole social ideologies rather than the specific conflict. Such everyday aesthetics, as Margus Vihalem notes, reaffirms "the potential of aesthetics to affect the perception of the sensible" (1). For the very reason, in "Tragedy and the Whole Truth," Aldous Huxley argues that "to make a tragedy the artist must isolate a single element out of the totality of human experience and use that exclusively as his material" (12-3). He indicates that tragedy should deal with something that is separated out from the whole truth, distilling some pure moment of crisis from the ruck of life around it. Countering such limited requirements of the tragedy, the two tragic novels present interest in the mundane, everyday life. Such emphasis on the normality and mundanity becomes

a powerful tool for the feminist tragic novel, signifying that women's lives themselves can be a tragedy, requiring the ordinary struggling against their fate.

At the extreme of Aristotle's requirement that tragedy represent only one action, the novels foreground the repressive society and women's tragic lives resulting therefrom. In this context, the readers' attention is directed at the social injustice rather than purified or purged by the tragic moment in terms of catharsis. For Aristotle, tragedy can perform the pleasurable, politically valuable service of draining off an excess of enfeebling emotions such as pity and fear, thus providing a kind of public therapy for those of the citizenry in danger of emotional flabbiness, so tragic drama plays a central role in the military and political protection of the state (Eagleton 153). Such emphasis on the ideological dimension is also seen in what Karl Jaspers' definition of tragedy as "a spiritual refuge from the dreary empirical" (27), implying that tragedy implicitly promotes the flight from painful reality. Contrary to the ideological escapism, however, the aesthetics of the feminist tragic novels draws attention to unresolved conflict as it is. To wit, the aesthetics of the feminist tragic novels consist of mundanity and schism, in opposition to the transcendence and ideological reconciliation of sublime aesthetics.

As a result, the feminist tragic novels have an inherently ethical aesthetics. It is sharply contrasted to the sublime aesthetics of the traditional tragedy, which emphasizes the sublimation of pain and conflict. The dual structure of the sublime aesthetic and tragedy leads to emphasizing the power of human reason, reflecting "innate human transcendental desire" (Gasché 20). In this way, great tragedies were considered to arouse positive sentiment by separating readers or audiences both from the protagonist's painful situation and our corporeal reality. Indeed, many

Kantian aestheticians from Aristotle, Kant, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Lacan⁴³ to more recent one Henry Ansgar Kelly⁴⁴ support the cathartic effect of tragedy and the aesthetic pleasure that arises from emotional detachment from what happens in the text and its tragic feelings. The feminist tragic novels, however, directly confront women's sufferings and the sociological ideologies that cause them. In this process, the feminist tragic novels show that the reality in which most women live is filled with contradiction and schism. Such an attempt is feminist and revolutionary given the man-centeredness of the sublime aesthetics, associating masculinist reason with the sublime power and negating the existences of women and nature.

More importantly, the aesthetics of the feminist tragic novels promotes self-exploration and self-discovery rather than the loss of the self. As a matter of fact, many post-Kantian aesthetics of tragedy presuppose the loss of self. To exemplify, for Schopenhauer, tragedy is a tool for renunciation of the will to live and our disengagement from the world, which is not worthy of our attachment. In his belief, therefore, there is no room for the self-exploration and self-discovery insofar as we distance ourselves from the worldly existences. Contrary to the transcendental aesthetics, the feminist tragic novels seek the protagonist's self-exploration, drawing attention to the social background. In line with this stance, Mary Castiglie Anderson notes that "Glasgow's intention in *Barren Ground* is to express through Dorinda and individual's progress toward identity" (383), appropriating "the archetypal pattern of the heroic quest for self" (384). What matters is that the female protagonists are not noble like a classical tragic hero

⁴³ In the introduction of this dissertation, I clarify the Post-Kantian emotional approaches to tragedy in depth.

⁴⁴ In *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy* (1993), Kelly contends that "the best-expressed tragedies have given us much solace and comfort" (222), which is in line with Kantian emotional approach to tragedy.

and their plights are not an event or accident. To wit, their domesticity and their ordinariness or humbleness transfer their specific individual tragedy into collective one. In this context, their suffering serves to form collective identity. As such, the feminist tragic novels constitute the political, ethical, collective counterparts to the imaginary, emotional, rational audience of the traditional tragic genre.

Consequently, the aesthetics of the feminist tragic novels can be recapitulated into the aesthetics of dissensus, distancing the novels from the domineering totality of the society and the literary tradition that has excluded women in many ways. By retrieving women's self-identity and restoring their corporeality, the feminist tragic novels serve as an antithesis to the masculinist aesthetics of tragedy. The tension and dynamic between the perceived self and the perceiving one create the new disjunction and sensation and ultimately reveal what was hidden or invisible. If the politics engages how our sensation should be arranged and distributed, the process is indeed political as well as aesthetic. Moreover, the aesthetics of dissensus is revolutionary in that it produces an antithesis to both repressive ideologies and androcentric literary convention. Specifically, ordinary, domestic women experience a paradoxical existence, illustrating the iniquities of the society and eventually engaging saving the society. The paradox is the main principle by which women are guided and serves as a momentum for the dissolution of man and woman, the noble and the vulgar, the center and the periphery, whereby women's domesticity and ordinariness which were disparaged in the tragic genre regain their aesthetic value.

Conclusion

There is nothing harder to refute than empiricism. This dissertation derives from my vague but concrete feelings that the traditional theories and aesthetics could not explain properly when reading feminist tragic novels. To be specific, the theories of catharsis or the sublime aesthetics that have dominated the tragic genre could not account for my strong identification with the tragic protagonists and my protesting indignation in light of their fates. At the outset, what I see as a critical gap leads to many questions: Is it possible to establish a gender-specific aesthetics? If so, does it reinforce the gender binary that needs to be sublated ultimately in this modern society. This dissertation is the theoretical answer to those personal questions, which turn out to be a highly political and historical journey.

In this dissertation, I show that aesthetic values of the feminist tragic novels should be explained by desublimation, distraction, and dissensus rather than sublimation, transcendence, and consensus. I demonstrate the unique space of feminist tragic novels within the wider genre of tragedy by focusing on Chopin's *The Awakening*, Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Stein's "Melanctha," Kelley's *Weeds* and Glasgow's *Barren Ground*. By situating the feminist tragic novels at the intersection of traditional tragedy and modern novel, I illustrate the emergence of the feminist tragic novels as an evolution of tragic genre through secularization, prosification, and feminization. In relation to traditional tragedy, the feminist tragic novels appear not as an independent genre but an evolved tragedy appropriated by mundanity, individualism, and feminism. Despite the differences, they share the commonalities that they are structurally characterized by contradicting dichotomies, which are thematically related to a tragic

vision and resistance.

The characteristics also differentiate the feminist tragic novel from other similar genres such as the sentimental novels, epistolary novels, and the novel of naturalism. To wit, the feminist tragic novels, albeit similar to traditional tragedy, are characterized by the feminist awareness of individual desire and freedom, unsublimated or unrepressed through catharsis. In order to highlight the political traits of the feminist tragic novels, I take the viewpoint of materialist aestheticians such as Karl Marx, Georg Lukacs, Theodor Adorno, Raymond Williams, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière and so forth. In this way, I illuminate how the characters reveal the plight of women within society, as well as the writers' grasp of the challenges of female roles in society, and ultimately show how the tragic feelings trigger social criticism and resistance. Beyond the economic or political implications, I emphasize sensuousness and materiality, thereby arguing that the feminist tragic novels are both a cultural product and an artistic work with a revolutionary power.

To explicate the emergence of the feminist tragic novel as a cultural phenomenon, I delve into the social background and literary environment in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth: Most women experienced a large gap between the high expectations for equality the Progressive Era fostered and the repression of the still restrictive society. As a result, a group of women writers grappled with their frustrations by depicting subjects that had been taboo or silenced, focusing on the conflicts between women's desires and social constraints and by turning to the tragic mode. Defining the feminist tragic novels as a cultural product of cultural tension reveals their artistic potential to counter previous genres by making

gendered claims regarding not only the patriarchal society in which authors live but also the genre in which they write.

Unfortunately, the realist and political traits of the feminist tragic novel prompted a repressive response from the man-centered society and literary world, precipitating the misogynistic perspectives inherent in the tradition of aesthetics and American literature. In an American literary tradition in which the unique masculine myths had been prevalent, the terms such as regionalist, realist, or domestic novels were often used as derogatory to the feminist tragic novels, demarcating the androcentric canonized works. American literary culture of the nineteenth century was not favorable to women's realist novels. Neither was there much room for the feminist tragic novels in the domain of aesthetics, which was imbued with Disinterestedness and aesthetic formalism. Standing against the hostility against the mundanity and realism in women's literature, the feminist tragic novels depict women's tragic lives as they are without falling into the happy ending illusion or natural victimization. As such, the feminist tragic novels are the antithesis to androcentric literary tradition and ideology.

Such differences manifest themselves in an embodiment of political aesthetics, involving the transformation of the readers' social awareness. As I trace particularly in the first chapter, women's suicides in Chopin's *The Awakening* and Wharton's *The House of Mirth* serve as a vehicle to allow readers to experience the emancipation of ethics, rather than that of emotion. Instead of sublimating the negative emotion, the novels garner attention on the gendered reality by drawing on melancholy, homosexuality, and suicide as the main topics, ultimately yielding the contradictory emotions and embodying desublimation. Likewise, in the second chapter, I outline

how women's mental breakdown caused by patriarchal ideologies in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Stein's "Melanctha" draws attention to the chasm between women's desire and social oppression. Throughout the chasm, the contradictory sensations and reception emerge, enacting the aesthetic of distraction by dissolving naturalized perceptions and inducing feminist awareness. Similarly, in the third chapter, I argue that Kelley's *Weeds* and Glasgow's *Barren Ground* depict women's adversities in ways that raises readers' social consciousness, rather than allowing them to transcend or sublimate it. In each case, I define the feminist tragic novels as cultural products that represent their materiality, while simultaneously becoming a source from which new meaning is produced in both a dialectical and a revolutionary way.

What they have in common is their feminist resistant perspective on a world where social conventions shape every aspect of a woman's life. Although they are different in form, plot, and other characteristics, these novels all present a female protagonist whose tragedy is caused by social ideology but who poses resistance to that ideology. By juxtaposing the contradictory women's identities, the feminist tragic novels trigger their readers' social awareness and conscious participation. Eventually, the feminist tragic novels establish a new aesthetics that centers on materiality, sensuality, and their dissociation, rather than forceful working of rationality and its reconciliation. In this way, the narratives not only destabilize our notions about culturally conferred identities and values but also deconstruct the demarcations of genres and aesthetics.

My purpose in "Aesthetics and Politics of Feminist Tragic Novels at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century into the Twentieth" has been to suggest that if one reads these novels with an eye to their aesthetic and political values, the novels open up new possibilities these readings create.

I would suggest that we focus on the myriad of narratives by and about women, resisting the dominant critical approaches. For follow-up studies, I would like to propose that we pursue new scholarship on the relationship between the feminist tragic novels and their women readers from the reader-response perspectives because it would further illuminate the social aspect of women's tragedy and literature. Ultimately, we need a history of the feminist tragic novel's transformation from the turn of the century into the twentieth century, reflecting and resisting an evolving yet persistently patriarchal society.

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