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Solitary blessings: solitude in the fiction of Hawthorne, Melville, and Kate Chopin

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SOLITARY BLESSINGS:
SOLITUDE IN THE FICTION OF HAWTHORNE, MELVILLE,
AND KATE CHOPIN

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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in

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by
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To My Mother
Acknowledgments

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Abstract

“Solitary Blessings: Solitude in the Fiction of Hawthorne, Melville, and Kate Chopin” examines a construction of solitude in which nature is alien and perilous, the self confronts rejection and death, the subject is subordinated to an unknown, and the revealed truth is experienced as both gift and curse. Arising out of fictional portraits of people under duress, this interpretation counters a more dominant construction in American literature, enunciated by Edwards, Emerson, and Thoreau, that shows solitude as composed and calming, subordinating nature to mind, and revealing an underlying truth in presentable form.

Solitude has been equated with privation and exile since antiquity; the Christian era added a contrasting context of interior communion with God. Romanticism revived and secularized both connotations, mixing the joy of inner communion with the potential for dark, destructive discoveries. Further analysis of solitude in this study employs concepts from authors Virginia Woolf and Albert Camus, cultural theorist Victor Turner, philosopher Gaston Bachelard, psychoanalyst Anthony Storr, and composition theorist Linda Brodkey.

In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne balances the sympathetic portrayal of Hester Prynne with her presentation by a narrator respectful, even fearful, of Puritan authority, thereby keeping the experience of rejection and privation active in constructing the meaning of her experience. Hester’s solitude leads her through self-condemnation and rebellion to a clear-sighted sympathy and an alternative authority of her own.
Melville’s characters confront solitude radically. Bartleby seems to possess the hard-won wisdom of solitude already in an absolute form, and the lawyer-narrator must come to terms with it. Pip’s episode in *Moby-Dick* presents the encounter with solitude at its most condensed: forced into an extreme, inexplicable confrontation with nature and death, stripped of sanity, the sufferer of solitude achieves a God-like wisdom of indifference.

Edna Pontellier’s quest for solitude in Chopin’s *The Awakening* causes her to withdraw gradually from everything including herself as she becomes the poet-thinker alone. She takes charge of the process of self-discovery in solitude, outlining a path to autonomy, but her quest for a truth of the self without limits leads to the ultimate limit of death.
Chapter 1

The Shape of Solitude: A Folding and an Unfolding

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That polar privacy
A soul admitted to itself–
Finite Infinity.

--Emily Dickinson, #1695

Walden Pond and Ishmael

Solitude admits the person who experiences it to a profound and challenging experience of self. As Emily Dickinson avows, space, the sea, and even death furnish only stages for enacting this encounter. American literature testifies that solitude continues to be a formidable and pervasive force both in literature and in life. Throughout history, individuals have sought solitude for a variety of reasons, since leading a solitary life can have many and varied results. The concept of solitude has multiple definitions according to the solitary seeker’s interpretation, life style, frame of reference, and the times in which he or she lives. Although two familiar definitions include being alone, as in existing separately from other people, and simply being alone in thought, the concept of solitude is much more complex than either of these definitions. Change in the individual often results from experiencing solitude.
What, then, is solitude? What is its origin? What kinds of change resulting from a solitary condition manifest themselves in what particular ways? And why?

Although this study primarily will examine in depth literature from nineteenth-century America, the implications of leading a solitary existence suggest many answers for many times. The problems resulting from a study of solitude may best begin with a quintessential name, Henry David Thoreau, and his famous place, Walden Pond, and what often occurs at Walden Pond now.

“By noon the small beach was towel to towel,” lamented the New York Times in 1996. Journalist Sara Rimer described the Walden Pond park area as one that fills up with tourists before mid-morning and which sees “2,000 to 3,000 visitors a day, according to the State Park Service.” Hordes bring disposable diapers and coolers, boom boxes and strollers, and even an occasional book to read. A mother of five-year-old triplets, one Mrs. Hurkett, “absorbed in motherhood, could not wait to see a little civilization in Walden. She was amazed, she said, by all the young women with tattoos: butterflies and roses adorning ankles.” George Carroll, a Latin teacher at the Boston Latin School, said, “I don’t think Thoreau would have been pleased to have his sanctuary so populated,” but added later, “Walden [. . .] is as much a state of mind as anything else. [. . .] It’s a lovely place to be on the 22nd of July--in God’s nature.” But Rimer concluded with the words from a state park supervisor: “We try not to guess what Thoreau would have thought about all of this; I’m not sure he would have stuck around” (12). Thoreau came a century earlier and stayed two years, and during that time he was not entirely alone; he had visitors, too, and they deterred him from his meditations but not for long. The
scene at Walden in 1996 serves as an announcement to our time: solitude has become an endangered species, at no little peril to our psychological health and cultural creativity. In fact ecocritic Lawrence Buell notes, as part of the current troubled scene of environmentalism, that “Walden Woods in Concord, Massachusetts, has become a legal battleground because Thoreau’s writings have led many to perceive it as sacred space that should be kept in its ‘natural’ state” (3). This study aims to reconstruct what was discovered about solitude in calmer times, in hopes of contributing to its future preservation.

Hordes of people descend on Walden Pond annually, whether to experience solitude or to bask momentarily in an aura of historical sacredness. Herman Melville provides another reason why people flock to a site of solitude near lake or sea, as he has his romantic narrator Ishmael draw the reader’s attention to the edge of the water in Chapter 1 of Moby-Dick: “Look at the crowd of water-gazers there” (12). Ishmael continues:

Once more. Say, you are in the country; in some high land of lakes. Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down in a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream. There is magic in it. Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water, if water there be in all that region. [. . .] Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever. (13)

How often have we as “water-gazers” viewed paintings of men gazing silently at water in an apparent meditative mood or sat on a beach, facing not one another but the sea. Water may be more than a passive object of the would-be romantic’s gaze, however. Indeed, “meditation and water are wedded,” and the encountering of water often brings on the subjective experience of solitude. It does so more profoundly for Melville’s cabin boy Pip and for Kate
Chopin’s Edna Pontellier, whose journeys “down” into water and the ultimate dimensions of this “magic” require destruction.

More than seeing water and sitting on a beach draws visitors to Melville’s and Thoreau’s sites. Henry David Thoreau’s philosophy of experiencing a life free from being “frittered away by details,” a life answering his demand to “Simplify! Simplify!,” causes visitors today to seek the same kind of solitude that Thoreau sought in a less populated time. The teacher in the *Times* article comes closer to explaining why he was there by suggesting that Walden is “a state of mind.” This comment suggests also that solitude can adapt. Thoreau would not have tolerated the crowds; we can. Even though the others whom Rimer interviews do not express any sentiments even close to that perception, Rimer reports that they still come to the narrow edge of beach with a road surrounding the pond and a highway close by. That they go there to seek solitude even while bringing civilization with them demonstrates the need within for a kind of aloneness, perhaps that unconscious wedding of “meditation and water,” at the same time that it shows how hard it is to let go and enter into this aloneness. In fact, as will be shown, the “edgeness” itself is an important condition in inducing this experience.

Images of Solitude

Besides what appears to be the salubrious benefits of solitude—thought, freedom, inner discovery, prayer, self-accounting—solitude can also result in a kind of peril. Those who do not simply find themselves in moments of solitude but choose it by an act of will, or who are forced into it against their will—sentenced there either by their community or by an act of God
or nature or some force other than human—may experience what at first might appear to be deleterious effects. What is termed good for some may be bad for others. Examples from literature as well as popular culture raise some pertinent questions about the nature and effects of the concept of solitude. Questions about these examples also lead to more questions about American life itself. These inquiries could begin with juxtaposing a variety of images.

Through the persona of the correspondent, Stephen Crane in “The Open Boat” describes what must be a perilous experience: four men adrift in a life boat on the open sea where “none of them knew the color of the sky” (457), but they all knew the colors of the sea. They question the “seven mad gods who ruled the sea,” who allow them to see sand and trees while they may be drowned. One who comes to that point, observes Crane, wants to throw bricks at the temple, only there are no bricks and there is no temple. The correspondent, to whose point of view Crane’s narrative is closest, is never named; the only one named is the oiler, Billie, who drowns, experiencing the solitude of death.

The unnamed woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is forced into dependency and solitude in a nursery, and being at the same time forbidden to write, she goes mad. Does near-total enforced solitude devoid of responsibility or creativity cause insanity? Marshall McLuhan observed that “in experiments in which all outer sensation is withdrawn, the subject begins a furious fill-in or completion of senses that is sheer hallucination” (44-45). Is solitude an experiment in deprivation that issues in an imperative of creativity, to be ignored only at one’s peril?
Scarlett O’Hara in the movie version of *Gone with the Wind* declares to the empty barren landscape that she will never be hungry again. Director David Selznick draws on the Shakespearean stage convention of the soliloquy for this scene, but it retains an indelible power nonetheless. Does her solitude in untoward conditions create responsibility?

Robert Frost’s persona in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” pauses to contemplate as he watches the fields fill up with snow, but though he concedes that “The woods are lovely, dark and deep,” he continues, “But I have promises to keep.” He refrains from delving into the possible dangers of the solitary state with the opposing conjunction *but*.

North American Tlingit Indians punished two teenagers who robbed a pizza delivery man and beat him on the head with a baseball bat by sending them farther into the Alaskan wilderness to experience solitude for a year and to return to the community healed in some way (“Court” A-4). What did the elders hope that these recalcitrant tribal members would find alone, apart?

A lone student sits in front of her laptop connected by modem to the Internet. Although alone in her dorm room, she corresponds with unknown new acquaintances. Is she a secluded writer, or by her connection to others through the typed written word, is she not alone? Does having an actual but unseen audience alter her solitude? The situation results in a paradox: how can one be alone while at the same time connected to others? Linda Brodkey in “Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing” admonishes herself, “I must first exorcise the image of the writer-writes-alone” (396). (Brodkey’s theory will be examined in Chapter 2.)
Definition

All these questions and examples illustrate the complexity of the concept of solitude. However, to provide a starting point, a beginning common frame of reference, the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary is useful, not to limit or to suggest closure, but to provide a consensus, a frame of reference. According to the OED, solitude “is not in common use in English until the 17th c. In poetry, esp.” (Later in this chapter I will discuss possible causes for this timely emergence.) “Of the 18th century, freq. more or less personified in sense 1 and 2, or in a blending of these 1. The state of being alone, loneliness, seclusion, solitariness (of persons) 2. Loneliness (of places), remoteness from habitation; absence of life or stir.”

The synonym aloneness does not necessarily mean being totally alone as a prisoner in solitary confinement. Being alone or being in a solitary state can exist even if a person or character is surrounded by other people. Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, has her illegitimate child Pearl for comfort, but her child is neither her lover nor her confidant; Hester and the entire Salem community view her as being alone. If a character perceives himself or herself as being alone, then no matter how many individuals may surround that person, he or she is solitary. Solitude, then, takes its definition in relation to community.

A possible reason the word *solitude* was not in common use until well into the English Renaissance is that the comparatively sparse population of Europe gave little contrast to help define its experience as a distinct state. Centuries ago, even community existence was solitary. Towns were often protected by guarded walls, and banishment to an existence
outside those walls was terrifying. In contrast, the very communities themselves were solitary, that is, not well connected, until the rise of nationalism and its supportive networks. Solitude, then, was so intrinsic to mere existence that few examined that state of being, though, as rare but exemplary exceptions, saints and hermits may have chosen it. Then, it was not solitude as such; it was a way of life. Another paradox exists here, too, since community is everywhere.

Certainly no definitive explanation of the origin of solitude exists; nevertheless, the following works may suggest answers to this problem. Here I am seeking only to highlight revealing features of a constellation of conditions, impulses, and expressive forms, independent of any notion that American solitude might be different or special. In the next chapter I shall review texts revealing the concept of solitude as crucial to a possible understanding of nineteenth-century American literature.

**Historical Representations**

Religion seems to occupy a privileged place in the development of the experience of solitude. A closer look reveals solitude to be part of the development of religion itself, specifically in the momentous turn away from tribal religion accomplished in several instances around the globe.

In the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu philosopher urges the reader to “Turn all thought toward solitude [. . .] Strive without seeking/ To know that Atman/ Seek this knowledge/ And comprehend clearly/ Why you should seek it” (128). Here is a notion of detachment. The reader should seek, find, and know the *atman*, as I am interpreting it for this study, as the soul,
as the Godhead found within every human being. The Gita was an important influence on American Transcendentalism, of course, and sections of it read as parallel companions to many ideas in Emerson. In “Self-Reliance,” for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson urges his readers to look to no one outside themselves as he advocates a philosophy of individualism, not one of selfishness. He counsels self-trust while searching for the divine spirit which he claims is within each individual: “the divine idea which each of us represents.”

In other religious traditions, figures of great men such as Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed have influenced society by changing history and altering lives. Jesus himself spent forty days in the desert examining his fate, and the early Christian hermits copied his example by living alone in the desert, praying and contemplating truth. The bringer of change has almost always been masculine, but to varying degrees, worshipers of both genders are enjoined and engaged in that same solitude in that decisive action. In the Catholic tradition, for example, Mary is praised as a virgin, as the mother of Jesus, and, therefore, as the mother of God. Surely she lived in inner solitude, for with whom could she discuss her position as the mother of God? In Mary, and in certain other female figures in the religious imagination, an important alternative iconology of solitude is implied that is not determined, ascetic, or masculine, but inward, quiet, and fertile. Her very pregnancy suggests the creative dimension of solitude.

From its earliest times Christianity gave rise to writers on solitude or for whom solitude had special significance. In his autobiographical Confessions, St. Augustine is the seasoned convert remembering his struggle with conversion in order to teach others. His
questioning and doubting take place in solitude. Though he does not even write the name of his wife in his teaching text, he has the prayerful support of his mother Monica, so the autobiography becomes a reflective and certainly didactic piece written in retrospect. Augustine forsakes his inquiry into various sects, leaves his dissipated life, and finds God within himself.

Boethius was so confused over his sentencing to death that he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* in prison around the year 524 as an attempt to understand why Lady Fortuna’s wheel had dealt him such a cruel fate: “You are wasting away in pining and longing for your former good fortune. It is the loss of this which [. . .] has so corrupted your mind. I know the many disguises of that monster, Fortune, and the extent to which she seduces with friendship the very people she is striving to cheat[. . . . You] did not lose anything of value” (54). Would Boethius have written his classic had he not been alone, imprisoned and condemned?

What was the social situation before the seventeenth century that caused the editors of the OED to report that the word *solitude* was not then in common English use? Perhaps individuals were so dependent on the security and maybe even sanctity of community that being alone or remote from habitation often resulted in danger or death. In Plato’s *Crito* Socrates famously rejects an offer to escape from his own death sentence because his life would be worthless outside his polis. Solitude in such an instance is equated with a person’s perceived aloneness and unprotectedness and is fraught with danger; it has no positive value.

In its pejorative sense solitude connotes terror or misery (trauma). Exile or banishment often appears as the punishment closest to death. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus the*
King, for example, when Oedipus demands that King Laius’s murderer be found, he issues the order: “This murderer, no matter who he is, is banished from the country where my power and my throne are supreme” (32). Oedipus himself, ultimately, reconciles his fate while blind, and alone but for his daughters/sisters, Antigone and Ismene, away from home in Colonus. In *Oedipus at Colonus* the language remains constant as Oedipus questions:

> where if anywhere,  
> The suffering stranger should look for refuge and help?  
> Where are they then for me? You would drive me, would  
> From my sanctuary, then hound me from your land? (79)

Theseus echoes Oedipus: “I do not forget my own upbringing in exile,/Like you, and how many times I battled alone,/With Danger to my life, in foreign lands” (88). Theseus is the celebrated hero of several myths as well as the legendary king of Athens; the meeting of Oedipus and Theseus presents a mutual recognition of heroes. Sophocles’ hero figures may experience solitude as humiliation and privation in exile, but they manifest a courage toward life and death that was tempered in the forge of solitude.

The OED definition can also include an extended “solitariness.” For example, Emily in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale (from *The Canterbury Tales*) prays to Diana to allow her to remain alone and not to marry: “Chaste goddess, wel wostow that I/Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,/ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf” (56). Though Emily ultimately marries or rather is forced into marrying Palamon by her brother-in-law Duke Theseus (the same legendary king as in Sophocles), she earlier illustrates an even broader definition of solitude: virginity. A virgin does not physically know another human being, and hence in its attribute of purity it stands for the undefiled soul. Socially, of course, its significance was usually not so much
honor in its possession as dishonor in its loss. Chaucer suggests in the Physician’s Tale that
virginity extends to the perception of virginity. Virginius beheads his daughter Virginia
because she loses her virginity through Apius’ perceived lust for her:

“Blissed be God that I shal dye a mayde!
Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame;
Dooth with youre child youe wyl, a Goddes name!”
   And with that word she preyed hym ful ofte
That with his sword he wolde smythe softe;
And with that word aswowne down she fil. (193)

In tales of heroic virginity the same steadfast courage of the soul is manifested. As with the
Virgin Mary, Chaucer’s deathbound daughter is isolated in an inner solitude and attains an
inner communion with the absolute, early indications of the existence of a distinctive female
experience of solitude.

The exploration of inner solitude intensified beginning with the romantics and
continued throughout the nineteenth century. The OED cites as a representative instance a
sentence from Robert A. Vaughan’s *Hours with the Mystics* (1860), “Solitude brings no
escape from spiritual dangers.” The association of peril with solitude continues, but now
being solitary can create or heighten mental peril and not provide an escape from it. Clearly,
for the definition of solitude, being remote from others and from an increasingly sensed social
web or support is as important as being physically alone.

Earlier, in the formative days of English romanticism, William Wordsworth wrote his
Lucy poems in Germany, “founded on a true account of a young girl who drowned in a
snowstorm” (Abrams 2: 178). “Lucy Gray” is subtitled “Or Solitude.” Wordsworth’s
persona views Lucy Gray as “The solitary child” even though, of course, she has a family; but
in the poem the author, recounting the girl’s untimely, unwarranted death, remains solitary also:

Yet some maintain that to this day  
She is a living child;  
[. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . ]  
O’er rough and smooth she trips alone,  
And never looks behind;  
And sings a solitary song  
That whistles in the wind. (179)

Here the concept of solitude comes to include an empathy with someone real or imagined as experiencing solitude. “Lucy Gray” captures one of Wordsworth's “spots of time,” a moment when time seems to still and to transform ordinary experience into moments of realization.

In the twentieth century, Doris Lessing in her short story “To Room Nineteen” examines aloneness. In her search for solitude, the protagonist Susan Rawlings wants to be alone for a few hours, above all “alone and with no one knowing where I am” (emphasis Lessing’s). She wants not just to be physically alone but to have no responsibility, not even to have to think of a responsibility. Not wanting anyone to know where she is physically is almost impossible since she has a husband and children who live and care about her. She attributes part of her need for solitude to “seven devils” (like Stephen Crane’s mad gods?) and the rest to a kind of emptiness. She tries to lose herself in her garden, in a separate room in her home that her children call “Mother’s Room.” (Unlike Gilman’s unnamed woman, Lessing’s Susan chooses her own room; even Virginia Woolf’s room of her own, to be discussed in Chapter 2, works against the protagonist.) And finally she moves herself to a cheap hotel. Rather than experiencing a heightened awareness, Susan experiences the total
freedom found only in the grave. The only way that the protagonist can leave all responsibility for living behind is to lie in a fetal position and turn on the gas.

Bakhtin and Baudelaire

Another explanation of the origin of solitude, or at least of the infrequent use of the word solitude until the romantic era and later, may be found in the Introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, by Mikhail Bakhtin. What Bakhtin proposes is that inner solitude, later referred to as the “interior infinite,” parallels the history of laughter. A culture of folk humor prevailed in the Middle Ages when, in a carnival atmosphere, individuals participated fully in elements of laughter: parades, feasts, animal trainers performing in church rituals, what are considered now as obscene jokes and oaths and curses or billingsgate, emphasizing the “unfinished nature of the body” (29). According to Bakhtin this folk humor lasted through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance--recall the bawdiness of Shakespeare’s fools--but was suppressed later in the seventeenth century as festivals became part of a family’s private life and not the open participants’ entry into the carnival as in earlier centuries.

About twenty years ago, I was stunned by seeing a working ferris wheel outside a cathedral on a hill top in Barcelona, and I learned that amusements like the current wheel had been there in front of that majestic edifice for centuries. Another example of carnival exists in today’s New Orleans Mardi Gras, where people do not merely watch the parade, but they become the parade; they themselves become carnival. More recently, a “happening” or phenomenon in the desert of the Far West called “Burning Man” lures people to a gathering
where each one is encouraged to become what he or she is through dance, art, dress, undress, drama, music, and so on.

After the Renaissance, Bakhtin maintains, laughter with all of its ramifications dwindled from the concept of carnival spirit to a mere holiday mood. In the literature of the “seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the grotesque related to the culture of folk humor was excluded from great literature. [. . .] The feast ceased almost entirely to be the people’s second life, their temporary renascence and renewal” (33). However, reaction against the Enlightenment, against a cold rationalism, led to an individualized carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The romantic grotesque is evidenced in the horror tales of Edgar Allan Poe, for example. Laughter turned inward led to terror. “But Romanticism made its own important discovery--that of the interior subjective man with his depth, complexity, and inexhaustible resources” (44). Bakhtin continues:

This interior infinite of the individual was unknown to the medieval and Renaissance grotesque; the discovery made by the Romanticists was made possible by their use of the grotesque method and of its power to liberate from dogmatism, completeness, and limitation. The interior infinite could not have been found in the closed and finished worlds with its distinct fixed boundaries dividing all phenomena and values. Suffice it to compare the rationalized and exhaustive analysis of interior experience by classicism and images of inner life offered by Sterne and the Romanticists. (44)

Therefore, the infrequency of the concept of solitude until the nineteenth century in America could have as its origin the change in Europe’s attitude toward laughter, as the participation in humor turned inward and laughter became an element of the grotesque in becoming more isolated from full participation in community.
Solitude can exist in a crowd, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Self-Reliance”:

“It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (57). Here Emerson expresses a paradox that is crucial to the expansion of the idea of solitude in his age.

Emerson’s classical-seeming “great man” receives a romantic deepening and more complex insight in Charles Baudelaire’s prose poem “Crowds,” from his 1869 *Paris Spleen*, where he writes, “Enjoying a crowd is an art [. . . bestowed only] on whom in his cradle, a fairy has bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming” (20). Baudelaire suggests both losing and finding oneself in the crowd, a paradox capable of only those who have achieved a comprehension of solitude and can “take a bath of multitude.” “Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet. The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd” (20). It is as if Baudelaire is suggesting a real-life application of Bakhtin’s interior infinite as the carnival of participatory laughter leads to interior aloneness.

The solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion. The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell, will be eternally deprived of. He adopts as his own all the comparisons, all the joys and all the sorrows that chance offers. (20)

Baudelaire argues that man, more particularly the poet, can be alone in the crowd while at the same time having “the soul giving itself entire, all its poetry and all its charity, to the unexpected as it comes along, to the stranger as he passes” (20). Being a physical and mental
part of the crowd and yet distant and separate at will creates a perspective perhaps found only by the poets and the saints.

The American Tradition

We have examined Hindu, Jewish, Christian medieval, and English and European romantic expressions of the concept of solitude, all as prologue to the distinctive developments of this complex of the imagination in the New World. Even superficial differences between North and South American literature on solitude are revealing. Latin America’s markedly Spanish and Catholic elements distinguish it from the North; the elaborate masses and festivals celebrating saints for which its cultures are most known in the United States demarcate a pronouncedly different, more exteriorized sense of community. Historically it has continued the very forms of cultural expression against which the Reformation, and especially the English Puritans, revolted. It is interesting to note, then, that two of the most distinguished and best known books written by Latin American authors in the twentieth century contain the word solitude (soledad): *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), by Octavio Paz, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1966), by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Both authors were Nobel Prize winners, and for both the concept of solitude is seen as a pure privation, as a political, cultural, and spiritual lack, the opposite of solidarity and community, equivalent to the element of fate in Latin American history. The title of Garcia Marquez’s Nobel acceptance speech, a plea for political and economic reform, was “The Solitude of Latin America.”
Catholicism has tended to de-emphasize individual reading of the Bible and even to portray such activity as perilous if one is untrained. Meanwhile, though saints and religious are frequently portrayed as struggling in solitude with their spiritual lives, the faithful have mainly been encouraged to tend to their spiritual health by taking part in the rituals of the liturgical year. Catholicism could be said, without too much exaggeration, to have a performative notion of community, and thus solitude is held off from religious experience except in religious writings where it can be of less influence on the general culture. In contrast, the Calvinist Puritans of New England, for example, emphasized the need for community in protecting themselves from the Indians and establishing their theocracy, as the stark barrenness of the community church lacked the ritual, the icons, and other embodiments of the performative dimension of community. Their community was real and functional, and any traces of mere symbolism were transformed in those first New England winters.

But despite the less symbolic and more functional--and more central--notion of community, a powerful means of individuation apart from the group existed in the availability--and again, the centrality--of the Bible. There, an individual could ponder, meditate, and seek a kind of solitude. The Puritans present another kind of paradigm for Christianity. Their preachers interpreted the Bible, but they allowed individual parishioners to read and interpret the Bible also. Even within the strict guidelines of doctrinally dictated interpretation, the experience of reading militated in itself against the total dominance of community. Later in this study, I will examine how the idea of individual interpretation comes to Hester Prynne.
From America’s earliest beginnings, individuals seeking, enjoying, or being forced into a solitary state have been part of the American heritage. Puritan leader John Winthrop was so afraid of what might and what certainly did occur when individuals were allowed to be alone, to think for themselves, to question authority, and to make their own moral decisions—the heretic Anne Hutchinson, for example—that before his ship the *Arbella* ever landed in the New World in 1630, he exhorted his charges to form a special community, “a city upon a hill,” that would be as a beacon to all the world. In this utopian city, the individual was to be subject to the community through love; the concept of solitude is meaningless. Winthrop’s community would have “many stewards,” to “manifest the work of His Spirit”; every man would have “need of the other,” and each would contribute food if necessary to another. The individuals are members of Christ, and as such will have a “place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical,” to improve their lives by a means of the “conformity and end [they] aim at” (215-16). Winthrop aims at a new Israel, almost a commune, as all help one another: “we are to walk toward each other with justice and mercy” (207).

The Calvinist Puritans emphasized the need for community in protecting themselves from Indians and establishing their theocracy. Although the stark barrenness of the community church lacked the ritual and the icons usually associated with Anglican and Catholic churches of Europe, the New England preachers told members exactly how to live their lives in the community. Often an individual could ponder and meditate and could even
seek a kind of solitude as long as that individual conformed to community ideals. Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” insists on the need for both mental and actual community.

In this new world, Mary Rowlandson wrote in *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* about her being captured by Indians after witnessing the horrible deaths of her family and the destruction of her home. One child survives, but later that child too dies as the Indians move from resolve (place) to resolve to prevent their own capture. Although Rowlandson endures great emotional and physical suffering, intense deprivation, agony and loss, she remains as stoic as her captors, as evidenced by the style and diction of her narration. “Yet I see, when God calls a person to anything, and through never so many difficulties, yet He is fully able to carry them through and make them see, and say they have been gainers thereby” (340). Rowlandson’s Bible, given to her after it was left behind by another white captive, sustains her during most of her journey. Her enforced solitude is made bearable; the succor gleaned from her Bible prevents madness. Rowlandson’s solitude was forced upon her, and she reconciled herself to it by interpreting the Bible to help her understand her fate.

In direct contrast to a loving, gentle God is the God portrayed in Jonathan Edwards’s sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” expounded during the time of the Great Awakening. Edwards describes God holding a lone soul like “a spider or some loathsome insect” over the pit of hell, ready to release him or her into perpetual fire. Does each person truly experience solitude only in terms of the soul at the moment of death and judgment? His listeners know that one dies alone, but is the Almighty going to dangle that soul over the abyss
until He decides if the soul is part of the predestined Elected? Or is such terrifying solitude already a sign of damnation? Solitude in that case would be redefined as abandonment by God. Edwards’s description of the pit and the insect drove sheer terror into the minds of his congregation. Although congregations heard such a sermon as part of a community, certainly every scared listener named and counted his or her sins in solitude.

However, the very birth of the Great Awakening was owed to a radically different experience of solitude, according to Edwards’s own testimony in his “Personal Narrative.” He recalls the birth of his religious sense in his youth, when he would have “sometimes a kind of vision [. . .] of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God” (468). Later, he continues, “I walked abroad alone, in a solitary place in my father’s pasture, for contemplation. And as I was walking there, and looking up on the sky and clouds; there came into my mind, a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express.” From this moment he dates his “sense of divine things.” Without himself making this connection, Edwards substantiates the growing sense that solitude characterizes both the extreme height and extreme depth of human experience.

Both J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in *Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, published in 1782, and later Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* write of Americans shutting themselves up tightly and insisting “upon judging the world from there” and arguing that the solitude of the New World brings a “sense of isolation and abandonment.” Crevecoeur writes of letters that may not be elegant
but “will smell of the woods and be a little wild” (41). Tocqueville echoes Winthrop’s sentiment as he writes, “Each individual stands in solitary weakness; but society at large is active, provident, and powerful; the performances of private persons are insignificant” (315). Transcendentalism altered that attitude.

As Puritanism subsided and the colonies grew and other intellectual movements such as deism influenced writers, the emphasis on community lessened and the importance of the individual emerged, as evidenced by William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. For Bryant the discovery of self through solitary contemplation in a natural setting will allow one to surmount the fear of death. In “Thanatopsis,” Bryant urges readers who are overwhelmed by civilization to go alone to Nature: “Go forth under the open sky, and list/ To Nature’s teachings, while from all around [. . .] / Comes a still voice” (1073). Ultimately he advises readers to use these teachings to face death bravely:

not, like the quarry-slave at night,  
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustain’d and sooth’d  
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,  
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch  
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.  (1074)

Bryant’s advocacy of pleasurable death may be viewed as possible for Kate Chopin’s character Edna. Nevertheless, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s clergyman in “The Minister’s Black Veil” alienates and mystifies his parishioners as he secludes himself, symbolizing the hidden sins of all mankind behind a veil of crepe. Before Father Hooper dies, he asks his parishioners why they tremble so at the sight of his veil and continues: “When man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then
deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!” (52). In this context, solitude takes on a heightened significance for those Puritan characters of Hawthorne, implicitly challenging Winthrop’s communal ideal. With his veil, this romantic Puritan has fashioned a perpetual solitude for himself in the midst of any crowd or congregation, offering an altered view of mankind and its infirmity of soul.

Individualism, which, simply stated, acknowledges the individual apart from church and state, found its way from the European followers of Rousseau to the English romantics and to the Americas. Washington Irving, for example, was one who drew from the European romantics while writing in New York. Individualism was a move away from the monarchy to a new stage of development in the English romantics, for whom the concept of solitude takes on a transformed and central meaning. One aspect of romanticism holds the individual superior to community and able to function in an ideal state if all surrounding corruption is removed. Adapting and extending English and European romanticism in his Transcendentalist movement, Emerson writes that society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Memorable Emersonian lines became touchstones for the Transcendentalists and anchors for Thoreau’s philosophy: “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist”; “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your mind”; “Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Independence emerged as such a primary concern that critics have sometimes alleged an imbalance in the American psyche away from community and toward solitariness. William Meyer asserts that the “origin of the work of art”
in America is “not Heideggerian or Wordsworthian” but “Emersonian and Edwardsian”: “the preference for solitary vision over communal expression; the transformation of Word to Light” (33). Meyer associates the American conception of solitude with the desire for vision and the ignoring of oral-auditory experience, which is more connective and involving. Wordsworth’s “I hear!” becomes Emerson’s “I see!”

Another aspect of the American definition of solitude that manifests itself as a part of American romanticism is the role of nature, both the physical surroundings of community and the discovery that looking to nature in its solitariness can facilitate finding the romantic ideals within oneself. John Gatta has demonstrated important American precursors in associating nature and the sublime, including Anne Bradstreet, Edwards, Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper, and Emerson. His book *Making Nature Sacred* reproduces W. H. Stillman’s 1857 painting “Philosophers’ Camp in the Adirondacks” (97) as an example of the accepted American association of nature with mind and spirit. Even more pertinently to our study, he cites the example of Margaret Fuller, who typically experienced “the mystical spirit-world [. . .] in natural settings removed from society” (Gatta 108). In her journal she writes of a spiritual awakening when she was twenty-one: “she finds herself [Gatta tells us] able to pray only after she walks out of a church service in Groton, Massachusetts, to wander through the surrounding fields. [. . .] ‘I was for that hour taken up into God’” (108). Fuller’s writings as well as her personality were of some considerable influence on Hawthorne; as we will see later, this scene foreshadows a scene in Chopin’s *The Awakening* additionally. One might further be reminded of Dickinson’s poem “Some keep the sabbath going to church.”
Thoreau’s attempt to live Emerson’s Transcendental philosophy found fruition in *Walden*, in which he repeatedly emphasizes life and living. In “Where I Lived, and What I Lived for,” he writes, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (1987). These words *not* and *die* are pivotal to the concept of solitude as it relates to death, the ultimate aloneness of the grave. The agony of death for Thoreau is his fear, not of dying alone, but of the realization that his life had been empty, worthless, and meaningless. The chapter titled “Solitude” in *Walden* has Thoreau describing a kind of ‘doubleness’ by which he can separate himself and look at himself as he “may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra [the Vedic king of heaven] in the sky looking down on it” (90-91).

When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes. [. . .] I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. (91)

Thoreau’s philosophy of living “deliberately” while experiencing “doubleness,” seeing himself apart from himself in an objective manner, as he “love[s] to live alone,” figures in the lives of the characters to be examined in later chapters as they experience their peculiar kind of solitary life.

Thoreau is one of the world’s classic witnesses to the power of solitude to transform, to bestow on a person the power of indifference. Yet Thoreau writes from a position of well-being and plenitude. Although he makes much of the thrift with which he has organized his
stay in the woods, his freedom is untroubled by thoughts of survival or of obligation to any other living person. His chapter “Solitude” readily displays this privileged expansive feeling as if it were a spontaneous experience of authenticity: “This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself” (86-87). Beginning as someone purely enjoying a kind of aesthetic delight, Thoreau then transforms himself effortlessly into the selfless observer of nature: “The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water” (87). This stance of self-effacement, however, is possible only if one exists in a plenitude of self-enjoyment in the first place. “Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled.” He is Emerson’s all-seeing eye put into practice: “I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself, a distant view of the railroad where it touches the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland road on the other. [. . .] I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself.”

Thoreau sees himself mirrored in all his surroundings: “I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself. [. . .] I am no more lonely than the Mill Brook, or a weathercock, or the north star, or the south wind, or an April shower, or a January thaw, or the first spider in a new house” (92). His solitude is delicious to him: “I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (91); “I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls” (92). Solitude makes
the heights available to Transcendentalist Thoreau, yet curiously he seems innocent of any depths in human experience. “There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still.”

This is not to say that Thoreau’s famous experience is without depth. Solitude allows him to look into himself, where that doubleness resides. “However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you” (91). Yet even this revelation of the split nature of the self is not troubling. His conception even of the forced and fatal experience of solitude is bright and sunny: “I have heard of a man lost in the woods and dying of famine and exhaustion at the foot of a tree, whose loneliness was relieved by the grotesque visions with which, owing to bodily weakness, his diseased imagination surrounded him, and which he believed to be real” (92). One may want to keep this passage in mind later when considering Herman Melville’s Pip and deciding whether, as death loomed, “relieved” is the best term to describe how the visions Pip encountered affected him!

I dwell on Thoreau’s “Solitude” first of all because of its eminence for any study of the American conception of solitude but also because it exhibits a pronouncedly masculine and privileged point of view that emphasizes a buoyant and commanding mood, a surveying view, and a mirrorlike seeing of himself in the perfection of nature. The texts that this study will examine contrast those traits with situations of oppression, moods of desperation, and brooding self-absorption or self-loss. Nature often leads them to the experience of solitude to
which I refer, but the beauty of nature, or its self-affirming qualities, is not always necessary and does not play a significant role. I am thus compelled by my findings in the texts I have examined to part company with the ecocritical movement as laid out by Buell, which models itself on Thoreau’s stance and calls, among other things, for a new ecological perspective on many American works that set the experience of solitude in nature.

Drawing on Buell, but taking a less radical stance that still places the human subject in the landscape, Randall Roorda’s *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing* sees the retreat into solitude as the central drama in American nature writing (xiii). In these works, Roorda claims, the retreat into solitude is construed as a turning of one’s back on vanity and illusion. Nonetheless, in the writing Roorda takes as paradigmatic—works by Thoreau, Wendell Berry, William Stafford, and others—this turning is accompanied by a self-effacement. These narratives “lose the human”; they are “essentially depopulated” (12). This goes one step too far into the wilderness for my purposes. In purporting to “speak for” nature, Buell’s ecocritical movement ignores to its peril the self-reflective part of the man-nature connection, which is always, in any case, the darkest, most troublesome, and most crucial part of the landscape.

That the prospect of the solitariness of death can bring with it a heightened awareness is suggested by Emily Dickinson in her poem “I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died”:

- I heard a Fly buzz--when I died--
- The Stillness in the Room
- Was like the Stillness in the Air--
- Between the Heaves of Storm-- (465)
Dickinson’s poem famously sets the scene for a formal, almost regal transfer of domains from life to death until the unsettling moment, no less unsettling for having been announced in the first line:

and then it was
There interposed a Fly–

With Blue--uncertain stumbling Buzz--
Between the light--and me--
And then the Windows failed--and then
I could not see to see--

Clearly, Dickinson is writing, not dying, yet she puts herself or her persona in the situation of death; without any preconceived notions of what death is like, she achieves a heightened awareness. The minuscule things in life matter at the time of death. Seeing and hearing an ordinary fly at the moment of death take on monumental proportions; it is as if the dying person had never really seen or experienced an insect before. The same sort of heightened awareness as experienced by Hester Prynne, Pip, and Edna Pontellier will be examined later.

Experiencing solitude in the nineteenth century was not limited to New England or the South. Americans also experienced the vast emptiness of the western frontier, which forced a person to contemplate the uncertainty of survival. Community in whatever church was often a day’s carriage ride away. Legend has it that when Daniel Boone saw the smoke from his neighbor’s chimney eighteen miles away, he moved. Such a close distance impinged on his solitude, his aloneness. Thoreau and Boone would have appreciated Dickinson’s poem:

The Soul Selects her own Society--
Then--shuts the Door--
To her divine Majority--
Present no more-- (303)
Dickinson’s Soul chooses whether to be alone or not. Thoreau, Dickinson, and Boone eschew the tenets of Winthrop’s Calvinist dictate to form community and to be subservient to it. And Edgar Allan Poe, the great romantic, ignores community entirely.

What do all of these incidents and examples from literature and life have in common? All the individuals, real or imagined, experience new thoughts and activities as a possible result of their solitude or remoteness from others or their perceived aloneness. In the nineteenth-century American literature that I will examine in this study, the characters in solitude experience sadness, suicide, an awareness of self, or a facet of life on a distinct new plane or level of awareness. These characters who experience solitude undergo a major change as a possible result of their solitariness. Winthrop had cause for fear of “wildness,” for its pull resulted in a series of heretics, whose careers in turn are mirrored by fictional heretics such as Hawthorne’s Hester, Melville’s Pip, and Chopin’s Edna. Does seeking solitude result in desperation? I will question whether character changes can be labeled salubrious or deleterious, or what at first might seem to be a paradox: that characters experience both good and bad and even satisfactory perilous encounters as a result of their solitude. I will offer possible reasons for such results. Other questions that I will attempt to answer in this study include: Why is solitude so important, so life-determining for both female and male characters? Do women and men experience solitude in the same ways? How is its significance different for men and women? This study will include texts by both male and female authors: one woman author who portrays a woman character, one man who portrays male characters, and one male author who characterizes a woman. No one can know for
certain if all the authors in this study--Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Kate Chopin--experienced solitude for a greater or lesser amount of time or in greater or lesser intensity; nevertheless, to create solitary characters, a writer--a convincing writer--must have experienced some solitude herself or himself.

In Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, in the excerpt on Pip (“The Castaway”) from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, characters experience solitude either by choice or by fate or both, resulting in different manifestations. American characters are caught up with this solitary notion that manifests itself in an odd kind of perilous/beneficial manner.

The concept of solitude forces one to raise questions about whether the effects of solitude result from the individual’s separation from his or her social structure or a negation of the social structure entirely. Even if one is solitary, is conforming to social structure a continued obstacle to be faced? Is this conformity the real obstacle? Although the effects of solitude may include madness, suicide, heightened awareness, and a kind of indifference, experiencing solitude may result in a kind of pinnacle: a balance, wrought by self-discipline, that yields self-knowledge and a new accord with the community with which one has been at odds.

The next chapter presents solitary responses that may answer some of the questions presented so far. Characters or personae in the following texts may be viewed as heroes or saints in different traditions. Just as two Tlingit Indians were banished, literally, to an isolated island in the northern Pacific, so too, for example, do modern Hindu women feel banished
from their mothers’ kitchens. Solitary meditation has probably existed since the early hunters and gatherers, as evidenced by the cave drawings of Lascaux, Altamira, and Siberia. With the invention of the printing press, the industrial revolution, and so-called modern civilization, the elite calling of being a writer has become a role available to almost everyone. Virginia Woolf’s famous need for a room of her own to write has been one important response to this expanded possibility; another, which I will deal with in the next chapter, is an opposite response that claims the “writer-writes-alone” idea is fatally flawed and should be discarded for effective writing in the modern world.

In any case, the myth of the necessity of solitude for writing or contemplation or personal growth continues. Huge shifts may have taken place in the paradigm as the concept moved from Europe to the New World and back again. Although the effects of solitude may change, the need for it remains. Perhaps the repeat visitors to Walden Pond today experience a situation described by Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Self-Reliance”: “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (57). And if it is so effective, why then is such solitude so often feared?
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature of Solitude: The Poet-Thinker

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant.

--Thoreau, *Walden*

Cultural Construction

Since I have examined multiple definitions and origins of the concept of solitude, it is now necessary to examine the effects of that solitary state. I have chosen twelve different texts by authors from ancient times through the late twentieth century to examine the concept of solitude from divergent points of view, leading to different and occasionally opposite ideas as to the consequences or effects of solitude. Examining consequences or effects, however, is not entirely what this review attempts to show; instead, in this study I am more interested in what occurs to the individual, either in fiction or nonfiction, as she or he is *in* solitude. Each of the authors examined in this chapter illuminates an area of solitude, allowing a conceptually developed study of the rich presentation of solitude in the fiction of Hawthorne, Melville, and Chopin to be examined in the next three chapters.

One element that cannot be ignored is that Thoreau might not have tolerated his woods commercialized, but we can. How has America changed in its capacity to tolerate? How does
solitude “repackage” itself? An understanding of the American past will help connect and project to the twenty-first century.

In Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, characters experience an “edgeness” where they meet and talk with one another, but they filter out the noises and tastes and touches around them and concentrate on only a portion of what is in their existence. Each character, every one of them, in spite of their community, blocks the other out. For example, Jack and his collegiate colleague Murray drive out into the countryside to see “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA” (12). However, they never “see” the farmhouse. They become part of the aura of the farmhouse as they watch photographers take pictures of photographers taking pictures of the vendor selling postcards and slides of the farm.

“No one sees the barn,” he said finally.
A long silence followed. (12)

Having a solitary reaction to the barn is impossible, as Murray insists: “Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. [...] We can’t get outside the aura. We’re part of the aura. We’re here, we’re now” (12-13).

The hordes who flocked to Walden Pond have also created their own “aura,” and only a privileged few see through and beyond it. DeLillo makes contemporary readers aware that we are now our own worst enemies in blocking the experience of solitude, which may be tantamount to blocking the capacity to experience at all. Perhaps something has finally been snuffed out and solitude no longer yields its magic to the plugged-in generation? Or does the
incapacity for solitude mean a decreased capacity for something else empathy, for instance?
appreciation of things independent of ourselves? having a self at all?

A Perilous Place

A writer writes alone: in Fifty Days of Solitude author Doris Grumbach secludes herself in “frozen, snow-filled country” along the Maine coast to “become Thoreau’s unsuccessful writer, searching desperately for ideas” (2-3). Grumbach asks herself, “Was I all outside? Was there enough inside that was vital, that would sustain and interest me in my self-enforced solitude?” (3). The Boston Globe hailed this thin volume as “a travelogue for those for whom the world is too much with them” and an “account of a journey to a remote, enticing, and perilous place” (114/95). That “perilous place” becomes not so much the hostile outdoors environment but what happens to Grumbach’s spirit as she lives and thinks inside her solitary retreat.

Throughout her memoir, Grumbach refers to authors and painters who influence her thinking. She reminds herself, for example, of the painter Effling, who spent a year in a cave and came “to realize he had to devise a disciplined life” (5). Parts of her book remind the reader of Thoreau, especially her descriptions of snow and winter. Her art selections, photographs, short biographies, and descriptions of her daily routine all emphasize the salubrious effects of solitude upon her personality. Grumbach decides that “order, sequence, is a secret of being alone” (Grumbach’s emphasis; 6) and so orders her days into a kind of routine. Gaston Bachelard suggests that in recursive solitude things that are recursive tend to isolate themselves from their environment; they therefore become more intense and isolated.
Since silence is a mortal quality, Grumbach writes that “uninterrupted sleep is a foretaste, a 
trial run, for what is to come, the pleasure of death” (7). Some of her musings about living a 
solitary life and contemplating death sound like Bryant’s poetry; they also mirror thoughts of 
each of the main characters to be examined in the chapters to come. Solitude, silence, the self, 
and death are all inexorably connected.

Nevertheless, Fifty Days is not lugubrious but rather a paean to the joys and benefits of 
being alone, often reminding the reader of what the painter Edward Hopper claims, that 
“living in the world […] we are nonetheless alone and lonely” (Grumbach 14). At times, 
Grumbach is a bit frightened. “Searching for the self when I was entirely alone was 
hazardous” (18), she writes, echoing Virginia Woolf since Grumbach too has a room of her 
own--the entire cottage--for these fifty days. She adds, “For too long women have existed in 
groups” (19), a first intimation of a question to be touched on repeatedly in this study: the 
special character of solitude for women’s experience and imagination. After Grumbach 
accepts her aloneness, she comes “to look hard at what [she] did not notice before and even 
harder at what is not there” (24). Bachelard refers to the imagination in relation to the real 
and the unreal as analogous to scientific knowledge in that it covers both the known and what 
is unknown or undiscovered. In Bachelard’s view, both the real and the unreal are perfectly 
real, so there is nothing truly unreal.

Occasionally Grumbach chastises herself: “In the silence I eagerly sought, I could hear 
myself think, and what I heard was, sadly, often not worth listening to” (51). Her descent into 
self continues, and then she realizes that the silence makes noise until the entire “odious
concept of sharing disappeared” (81). She does, however, share her thoughts with the reader, who alone seems privy to an earned and only provisional community. As she explains, “In this way, metaphorically, I now needed to live, with the top layer of my person known to the outside world and displayed for social purposes. But, close to the bone, there had to be an inner stratum, formed and cultivated in solitude where the essence of what I was, am now, and will be, perhaps, to the end of my days, hides itself and waits to be found by the lasting silence” (113). Self-discovery approaches metamorphosis here, for as the discovery of the most foundational stratum of the self is also a new revelation that changes her. Solitude as metamorphosis--its liminal power--will also be a focus in the chapters to come.

However, almost hidden in Grumbach’s recounting of the salubrious benefits of secluding oneself in solitude is the devastating story of the college student from Alaska she knew who could not tolerate the loneliness when he was returned to his family after a suicide attempt. The poet-student tries to take his life while surrounded by the university but succeeds only after he is returned to his family and their home. Why does Grumbach include this haunting narrative after she herself works through all the hazards and contradictory benefits of her own enforced solitude? Perhaps she wishes to tell her readers that everyone needs that “inside” and “outside” self, and this student could not tolerate his life “outside.” The loneliness was overwhelming for him. Also, the author suggests that only those who are older and have sufficient strength and wisdom can endure solitude. (It will be important to assess just how much wisdom, age, and strength the nineteenth-century American characters in this study have to draw on.) Although Grumbach relies on her own personal resources, that
one horrific story at the book’s conclusion almost negates all the quotations, references, and allusions to the wonder and contentment that she finds in living alone.

After these vignettes we must ask, does solitude require an aloneness within the whole? *Fifty Days of Solitude*, as a memoir of musings and insight, attests to the beneficial solitary state, except that the suicide haunts both the author and the reader. Grumbach silently chastises herself, suggesting that she could have responded to the student in some special way and that perhaps her intervention might have prevented that student’s death.

Does the student who commits suicide do so because of the attraction or perceived attainment of a higher level of awareness, or because he was repulsed by his own comprehension of his present life? Did he think that he was going to a better place, to perhaps, as William Cullen Bryant writes, to “lie down with patriarchs and kings”? It does not matter. Grumbach works through her use of solitude; the student does not. Nevertheless, Grumbach holds herself partially responsible for his death because she did not respond to his needs. That one incident undermines all her listings of the benefits of solitude. The drama of removal and discovery focuses intensely on self, but in real time it is intertwined inextricably with other dramas to which the seeker remains tied. Solitude is a kind of fiction, one in which a truth can be revealed.

**Connecting Strands**

In *Women and Solitude: The Center of the Web*, twenty professional women define their concepts of solitude as a personal experience, narration, or description, relying on explanations and interpretations from D. W. Winnicott, Anthony Storr, Tillie Olsen, Virginia
Woolf, and May Sarton, among others. Jacqueline Jones Royster, editor and director of a university writing center, offers a definition: “Ultimately, I came to understand distinctions among solitude, loneliness, isolation and alienation, and across the matrix of these experiences, I learned to appreciate the power of solitude” (35).

This collection is divided into three sections: Solitude and Identity, Solitude and Culture, and Solitude and Work. In all essays, the authors either choose solitude at some time in their lives or else have solitude forced upon them briefly. All of the writers appear to grow or mature or gain some insight from having had the experience of solitude. Most of the ideas that each woman discusses have been referred to earlier in this study, yet some of their interpretations and explanations add to the understanding of this complex concept.

Editor Delese Wear’s introductory essay in the volume, “A Reconnection to Self: Women and Solitude,” explains the volume’s subtitle:

I, the spinner of my web, was at the center, but it was a center that existed within the architecture of the rest of the web. The threads leading outward and around were essential, reassuring, and secure. [...] I’ve come to realize that webs are also structures where we can get caught, [...] painful experiences of being tangled in the webs of heterosexist, racist, patriarchal cultures. When caught in a web, spinning is wearisome, often impossible; connections are difficult and knotted. (xi)

For Wear and for several of the essayists, the web is a metaphor for construction of one’s life and ultimately for being caught in the center (though perhaps “caught” is too pejorative a term). Nevertheless the web holds the person and in some instances overcomes the person while in isolation. But the web is connected to itself and to a kind of supporting system, and through those connections, the writers are never totally solitary. Because of the connecting
“strands,” these women can discuss solitude in terms of their own personal identity, solitude as it relates to the culture surrounding them, and solitude as experienced in the workplace. To be isolated, one must be in the center, yet identity is related to how the web “spins out” to culture. Even work may have the effect, for example, of “spinning” out. Since no one can be totally solitary, the metaphoric web works to describe women’s lives as webs and women as individuals who have the “abilities to influence the method and direction of our spinning.”

Wear describes this solitude as “a more ethereal (although often literal) kind of shelter in order to think and reflect and often create, away from others we care for and about—children, friends, parents, students, partners” (Wear’s emphasis; xii). Wear argues for the importance of solitude in comprehending work and identity and culture. Solitude is necessary as a “respite for reflection on identities” (xiv). For Wear, solitude is “a condition/place to replenish our spirits, live, and often to work—separate from the other lives we live within the many kinds of families we’ve created.” It becomes clear that for women much more than for men, solitude is not a simple autonomous decision one can make at any time, like Thoreau’s determination to live deliberately; it is rather a refuge and a reconnection that one may never be afforded as thoroughly as one desires.

Editor Wear summarizes some of the essayists’ main tenets in her introduction. Lynne McFall, a philosopher, writes that “to become an individual requires solitude and suffering. To survive and develop as an individual requires the capacity to ‘stand alone’ to think and feel and speak for oneself.” Mara Sapon-Shevin, a professor of education, writes of her changing experiences of solitude from childhood to the present “as uncloseness, as alienation, as
disempowerment, as hiding, as vulnerability, and finally coming to realize solitude as a potentially affirming experience.” Jo Anne Pagano writes, “I can be alone because I know that I am connected. The world does not fade when I am in solitude because it is only in the world and in my connection to others in it that I am myself.” Beth Rushing “posits that ‘we are […] more aware of solitude if our surroundings constantly serve as a reminder of our solitude, thus heightening the sensation’--such as being alone amidst a crowd” (xv). Other writers define their relationship to both solitude and community “through the lenses of difference and isolation imposed by racist, heterosexist, patriarchal cultures” (xv).

Wear asserts, “I want not just a room of my own; I want figurative space in my life” (4). That statement echoes what best exemplifies my ideas of solitude and its value for the life of the mind, a life of reading and writing, to be found in a room of one’s own while breaking away and reuniting with community again. Ellen Michaelson, medical doctor, writing in “Solitude and Work,” struggled with her desire to be a writer. “I do not think I am antisocial any more because I want to be alone or write, or even just to be by myself. Now I can freely choose to open the closed door” (234). Virginia Woolf would approve.

Issues of solitude and community are paradoxically wound together in a particular web described in “Inner Life Outer World: Women and Solitude in India,” by Darshan Perusek. In her essay, Perusek lists dozens of rules, restrictions, and burdens placed on women in India: the obligation to the omnipotent husband, the requirements to bear children, the neglect of female babies, the lack of support for women’s education, the absence of sexual satisfaction, the number of women who figuratively and sometimes literally die when their husbands die,
the missing security for females once they leave the home, the dire poverty of elderly widows, and so on. Perusek narrates how she escaped (my word, not hers) her mother’s kitchen and the impositions of class/caste to become an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stout and an editor of an international magazine. When she returned to Wisconsin from a visit to India, she wrote, “In truth, my spirits protested against the quiet and contrast to India” (118). She recalls that she did not have a room of her own and narrates how when reading that David Copperfield was ordered to go to his room, she had “as little a notion of what this meant as [she] had of a ‘host of golden daffodils’” (121). She likens houses in Wisconsin to fortresses, whereas in India home had nothing to do “with privacy or personal space” (122). For Perusek, community is the parents’ home where the two dominant themes of songs women sing should be the harshness of life in the husband’s home and the loss of the sweet joys of the parents’ home. [. . . T]he parental home [. . .] is still the only place where they remember being loved and cared for, and to which after being married they cannot return except for brief visits, and that only so long as the mother is there to welcome her. [. . .] What truly crushes us, what truly makes us homeless and alone, is the silence in which our deepest needs and longings go unheard. (126-27)

Perusek adds an “Afterword” to her personal essay as she describes renting an entire house in Wisconsin where she had room enough for a separate study. She carefully describes how the room is furnished with desk, chair, shelves, lamp, and how “the study looks beautiful, except [she doesn’t] work there” (131). She continues: “I have gradually sneaked everything I need back to the kitchen table, which is where I have worked all my life. I felt an exile in my study, banished from the sights and sounds of life, condemned to an intolerable solitude. The pages on which I write are sometimes marked with tea stains and the yellow of turmeric. But
I don’t care. I’m back where I feel at home. In my kitchen.” The word sneaked suggests that even in Perusek’s freedom as an independent woman, she feels constrained or compelled by mores from her past. Nevertheless, her writing in the kitchen alone represents both elements of the web: comfortable because of connectedness to that community which she experienced in her mother’s home. And the comfort she derived from that memory makes her comfortable in solitude. Perusek’s kitchen is solitary, yet it is not solitary for her at all.

A more recent volume, *Herspace: Women, Writing, and Solitude*, edited by Jo Malin and Victoria Boynton, has followed in the path of Wear’s originative collection. The cumulative effect of most of the essays in this volume is to elevate the house with a single female owner-occupant to the level of an iconic image, as a means of self-communion. “My house,” volunteers Malin, “is a lovely piece of tangible beauty that enhances my life as a solitaire” (8). Her way is radically different from the way American men have imagined the sublimity of solitude, as Malin acknowledges in referring to this collection of essays as presenting “alternatives to the history of class-bound, masculine models of the creative process.” Does it also lead one to question whether such companionship, even with something inorganic and personified, forestalls a more authentic experience of solitude? Or is it a genuinely alternative experience of the bliss of solitude?

Using the image of the social web that is central to Wear (whom she cites), Malin remarks that “for [her . . .] the web is once-removed; there is a neutral, peaceful space between the web and [her].” She continues, “It is the open space ‘around’ the work that living alone gives me and that I find so valuable in helping me to achieve focus and be more
productive” (7). Bachelard provides a terminology for this space in Lisa Johnson’s essay “A Veritable Guest to Her Own Self” in this volume. Johnson takes the concept of felicitous space from Bachelard, who means by it “a mode of inhabiting space [. . .] experiencing aloneness with one’s surroundings” and their “resonance with the human imagination” (Johnson 97). Malin paraphrases this approach: “Women deal creatively with the spheres accorded to men and women by reconceiving enclosures as refuges, recasting the imprisoning house as a space of creativity,” and associating domesticity with “spiritual growth, autonomy, and continuity” (Malin 11). If women’s experience is to be taken into account, then the quest for creative solitude leads indoors as well as out, it seems. A reexamination of Woolf’s famous essay on this subject is in order.

Shakespeare’s Sister

In 1929, Virginia Woolf’s definitive long essay on women and their writing fiction was published. Based upon two papers read to the Arts Society, Woolf’s piece argues for women’s solitude in that they need a room of their own with a lock on the door and the financial security to retreat to that room to write fiction. It is important to note that in A Room of One’s Own, women who want to write or who feel a need to express themselves through the written word must have more than just a place to write: They need a physical place that can be locked from the inside. (Gilman’s female character is locked in her room from the outside, and her solitude is one in which she is forbidden to write.) Also, Woolf argues that women must have the financial security to attempt the writing without fear of reprisals from anyone on whom they depend and without the added responsibility of having to write to
provide substance for themselves or others. The room must become a kind of retreat, a situation for women to write in security and freedom, alone. Despite the contrary view of those like Linda Brodkey, whose article we will examine shortly, Woolf’s argument, written almost seventy years ago, has not changed much for women seeking the opportunity for creative thought.

“Is the charwoman who had brought up eight children of less value to the world than the barrister who had made a hundred thousand pounds?” (60) asks Woolf. Apparently so.

Unlike Woolf’s celebrated “Shakespeare’s sister” who was denied her room, a woman who wishes to write at all has to have access not only to a private room but to other rooms that were often denied to women sixty years ago. Woolf recounts her being denied entrance to “a famous library,” where “an unending stream of gold and silver, [she] thought, must have flowed into this court perpetually to keep the stones coming and the masons working” (4):

and I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and of the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and, thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of the writer, I thought that at last that it was time to roll up the crumpled skin of the day with its arguments and its impressions and its anger and its laughter, and cast it into the hedge. (40-41)

The reader must assume that in spite of her exclusion, like Camus’s Sisyphus, Woolf is “happy.”

Banishing the Romantic

The notion of a view of private existence forms Linda Brodkey’s argument in her essay “Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing.” Brodkey musters all aspects of the
modernist movement to debunk the concept of the solitary writer “alone in a cold garret
writing into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle” (396). For Brodkey,
modernism, with its response to revolution, culture, intellectual queries, spiritual upheavals,
social problems, and vagaries in language, has destroyed the romantic image of the writer-
writes-alone. This familiar icon as a “romantic representation of the production of canonical
literature” is for her “an image of economic, emotional, and social deprivation.” Brodkey
forces herself to “exorcise” the image of the solitary writer since she teaches students her own
techniques “that rest on principles of revision and response” (397). Brodkey’s argument rests
on her assumption that good writing cannot exist without a specified audience. Those of us
who teach students to recreate a garret and conduct research on those students’ writing make
that garret into a “laboratory, the author a subject, the reader a researcher, and reading an
analysis of data.” Brodkey argues that disrupting the scene of writing through acts of the
imagination will revise the scene to accommodate students and self, as writers as well as
recorders.

For Brodkey, the solitary writer is “an amanuensis, making transcriptions a synecdoche
of writing” (398). No imagination enters Brodkey’s image, nor does the text even begin to
represent a total experience. When we (Brodkey and other writers) seek solitude necessary for
writing, we may experience “moments when the solitude overwhelms us, when we cannot
recall our reasons for doing so” (398). She goes on to say:

[In modernism] the metaphor of solitude is reiterated in the themes of
alienation in modern art and atomism in modern science. In much of literary
modernism, solitude is at once inevitable and consequential, the irreconcilable
human condition from which there is no escape. And whenever writers are
picted there, as they often are, the writer-writes-alone is a narrative of irreconcilable alienation, a vicarious narrative told by an outsider who observes rather than witnesses life. (398)

Brodkey further argues, “In the scene of writing [. . .] the writer-writes-alone is an image in which the writer is made to appear a prisoner of both language and society, for the scene resembles nothing so much as a cell” (399). Brodkey does concede that the picture of the writer-writes-alone exists but takes issue with the “unexamined assumption that this and only this moment counts as writing.” Ultimately she is at pains to transform the image of the writer’s solitude from a romantic image to “a metaphor for the isolation of modern man” (404). To write alone is to write as if possessed by writing, contends Brodkey, extending her argument; and this possessed writing, the most intense image of writing, thus paradoxically denies authorship. This is an interesting but overextended claim, as is her contention that writing alone robs authenticity and engagement from the writer by banishing time from his writing. For centuries of poets, negating time was a passionately wished-for goal. A case can be made that human existence is characterized by shuttling between engagement in and detachment from time.

Brodkey reminds readers that the “prisoner of writing is irrevocably male” (406). Women are not the writers but the “women who support men who write, a muse or a mistress, a doting mother, wife, or sister.” Although Brodkey acknowledges Woolf’s assertion that women need a room of their own in order to write, Brodkey echoes Woolf’s question about who shares the room and on what terms. By questioning the terms of occupancy, Woolf connects writing both to writers and to the world. “She [Woolf] argues that writing, once a
closed shop, is now an occupation open to those few women fortunate enough to learn and practice it.” Woolf’s room for women writers is about having the time and a place in which to write. The scene is then pragmatic rather than romantic. Brodkey continues:

While the scene of writing guarantees the consequences (Literature), it is as much a mystery to the writer as it is to us why he, rather than someone else, is the prisoner of writing. He is elected to write, she selects to write; the scene mystifies writing, the room demystifies it; he is alone, she is in the company of other writers (writing is a house with many rooms); he is product, she is process. (407)

The scene of writing, the garret, “frees writers from the world only to make them prisoners of writing” (408). For Brodkey, the modernist writer bears little responsibility for either the world or the word. “The writer in the scene of writing is the victim of both the word and the world, he who mediates the sacred word is in a profane world.” Hence, “the act of writing is at once a practical and radical demonstration, in which every writer protests the implausibility of language in a world where words might mean anything or everything, but somehow mean neither as much nor as little as we wish” (409).

Brodkey calls for a revision of the scene of writing to reexamine the social and political consequences of the scene: “What I have in mind calls for an act of imaginative resistance” (413). She wants writers to come out of the garret: “A descent from the garret will of course be an excursion into the very social, historical, and political circumstances from which garrets have been defending us.” She does concede Woolf her “room” but only if the writer can escape from that room: “[One] must have resided however briefly in the room, even to imagine oneself as a member of a community of writers” (414). Brodkey argues that the writer must come down—*descend*, which is Camus’s word, too—as if the room is lofty and
what Brodkey advocates is not—and participate in collaboration. Brodkey cites the research of Nan Elsasser and others who document the great strides made by women in underdeveloped countries who verged on the illiterate but wrote successfully in collaboration. Brodkey does argue, however, that collaboration is a means to an end and that it is not the end itself. She argues for the extension of the National Writing Project (of which I have been a participant), where teachers teach each other how to write and share their writing. Although I shared in that writing, I would take issue with Brodkey’s assertions; as a member of that project, I still did most all of my writing alone, in my own special garret.

Finally, Brodkey argues for the need to “transform pedagogy by institution writing as a social and material political practice in which writers endeavor to reconstruct society even as they construct and critique their understanding of what it means to write, learn to write, teach writing, and do research on writing” (415). Brodkey does present a challenge to the romantic notion of the need for solitude in writing. She asks that the whole notion be rethought and argues that the writer descend from the garret to a kind of collaborative setting.

Nevertheless, solitude must be defended on new grounds as an inquiry into the deep structure of what constitutes being alone. Even a woman in her room alone writing is not quite alone. Her entire existence, found in her frame of reference, is there with her. Yet, today, when we think of writing, we think of a scene that is precisely that romantic image of solitude. Brodkey does not see this scene, though she thinks about herself writing. For her the romantic scene does not allow for revision or response, but does this flawed image harm the writing as she seems to think that it does? Even the title of her argument includes multiple
“scene(s) of writing,” and Brodkey herself experiences the scene. While the scene for her is wrong because it does not match her ideal of the collective, we have to ask if that makes it harmful. Characters in this study will be seen as existing alone, but does that aloneness make their situation harmful? Or does that solitariness result in some other situation? For Brodkey, teachers, students, and researchers are influenced by the scene of writing. She does concede and agree with Woolf that writers need solitude to write and that the solitude can momentarily break our contact with the community. The writer in the scene is isolated from reality, and writing is independent of the writer for Brodkey, creating an identity of its own. For the authors in my study, the writing is a part of themselves. If writing is an entity of its own, does this mean that the image of the writer is not responsible for the image of the writing?

Night Is Not Night Enough

Although Brodkey’s is a radically one-sided argument, she is able to maintain her position because there is an irreducibly communal element in language. Yet perhaps writing is not entirely in harmony with language as communication; perhaps there is always also an irreducible element of difference, newness, strangeness; otherwise why write? Thus distance from community reenters the equation, and one returns to the scene of writing with a new appreciation of the self-making and self-expressing potential of solitude.

In contrast to Brodkey’s dismissal of the writer-writes-alone scene, Anthony Storr in Solitude: A Return to the Self quotes Kafka: “That is why one can never be alone enough when one writes, why there can never be enough silence around one when one writes, why even night is not night enough” (103). Published in 1988, psychiatrist Storr’s definitive work
on the subject of solitude written for a lay person describes how solitude has affected writers, artists, composers, and others through the ages in both beneficial and harmful ways. Storr contrasts the “two opposing drives [that] operate throughout life: the drive for companionship, love, and everything else which brings us close to our fellow men; and the drive toward being independent, separate, and autonomous” (xiv). Also, Storr lessens Freud’s emphasis on sexual satisfaction as a result of an intimate relationship and Freud’s emphasis on total comprehension of the past to explain the present and change the future. “Sex was the touchstone by which the whole relationship could be evaluated today, [. . .] psychotherapy [. . .] directed toward understanding what has gone wrong with the patient’s relationships with significant persons in his or her past [. . . and toward] making more fruitful and fulfilling human relationships in the future” (6).

Instead, Storr argues for a balance between attachment and solitude so every person has a chance for Maslow’s self-actualization found in some kind of singular creativity. “Learning, thinking, innovation, and maintaining contact with one’s own inner world are all facilitated by solitude” (28). Even though “most adult human beings want both intimate relationships and the sense of belonging to community, [. . .] with few exceptions, psychotherapists have failed to consider the fact that the capacity to be alone is also an aspect of emotional maturity” (18). Storr argues for balance between community (the need for emotionally satisfying relationships) and solitude (linked with a self-discovery and self-realization). “Whether or not they are enjoying intimate relationships, human beings need a sense of being a part of a larger community than that constituted by the family [. . . to] provide
a setting in which the individual feels he has a function and a place” (13). (This idea is elaborated further by Victor Turner’s concept of *communitas*, to be examined shortly.) “The fact that a man is part of a hierarchy, and that he has a particular job to carry out, gives his life significance. It also provides a frame of reference through which he perceives his relation with others[. . . . By means of this frame we] encounter people with whom we are not intimate, but who nevertheless contribute to our sense of self.” Therefore, individuals want both intimate relationships and a sense of belonging to a community, but they also need the capacity to be alone. “Learning, thinking, innovation, and maintaining contact with one’s own inner world are all facilitated by solitude” (28).

The paperback edition of Storr’s book indicates the therapeutic emphasis of his book with the heading printed above the title: “A profoundly original exploration of solitude and its role in the lives of creative, fulfilled individuals.” This phrase certainly should help sell more copies of *Solitude*; but for the purposes of literary study--and for a fuller picture of the nature of solitude--I question the word *fulfilled*. Not every individual whose life is discussed in the works examined in this study leads what ordinary people would consider to be a fulfilled life. Storr registers early on as a defender of happiness: “It is widely believed that interpersonal relationships of an intimate kind are the chief, if not the only, source of human happiness. [. . . I]t is easy to assume that creative talent, mental instability, and a deficient capacity for making satisfying personal relationships are closely linked” (ix-x). Then, however, as an example he points to Boethius, who “was accused of treason, arrested, condemned, and sent into exile to await execution. While imprisoned in Pavia, Boethius composed *The
Consolation of Philosophy, the work by which he is now remembered. He was tortured and then bludgeoned to death in 524 or 525 AD” (57). That Boethius wrote a text studied to this day may have given him a fulfilled life in an important sense, since through his writing he does come to a kind of acceptance of the fate that Lady Fortuna and her wheel of fortune dealt him, but the kinds of fulfillment that Storr admires and recounts may not fit the popular definition of a “fulfilled” individual.

Storr’s quiet argument appears to assert that men (almost always men, seldom women; more about this later) need not always have satisfactory mutual relationships, or, as Freud maintained, satisfactory sexual relationships, to live a “fulfilled” life. It seems to Storr that what goes on in the human being when he is by himself is as important as what happens in his interactions with other people:

Two opposing drives operate throughout life: the drive for companionship, love, and everything else that brings us close to our fellow men; and the drive toward being independent, separate, and autonomous. […] His most significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and those moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone. (xiv)

All the characters in this study experience Storr’s struggle for both community and solitude. For Storr, however, the attachment is not “as important as work to the emotional significance of what [goes] on in the mind of the individual when he is alone, and, more especially, to the central place occupied by the imagination in those who are capable of creative achievement” (15). Intimate attachments are “a hub around which a person’s life revolves, not necessarily the hub” (Storr’s emphases).
Storr suggests that what has been overlooked is that man needs satisfactory work and that man can find fulfillment in solitude. This solitude, whether it be sought or imposed, can be used as a vehicle for creativity, for extending the imagination, as a means of understanding origins of temperament, as a way to facilitate bereavement or depression or repair, as a search engine for coherence, as an answer to a waning sexual interest in later life, and as a path to pursue the whole self. Storr’s subtitle, *A Return to the Self*, argues that psychoanalysts’ determination in exploring the past to interpret the present and maintaining the importance of mutually satisfying relationships have eclipsed the need to know self in solitude, “the source of man’s inner happiness and psychic wholeness.” For emotional maturity, individuals need to take into account the capacity to be alone.

Storr argues that “most adult human beings want both intimate relationships and the sense of belonging to community” (17). Storr does not suggest that all individuals seek solitude, but he argues that “the creative person needs solitude [. . . that the] most significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and those moments are chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone” (xiv). He sums up his argument in asserting that “the drive to be alone thus becomes linked with self-discovery and self-realization; with becoming aware of one’s deepest needs, feelings, and impulses” (21). For “what goes on in the human being when he is by himself is as important as what happens in his interactions with other people” (xiv).

Besides providing insight into the characters’ lives in succeeding chapters, Storr’s theories help explain sources and origins of solitude discussed previously:
That solitude promotes insight as well as change has been recognized by great religious leaders, who have usually retreated from the world before returning to it to share what has been revealed to them. Although accounts vary, the enlightenment which finally came to the Buddha whilst he was meditating beneath a tree on the banks of the Nairanjana river is said to have been the culmination of long reflection upon the human condition. Jesus, according to both St. Matthew and St. Luke, spent forty days in the wilderness undergoing temptation by the devil before returning to proclaim his message of repentance and salvation. Mahomet, during the month of Ramadan, each year withdrew himself from the world to the cave of Hera. St. Catherine of Siena spent three years in seclusion in her little room in the Via Benincaca during which she underwent a series of mystical experiences before entering upon an active life of teaching and preaching. (34)

In contrast to Freud, Storr writes:

The path of self-development upon which such individuals embarked under Jung’s guidance was named by him “the process of individuation.” This process tends toward a goal called “wholeness” or “integration”: a condition in which the different elements of the psyche, both conscious and unconscious, become welded together in a new unity. [. . .] The person who approaches this goal, which can never be entirely or once and for all time achieved, possesses what Jung called “an attitude that is beyond the reach of emotional entanglement and violent shocks—a consciousness detached from the work.” (193)

The characters in this study experience solitude and in that separation from community achieve a higher awareness of reality like Plato’s escape to the realm of Forms or Ideas and a kind of indifference to fate like Camus’s hero. Only in those hours of consciousness do characters rise above themselves and become superior to their fate. An awareness of absurdity followed by a sense of indifference to it can result in happiness. “The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory” (231). All of the characters in this study strive whole-heartedly in the labor of their existence, and each one comes to some kind of futile end—but only seemingly so. Each character studied achieves a kind of Sisyphus-like
detachment. Whether or not the characters in this study can be imagined as lucid, happy, or victorious remains to be seen.

Reality or Illusion

In Plato’s allegory of the cave from the Republic, individuals are chained to a wall in a cave while along a parapet, lighted by a fire, marches a parade of objects. This chained group sees only shadows and not what is real: “Prisoners so confined would have seen nothing of themselves or of one another, except the shadows thrown by the firelight on the wall of the cave. [. . . S]uch prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects” (50). Plato writes this allegory or parable as a dialogue with the Athenian Glaucon, sometime in the fourth century B.C. He explains that when an individual escapes his shackles by being forcibly dragged from the cave and comes into the sunlight, he (or she) ultimately comes to see the sun as reality: “Last of all, he would be able to look at the Sun and contemplate its nature, not as it appears when reflected in water or any alien medium, but as it is in itself in its own domain” (51).

Freedom from such a community as those condemned to see shadows results in the “healing of their unwisdom”; however, if the prisoner were freed and able to see the real objects, now he would be “perplexed and believe the objects now shown to him to be not so real as what he formerly saw” (51). Although this escape to solitude results in incisive knowledge, returning to the cave to those still shackled to instruct them would result in death. “If they could lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead them up, they would kill him. Yes, they would” (52). The reader is reminded of religious leaders and
scientists, among others, who tried to convince those in power of the truth and were banished, tortured, or killed.

For Plato, every thing, every concept could be so generalized (an oversimplification) that it could fit his concept of the Idea. For example--to use a concrete object--a stool, a chaise, a desk swivel chair, a bench, a sofa, a couch or recliner, no matter the size or style, would fit Plato’s Idea of chair. In the cave, those chained represent all of us; the shadows are representations of chair, and only when an individual escapes into solitude outside of the cave, does he or she perceive the Idea. The chains and shadows represent doxa, opinion, and those people chained since birth represent those who know only what is allowed. Separation from that cave, for Plato, is essential in knowing truth, the perception of the Idea. Since individuals in Plato’s cave are literally chained by the foot and neck, they cannot turn their heads. They do not see themselves or one another.

In a community of any kind, and more particularly in the fiction to be discussed, individuals often do not “see” themselves as they really are or quite perceive how others are until they escape to a solitary state of their own. All the characters to be discussed later live in a community, and in a symbolic sense they are chained to see reality as perceived by themselves. Perhaps, until they experience solitude, they, too, see only shadows of reality. Only when characters such as Hester Prynne, Pip, and Edna Pontellier separate themselves from their lifelong community to enter solitude do they perceive a kind of truth, or Plato’s Ideas, as different from what they had previously known. Are the individual characters
ostracized, tortured, or killed by the community who rejects their insight learned outside of community? And what do these characters learn or attain while in solitude?

The Joyful Descent

Singular individuals can also perceive differently through detachment. Indifference can also signal an absence of love, an absence of hate. That kind of detachment is evident in Albert Camus’s essay “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Condemned for all eternity to roll a rock up a mountain, Sisyphus ruminates in his solitude as he returns from the top of the mountain to the bottom because the rock rolls back down to its starting point, unaided. Only then, on his passage down the slope, is he free in his solitude to contemplate his fate. By knowing and accepting his fate, Sisyphus achieves a kind of indifference or detachment from his punishment. Then, he can and does rise above his fate.

For John Cruickshank in Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt, “the most appalling truths can lose their power over us once we have resolubly recognized and accepted them.” He points out that “the ‘all is well’ of Sophocles’ Oedipus is prompted by final knowledge of his true condition” (88). Cruickshank sees Sisyphus not as a “symbol of despair, but of obstinate happiness.” Sisyphus is often seen as a hero of consciousness. As David Sprintzen writes in Camus: A Critical Examination, “Consciousness is, of course, the presupposition, because it is from consciousness alone that human experience comes to be and that the quality of finitude gives the moment its irreplaceable urgency” (64).

Sisyphus spends an absurd eternity striving with all his strength for no purpose and toward no end. “They [the gods] had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful
punishment than futile and hopeless labor” (229). Camus anatomizes with care, if in elusive language, the burden of solitude: “When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, where the call of happiness is too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man’s heart; this is the rock’s victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are nights in Gethsemane” (23). (Earlier in the essay, readers were reminded of Christ’s solitariness as one of the explanations of the origin of those who sought solitude.) Camus reminds us of the “boundless grief” of that solitude.

Like Sisyphus, the characters in this study depart from the standards and expectations of society and can, like Sisyphus, be accused of a certain levity (disrespectful frivolity) in regard to the gods. (In this study “the gods” refers to those authoritarian figures, whether real or unreal, who determine what community members will believe and how community members will act. John Winthrop’s exhortation to remember always that some must be subjugated to the will of others is certainly godlike in its absoluteness in imposing theocracy.) Camus redefines the loner as hero: “You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which his whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth” (230).

All of the characters examined in this study experience the “passions of this earth”: they toil through their--both perceived and unperceived--meaningless lives in community. It is only in their solitary moments that their lives become meaningful. Just as for Sisyphus
during his solitary descent, “that hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of these moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock. [. . .] There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn” (231).

Scorn is another word for indifference, that detachment found in solitude wherein a character, seeing his or her own absurdity, rises above it by an existential detachment. That kind of separation from community, from fate, is achieved in those moments of solitude. “If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much,” writes Camus (231). Oedipus, too, at the outset obeys fate without knowing it, but from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Only later does Oedipus concede “that all is well.” Sisyphus “too concludes that all is well,” and Camus observes, “All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing.” Each of the characters in his study has a rock, a burden that can be acknowledged and understood only in solitude. In their own unique manners, all of them will reach the same conclusion. What “all is well” means, however, will vary with each character’s condition or fate.

Camus concludes his essay by iterating his argument that Sisyphus finds joy in his descent: “The struggle itself toward the height is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (232). Since striving is not the goal but the process, then all of these characters must also be “happy.” As a result of Pip’s descent, for example (to be examined in Chapter 4), his shipmates mistakenly call him “idiot,” that is, incapable of not being happy.
In Sisyphus’s detachment in solitude as he descends the mountain at rest from his arduous toil, he reaches a kind of indifference, an attainment of a next level or higher plane. He neither hates nor loves; Camus calls it joy. This existence on a higher plane reflects the perception of all surroundings--people, events, objects, and so on--experienced by Plato’s freed cave inhabitant who sees the sun and perceives that essential (basic) Form of Goodness. Albert Camus’s Sisyphus achieves a kind of existential indifference representing a higher perception of reality found in solitude.

America’s Vast Emptiness

Solitude has been an object of study in American literature for several decades. One of the earliest such studies is *The Necessary Earth: Nature and Solitude in American Literature* (1964), by Wilson D. Clough, who argues the title as his thesis: Because men were alone in the vastness of the frontier, they were solitary. As captives of solitude, they wrote little and what writing they did accomplish was achieved because they looked to nature for inspiration, for they were without the culture of Europe. On first reading Clough, I applauded his criticism: simple, meaningful, supported. However, upon further examination, I found that it was too simple, too easy. To claim that Americans wrote the way that they did simply because the land was vast is an oversimplification; yet certainly solitude contributed to the American character in writing. Also, Clough argues, rather naively, I believe, that it was not until Mark Twain and later Walt Whitman that Americans found a voice, as instanced by the use of American colloquialisms in their writings.
For Clough, America provides “a universe awful enough in its vastness and its immeasurable reaches to tempt and test the creative and orderly imagination beyond all past experiences, but tempting in the name of knowing and seeing with utmost clarity” (6). Clough, however, states that the creative and orderly imagination had little hope in the vastness of that solitude and produced a literature that was dependent on nature and thus uniquely American after all. For Hawthorne, according to Clough, the vastness produced “gloom”; for Cooper, the solitude produced innocence that could function not in society but only in “the purity of this new Eden, the forest” (69). Thoreau, for Clough, became “a one-man laboratory of research into the minimal cost of survival in an acquisitive society, and into the complex chemistry and biology of the creative art” (111). America presented a new kind of humanism where man “alone [. . . in] unmapped nature [. . .] encounters in its solitude a new discipline, [. . .] self-reliance and dependence on self” (7). Emerson, therefore, found his “correspondence [. . .] for which nature is but an endlessly varied symbol and metaphor” (101). Man experiences such enforced self-decision because America’s vastness proves “indifferent to man’s little cries for a special consideration of his universe” (8). Perhaps Clough was reminded of Jonathan Edwards, who roamed the countryside in his “lonely youth” and might have transferred that aloneness to his description of the lonely soul at judgment.

Although in praise of much nineteenth-century American literature, Clough still criticizes the lack of what he calls an American literature and claims that that lack of voice (until Twain and Whitman) was owed to the harsh American experience: “Much was inevitably sacrificed in the delay of establishing oneself against sheer starvation and threats to
life, until such daily pressure dulled the edges of expression. Men became taciturn and
sparing of speech, losing much of the old resources of fluent, poetic, and literary language”
(15). Since the frontiersman lacks any “cultural environment, [he] suffers a double burden if
he would be literary. He not only lacks the approved discipline of the past [. . . but is] further
confronted by [. . . the challenge] of inventing a new language for a new world” (16).
Whatever that “new language” was for Clough, it did not materialize until the late nineteenth
century. Even the titles of the chapters in his book--“The Cost of Solitude,” “The Fading
Frontier”--indicate the harmful effects of this solitude. That solitude did produce literary
classics Clough concedes, but they came at a great cost, he insists. In a chapter seemingly
extolling the benefits of finding self-reliance while communing with nature in solitude,
Clough writes, “In the negative column, we must surely admit a withering of the cultural
inheritance, the heavy price in isolation and in loss of communal virtue” (41). “Communal
virtue” is never quite defined, though Clough suggests that community would have been
beneficial to man in terms of language development, knowledge, and education in the arts.
(Earlier discussion noted how Crevecoeur and Tocqueville extolled the need for frontier
Americans to relearn or rediscover cultural life abandoned in Europe.) Repeatedly Clough
agrees with Emerson and Thoreau that for all men self-reliance is found in solitude through
nature: “But what if squirrel and pigeons offer no intellectual face; and what if the solitude cut
one off from human society; or what if society come again and still again to one’s remote
cabin door? The answer was to be found in a new definition of solitude: the inner solitude
and self-reliance of genius” (101).
Nevertheless, Clough writes that “the unpardonable sin, in the end, is to cut oneself off from the common stream; and the dread punishment is isolation from one’s fellowman” (123). This “cost of solitude,” of course, can be readily seen in the character of Roger Chillingworth in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as he surreptitiously executes his vengeful plan or in the previously examined short story by Hawthorne, “The Minister’s Black Veil,” as the minister dies alone, apart from the community apparently through his own choosing.

For Clough, looking back in 1964 on the concerns of the previous decade, “the old themes of nature as inspiration and the virtues of solitude become an anachronism.” He continues: “We observe in our setting less evidence of man exulting in his natural rights than of man in ‘the lonely crowd,’ the organization man and his pitiable subservience, the crack in the picture window, and the passing of individuality in a general conformity, threatening to congeal into a narrow provincialism in the face of the new” (147). Doubtless Clough means by “the crack in the picture window” to invoke the frequent theme of the hollowness of suburban life (picture windows were new, attractive items in 1950s homes); but the image suggests more: that solitude is not dependent upon a view, that solitude is a function not only of the frontier of the wilderness but of a frontier of the mind, “for solitude becomes more a state of mind rather than an accident of geography” (102). One is reminded of Thoreau’s “owning” the landscape, as in appreciating a magnificent view. Clough concedes, “It is, admittedly, the solution of the bookish man in his private library [Hawthorne’s Chillingworth, for example]; but it goes deeper than that, for it is likewise the necessity of the creative artist everywhere” (102). Clough may have anticipated Storr’s argument that solitude is necessary
for creativity, or Bachelard’s theory (to be discussed later in this chapter) that the poet-thinker in the library needs more than the library, needs more than the solitude of aloneness and more than the physical solitude of the vast frontier. Instead, the “creative artist everywhere” needs something “deeper than that,” needs that essential solitude, however defined. Characters will experience Clough’s “shock of enforced self-decision” not on the frontier or in the vast American wilderness but in the solitude of their own private existence.

The Model: Turner’s Liminality

Becoming another person or object by donning a mask has been done since ancient times, as carnival and revelry provide opportunity for anonymity when laughter becomes an overt activity. Carnival takes on characteristics of ritual when individuals participating in a rite change from one status to another. This kind of ritual is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s *interior infinite* and Baudelaire’s “multitude, solitude: identical terms.” Anthropologist Victor Turner explores ideas of ritual through rites of passage that separate an individual from community in “Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas.” For Turner, “people had a real need [...] to don the liberating masks of liminal masquerade” (243).

Turner argues that individuals must be separated from community to become the initiated. However, individuals still maintain their communitas in a structured society. “Communitas is universal and boundless, as against structure which is specific and bounded” (264). Social structure is concerned with status and roles and not human individuals, though society is made up of both social structure and communitas. Turner’s definition of the frame of social order is “in Robert Mertonian terms, ‘the patterned arrangements of role-sets, status-
sets, and status-sequences’ *consciously* recognized and regularly operative in a given society” (Turner’s emphasis; 237).

Ritual can change status in communitas but not in the social structure. Turner notes “how often the term ‘sacred’ may be translated as ‘set apart’ or ‘on one side’ in various societies” (241). For example, baptismal candidates may all wear white, be submerged, become members of the church and expand their communitas, but they still maintain the same status (or caste or class) in society. Structure and communitas relate to the concept of solitude in that a person must, according to Turner, experience *liminality*, a levelling or shaping of the structural status (252). “Three aspects of culture seemed to me to be exceptionally well endowed with ritual symbols and beliefs of non-social-structural type. These may be described, respectively, as liminality, outsiderhood, and structural inferiority” (231):

*Liminality* represents the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two positions, *outsiderhood* refers to actions and relationships which do not flow from a recognized social status but originate outside it, while *lowermost status* refers to the lowest rung in a system of social stratification in which unequal rewards are accorded to functionally differentiated positions. [. . . Structural units] are statuses and roles, not concrete human individuals. (237)

Since Turner’s liminality has special significance for my concept of solitude, I will discuss these terms in reverse order to end with the most important of his ideas for my purposes.

“Structural inferiority” refers to individuals in society who are in a class or caste system and either cannot move or would have difficulty moving to a higher class or caste. For Turner, “structural inferiority” includes “the despised and rejected in general [. . . H]ere
the lowest represents the human total, [ . . ] a differentiated system whose units are status and roles, and where the social persona is segmentalized into positions in a structure” (234).

“Outsiderhood” refers “to the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system” (233). Hester Prynne is indeed set apart from the Boston community; Edna Pontellier voluntarily sets herself outside community. But all the characters in this study come to a new level of awareness through Turner’s concept of liminality. “I see liminality as a phase in social life in which this confrontation between ‘activity which has no structure’ and its ‘structured results’ produces in men [and women] their highest pitch of self-consciousness” (255).

Liminality is a term borrowed from Arnold van Gennep’s formulation of rites de passage, “transition rites”--which accompany every change of state or social position, or certain points in age. These are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, Latin for threshold, signifying the great importance of real or symbolic thresholds at this middle period of the rites, though cunicular, “being in a tunnel,” would better describe the quality of this phase in many cases, its hidden nature, its sometimes mysterious darkness), and reaggregation. (Turner’s emphases; 231-32)

The word cunicular would literally describe the setting of Doris Lessing’s short story “Through the Tunnel,” which enacts a rite of passage. A boy separates himself from his mother on a beach, dives from a rock into the sea, and swims through an underground tunnel to emerge on the other side of the rock. He swims upward, gasping for air but bleeding, and never bothers to tell his mother about his epiphany. The tunnel represents a rite of passage and even more symbolically, the rite of birth itself.
The first phase, separation, comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or the group from either an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from an established set of cultural conditions (a “state”). During the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the “passenger,” or “liminar”) becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification. (232)

At the third phase, the initiand re-enters the social structure, often but not always at a higher status level:

In liminality, the symbolism [. . .] indicates that the initiand [. . .] is structurally if not physically invisible in terms of his culture’s standard definition and classifications, [. . .] divested of the outward attributes of structural position, set aside from the main areas of social life in a seclusion lodge or camp, and reduced to an equality with his fellow initiands regardless of their ritual status. [. . .] In liminality [. . .] communitas emerges [. . .] in a cultural and normative form. (232)

How communitas supports or negates liminality for all the characters will be discussed later in this study where “major liminal situations are occasions in which a society takes cognizance of itself or rather where, in an interval between their incumbency of specific fixed positions, members [. . . may perceive a] global view of man’s place in the cosmos” (Turner’s emphasis; 239-40). Turner asserts, “I see liminality as a phase in social life in which this confrontation between ‘activity which has no structure’ and its ‘structural results’ produces in men [and women] their highest pitch of self-consciousness” (255). For the characters in this study, liminality provides the threshold of discovery.

The Model: Bachelard’s Poet-Thinker

This paradox of being both a part of community and apart from society, expressed so concisely in Baudelaire’s advocacy of solitude amid crowds, is mirrored in the texts of another French writer, the twentieth-century essayist Gaston Bachelard, who began his career as a
philosopher of science but became devoted to the study of poetic reverie. Unlike Baudelaire, however, Bachelard argues that the poet must first be the thinking-poet in solitude before he (or she) can enter the community as that thinker-poet. Colette Gaudin characterizes Bachelard’s point of view (in the following passage she uses “subject” in the philosophical sense meaning any entity that does mental work): “The subject [of . . .] poetic experience [. . .] breathes at the center of a solitary wisdom bordering on mysticism; it is not, for Bachelard, the foundation of a metaphysics. It suggests instead a philosophical direction [. . .] which could be called a poetics or an ethics of solitude” (xxvii). For Bachelard, continues Gaudin, the “good” appears to depend on a healthy dialectics between the “real” and the “unreal.” Paraphrasing Bachelard, we could say that a true image--an image really imagined--is also an image that contains a truth about human reality. Such an image, by expanding the subject, is necessarily a source of happiness. [. . .] But his ethics point in fact toward asceticism. [. . .] The primitiveness of poetic consciousness is not immediately given. It can only be a conquest. The Bachelardian reverie, far from being a complacent drifting of the self, is a discipline acquired through long hours of reading and writing, and through a constant practice of “surveillance de soi” [supervision of oneself]. Images reveal nothing to the lazy dreamer. (xxvii)

Bachelard thus connects solitude, reverie, and the creation, reclamation, and/or purification of images in the imagination; and he associates solitude and reverie moreover with ascetic self-discipline rather than a dreamy and undisciplined self-discovery.

In *The Poetics of Reverie* Bachelard seeks to “establish the persistence in the human soul of a nucleus of childhood, of a motionless but enduring childhood, outside of history, hidden from others, disguised as history when it is narrated, but having real existence only in its moments of illumination--which is to say in its moments of poetic existence” (95-96). He continues in this vein:
The child knows a natural reverie of solitude which we must not confuse with that of the sulky child. In his happy solitude, the dreaming child experiences cosmic reverie--that reverie which unites us with the world.

In my opinion, it is in the memories of this cosmic solitude that we must find the nucleus of childhood which remains at the center of the human psyche. [ . . . ] All [the] images of his cosmic solitude react in depth within the being of the child; separated from his being for men, there is created, under the world’s influence, a being for the world. [ . . . ] The cosmic nature of our childhood remains in us. It reappears in our solitary reveries. (96-97)

This model of poetic reverie is of signal importance for understanding the moments of solitude I am examining in this study--moments that seem to occur with greater frequency and intensity in American literature from 1850 to 1900 than in any other period. Bachelard is writing in defense and praise of reverie. It is important first of all to note that though his approach is akin to psychoanalysis, he is interested here in conscious or semi-conscious reverie rather than in dreams. It is not merely the unconscious that is affected by solitude in a meaningful way; it is rather those faculties such as imagination and memory, the source of affective images that can guide, cheer, and inspire us, that are shaped by solitude. A second point of importance is his insistence that the work being done in solitude is not solely a mind’s discovery of itself but is the connection of the poetic subject to the world, the cosmos. (As Gaudin comments, Bachelard imagines “a ‘successful’ psychoanalysis that would lead to a reconciliation of the individual psyche with the universe,” xxiii). And a final point is that this connection, established in childhood, is somehow retained throughout a person’s life and is of enormous influence.

A number of points stand out that would seem to make this passage a bad fit for the literary works that this study will examine. None of the protagonists of these episodes of
American literary solitude are children; none are poets. Worse, none experience what could be unproblematically termed a happy solitude. Can Bachelard even be talking about the same kind of solitude as these American novelists? Ought one to go back instead and stick to sociological cause-and-effect analysis of the kind that Clough practiced?

On the contrary, the seeming weaknesses just pointed out indicate the strength of Bachelard’s analytic as a means of examining these novels. For each author—Hawthorne, Melville, Chopin—is a novelist with strong poetic tendencies, manifested through lyrical language in all of the three works studied here, as well as, in Melville’s and Hawthorne’s works, through pronounced deformations of “ordinary life” in their narratives. Unlike romantic poets, as novelists they cannot discourse freely on the sources and nature of poetic reverie, yet the reveries that are the source of their imaginative works seem to find a way to be expressed in their work. While the simplest way to make this expression is by portraying a poet protagonist who will have these experiences himself, such a scenario is less likely for an American novelist than for a European novelist, because of the historic distrust of poets and of undiluted high culture by American readers. Consequently, if the process of reverie manifests itself in these authors’ works, it must do so through characters who are not themselves poets but who encounter the elements that make up poetic reverie. The transformations that occur in them, moreover, though they may be far from anything artistic or poetic, may be clues to these authors’ understanding of the birth and renewal of the imaginative life.

For Bachelard, furthermore, the poet, as subject of poetic reverie, bears a conflicted relation of both affinities and tensions to the thinker in the community. Gaudin comments:
Bachelard’s work [. . .] display[s] the conviction that the destiny of philosophy is to remain somehow “pluralist” or incomplete. This incompleteness is made obvious in his poetics by the tension between the meditation of the solitary dreamer and the work of the thinker in a community. For the former, sitting at his table lit by a simple candle, it seems that all metaphors become the equivalent of the flame-life he is contemplating. For the thinker in the world, the one who teaches, reads poets, and writes books, the task is to show us how to read the complex syntax of symbols. (xxvii-xxix)

Therefore, solitude is enabling, according to Bachelard. But he does not advocate a life of asceticism. Rather, it is good to experience a healthy dialectic between the real and the unreal. Although Bachelard gives lessons in dreaming well, the cogito must be able to function satisfactorily in the community. An image really imagined contains a truth about human reality, yielding a source of happiness.

Characters in this study experience that tension between the individual experiencing the unreal (as Bachelard terms the images of reverie) in solitude while at the same time forced to contemplate actual reality, that is, as a part of a community structure. Because discipline is required to conquer self, one needs supervision of oneself. The tension is that between the meditation of the solitary dreamer and the thinker in the community. Successful followers of Bachelard’s philosophy achieve a balance between solitary and community life, in Bachelard’s words, “an art of living poetically” (xxviii). Bakhtin’s interior infinite, Baudelaire’s insistence that multitude and solitude are identical terms, and Bachelard’s insistence on the need for the poet-thinker to take a poet-thinker’s place in the community may explain why solitude may lead to a heightened awareness. This awareness may include a kind of detached indifference, a realization that one’s destiny is one’s own--a kind of
ascendancy—or even a model of production to get beyond the romantic notion of communing with nature and with God and instead commune with self.

Solitude, then, becomes a constructed state. It becomes what the character makes of it whether the solitude was entered by choice, by having solitude forced upon him or her by another, or by force, as a result of nature or some outside non-human force. The construct of solitude can have salubrious or deleterious effects, or, paradoxically, both. It can even mean space, empty space, a solitary page to fill up with writing. But the constructed state of solitude becomes that character’s frame of reference and produces its changes accordingly. This study does not suggest that community is worthless or that characters do not need community to survive; rather its focus is on what happens to characters in solitude, why this need for solitude is so pervasive particularly in nineteenth-century American culture, and ultimately how it is tied to the present.

Other questions arise. Do the effects of solitude result from the individual’s separation from his or her social structure or a negation of the social structure entirely? Is conforming to social structure good or bad even if one is solitary? Although the effects of solitude may include madness, suicide, heightened awareness, a kind of indifference, experiencing solitude may result in a kind of pinnacle, a balance between man/woman thinking and man/woman acting as envisioned by Bachelard’s poet-thinker, who through self-discipline and self-knowledge moves to, if you will, man/woman community-actor.
Answers and Questions

Whether in the vivid case of the two Tlingit Indians banished, literally, to an isolated island in the northern Pacific or in the instance of modern Hindu women who feel banished from their mother’s kitchens, experiences of solitary meditation have taken countless forms in actual lived human experience. Encouraged by Bachelard, we can see that these experiences are not categorically different from poetic meditation. Although this study has shown that Linda Brodkey denounces the concept of Virginia Woolf’s needing a room of her own to write and so negates the idea of the writer-writes-alone, the sense of the necessity of solitude for writing or contemplation or personal growth continues. Despite any shifts that may have taken place as the concept moved back and forth from Europe to the New World, clearly the need for such solitude remains as a kind of bedrock.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, in the chapter on Pip, “The Castaway,” from Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, characters either have solitude forced upon them or choose solitude themselves, resulting in madness or suicide, heightened awareness and knowledge, and a kind of indifference. American characters are caught up with this notion of solitariness that manifests itself in an odd kind of perilous/beneficial manner, making readers both drawn to and fearful of this state.

Conceptually, all the preceding authors argue that a tension exists for individuals striving to act in solitude and in community. Those who seek solitude change in at least one aspect of thought. I shall argue that solitude leads to indifference, that is, a detachment from the constraints of community. Metaphorically, in solitude an individual returns to the womb,
succeeded by the surrounding community but apart from it. Individuals need the world for sustenance, but successful aloneness requires indifference to the community just as the infant is indifferent to the womb’s contribution. However, for Bachelard particularly, the one in solitude who becomes the poet-thinker must return to the community in that role and act successfully in community. Both the dreamer and the thinker, for Bachelard, exercise the same activity. The image—the dream—is the object of the dreamer. He or she in solitude does not care if the image has application in community action. The thinker might not care, either, but the image must be applied, affecting the thinker’s environment outside himself or herself. The object of the thinker becomes the application. If the community fails and individuals change dramatically and/or possibly die in the following narratives to be discussed, the individual is not concerned with such actions.

Camus suggests that Sisyphus is happy in his detached state as he walks down the hill to resume his arduous, eternal task and cares not about his surroundings. The child in the womb also has no perception of the strength and support that the womb gives. Like these two, the nineteenth-century characters, though they exist in community, are detached from it in essential ways so that the community in this perspective, like rocks or amniotic fluid, becomes just a given. What this study examines, rather, is what happens to them in solitude as they grow toward a kind of indifference. All the characters experience solitude, and though colored by the differences in perception and in frames of reference, this solitude is the same for all of them. If all the characters are “right” about their solitude, which is certainly what
their authors imply, then it is only in seeing all of their perceptions together that we may begin to see the outlines of the shape of solitude.
Chapter 3

*The Scarlet Letter*: To “Catch the Sunshine in the Wilderness”

Guilt and Fancy

Is indifference a part of reality? Does reality exist only apart from the mind? Conversely, does reality exist only in the mind? In other words, is reality just a figment of the imagination? These conventional conundrums are resolved by the different approach Gaston Bachelard takes in his study of the real and the unreal in human life. To him the unreal is no less a part of the cosmos than is the real, and one may sometimes intuit a reality sooner and more surely through encountering it in one’s mind, in the imagination. As Bachelard asserts, “It must be admitted that fright does not come from the *object*, from the scenes evoked by the narrator; fright is born and reborn ceaselessly in the *subject*, within the reader’s soul” (Bachelard’s emphasis; 14). He emphasizes the importance of this reorientation by calling it a “*Copernican revolution of the imagination*” (Bachelard’s emphasis). He continues:

> This revolution is the equivalent of placing
dream before reality
nightmare before tragedy
fright before the monster
nausea before the fall;
in short, the imagination is sufficiently vivid in the subject to impose its visions, its terrors, its sorrows. [. . .] It is the imagination itself which thinks and which suffers. (14)
Thus the “art of living poetically” is the discipline of discerning the larger (the cosmic) reality through the unreal, through the action of the imagination, the discipline of preparing for and completing the real. It is an art of vision, of intuition, of speculation; and it describes the core of Hawthorne’s effort and aspiration as an artist.

A vivid example of this kind of discernment occurs in “Fancy’s Show Box: A Morality” in *Twice-Told Tales*. “What is Guilt?” writes Hawthorne: “A stain upon the soul” (220). He wonders whether such a stain may be contracted by “deeds [. . .] which, physically, have never had existence.” What causes the stains never happened except in the imaginative mind. Hawthorne’s character experiences excruciating guilt, whether real or imagined, in his solitude. Hawthorne continues, “In the solitude of a midnight chamber, or in a desert, afar from men, [. . .] the soul may pollute itself even with those crimes,” believing in solitude that one is guilty, even if one has not committed a crime or a sin. “If this be true, it is a fearful truth.” A fearful truth is eventful, dangerous, filled with suppositions and consequences.

“Fancy’s Show Box” describes a “venerable gentleman, one Mr. Smith, who had long been regarded as a pattern of moral excellence, [and who] was warming his aged blood with a glass or two of generous wine” (220). Hawthorne explains: “Some old people have a dread of solitude, [. . . but Mr. Smith] had no need of a babe to protect him by its purity, nor of a grown person, to stand between him and his own soul” (221). In this solitude, Mr. Smith is visited by “three figures entering the room”:

These were Fancy, who had assumed the garb and aspect of an itinerant showman, with a box of pictures on her back; and Memory, in the likeness of a clerk, with a pen behind her ear, an ink-horn at her button-hole, and a huge manuscript volume beneath her arm; and lastly, behind the other two, a person
shrouded in a dusky mantle, which concealed both face and form. But Mr. Smith had a shrewd idea that it was Conscience.

These figures remind Smith of contemptuous deeds: denying responsibility of fatherhood, murdering a boon companion, and “stripping the clothes from the backs of three half-starved children” (224). Whether Smith is guilty of these deeds or just imagines his guilt while he is solitary is unimportant. What is essential is the application of the notion of reality while we examine all our characters in the state of solitude. If one thinks that one acted, then one suffers the effects. But what one perceives the situation to be—even in imaginings— influences the outcome. Smith has seen into the human heart and seen himself as an instance of its fallenness. Repeatedly Hawthorne writes of this ability to look into the human soul, to see the truth of the human heart. In “Young Goodman Brown,” for example, it happens as the result of some trauma (in this case, it seems, a blood initiation into a devil-worship cult). It always bears with it a stigma of guilt, for such knowledge comes only through “sympathy” (one of Hawthorne’s famous words), and that means co-participation, if not in deed then in imagination. This power of looking into the human heart, and especially of discerning its reality through an adventure into the unreal of the kind that Smith makes, I shall call “speculation,” borrowing an older sense of the word that means intuitive understanding (OED sense 1b: “said of the soul, understanding, etc.”).

Controversial Views

Critics acclaim The Scarlet Letter as a story of the first American heroine, of a martyr, of a woman who in her community comes to be viewed as an angel. It is a novel with the controversial nineteenth-century theme of adultery as its focus, a novel whose sinner in exile
becomes a model of redemption. According to Maxwell Geismar, this novel includes “the brooding note of pity with which Hawthorne viewed those heroic women who were sacrificed, whether by sacred edict or social convenience, on the altar of masculine institutions” (279). These and many more accolades may be correct. *The Scarlet Letter* is about an adulteress who acquires a unique place in the community as a result of her redemption or, as I believe, her ascension, but the reasons Hester Prynne is heroic are none of the above. Ultimately, she is not to be pitied. Hester Prynne is heroic because she speculates in solitude. Her solitude is recursive; she is able at length to discern the real through the unreal; she negotiates between solitude and community; she exemplifies the achievement of the human imagination according to Bachelard’s model.

Wilson Clough views Hester Prynne as “the embodiment of self-reliance” (124), but Hawthorne’s own picture of her is more complex and does not proceed from the sort of high-profile ego that is a prerequisite for the Transcendentalist model. Biographical accounts give some testimony of Hawthorne’s personal experience with solitude. John Gatta reads Hawthorne’s essay “The Old Manse” as containing a moment of sublime solitude. The nearby Concord River “offers boaters a rare opportunity to find solitude and seclusion close to civilization” (Gatta 102), and as Hawthorne records this moment, “all seemed in unison with the river gliding by, and the foliage rustling over us, [. . .] sacred solitude [. . .] celebrating a holy freedom] from all custom and conventionalism, and fettering influences of man on man” (quoted in Gatta 103; the phrase “sacred solitude” provides Gatta his book’s title).
Hawthorne’s experience of solitude is more complex than Emerson’s, and he presents Hester in a way different from what self-reliance can account for.

The relation between Hawthorne’s narrator and Hester as protagonist has often been seen to be not only complex but conflicted, enunciating both the profound sympathy for women that his fiction displays and the piercing distrust that he sometimes shows toward women in roles in which they might compete with men. On the one hand come appraisals such as Melinda Ponder’s and John Idol’s that “Hawthorne’s complex female characters, drawn partly from his depth of understanding and partly from literary conventions, set his fiction apart from that of his contemporaries” (10). On the other is the reality of Hawthorne’s well-known enmity toward women writers. Not only did he complain about having to compete with a “damn’d mob of scribbling women”; he wrote to publisher James Fields in 1852, “All women, as authors, are feeble and tiresome. I wish they were forbidden to write, on pain of having their faces deeply scarified with an oyster-shell” (Ponder and Idol 11-12).

In the light of this harsh and confidential sentiment, critics tend to choose whether to see the ambivalent portrait of Hester as a glass half empty or half full. Emily Budick, concentrating on the fact that Hawthorne willingly portrays the coexistence of motherhood and speculation in Hester, gives perhaps the most generous assessment of this ambiguity while resorting to a psychoanalytic approach: “By incorporating the female letter, Hawthorne acknowledges his own origins within the female body; he graphically demonstrates (in her language) that his story is the extension of hers, that he (and perhaps all men or, for that matter, all women) only edit and retell the stories their mothers tell to them” (72). T. Walter
Herbert places Hawthorne the novelist as middleman between prevailing mores and his own feelings, writing of *The Scarlet Letter* that in it he “bottled up an inward distress whose dimensions the novel itself explores, the dilemmas of a gender system requiring men to form and maintain a public identity, while women cultivate in retirement a sensitivity to the moral mysteries of the human heart” (164).

Hawthorne presents a double Hester, revealing to readers a suffering, loving, independently thinking sympathetic being at the same time that his narrator more than half affirms the Puritan community’s strictures on her. Much of the narrative presents Hester as his narrator thinks he ought to see her, as dictated by his own frame of reference, colored perhaps by resentment and guilt. The split between these two presentations of Hester may be helpfully labeled by the terms Victor Turner has provided for the rite of passage common to many cultures: structure and communitas. The gestures of stricture and disapproval define Hester within the parameter of “structure,” or social frame, while at the same time Hawthorne’s narrator goes deep within Hester’s liminal passage from a transgressor subjugated to the Puritan community’s strict resolutions and punishment to a Sister of Mercy viewed by the community as an angel. In this rite of passage, Hester Prynne attains the model of Bachelard’s art of living poetically.

**Beginnings of Denial**

In the first sentence of the Author’s Preface to the second edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne writes of “unprecedented excitement in the respectable community immediately around him” (1). As this “public disapprobation would weigh very heavily on him,”
Hawthorne, like Chaucer almost five hundred years before him, “disclaims such motives” as “enmity, or ill-feeling of any kind, personal or political.” In Salem on March 30, 1850, the emphasis is on community acceptance. Possibly Hawthorne, like Chaucer, did not care a whit for what the “community” thought of his works, but if so, why does Hawthorne, like Chaucer, deny his own works? Fear of rejection? Reprisals? Community acceptance is paramount in his mind. And *The Scarlet Letter* is about a woman apart from community living a life of solitude. Although she is sentenced to that fate, her position is frightful, “awful.”

In “The Custom House,” Hawthorne’s narrator describes how the narrative came to him to justify to his Salem community the reason and purpose behind his writing. He can prove that he has the obligation to tell this story. The entire preface is another disclaimer. The fear of not pleasing his readers or of eliciting censure from the community has as much power over the narrator as it does over the protagonist, Hester Prynne. But only Hester loses that fear as “thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England; shadowy guests” (164). By referring to his ancestors as participants in the Salem witch trials, the narrator gains his own acceptance into the community whose members will read this book. Yet it is an odd way to portray social acceptance. “‘What is he?’ murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other. ‘A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!’” (10). Hawthorne’s narrator wants readers to know that he agrees with his forefathers; adultery as a topic may not be fitting. However, this fiddler plays with his topic and so undermines his own approval. He
is acutely aware that his position as writer is already a “structurally inferior” one: not respectable, almost as low as Hester’s position as adulteress or freethinker. Is it this kinship or the difference between them that Hawthorne wants to explore? In “The Custom House,” no less than in the narrative itself of *The Scarlet Letter*, the narrator’s and Hawthorne’s most pronounced accents seem to fall on the elements that would, for Turner, be clearly labeled either “structure” or “communitas.” As a novelist Hawthorne is at pains to give the side of structure its due at the same time that he writes robustly of its undermining through the achievement, despite all of society’s best efforts, of communitas and self-transformation.

The narrator thus has “this strange, indolent, *unjoyous* attachment for [his] native town, [. . .] as if Salem were for [him] the inevitable centre of the universe” (emphasis added; 12). For him, for the author, for Hester Prynne, and for Arthur Dimmesdale, community is the center of their universe. Structure can confer a secure sense of identity, but it cannot bestow joy. What happens to Hester when she is forced to leave this kind of community and enter into a solitary life helps her strike the balance, in Bachelard’s terms, between (wo)man thinking in solitude and thinking (wo)man in the community.

Long before the reader is led to this balance, Hawthorne creates an elaborate fiction of how his narrator came into possession of the scarlet letter. Supposedly official documents from Jonathan Pue, an earlier surveyor of the Custom House, were left behind only to be found by a later holder of the office, our narrator. When placing the found scarlet letter cloth upon his own breast, the current surveyor “experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron” (32).
Neither narrator nor reader should be surprised. Hester Prynne in her solitude turns that “iron” into strong, independent steel in her own solitude. Nevertheless, the narrator is quick to criticize Hester so as not to praise her, describing how “[i]t had been her habit, from an almost immemorial date, to go about the country as a kind of voluntary nurse, and doing whatever miscellaneous good she might; taking upon herself, likewise, to give advice in all matters, especially those of the heart; by which means, as a person of such propensities inevitably must, she gained from many people the reverence due to an angel, but I should imagine, was looked upon by others as an intruder and a nuisance” (32).

Hester does good, gives advice, and just when she may rise in the estimation of his readers, the narrator names her as an “intruder” and a “nuisance.” He will not let Hester be elevated to a place apart and above her community. When he writes about her consoling the sinner and tending the sick, he hastens to moderate his praise with severe criticism: Hester’s charitable works make her a meddler. Instead of mass condemnation, Hester gains heroic proportions while separated from that very community that imposes the solitude on her. As if to protect himself from any disapprobation, the narrator appropriates Surveyor Pue to command him to write about Mistress Prynne; he thus has nothing at all to do with the result. He will never separate himself from his readership, his ancestors, or his community. Hawthorne represents him as wrestling with his knowledge along the beach or in the solitude of the Old Manse. The solitude he experiences he must carefully cleanse of any liminality or apartness; all is projected onto Hester.
Finally, as Hawthorne would have it, the narrator loses his job and so writes his tale. After forty-six pages of denial, readers are meant to be left with the impression that the narrator seeks—no, thrives on—community acceptance; and he is about to tell a tale of an outcast who ultimately ascends to a quite different kind of community acceptance.

Hawthorne’s heroine gains more than mere acceptance; she gains a balance of her own, a kind of aloof indifference as she epitomizes woman thinking alone and woman thinking in the community, which, of course, must come to her. As this tale unfolds, Hester achieves this balance that Bachelard sought to describe.

The narrator ends his Introductory by disclaiming that he needs a “genial atmosphere” (44) and immediately begins his narrative by stating that founders of a Utopia “have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison” (47). By linking virgin with cemetery and prison, he thus overturns his entire argument for “genial community.” At the same time that he presents this dark, heavy symbol affirming the enduring power of structure, he displays it in the harshest light possible. Also, the narrator’s immediate obvious use of the rose-bush growing by the prison door, another threshold symbol, clearly refers to Hester, so beautiful yet so painfully sinful. He continues his disclaimer by proposing to use the rose “to symbolize some sweet moral blossom that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow” (48). Yet The Scarlet Letter is not a tale of frailty; quite the contrary, it is a tale of learned strength.
Recursive Solitude

What kind of a person is Hester Prynne? Her solitude begins when the novel begins; however, the reader learns slowly of what events occurred before her condemnation. She is English; she married an older man, a doctor, not so much out of love as out of availability. She sailed to Salem, was separated from her husband for two years during which time she fell in love with the local preacher, had his child, was imprisoned, and was sentenced to stand alone on the scaffold and to live alone with her child outside of the community, “looking across a basin of the sea at the forest-covered hills, toward the west” (81). Although the sea is not emphasized, Hester is part of that “edgeness,” that threshold that Ishmael and the hordes at Walden attempt to experience. The purported wildness or wilderness is always toward the west. While the novel itself begins with her standing on the scaffold with her illegitimate child in her arms, how Hester Prynne uses her ostracism evolves slowly and subtly.

Besides characterizing Hester as an adulteress, obeying the commandments of Winthrop’s sermon by living her penance in solitude and by wearing the brand of adulteress, the narrator continues to temper his view with mixed condemnation and subtle praise. Although her child Pearl is described as an “imp” or “elf,” the child is further classified as “the scarlet letter endowed with life!” (102). The child becomes an extension of the sin. That “the child could not be made amenable to rules” (91) is no surprise; neither could Hester. Previously, Hawthorne’s narrator defended his ancestors and his religion by writing “the penalty thereof [i.e., of adultery] is death” (63) and then offered an excuse for why Hester should live by adding, “But, in their great mercy and tenderness of heart, they have doomed
Mistress Prynne to stand only a space of three hours on the platform of the pillory, and then and thereafter, for the remainder of her natural life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom” (63). Because neither Dimmesdale, her child’s father, nor her dark husband, Roger Chillingworth, acknowledges her, Hester takes all the blame.

Even though Dimmesdale begs Hester to name him so as to relieve him of his guilt, Hester will not speak the name of her lover. Dimmesdale, as his name symbolically suggests, is too weak a man to stand with Hester or to admit his guilt publicly. Only in the darkest night and in the seclusion of the forest glade does Dimmesdale stand with Hester. To praise Hester and to obviate Dimmesdale’s role in Hester’s adultery, Hawthorne has Dimmesdale say to the assembled magistracy, “Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart! She will not speak!” (68). Dimmesdale praises the woman who refuses to acknowledge his own weakness in denying his sin by omission and silence.

Hester will not even condemn her husband as she murmurs, “I have greatly wronged thee” (74) to Roger Chillingworth, the greatest sinner in the novel, who violates the sanctity of the human heart. Yet Hester agrees not to tell anyone of her relationship to Chillingworth as she wonders, “Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?” (77). Hester thinks then that keeping a secret will “ruin” her soul; she is only beginning to speculate on the ruin of her soul. Later, when Hester appears ghostlike, a lifeless transformation, her face and beautiful hair shrouded in ignominy, the narrator suggests that Hester needs the “magic touch” of a man. He seems the deplorable misogynist; however, the men provided--
intentionally?--as exemplars of their sex, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, could never approach Hester’s ultimate level of thought and action.

Praise underlies the narrator’s criticism, and criticism, his praise. “She was patient,--a martyr, indeed,--but she forbore to pray for her enemies; lest, in spite of her forgiving aspirations, the words of the blessing should stubbornly twist themselves into a curse” (85). Words like patient and a martyr indeed seem to elevate Hester, but closer attention to the text shows that the word indeed, used ostensibly to intensify, has the effect of reducing the single word martyr to a perhaps. Even Hester’s “forgiving aspiration” might twist the blessing into a curse if it were spoken, for these men had subjugated her to their will and had refused to acknowledge their connection to her very life. It has been said as a criticism of her character that Hester remains in or near Boston because Hawthorne and his narrator are males and would have wanted her obedient. But Hester stays for years and even dies there because she loves Dimmesdale; she leaves only when he is dead and when she makes the decision to leave for a while with her daughter. Furthermore, Hester’s growth into the poet-thinker-actor comes only as a result of her remaining in solitude adjacent to but outside of her community.

Hidden in the allegations of shame and infamy leveled against Hester are words and phrases that undermine the narrator’s condemnation. Hester’s “ascending the scaffold” begins that paradox, juxtaposition, and undermining. “[R]ather, thou hast ascended to the pedestal of infamy, on which I found thee” (73-74), says her husband, not realizing to what positive heights Hester will ascend. She rises to punishment but ascends to achieve the status of angel, ultimately to fall to speculation and rise again to uncertainty. “The very law that condemned
her [. . .] had held her up, through the terrible ordeal of her ignominy. But now [. . .] began the daily custom, and she must either sustain and carry it forward by the ordinary resources of her nature, or sink beneath it’ (78). Hester, like Melville’s Pip, does “sink beneath it,” but in that sinking she attains new heights. That “[s]he could no longer borrow from the future, to help her through the present grief” (78-79) shows how Hester becomes one with the present.

“[T]he torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because of the result of martyrdom” (80). How could a condemned adulterer ever be pure? Hester does work out “another purity” that is “more saint-like” as she finally rejects her punishment and plans to escape with Dimmesdale. However, that sacred martyrdom, her spiritual death, leads Hester to a mental plane on which she is able to perceive differences above any human law. Her ascendancy, intellectually, comes not as Hawthorne and the narrator describe the relationship between mother and child as “awful sacredness” but as a relationship between what she perceives and what she thinks she ought to perceive. The “awful” part of sacredness is accompanied by intellectual change and growth. That “awful sacredness” reflects the town’s perception of Hester as they ultimately view her embroidered letter A to represent Angel, just as Hawthorne has embroidered the story with additional layers of meaning like the brilliant A in contrast to the gray garb it rests upon. They ultimately view this embroidered A as having “the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom” (163). Nuns are chaste; Hester was not; her cross is her aloneness. Perhaps Hester changes the implied metaphor of the sacrificial cross into a meaning consistent with the poetics of solitude, in which she gives her life for and to herself. Hester rises above
because she speculates; that is both her greatest sin and her grandest triumph. Hester’s bosom, her heart, led her to her passion, her original sin of adultery. That combination of the words *cross, nun, and bosom* belies the narrator’s condemnation and instead augments his subtle praise, a combination that Hawthorne himself is at great pains to set up. What leads Hester to her ultimate triumph of the life of the poet-thinker in community begins with the recursive solitude which feeds upon itself.

When Governor Bellingham and the magistrates call Hester Prynne to the Governor’s Hall with the intention of taking Pearl away from her, Pearl compounds the problem by failing to answer her catechism question. Hester does argue for keeping Pearl by exclaiming that “this badge has taught me […] lessons whereof my child may be the wiser and better” (111). Pearl certainly does become “wiser and better,” but not because she learns that community rule takes priority over individual thought but because her mother teaches her what she, Hester, has long been doing, questioning authority. It is not until Hester demands, “Speak thou for me!” (113) that Dimmesdale pleads her case, “that this boon [Pearl] was meant, above all things else, to keep the mother’s soul alive, and to preserve her from blacker depths of sin into which Satan might else have sought to plunge her!” (114). Naive, book-learned Dimmesdale has no idea of the depths to which Hester has already plunged in her solitude. He thinks that Hester’s keeping Pearl will keep her from sin and from ever joining Mistress Hibbins, who later is hanged as a witch. Even Hester remarks, “Had they taken her [Pearl] from me, I would willingly have gone with thee [Hibbins] into the forest, and signed my name in the Black Man’s book too, and that with mine own blood!” (117).
Hester goes into a wilderness, a forest all her own as she speculates, but the narrator must conclude this chapter with the observation: “Even thus early had the child saved her from Satan’s snare” (117). A passage somewhat after the scene with the governor discusses inner changes in Hester:

Much of the marble coldness of Hester’s impression was to be attributed to the circumstance that her life had turned, in a great measure, from passion and feeling, to thought. Standing alone in the world,—alone, as to any dependence on society, and with little Pearl to be guided and protected,—alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position, even had she not scorned to consider it desirable,—she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world’s law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before. [. . .] Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter. (164)

The entire passage is filled with ambivalence: speculative thought is all right in Europe but not in New England; thought is sanctioned for men but not for women; thinking makes a woman cold as she loses passion and feeling; Hester fulfills her obligations only through the saving presence of her child. The narrator reflects that his forefathers would have condemned Hester Prynne for thinking outside of community dictates. He further suggests that without the presence of Pearl, Hester might have become another Anne Hutchinson, a “prophetess,” or even “attempt[ed] to undermine the foundations of the Puritan establishment” (165). Is Hawthorne suggesting and the narrator beginning to see that that is exactly what Hester Prynne has already done?

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind, with reference to the whole race of womanhood. “Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As
concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and
dismissed the point as settled” (165). The narrator then disclaims any respect for Hester’s
new awareness by generalizing that for all women speculation makes them sad, that they
cannot tear down and build up again like men. “A woman never overcomes these problems
by any exercise of thought,” he continues, but only if “her heart chance to come uppermost”
(166). Even Hester considers and rejects a double suicide.

But the narrator then makes one sentence into a whole paragraph as he writes, “The
scarlet letter had not done its office” (166). Office, derived from the Latin term for “duty,”
denotes a domain strictly within Turner’s realm of “structure.” Seen outside that viewpoint,
the scarlet letter has another function: it provides the vehicle, the situation, whereby Hester
Prynne could think, could wonder, could question, could speculate, in her recursive solitude as
she perceives the real from the unreal--something which may mirror what the narrator himself
has done but which he must deny and hide from his ancestors and his readers at the same time
that he affirms it: “She had climbed her way, since then [before sentencing], to a higher point”
(167). To look into the human heart requires an inner freedom from social norms. To
“speculate” in the sense I use it here resonates with its accepted connotation of unorthodox
thought, freethinking. Never, however, are Hester’s thought adventures blithe or
irresponsible, bought as they are with scorn and struggle.

The Real and the Unreal

For most of her life outside the Boston community that condemns her, Hester Prynne
vacillates between what she perceives as real and unreal. Since Pearl is her only companion
and too young to respond to her musings, Hester must come to her own realizations of what is actual and what is not. That process takes years; not until she either accepts a difference or dismisses the difference as inconsequential is she able to move from Bachelard’s poet-thinker to his ideal of the poet-thinker-in-the-community.

“[F]or women in solitude, and with troubled hearts, are pestered with unaccountable delusions” (97). The narrator admits that Hester speculates in her solitude, yet he disparages women for so speculating and adds that these are women with “troubled” hearts. Earlier he had written that only if a woman supplants heart with head can she possibly retain her femininity, as if putting heart above mind quells all thought. However, do these “troubled” women think original ideas? Question authority? Consider alternate beliefs? For the narrator, no; they can only experience “unaccountable delusions.” Hester sees, according to him, only the unreal; she has no connection in her solitude with the real. But the successful Bachelardian model sees both real and unreal and reconciles them to satisfy, if you will, both mind and heart.

In Hester’s solitude comes one of the most intense descriptions of her reverie, her mental work:

Reminiscences, the most trifling and immaterial, passages of infancy and school-days, sports, childish quarrels, and the little domestic traits of her maiden years, came swarming back upon her, intermingled with recollections of whatever was gravest in her subsequent life; one picture precisely as vivid as another; as if all were of similar importance, or all alike a play. (57)

Here Hester has clearly gained a perspective, recognized by author and narrator. A “play” is a performance, usually in an ordered sequence; now, Hester can distance herself from the real
and examine the unreal of her past--unreal, as Bachelard argues, because it already occurred and because these reminiscences are distanced by time which alter the remembering. These moments from her memory have entered the realm of the imaginal and suggest much more than their singular occurrence in the past; they now become instances of contemplation.

However, the narrator deprecates this remembering and re-associating with the real by describing the remembered events as “little domestic traits.” If he were describing a man, he never would have used such diction. Previously, in her mind, Hester combines the real with the unreal by blotting out what was happening to her in prison and on the scaffold. “Then, she was supported by an unnatural tension of the nerves, and by all the combative energy of her character, which enabled her to convert the scene into a kind of lurid triumph” (78). That combination of the words *lurid* and *triumph*, much like “awful sacredness,” undermines the narrator’s dismissal of Hester’s thoughtfulness pejoratively as womanly rather than as Hester’s achievement. This characterization of Hester may cause the narrator to rethink her merits, but always he returns to his original premise of frail woman and sinful passion: “she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion” (79).

Although Hawthorne’s narrator is certain of the reality of sin, he must--to satisfy ancestors, readers, community--repeat his notion that she “who had once been innocent” is “the figure, the body, the reality of sin. And over her grave, the infamy that she must carry thither would be her only monument” (79). Even at her death, for him, Hester will be known
only for her sin; her retribution of that sin, of course, he does concede but not her great accomplishment of perception.

Another potent image of Hester’s mental work is given in the following scene, and again the narrator presents it with characteristic ambivalence. “Women derive a pleasure,” he writes, “incomprehensible to the other sex, from the delicate toil of the needle. To Hester Prynne it might have been a mode of expressing, and therefore soothing, the passion of her life. Like all other joys, she rejected it as sin” (83-84). Although he assumes Hester and all women thoroughly enjoy being seamstresses, he also assumes that that work will soothe her. If only the narrator had taken a moment to look at women sewing, he would see that they think undisturbed, that they meditate, that they are often alone with their thoughts, but Hawthorne’s purpose here seems to be to show the inability of the narrator to comprehend solitude in its various emanations, to remain the uncomprehending observer, to lack solitude and its benefits himself. If Hester’s needlework was so “soothing” to her passions, why then did she embroider that letter A so brilliantly that it virtually shone from her breast? To attract attention to her occupation of needlework? To flaunt her sin? Perhaps the brilliantly embroidered A signifies the Alpha, the beginning of Hester’s descent into the world of what is real and what is not, what relates to her and what does not, and what or who makes decisions for her or not.

An Art of Living Poetically

Her imagination was somewhat affected, and, had she been of a softer moral and intellectual fibre, would have been still more so, by the strange and solitary anguish of her life. Walking to and fro, [...] she felt or fancied, then, that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. She shuddered to believe
[. . .] that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts. She was terror-stricken by the revelations that were thus made. [. . .] Just she receive those intimations--so obscure, yet so distinct--as truth? In all her miserable experience, there was nothing else so awful and so loathsome as this sense. It perplexed, as well as shocked her, by the irreverent inopportuneness of the occasions that brought it into vivid action. (86-87)

The letter has given her a new sense; she can read the sins of others because she is silent, aware, and perceptive. Instead of talking, she listens and thinks; instead of partaking in community affairs and socials, she remains distant, aloof, apart but a part, and then she speculates. So, in her aloneness, she is able to perceive a reality hidden from those not experiencing her solitude. The narrator calls her new knowledge, her keen awareness “awful and loathsome” because he too fears the ability to see into the human heart. Hester becomes one with the reality of the inner souls of many women. “Again, a mystic sisterhood would contumaciously assert itself, as she met the sanctified frown of some matron, who, according to the rumor of all tongues, had kept cold snow within her bosom [. . .] and the burning shame on Hester Prynne’s,--what had the two in common? Or, once more, the electric thrill would give her warning,--‘Behold, Hester, here is a companion!’” (87). Rather than making a verbal connection with these souls, Hester is left alone because the community has condemned her to her aloneness.

But Hester Prynne, with a mind of native courage and activity, and for so long a period not merely estranged, but outlawed, from society, had habituated herself to such latitude of speculation as was altogether foreign to the clergyman. She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness; as vast, as intricate and shadowy, as the untamed forest [. . .]. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian [. . .].
The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss. (199-200)

These words are opposites: on the dangerous side are wandered, wilderness, shadowy, untamed, desert, wild, Indian, dared, and tread. All of them warn the reader of the narrator’s disapprobation of Hester’s delving into discerning between the real and the unreal. He reminds his audience that such thoughts are outlawed and foreign even to clergymen.

Although making Hester strong, her solitude had taught her wrong. Perception of the real and the unreal is disconcerting for Hester, the narrator, and their communities.

Clearly Hester Prynne achieves the solitude advocated by Bachelard as she learns through her recursive solitude, discerns between real and unreal, learns about herself and her attitudes and beliefs—and nonbeliefs—as she ultimately moves from the poet-thinker to the community-thinker. The men of learning, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth never ascend as a result of their learning. Theirs is book knowledge; Hester’s knowledge is her life experience.

When Hester meets Dimmesdale in the forest glen, she reveals to him her mental growth. She had earlier admitted to herself that she hates Chillingworth—“I hate the man!” (176)—but in the forest she tells Dimmesdale that Chillingworth is her husband and warns the preacher of his evil, vengeful plan. Dimmesdale, also a man of books, not of action, cannot do what Hester exhorts him to do: “Or,—as is more thy nature,—be a scholar and a sage among the wisest and most renowned of the cultivated world. Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save to lie down and die!” (198). To this, Dimmesdale, who has not the intense experience of solitude that graced Hester, replies, “I must die here. There is not the strength or courage left
me to venture into the wide, strange, difficult world, alone!” Hester reassures him that he will not share her fate: “Thou shalt not go alone!”

Hester Prynne moves from her solitude to a quasi-place in the community because the townspeople come to her not just for her needlework but to confide in her, to share dark secrets with her, to admit temptations, confessions that are usually reserved, if not, as with Catholics, for the priest, then for the hearing of one’s God alone:

But, in the lapse of the toilsome, thoughtful, and self-devoted years that made up Hester’s life, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too. And, as Hester Prynne had no selfish ends, nor lived in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment, people brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. Women, more especially, [. . .] came to Hester’s cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! [. . .] Earlier in life, Hester had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess, but had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow. The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! (263)

Although Hawthorne’s narrator admits the mitigating effects of the scarlet letter, he cannot, will not, allow that Hester has achieved a life of reverence in the community. He concedes that the “angel”--Hester had achieved that status in the eyes of the community--must be a woman, but not a woman like Hester. Earlier in the novel, Hester had returned from the bedside of the dying Governor Winthrop, the one who set the rules of behavior for a community subjugated to the rules of its elders. His death symbolizes the death of that old
rule, certainly for Hester, but not for the narrator. Does he believe that Hester does not achieve “the ethereal medium of joy”? Through the juxtaposition of Hester and the narrator, Hawthorne is able to explore the way in which the intense experience of solitude changes the very marrow of a soul while the observer can see yet not comprehend that change. As a poet-thinker who acts in the community, Hester Prynne certainly does achieve an art of living poetically, as suggested by an interpretation of Bachelard’s philosophy. And she achieves it in solitude. Hester Prynne’s liminality is complete: “in her lonesome cottage, by the sea-shore, thoughts visited her, such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England” (164). Over her threshold come speculation and finally independent thought and enough self-respect to return to the shore, away from the community that made her a pariah. Yet her keynote all along is a melancholy sympathy coupled with courage; “joy” does not describe the fruits of this solitude. A second instance of solitude, provided by Melville’s Pip, the cabin boy, shows a descent and ascent into a solitude that expands our understanding of the state.
Chapter 4

Melville’s Solitary Men: Bartleby, Pip, and Ishmael

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;
These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.
--Psalm 107: 23-24

On November 17, 1851, Herman Melville wrote a remarkable letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne responding to Hawthorne’s praise of Moby-Dick, imputing a mystical brotherhood of spirit with his fellow writer and friend in his characteristic hyperbolic way: “Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life?” (Melville Moby-Dick 545). He goes on to say:

Now and then as you read, you understood the pervading thought that impelled the book--and that you praised. Was it not so? You were archangel enough to despise the imperfect body, and embrace the soul. Once you hugged the ugly Socrates because you saw the flame in the mouth, and heard the rushing of the demon,--the familiar,--and recognized the sound; for you have heard it in your own solitudes. (Melville Moby-Dick 546)

The kinship that Melville sensed in Hawthorne involves an experience of solitude that he can liken only to a divine flame or a demonic familiar. The profound experience of solitude requires a mythic, religious, or poetic cosmos to name its heights and depths.

This is the same kinship of imagination to which Melville drew attention in “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” his review essay of Hawthorne’s Mosses from an Old Manse.
There he attributes to Hawthorne “a great, deep intellect, which drops down into the universe like a plummet” (Melville *Moby-Dick* 520) and a “great power of blackness [. . .] from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free” (521). And he goes on to confess, “Now it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me” (522).

This depth, this darkness, is a capacity of the imagination. Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne is ultimately firmly rooted in reality, whereas the venerable gentleman Mr. Smith of “Fancy’s Show-Box” lives entirely in his imagination. Even though Hester’s visitors are members of that Puritan community that condemns her, they do indeed come to her for solace and redemption. Hester throws off the tenets of her religion to think and wonder alone as to her purpose and meaning and role in life and so educates her child of sin, Pearl, to become an early feminist, a thinking woman. (At the very least, we can suppose such an outcome.) However, for venerable Mr. Smith, Hawthorne asks, “And could such beings of cloudy fantasy, so near akin to nothingness, give valid evidence against him, at the day of judgment?” (225). But with a prick from Conscience “too keen to be endured,” Smith bellows aloud, with impatient agony, and his guests are gone. “Yet his heart still seemed to fester with the venom of the dagger.”

Hawthorne continues his argument of imagining reality in solitude as he states, “A scheme of guilt, till it be put in execution, greatly resembles a train of incidents in a projected tale. The latter, in order to produce a sense of reality in the reader’s mind, must be conceived with such proportionate strength by the author as to seem, in the glow of fancy, more like
truth, past, present or to come, than purely fiction” (225). In his solitude Smith imagines his
guilt even though he, physically, never committed these crimes; nevertheless, Conscience
does stab him. Then, are his imagined sins real? Does thinking so make it a sin? This
assumption is not strange to Western narrative, most familiarly cast in terms of lust. Jesus
said, “But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath
committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5: 28). In Chaucer’s Physician’s Tale
in The Canterbury Tales, Virginia’s father executes her because he learns that an enemy of
his, Apius, lusts for his daughter. In this turnabout incident, the one punished is the one lusted
after. So Virginia, through no action or fault of her own, is beheaded because of her “fatal
attraction.” Imagination seems tied to reality through guilt.

The premise is that thought in solitude may or may not bring the poet to a higher level.
In this study the results are very clear and very real despite what is seen or imagined. As for
Smith, his three visitors affect him. His pain is just as real in his conscience as if he had been
wounded, and so the actions that he is accused of are real. Fancy is real, then, to the person
who imagines it. In the outside world the effects are real, so the causes are real. Our
characters change in the outside world. If characters change the way they act in the outside
world, then what happens in solitude is very real. Therefore, for Herman Melville’s solitary
Bartleby, Pip, and Ishmael, imagining becomes their reality. And to a greater or lesser extent
each of them responds to the Bachelardian model.
Melville’s Bartleby: Writing and Memory

In Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Bartleby’s seemingly tragic choice may have arisen from his own imaginings. Bartleby, in effect, kills himself. His reality is his choice, and he carries it out. Just as fancy is real to the person who imagines it, memory may have played a part in his demise. Bartleby is a clerk, a copyist, a writer. Hawthorne’s Memory is characterized “in the likeness of a clerk, with a pen behind her ear, an ink-horn at her button-hole, and a huge manuscript volume beneath her arm” (Hawthorne “Fancy” 221). Hawthorne’s Memory is a writer. Bartleby seems in part to be conceived along the same lines, as completely defined by his writing function and as unswervingly focused on the merciless morality of memory.

The first-person narrator questions Bartleby’s choices but never his conscience or his reality. The narrator-lawyer, seemingly the only meditative character, must attempt to explain Bartleby in his—the narrator’s—own terms. In one two-inch paragraph of print, the lawyer attempts to explain Bartleby but uses the pronoun “I” ten times! Like another Winthrop who wants everyone in his theocracy to comply with all his rules, the narrator concludes that Bartleby can be explained (not understood) by his past, his memory. Bartleby, a law-copyist in the narrator’s office, has come to his new job from the Dead Letter Office, where he had been a subordinate clerk. Relating this discovery, the narrator-lawyer muses:

When I think over this rumor, hardly can I express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? [. . .] On errands of life, these letters speed to death. (45)
The narrator claims knowledge of Bartleby’s nature and experience, when in actuality the narrator lacks almost all insight into himself and others even when this elderly, safe, religious man describes himself and his clerks in great detail. Even before Bartleby arrives, and before the employer describes his clerks, he describes his surroundings. One of the most telling details is that in one direction his office “looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft,” while in the other it offered “an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall [. . .] was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes [. . . so that t]he interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern” (14). He acknowledges that his view is “deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life,’” but it seems likely that “deficient in life” would also describe the narrator-lawyer’s view of humanity. The narrator who would explain Bartleby has his own “wall”--both real and imagined--in place even before Bartleby arrives.

The narrator writes, as in remembrance, “a motionless young man one morning, stood upon my office threshold [. . .]. I can see that figure now--pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby” (19). His adverbs diminish the adjectives and create paradox. So that “privacy and society were conjoined,” the lawyer places Bartleby’s “desk close up to a small side-window [. . . that] commanded [. . .] no view at all, though it gave some light.” Apparently, that isolation was not complete. “Still further to a satisfactory arrangement, I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice.” Does Bartleby consider the arrangement satisfactory? The narrator-employer never inquires; the reader does not know.
At first, Bartleby does his copying, an “extraordinary quantity of writing [. . .] to gorge himself on my documents [. . . with] no pause for digestion.” But the employer is not quite pleased because Bartleby is not “cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (20). However, when the lawyer asks his copyist to help him proofread word by word, Bartleby replies, “I would prefer not to.” Bartleby reinforces his own solitude by writing behind the physical partition that his employer, the narrator, puts up to separate them and which now creates a verbal barrier: the word is copied but not uttered aloud. “Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance” (23). The narrator works at tolerating Bartleby in order to to “lay up in [his] soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for [his] conscience” (23-24), but his conscience is not pricked. Next, Bartleby refuses to copy at all. When the narrator asks why, Bartleby replies, “Do you not see the reason for yourself” (32). His employer thinks that Bartleby’s vision is impaired, but Bartleby can “see”—he is Bachelard’s poet—what the narrator cannot. Bartleby has certainly reached that level of indifference. “‘I have given up copying,’ he answered, and slid aside.”

The five men in the office work in the same place but never form a community. When the lawyer discovers that Bartleby lives in the office, he tries to fire him; finally, the lawyer moves out and leaves Bartleby there alone. When the new tenant asks him about Bartleby, the lawyer denies ever having known him: “I certainly cannot inform you. I know nothing about him” (40). Bartleby is removed by the authorities to the Tombs; the narrator’s guilt or curiosity prompts him to give money to the caretaker for food for Bartleby, but he has starved himself to death. Bartleby has joined the ultimate solitude.
Hawthorne’s “venerable gentleman, Mr. Smith,” Bartleby, and the narrator are raised
to different levels of consciousness, but confusion arises--for Bartleby at least--from the
community as represented by the narrator and its/his conflicting ideas. Although the
Buddhists and Taoists use meditation to recognize reality, the reality for Bartleby is clearly not
the reality of his environment or of his narrator. Bartleby rejects community, preferring not to
copy, not to move, not to eat. He dies apart. His rite of passage to death leads him to another
reality. Even the lawyer murmurs aloud that Bartleby is now with “kings and counsellors”
(45), as he quotes from the Book of Job. Bartleby chooses, but Melville’s narrator does not
tell us what Bartleby learns in his solitude. Or does he? Bartleby keeps moving further and
further away from community, like an extreme image of Brodkey’s writer in the garret. The
copier who writes alone--ironically, writing only the words of others--began alone and ends
alone. It is not so much that he chooses another group as that he goes to the Tombs because it
is the only place he could go to die. Bainard Cowan argues:

Bartleby is a member of society only in death. [. . .] What is true and
blameworthy of the attorney at the beginning of the story, though not
immediately apparent, is true and apparent in Bartleby to the point of
absurdity--beyond the point of moral judgment. He is a product of this world
already in place, Melville’s intuition of what the new urban system means on
the level of the human body and the human soul. His preference for staring at
blank walls--his “dead-wall reveries”--manifest the wall as an impedance of
flow, as protection from the crowd, its blankness a sign of individualization
without individuation. (195)

Bartleby is not literally a poet, of course. An amanuensis, he seems to anatomize
allegorically part of the function of writing. Imagination is removed from his domain just as
absolutely as memory is ever-present. Thus one must arrive at a hypothesis whereby Bartleby
is a figure in Melville’s meditation on the powers of the poet and their emergence out of solitude. Bartleby “seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe. A bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic” (32). Bartleby authentically, but only halfway, achieves the model of the poet delineated by Bachelard. He reaches the level of indifference, but no inner theater of images seems to arise and flower into poetry. And though he does not physically return to community as the poet-thinker, he does influence the unnamed narrator-lawyer.

As much a solitary soul as Bartleby himself, the narrator remains nameless, a terrible thing if one considers that Adam gave every creature its correct name, its definition. The attorney attends Trinity Church and supposedly is part of that community, but probably only as an observer. The narrator explains his own lack of community with Bartleby by stating, “What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him” (Melville’s emphasis; 13). He never knows him. The narrator concedes that we are all “sons of Adam,” though earlier he exclaims, “I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs” (37). Bartleby has become a thing inhuman and so, by extension, has the narrator himself. Or so it seems. The last time he goes to visit Bartleby in the Tombs, he describes his impression of the surroundings there:

The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung. (44)

Cowan directs the reader’s attention to “two images juxtaposed here, grass and wall [ . . .] the inhuman, faceless altar to death--the pyramid--and the unassuming, unstoppable, seemingly
unorganized grass growing in the cracks” (197). The fact that the narrator registers both opposed forces clearly, Cowan contends, testifies to “how far this attorney has come”: “The grass-seed has seeded the mind of the narrator,” indicating that he has grasped an opposing principle to the forces of urban depersonalization that loom so large in his time and place and that have united to crush Bartleby. The opposing principle is life itself, and it remains undaunted. Has the poetic image then flowered in the narrator’s mind? Will the narrator-lawyer move his own desk toward a window with a view, remove the screens secluding him from his employees, make an attempt to establish community?

Everything in life is an illusion because of the confusion caused by the community. Only the poet-thinker who can isolate himself from the community, as Bachelard asserts, and who can return to the community as the poet-thinker is the one who succeeds in comprehending reality. The premise that solitude brings one to a higher level may or may not prove true even if all characters experience that solitude. The solitude and its result may be real or imaginary--fancy--but the Bachelard model requires that the poet-thinker return to community as an active member. The “walls” must be breached.

In his memoir *The Invention of Solitude*, Paul Auster comments on Van Gogh’s painting *The Bedroom*:

The man in this painting [. . .] has been alone too much, has struggled too much in the depths of solitude. The world ends at that barricaded door. For the room is not a representation of solitude, it is the substance of solitude itself. And it is a thing so heavy, so unbreathable, that it cannot be shown in any other terms than what it is. “And that is all--there is nothing in this room with closed shutters.” (144)
The lawyer-narrator will employ another scrivener. Nevertheless, since Walter Ong has declared the word as a reason for being and/or a means of being, there is hope for Bartleby’s lawyer-narrator.

Pip, the Alabama Cabin Boy: Beyond “Edgeness”

Bartleby, as I have noted, is described as “absolutely alone [. . . a] bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic” (Melville “Bartleby” 32). It is quite possible that a profound episode in Melville’s earlier fiction has been condensed into a single figure here. This episode is Pip’s moment in Moby-Dick. Of course, one would have to allow for an effortless transfer from the South China Sea to the Atlantic Ocean in order to identify the two passages securely; but both clearly paint the same stark picture of an absolute solitude, the picture of a single head bobbing in a boundless immensity of water. This is not what Freud meant by the “oceanic feeling,” to be sure. Such moments, Storr explains, in which one feels “totally at one with another person, or totally at one with the universe, are such deep experiences that, although they may be transient, they cannot be dismissed as mere evasions or defenses against unwelcome truths” (39). Freud is suspicious of such an enveloping euphoria. But Storr goes on to indicate that the oceanic feeling has another side: people have attested to “intense experiences of feeling that some kind of higher order of reality existed with which solitude put them in touch” (60). He adds moreover that many of these people “had also become more aware of horrors lurking under the surface”; and he draws the conclusion that “the human spirit is not indestructible; but a courageous few discover that, when in hell, they are granted a glimpse of heaven” (60-61). We never know what the dimensions of Bartleby’s inner
experience are; but Pip is granted this plummet beneath the surface, along with views of horrors and glimpses of heaven.

In Chapter 93, “The Castaway,” of *Moby-Dick*, the black cabin-boy said to be from both Alabama and Connecticut, “Pippin by nick-name, Pip by abbreviation” (319)—his given name unknown and unasked—falls from a boat while it is chasing a whale; he is later picked up by the whaling ship, the Pequod, and as a result of this third fall, “the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul” (321). Pip’s shipmates refer to him as an *idiot* just as the law-copyists refer to Bartleby as “luny.” Yet Pip reaches the state of Turner’s liminality. Turner clarifies:

> What I call liminality, the state of being in between [. . .] social milieus dominated by social structural considerations, whether formal or unformalized, is not precisely the same as communitas, for it is a sphere or domain of action or thought rather than social modality. Indeed, liminality may imply solitude rather than society, the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal of an individual from a social-structural matrix. It may imply alienation from rather than more authentic participation in social existence. (52)

Pip, involuntarily, leaves the “social structural considerations” of the ship as his new domain of thought keeps him separate from almost everyone.

Melville links Pip to Ahab first by space, in the organization of the novel’s structure, by having Ishmael describe Pip at the end of his chapter “Knights and Squires,” immediately before the chapter titled “Ahab.” Ishmael, as Melville’s narrator, describes Pip not as mad but as one of the “Anacharsis Clootz deputation [. . .] accompanying Old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world’s grievances before that bar from which not very many of them ever come
back.” He then adds, “Black Little Pip—he never did! Poor Alabama boy! On the grim Pequod’s forecastle, ye shall ere long see him, beating his tambourine; prelusive of the eternal time, when sent for, to the great quarter-deck on high, he was bid strike in with angels, and beat his tambourine in glory; called a coward here, hailed a hero there!” (Melville 107). An idiot? A coward? A hero? Ahab’s “secret sharer,” as described by Joseph Conrad? How can Pip be prelusive—introductory—to the eternal time? What happens to Pip as he experiences the solitude of the vast sea changes him forever.

Through Ishmael’s narration, Melville describes the events leading to this remarkable change, first, as a series of opposites in Pip’s chapter, “The Castaway,” which, paradoxically, Pip both is and is not: “a most significant event befell the most insignificant of the Pequod’s crew; an event most lamentable; and which ended in providing the sometimes madly merry and predestinated craft with a living and ever accompanying prophecy of whatever shattered sequel might prove her own” (319). Pip certainly does experience a “most significant event,” but Pip’s shipmates, with the exceptions of Ishmael and Ahab, view him as most insignificant because he is merely a “ship-keeper”; he stays on board while others chase whales. But it is Pip who experiences the significant event that enables him to perceive a truth alone. The sheer reversal of hierarchies implied in the scale of significance here points to the element of “anti-structure” that Turner identifies as a feature of liminality, when social hierarchies are not only left behind but are sometimes jarringly inverted. Ishmael explains that it is an event “most lamentable” but later undermines the “lamentable” when he describes Pip’s final experience. Although Ishmael describes the Pequod itself as “madly merry” and
“predestined” to a “shattered sequel,” these very words apply also to Pip, who loses his sanity, according to his observers, for idiots are described as “madly merry” and “predestined,” and the chain of events in order does “shatter” the crew’s perception of Pip. However, in Pip’s terrifying moment of solitude, he experiences Turner’s liminality and ultimately returns only to Ahab’s world as an emblem of Bachelard’s poet-thinker.

Pip’s playing his tambourine “so gloomy-jolly” continues his presentation as a series of seemingly inexplicable opposites, consistent with the sentiment of nineteenth-century perception, as “Pip, though over tender-hearted, was at bottom very bright, with that pleasant, genial, jolly brightness peculiar to his tribe; a tribe, which ever enjoy all holidays and festivities with finer, freer relish than any other race.” “At bottom very bright” could, of course, indicate that any crew member might discern some intellectual thought in Pip, but in actuality Pip descends mentally to the great ocean’s bottom to experience his great insight. Also, Pip is blinded by the gold-tone of the ocean. That “very bright” in another sense reminds the reader of the one who is blinded by the brilliance of the sun (truth) as he or she emerges from the shackles of Plato’s cave. However, the play is on the word *brilliant* again.

Ishmael continues:

But Pip loved life, and all life’s peaceable securities; so that the panic-striking business in which he had somehow unaccountably become entrapped, had most sadly blurred his brightness; though, as ere long will be seen, what was thus temporarily subdued in him, in the end was destined to be luridly illumined by strange wild fires, that fictitiously showed him off to ten times the natural lustre with which in his native Tolland County in Connecticut, he had once enlivened many a fiddler’s frolic on the green; and at melodious even-tide, with his gay ha-ha! had turned the round horizon into one star-belled tambourine. (319-20)
Here, Pip will experience a new “round horizon” as he goes beyond edgeness to liminality and perceives the mind of God.

As the Pequod is described, so is Pip. Both are predestined or, to use another category with opposites, unlucky. Because Stubb’s “afteroarsman chanced so to sprain his hand” (320), Pip is put in the crew boat to hunt the whale. “The first time Stubb lowered with him, Pip evinced much nervousness; but happily, for that time, escaped close contact with the whale”; Stubb reminds Pip to “cherish his courageousness to the utmost, for he might often find it needful.” The second time Pip is in the small boat pursuing the whale, the whale raps the boat “right under poor Pip’s seat [. . . which] caused him to leap, paddle in hand, out of the boat.” Pip becomes entangled in the rope, is pulled overboard, and almost strangles or drowns until Stubb gives Tashtego (his harpooner) the command to cut the rope. “‘Damn him, cut!’ roared Stubb; and so the whale was lost and Pip was saved,” another presentation of opposites.

Stubb “then in a plain, business-like, but still half humorous manner, cursed Pip officially; and that done, unofficially gave him much wholesome advice.” “Never jump from a boat,” Stubb advises; “Stick to the boat, is your true motto in whaling; but cases will sometimes happen when Leap from the boat, is still better.” “Leaping” from the boat, from the community--and we may call them community since all must trust each other to work carefully and consistently together to succeed--may be advantageous, but Stubb, fearing that “he would be leaving him too wide a margin to jump in for the future [. . .] concluded with a
peremptory command, ‘Stick to the boat, Pip, or by the Lord, I wont pick you up if you jump; mind that’” (320-21).

Leaving that community of whale boats provides danger for both body and mind; besides, Stubb reminds Pip, “A whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama” (321). When Pip jumps from the boat, he leaps out of his community. (Stephen Crane’s correspondent in “The Open Boat” reminds his readers of the little community that the survivors formed in the lifeboat on the rough, empty, turbulent, lonely sea, with waves so high they could not discern the color of the sky.) Nevertheless, what occurs on the third outing is that the whale is saved, Pip is saved, but Pip is lost; that is, Pip is viewed as an idiot by the narrator Ishmael and the rest of the crew. That Pip’s descent into the lonesomeness of the sea occurs on the third occasion is not remarkable. The number three has figured prominently in Western culture, especially in its association with Christ’s definitive liminal passage, his descent into hell and his return to the living on the third day.

Now, Ishmael reminds readers that “we are all in the hands of the Gods” (321). That idea of “predestined” from earlier in the chapter, juxtaposed with “Gods,” capitalized but in the plural, forms another opposite. Ultimately, Pip will see God as He weaves the fate of humankind. Now, “Pip jumped again. It was under very similar circumstances to the first performance; but this time he did not breast out the line; and hence, when the whale started to run, Pip was left behind on the sea, like a hurried traveler’s trunk.” Since Stubb’s back is toward Pip, Stubb assumes one of the other boats will pick him up, but meanwhile the other boats have changed direction to pursue another whale, and “in three minutes, a whole mile of
shoreless ocean was between Pip and Stubb.” Pip seemingly deliberately leaves the community, in this respect like Hester, Bartleby, and, as will be seen, Chopin’s Edna, to be alone on this immense, empty, flat “gold-beater’s skin” (the sea).

Pip turns “his crisp, curling, black head to the sun, another lonely castaway, though the loftiest and the brightest” (321). Significantly and again paradoxically, the sun is identified as a castaway along with Pip; and strictly speaking this is true, for the sun is not part of society. Nature itself is a “castaway” from society, especially the Puritan-descended society that Melville portrays all along in Moby-Dick. But a stunning reversal of hierarchies is implied in this identification. The sun carries other “lofty” associations as well. Pip does turn “his crisp, curling, black head” toward the sun just as Plato’s escapee from the community in the cave of untruths turns to the sun for the “Idea” truth.

Furthermore, he is not quite “lonely,” but very much alone. Lonely connotes longing for community, and Pip, though so named by Ishmael, is not strictly a castaway. He jumps from the ship; he is not forced out of the community by men’s laws or nature or God but seemingly chooses to make that leap: a leap of faith. “Now, in calm weather, to swim in the open ocean is [. . .] easy [. . .]. But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it? Mark, how when sailors in a dead calm bathe in the open sea--mark how closely they hug their ship and only coast along her sides” (321). Pip experiences the definitive solitude--no one, no shoreline, nothing within sight, only the brilliance of the sun--and this intense solitariness provides the vehicle for truth that he can neither comprehend rationally himself nor share with
those who have not experienced the depth of his solitude, with the possible exceptions of Ahab and Ishmael.

The dogma of predestination developed by John Calvin and envisioned by the Puritans of New England still influenced thought into the middle of the nineteenth century and beyond, though some of its more radical views had softened. Even the Transcendentalists and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who urge others to view the world through an all-seeing eyeball, never quite divested themselves of the idea of God knowing and, therefore, God ordering life and fate. In an earlier colonial time, Edward Taylor in his poem “Huswifery” (weaving) begs God to set his loom and “Then weave the web Thyself,” as if Taylor commits to God total control of his fate devoid of any free will.

In his solitude, Pip experiences a kind of predestination and insights unheard of previously: “Pip’s ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably. By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though.” As the horizon expands, so does Pip’s mind. He, at first, experiences “edgeness.” And as Pip knows liminality, he is caught on that threshold of knowing “the infinite of his soul”:

Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. (321)
Pip clearly sees Plato’s Ideas without having to reason, as he himself is not actively involved; Pip learns wisdom, which seldom comes so easily, even if so perilously.

Melville himself was thoroughly familiar with the area of the Pacific known today as Oceania. So it is possible to read “the colossal orbs” as the islands, islets, and atolls that volcanoes heaved out of the very bottom of the sea. But the word *orbs* seems to invoke a Genesis-like creation of the planets after the creation of earth: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Gen. 1: 2). To make the agents of creation “coral insects” renders the biblical creation strange and foreign but without decreasing its tone of wonder in the slightest. Pip’s imaginary worldscape is not devoid of God; He is merely a little removed. “He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it [hailed it]; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God” (321-22). This passage is key to the understanding of indifference as it is related to the experience of solitude. It is beyond reason; it is beyond judgment. It comes from having had a glimpse into the foundations of the world. It cannot be expressed directly, since it results from something beyond the realm of human discourse and ordinary human experience. Indifference may be an “oceanic” feeling of oneness, but if so it seems also to be beyond good and evil, beyond the opposition of life and death, beyond any binary systems.

Pip’s world expands beyond his tambourine, beyond his community, beyond himself. In that vastness his soul descends into the sea as well as into itself. There he sees the wonders
of the universe pass before him as he looks from a spot aloof, indifferent. “Joyous” is contrasted with “heartless”; “ever-juvenile” reminds readers of childlike Pip, who seemingly with his exuberant life remains childlike forever, and as a child, he sees God-omnipresent, present in all that passes before the eyes of his soul as it descends to depths unknown. However, the most significant insight for the Calvinist is viewing God directing the fate of humankind, even the insignificant Pip. Pip sees his destiny and acknowledges it. He makes sense of heaven; he is freed from the cave, from the shipmates in community, but those still chained to unreality cannot see.

At first, Pip returns free from community and even free from God. Like Hester Prynne, Pip ascends--by descending--beyond the rest. Pip views Bachelard’s reality, the reality that is unseen; that is, he sees the unreal that is beyond everyone else’s sight. Although he is rescued and safely returns to the ship, Pip is not in the same community any more but in a different one. Ishmael knows him, and Pip becomes a sharer to Ahab; only then does Pip become Bachelard’s poet-thinker. It would have made a difference if Stubb and the rest had left him there to drown; had he not returned to community on some level, he could not be the poet-thinker. Pip himself realizes that none of it is important, not the ship, not the whale, not the community, not even God himself. Pip and “man,” as Melville writes, “feel then uncompromised, indifferent as his God” (322), which undermines the Calvinistic notion of predestination. Pip’s insanity is heaven’s sense as he sees the unlogic of God; the entire world becomes his star-filled, but indifferent, tambourine.
Melville’s Solitary Men: Not So Solitary after All

Modern campus life reminds me of the difficulty of finding solitude. Students with gargantuan book sacks strapped to their bent backs, like the prideful punished in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, walk with eyes down, averted, and cell phones seemingly growing on their ears, unable to hear silence or enter the door into solitude. The “luny” amanuensis Bartleby’s choice of the grave—the ultimate solitude—most certainly influences his employer-lawyer-narrator as the latter speculates about the “Egyptian” walls of the Tombs and the turf beneath his feet, where “by some strange magic through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung” and grown (Melville “Bartleby” 32). The “strange magic” that allows the seed to struggle and grow must be the work of the poet-thinker, in this case the lawyer-narrator, who must begin the work of examining his own selfhood in relation to the community of his employees. The lawyer’s perception of Bartleby changes even as that employer continues to see him as “forlorn,” in need of pity, because he cannot turn himself away in total denial. When he finds Bartleby in the Tombs, he gives a keeper money for Bartleby’s food, but he is too late. Even then he never will accept Bartleby as he is; since he is so different, he is threatening. Nor will the lawyer presume to reach Bartleby’s soul. Change in the narrator is not easy to pin down, but the very existence of his narrative at all is testimony that his system of values has permanently changed from those of Wall Street, the point at which he began his interaction with Bartleby. As he declares at the very beginning, “I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby” (13), a recognition of Bartleby’s singularity.
Todd F. Davis criticizes interpretations that “too often present themselves as moralistic judgments either for or against Bartleby and the narrator” (183). “The very act of writing this narrative is an indication that the lawyer still deals with chronometrical guilt in horological time” (191), the terms chronometrical and horological taken from Melville’s Pierre, where they stand, respectively, for an absolute and a socially accepted standard of truth and morality. Davis argues that there is still a change in the narrator, for he “can never go back to his old way of life.” We can take such a charge even further to see Bartleby as a manifestation of Bachelard’s poet who may inspire the narrator-lawyer to become the poet-thinker in community as he contemplates and is changed by Bartleby’s indifference to the Wall Street standard of human behavior. Lawyer as poet? His narrative is the only flowering into words that the strange history of Bartleby has.

In considering the place of the lawyer-narrator, we would do well to remember Brodkey’s ideas about writing. Her “scene of writing” criticizes the writer-writing-alone image as cut off from contact with any community: “The scene is a sort of timeless tableau in which ‘the writer is an Author and the writing is Literature’; the reader is excluded as an element of that ‘social life’ which ‘must not be allowed to enter the garret’” (Roorda 145). Brodkey expands the scene(s) of writing:

Notice that the image privileges only one event in writing, the moment when the writer is an amanuensis, making transcription a synecdoche of writing. In such a freeze frame, the writer is a writing machine, as effectively cut off from writing as from society. [. . .] One implication is that writing costs writers their lives. Likely to terrify writers and would-be writers alike, it is a picture, sometimes the only picture, we conjure when we seek the solitude necessary for writing. In its extreme versions, writers are condemned to write without understanding either why they do so or for whom. (397)
Brodkey probably has twentieth-century authors in mind while painting this romantic stereotype; but the machine, the loss of life, the solitude, the lack of understanding all evoke Bartleby. Roorda in *Dramas of Solitude* interprets Brodkey’s assertion that writing is transcription, a mechanical function, showing “that the writer is a prisoner and the scene of writing a cell; that solitude is largely alienation and victimage; and that writing is separate from and threatening to life” (146). (So he evokes the Tombs, too.) He also claims that Brodkey argues for the writer as a solitary victim or a social being and so proposes that nature writing offers a viable alternative. Brodkey with her vision of communal activist writing and Roorda with his ecocritical canon of nature writing can both be seen as attempts to avert the fate of Bartleby without truly facing it. This study of Melville’s men is not an either/or case, as Brodkey and Roorda make it. Instead, for Bartleby in death and through his absorption into the life of the narrator-lawyer, Bartleby breaks free from the mechanical transcription of words as he “prefers not to.” The narrator-lawyer, much more open to change than Hawthorne’s narrator in *The Scarlet Letter*, shows the subtle effects of his attempts to understand his employee. Where he seemed at the beginning to impose his own standards and preconceptions on others, he is shaken out of his preconceptions by the end.

In *Moby-Dick* Pip is the intersection point of the concern with the social structure of the community, encapsulated in the Puritan view, and the view of the person engaged in the solitary life. Pip’s view of “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” is a recurring image of Calvinism and especially of the doctrine of predestination. Nevertheless, Emerson and the other Transcendentalists softened this austere belief in the election, reflected in *Moby-Dick*.
when Ahab questions, “Is Ahab, Ahab? It is I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?” (406). In Chapter 47, “The Mat-Maker,” Queequeg and Ishmael weave a sword-mat (a ship’s lashing). Ishmael recounts:

As I kept passing and repassing the filling or woof of marline [thin, small, twisted rope] between the long yarns of the warp, using my own hand for the shuttle [. . .] it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp [. . .] and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg’s impulsive, indifferent sword [. . .] finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance--aye, chance, free will, and necessity--no wise incompatible--all interweavingly working together. (179)

It is not until much later in the novel that Ishmael recounts Pip’s vision of God in control; here he suggests that free will exists between the given threads, even though chance has the “last featuring blow at events.” It is not at all surprising that Melville’s narrator Ishmael should vacillate between the Puritan ideas of predetermined fate and the Transcendentalist argument for an uncaring God who allows men to find Him within as each man practices self-reliance while living close to nature; throughout the novel Ishmael is shown to have an expansive mind that holds contradictions in tension.

In Chapter 102, “A Bower in the Arsacides,” Ishmael leaves his descriptions of the inner “subterranean” parts of the whale to describe a visit to an island glen:

It was a wondrous sight. [. . . T]he industrious earth beneath [the trees] was as a weaver’s loom [. . .] the ground-vine tendrils formed the warp and woof [. . .] the great sun seemed a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure. [. . .] Speak, weaver!--stay thy hand!--but one single word with thee! Nay--the shuttle flies [. . .]. The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who
look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. (345)

In all three incidents, Melville’s Ishmael clearly questions the vicissitudes of life and the role of fate. Unfortunately, David Morse, in his two-volume study *American Romanticism*, the second volume of which he subtitles *The Enduring Excessive*, would disagree. According to Morse, everything about Melville is “excessive,” as are “human attempts at explanation and analysis” (65). But the wondering and describing and questioning and thinking are what make this novel one of multiple layers; it is not overdone. Strangely, Morse argues, “By purporting to play God himself and by weaving only to unweave, the novelist does not merely fly in the face of our assured sense of the intransigence of the world through the banality of his optimism: he creates an illusion of transparency that is as mystifying as it is false” (65). What Morse terms “mystifying” is what makes Melville “enduring,” that is, in part at least, his complex vision of the world and his description of the effects of solitude in the novel. And this is neither an “optimism” that would more suitably apply to Emerson than to one of Emerson’s chiefest critics, nor a “transparency” that even the poorest classroom readers have the good sense not to accuse him of. Melville approaches the question of the motivation of the world with a rare openness and a figurative imagination that leads readers to achieve, momentarily at least, a sense of wonder toward a grand mystery, merely to think about which enlarges them.

Mad Pip’s epiphany allows Ahab to experience his very own sense of humanity before his death, even though Ahab’s last words include the prescient apostrophe to the white whale, “For hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee” (426). Nevertheless, Pip’s return is to a
community of three: Pip himself; Ahab, who adopts him, confiding about the carpenter-undertaker’s role, “Now, then, Pip, we’ll talk this over; I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee!” (396); and Starbuck, the chief mate, who wonders, “So, to my fond faith, poor Pip, in this strange sweetness of his lunacy, brings heavenly vouchers of all our heavenly homes. Where learned he that, but there?” (366). Starbuck joins Pip’s community, although unknown to each of them, as Starbuck ponders, “Oh! my God! What is this that shoots through me, and leaves me so deadly calm, yet expectant,--fixed at the top of a shudder! Future things swim before me, as in empty outlines and skeletons; all the past is somehow grown dim. [. . .] Strangest problems of life seem clearing; but clouds sweep between” (422).

Pip’s descent into indifference does, indeed, alter Ahab, Ishmael, and even Starbuck.

Morse continues his evaluation of excessiveness as he names Herman Melville the most “defiantly and persistently excessive,” an author who imposes upon the reader, “trying his patience, his credulity and his tolerance to the very limit,” insisting “on the truthfulness of his most shameless and whimsical fabrications.” What ties imagination to veracity, it seems, is the “genuinely deceptive and provocative” narrator who transforms the reader into a “puzzled voyeur” (11):

*Moby-Dick* is a vertiginous experience for the reader, full of abrupt and unexpected transitions. It takes Ishmael directly from a comical and unforeseen night in bed with the pagan Queequeg into the audience of the earnest and eloquent Father Mapple. [. . . Starting] from essential plausibility of the events [. . . he] deliberately incorporates episodes that undermine the book’s credibility [. . .] keeps the reader dangling interminably [. . .] offers interpretative clues that are intentionally misleading [. . . and] brandishes symbolic and allegorical meanings on every side yet [. . .] read on the most pedantic and literal level. (38)
Later, Morse disagrees with the criticism of Melville’s contemporaries:

By presenting man’s encounter with God and the opacity of the universe in the guise of a whaling-voyage he could show that this confrontation was one of the utmost strenuousness, tension, frustration and danger and could in no wise be dismissed as airy wool-gathering or frothy romance. What *Moby-Dick* proclaims in every line is not only the reality of the real but the reality of thought as it is brought up against and endeavours to structure that real. Yet even here there are paradoxes. (42)

Morse continues his criticism of Melville’s lack of expertise in whaling on one hand and the problem of the Ishmael-Melville persona on the other. For Morse, Ishmael is the “shifter between the thoughts and feelings of ordinary men and the excessive ambitions of Ahab” (45).

“As Melville sees it, God’s omnipotence makes a mockery of all claims that the universe is just, since we are bound to find it just and crushed if we question that it is so” (47).

Ishmael raises questions that remain unanswered as he retells Father Mapple’s sermon about Jonah. Morse continues, “The menace that hovers so threateningly over *Moby-Dick* is of a world without difference. The question it provokes is whether in the face of it man can remain indifferent. For a universe that lacks specificity, individuation and particularity or response would seem to be one that possesses no meaning” (Morse’s emphasis; 51). He maintains, “For Melville implies that all aspects of the Spinozan universe, God, man and nature, are equally to be characterized by indifference. Indifference and lack of difference are one and the same thing” (53). And therein lies our greatest disagreement. The indifference whose outline I have attempted to trace in this study does not rest in an *aha!* moment in which, behind the illusion, the charade is seen for the meaningless thing it supposedly is. It is not a philosophical insight statable in the form of a proposition. Rather it is an inner
orientation that never forgets, no matter what urgent matters present themselves in the immediate moment, what revelations were granted to one in the depths of one’s solitude.

And as for Ishmael, he survives as does his biblical namesake, as the detached narrator, as a poet-thinker himself. The entire crew “lay the world’s grievances before that bar” (107). But Ishmael can say, like Job’s messenger, “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee” (427). Ishmael comes full circle from the “pond” to the edge of the sea, to the lulling of the sea that almost betrays him while he is at the helm at night, to the try-pots conjuring Plato’s images of the Ideas, to the sea that, after swallowing the Pequod and forming a “closing vortex,” had “subsided to a creamy pool,” from which he is saved.

The crew of the Pequod, observes Ishmael, were “nearly all Islanders [...] Isolatoes too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own” (Melville’s emphases; 107). More than those crewmen studied thus far have a profound relation with solitude. Perhaps the premier person in this category is Captain Ahab himself, of whom Ishmael comments, “Ah, God! what trances of torments does that man endure who is consumed with one unachieved revengeful desire. He sleeps with clenched hands; and wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms” (169). He is “self-crucified,” as Hershel Parker’s note to this line asserts. In a chapter of Clough’s *Necessary Earth* titled “The Cost of Solitude,” Ahab is identified with something deep in the American settler spirit: “For all his brooding intensity [...] Ahab is] wholly native, a hunter, an explorer, a wanderer, a doer, an individualist, a capitalist, a seeker [...]. His spirit is that which crosses continents, dares unknown horizons, savages, and wild beasts, challenges what lies beyond the
most distant sky. He is, in short, a master of self-reliance and the resolute will” (128). But far from the sunny optimism of Emerson’s self-reliance, Melville intuits the self-torture to which a consistent devotion to self-reliance leads. Ahab is “Man tortured by a too-near gaze into the solitary experience” (130). “With a reliance on self so deep as to be obsessive, with a desire to know with an immediacy that is almost insanity,” Melville’s men tend toward death, unless they achieve some sort of conversion away from this single-mindedness.

It is the indifference that leads all of them to their conclusions, and this indifference is what occurs in solitude, not as result of it. To see reality, each of Melville’s characters learns of himself. For Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, for Melville’s solitary men, and next for Chopin’s Edna, thinking of what is done brings consequences. But whatever these characters perceive their situation to be, even in imaginings, influences their outcomes. They all experience a kind of Camusian detachment. The perception of the poet’s indifference in solitude leads her/him to be the community’s poet-thinker.

In Paris Spleen, Baudelaire names a one-page chapter “Solitude” and therein quotes La Bruyere as saying, “somewhere, ‘That great misfortune of not being able to be alone!’” as though to shame those who have to go into crowds to forget themselves, doubtless fearing that they could not endure themselves alone” (46-47). Neither of these alternatives is Edna Pontellier’s problem in The Awakening.
Chapter 5

_The Awakening_: A Parrot, a Mockingbird, and a “Bird with a Broken Wing”

Imagination is more important than knowledge.
--Albert Einstein

In _The Invention of Solitude_ Paul Auster writes of connections that are “commonplace in literary works [. . .] but one tends not to see them in the world--for the world is too big and one’s life is too small. It is only at those rare moments when one happens to glimpse a rhyme in the world that the mind can leap out of itself and serve as a bridge for things across time and space, across seeing and memory” (162). The idea of the mind’s leap out of itself is another way of denoting what has been the subject of this study: the transcendent or unnameable experience of insight through a radical encounter with solitude. American literature has sometimes depicted this leap with striking literalism, as Pip’s example has shown. Auster continues eclectically: “Coincidence: to fall on with; to occupy the same place in time or space. The mind, therefore, as that which contains more than itself. As in the phrase from Augustine: ‘But where is the part of it which it does not itself contain?’” (163). Saint Augustine drew attention to the otherness of the mind to itself in order to emphasize the presence of God; in literature, however, the mysteriousness of the mind is a topic of wonder that is not necessarily religious. That the mind contains within itself the capacity to be more than itself is perhaps the first premise underlying all the discourses of the sublime, from
Longinus to the comparatively new developments in American literature. Hester Prynne and cabin-boy Pip prepare the way for a fuller consideration of Edna Pontellier’s leap in *The Awakening*, the work Kate Chopin first named *A Solitary Soul*.

In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, D. H. Lawrence writes of Melville’s great white whale: “[H]e is hunted, hunted by the maniacal fanaticism of our white mental consciousness. We want to hunt him down. To subject him to our will” (169). Lawrence’s notorious overstatement, his projection of Ahab’s will onto Melville’s readers, is based on the presupposition that an act of mind, even an act of knowing, can wreak havoc on its object by robbing it of its uniqueness and reducing it to another instance of a known category. Herman Melville’s Bartleby, defined by Walter Ong as a *homoioiteleuton*, an end in himself, is so hunted. And so men and women seek to “hunt” others like Hester Prynne and Bartleby and Pip to subject them to their wills. In some cases, certainly in Hester’s, these dramas of persecution can be seen as a more literal hunt and subjection, a social victimization. In all the instances we have been examining, however, there is a dimension of meaning in which the persecuted person is a figure for the mind itself. When seen from the Augustinian view that Auster invokes, the mind is an entity in its own right. Whereas Augustine would emphasize its createdness, a modern view would stress that the mind possesses its own life and its own needs, among them a need for freedom and a need to encounter reality. Resisting a kind of subjugation that resembles Hester’s, Pip’s, and Bartleby’s is Kate Chopin’s Edna, who encounters her own liminality and the abysses of solitude to reach indifference. In the terms developed in this study, she also becomes an emblem of Bachelard’s poet-thinker.
Politics? Local Color? Sex? All/Some/None of the Above?

Not quite so long ago I sat in a graduate seminar class on nineteenth-century American fiction and was stunned when the professor said that surely Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* is not about sex but about politics. I wondered how. Almost every article or reference to Chopin’s book usually emphasized the sexual, though I thought that the novel was about so much more, but asserting that “politics” is the definitive primary topic surprised me. My look of disbelief in class prompted the professor to ask me what then it was about. Unfortunately, I responded with the cliche that Edna “needed to find herself.” A long-drawn-out sigh from the professor, coupled with some eye-rolling from two men across the seminar table, made me yearn for poker-faced seclusion as I amended my hasty answer to “about a woman trying to discover who she is as a person.” I doubted that I had redeemed myself.

Now, I am not surprised at so many different analyses of this novel, including deconstructionist, Marxist, feminist, psychological, and postmodernist theories that often interpret words that interpret the words that, indeed, make up the novel. A formalist reminds the reader of Chopin’s admiration for Guy de Maupassant’s short stories as she uses situational irony in her surprise endings, claiming Edna Pontellier’s death is modeled on Maupassant’s surprises. For others, the novel’s ending is simply the next step in the continuum of life. A Marxist will assert that her actions are all economically motivated. A psychoanalyst will insist on looking at Edna’s seemingly split personality, a sense of doubleness, a splitting apart, a dichotomy of inner and outer self, which is an oft-repeated theme: “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life--that outward
existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin *Awakening* 893). Other approaches focus on a close reading with its historical setting in mind while analyzing its local color, for example, Chopin’s description of life in late nineteenth-century New Orleans and the beaches and the sea at Grand Isle.

I drove to present-day Grand Isle, Louisiana, on a hot, humid, blazing-sun kind of day in an attempt to imagine how a vacation in a hotel there must have been in Chopin’s time. I felt the extreme isolation of the community perched on so small a space hemmed in by bays and the Gulf on all sides. Even the black-topped narrow road leading to the island is only inches above the surrounding waters. It is not a beautiful place, having been flooded and buffeted by hurricanes for centuries and subject to some of the worst coastal erosion in America. It can easily be labeled lonely; so much water and sky make the ground and the people and houses upon it seem small, buried, inconsequential. But parts of the tiny island, even today, certainly can be described as lovely. Streets and two-hundred-year-old architecture there, like the even older preserved architecture in New Orleans, Chopin’s other setting, are just the same today as in Chopin’s time.

Indeed, this novel’s emphasis can be argued to be politics or, more specifically, cultural displacement: the Catholic Cajun, apparently open, effervescent, tradition-driven southern culture as opposed to the somewhat closed, tightly-knit, cold Protestant northern or midwestern community. Even southern flirtation is political and must be learned, as is indicated when Madame Ratignolle speaks “what she believed to be the law and the gospel” (900). As she asserts, warning Lebrun that Edna is unaware of southern gentlemen’s flirting:
She [Edna] is not one of us [southern Creoles]; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously. [. . .] If your attentions to any married women here were ever offered with any intention of being convincing, you would not be the gentleman we all know you to be, and you would be unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust you.

Emphasizing the politics of the Creole/Cajun South at the turn of the nineteenth century as a major theme in asserting that Chopin’s protagonist “resists authority in her quest for freedom,” as the back cover of the Bantam edition puts it, does open interpretive possibilities. For some critics, Kate Chopin belongs with the regionalists like New Englander local colorist Sarah Orne Jewett. And there is something to be said for this line of association, for Jewett’s most famous short story also examines solitude and personality and then comments explicitly on the consequences of solitude.

Watching the Heron, “the Sea and the Morning Together”

Sylvia, the child-woman in Jewett’s “A White Heron,” has solitude imposed upon her by her family as she is moved from a crowded manufacturing town to a farm. Her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley, likens Sylvia to a “wretched dry geranium.” Although Sylvia has a naive crush on an ornithologist who seems to promise a connection to the world beyond her, she refuses to disclose the location of the nest of the elusive white heron that he seeks. In her own solitude, the bird becomes for her the manifestation of aloneness, for her own need of protection, and for her own worthy beauty. In solitude, she observes the heron, intuitively comes to recognize the beginning of selfhood, and, as a consequence, gains a nebulous understanding of the solitary nature of beauty. Although Sylvia’s solitude, significantly, is forced upon her, that experience contributes also to a quiet strength of the kind exhibited by
Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne and Melville’s Bartleby and Pip. Sylvia does not go mad when she faces the displeasure of the admired ornithologist and her own grandmother; instead for a short while she goes “dumb”; she cannot speak the bird’s whereabouts, nor will she speak of her own awakening. Jewett, herself, enters the story as an outside observer, emphasizing her belief in Sylvia and in her finding selfhood:

No, she must keep silence! What is it that suddenly forbids her and makes her dumb? Has she been nine years growing, and now, when the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her, must she thrust it aside for a bird’s sake? The murmur of the pine’s green branches in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away. (789)

Nor can she give her self away. Jewett has created a situation in which to succeed in the world’s eyes would be to be untrue to the vision of beauty and the soul that Sylvia has just learned to guard in solitude. Conversely, failing and falling below social regard is the path she has to take to be true to that unnameable principle of the soul’s beauty. “Dumb,” she seems not to choose her silence, not to be master of it, but to submit to it; at the same time, though, this involuntary submission seems to be testimony that she is one with this fidelity. It is not merely her conscious self but her whole being that responds to this crisis.

Chopin’s Edna likewise cannot give her self away. And like Jewett in the passage just quoted, at crucial moments Chopin will enter the text with her own personal observations.

A Sensuous Sea, “Enfolding the Body in Its Soft, Close Embrace”

I am not startled any more by evaluations of The Awakening that exploit explicit depictions of a southern woman’s sexual awakening, urging readers to note carefully all the
references to an unsatisfying (or later fulfilling) sexual relationship found by a woman approaching thirty who cannot escape her biological clock. So many images and most certainly Edna’s dreams clearly indicate sexual symbolism. A few claim that this entire novel’s theme is that of a woman experiencing a sexual awakening, finally leading to orgasms and “satisfaction,” and that assumption is true, somewhat. Clearly, Edna Pontellier is portrayed as a woman who does not miss her husband in bed when he is away from her; certainly, she has disallowed her infatuation for Robert Lebrun, who encourages her to swim, who entertains her while strolling on the beach and exploring another island, and who dotes on her every word. At first, Edna thinks that she is in love with Robert, but no depth of feeling, no commonality exists for either one of them. “You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things. [. . .] I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (992). When he cannot and will not accept the relationship that Edna wishes, Robert runs away from her. (Whether or not Robert is a gay character, a question some readers have raised, does not affect Edna’s relationship to him.) Certainly, she experiences new, strong sexual feelings when Alcee Arobin kisses her but not on the hand this time: “There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips” (967). When Edna continues to find sexual satisfaction with the experienced womanizer Arobin, that new-found experience is not enough for her, for she recognizes it as lust, not love and not lasting. “To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me” (999).
Indeed, this novel does abound in dreams and longings for a phantom man, along with sexual images, for example, of Edna’s crying in bed while her husband smokes cigars on the porch outside, of her husband’s rolling his walking stick between his hands between his legs as he complains to the Doctor about Edna’s whims and their inadequate sexual life: “She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and--you understand--we meet in the morning at the breakfast table” (948). Even the first glimpse her husband has of her is described in sexual imagery. “He could see it [the white sunshade] plainly between the gaunt trunks [legs] of the water-oaks [. . .]. The sunshade [his wife] continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife [. . .] and young Robert Lebrun” (882). But seeing her as such makes her even more solitary--an appendage, a sexual object, as he “look[s] at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (referring to her sunburn).

Chopin uses the term infatuation over and over to refer to what Edna is experiencing. If the entire novel is devoted to the sexual awakening that Edna achieves through such infatuation, why then does she commit suicide? She certainly does not do so because of her infatuation with young Robert or her satisfying physical liaison with Arobin. Edna Pontellier has a faithful husband, women and male friends outside of her husband’s circle, a craft that merits some success, an avowed love of music that stirs her emotions, and satisfaction in planting outdoors. She enjoys obedient, bright, loving children; good health; physical attractiveness. She has knowledge about horses and horse racing, has successfully managed a household of servants, and finally, experiences passionate, sexual satisfaction. But The
Awakening is much more than politics or local color or sex or the restructuring of a person. To reveal Chopin’s philosophy and the definitive theme of this novel exploring solitude, we need first to examine an essay and a short story of Chopin’s that open up avenues of her thought.

A Preface to Edna Pontellier’s Fall(ing) out of Rank

In her short essay “A Reflection,” Chopin proposes that “some people are born with a vital and responsive energy” to “keep abreast of the times” and “to furnish [. . . their own] motive power to the mad pace.” In a series of oxymorons, Chopin juxtaposes how fortunate are these beings who do not need to “apprehend the significance of things,” who never “sink by the wayside to be left contemplating the moving procession,” which, she believes, has left her. But grouped words--fantastic, brilliant, beautiful--are followed by falling bodies and discordant clashes: “What matter if souls and bodies are falling beneath the feet of the ever-pressing multitude! [. . .] It moves with the majestic rhythm of the spheres. Its discordant clashes sweep upward in one harmonious tone that blends with the music of other worlds--to complete God’s orchestra.”

The moving procession has left her but with contradiction. “It is greater than the stars--that moving procession of human energy. [. . .] Oh! I could weep at being left by the wayside; left with the grass and the clouds and a few dumb animals. True, I feel at home in the society of these symbols of life’s immutability. In the procession I should feel the crushing feet, the clashing discords, the ruthless hands and stifling breath.” Chopin respects earth and sky and life’s representations that are not susceptible to radical change. Words such
as **crushing, clashing discords, ruthless, and stifling** suggest that she is content not to be a part of that procession. That she writes “I could not hear the rhythm of the march” suggests additionally a kind of anarchy. The strident noise obviates order. “Salve! Ye dumb hearts. Let us be still and wait by the roadside.” Does Chopin reflect a kind of ambivalence about joining/not joining? Those who do not “fall out of rank” in this procession are now “dumb hearts.” To be still and wait is far better than to be crushed and stifled. Although clearly this is a choice Chopin prefers not to make, she will not follow the definitive tenets of the local color, regional, American writers of the nineteenth-century South. And since, indeed, Kate Chopin is a realist, then the clue to Edna Pontellier lies not only in her personal, sexual awakening but in a more general awakening connected to solitude.

**“The Story of an Hour”: A Kind of Preface**

In Kate Chopin’s short, short story “The Story of an Hour,” written just four years before *The Awakening*, a woman with heart trouble receives the tragic news that her husband has died in a railroad disaster. The new widow, Louise Mallard, weeps with sudden wild abandon in her sister’s arms and then goes alone to her room. What happens to Mrs. Mallard, who emerges as “Louise” devoid of her married surname, is both a sexual and psychological awakening. While in her comfortable armchair by the open window, she notices a plethora of newness outside and experiences new emotions and, for her, radical thoughts within:

> She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.
[. . .] But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought. There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. [. . .] Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body. (352-53)

Although I have not read any critic who suggests that this pulse and flow is orgasmic, if the reader just concentrates on the sexual connotations as “she was drinking in a very elixir of life” (354) or the it she is waiting for, the reader can sense how Louise does abandon herself. The sexual connotation is overwhelming. But there is more here than the local color of a late nineteenth-century family, more than the political attitude of wives’ existing subservient to their husbands, and more than a sexual experience. Apprehending the significance of things, as in “A Reflection,” comes through examining the words she repeats “over and over under her breath: ‘free, free, free!’” (353). The “vacant stare and look of terror” leave her; she has “a clear and exalted perception.” Her new-found freedom means that she can live for herself. Financially secure widows at the turn of that century had freedom, honor, and even some power to do whatever they wished without joining the “ruthless hands and stifling breath” of the procession as in “A Reflection.” Louise’s “brief moment of illumination” partakes in Turner’s liminality: “The intervening liminal period or phase is thus betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life” (Turner 53), between her former married life and her new single life. For Louise Mallard experiences Turner’s “social creativity--where new social and cultural forms are engendered” (Turner 51). Edna Pontellier will also move from a faithful
married state to an adulterous state, most definitely a new social and cultural form for her. Louise Mallard recognizes the “powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature” (353). Her assertion “And yet she had loved him--sometimes” is undermined by the ironic repetition in a later pair of sentences: “She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.” Unfortunately, Louise experiences Freud’s “oceanic feeling” only once in her life and only for one hour. According to Anthony Storr in his definitive study Solitude: A Return to the Self, Freud in Civilization and Its Discontents maintained that this oceanic feeling is regressive; however, for Storr and certainly for Louise, Edna, and their author Chopin, this oceanic feeling “had a permanent effect upon [. . . the] perception of themselves and of the world; as being [among] the profoundest moments of their existence,” bearing with it a “sense of unity with the universe” (Storr 38).

Chopin’s Original Novel Title, A Solitary Soul

Though these stories and sketches [. . .] received considerable praise for their realistic economical portrayal of Creole manners and customs and their careful delineation of local scene, and earned her a place among the so-called local school of American regional writers, they did little to prepare her audience for the publication of her masterpiece, The Awakening (1899), a novel frankly depicting its heroine’s growing awareness of her own sensuality and psychological need for self-fulfillment and independence. Clearly a novel ahead of its time, The Awakening was, as Larzer Ziff has noted, “the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America, and the first fully to face the fact that marriage, whether in point of fact it closed the range of a woman’s sexual experiences or not, was but an episode in her continuous growth.” (Pickering 1463)
This novel is more than simply “continuous growth.” Edna Pontellier’s awakening, however, begins as a choice. And what that choice is about begins as a foray into the question of self.

*The Awakening* is a novel of a woman’s desire, but it is not only a realization of sexual fulfillment. This woman’s desire is not that of a mother-woman either, like Madame Ratignolle, because Edna would not sacrifice herself for her children, though she would give her life for them, an important but subtle distinction. Edna tries to explain this perception to her friend Mademoiselle Reisz, her childless friend: “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. I can’t make it more clear; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me” (929). Her desire is a longing for that elusive something, that thread of joy that aids life’s meaning. It is Edna’s story as she tries to discern who she is as a person. And her death indicates self-possession rather than a retreat from a dilemma, experience at another level rather than a failure of imagination or will. Her death is neither one of defiance nor one of consolation for rejection. Rather it is a culmination that had a slow but sure beginning as she delved into the meaning of self: “She could only realize that she herself--her present self--was in some way different from the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect” (921). Edna’s slow growth into a figure of Bachelard’s poet-thinker is facilitated by the sea and her relationship to it rather than to friends, family, or home. “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” (893). How prophetic it is that the sea is both whispering and murmuring, and dangerously clamoring.

The appeal of water and sea is a revealing motif for the course of reading in this study, invoking as it does the drawing force of the sea as experienced by Ishmael and Pip. (Perhaps Hester Prynne could even be added, since while living away from the townspeople she finds a new life for her daughter across the sea.) *The Awakening* has strong elements of the story of yet another Bachelard model of the poet-thinker; and it is the sea, a source, a pulling-toward, and the land, a pushing-away-from, that allow Edna her own awakening.

**Edna’s Progressive Separation to Awaken**

Yes, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever. 

--*Moby-Dick*

“There was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water-oak, and the everlasting voice of the sea, that was not uplifted at that soft hour. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night” (886). “The moon was coming up, and its mystic shimmer was casting a million lights across the distant, restless water” (905). “How still it was, with only the voice of the sea whispering through the reeds that grew in the salt-water pools!” (917). Nature imagery and a tempo of stillness, anticipation, depth, intimacy, and transformation dominate the scene-painting in these chapters. Early in *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin subtly suggests a myriad of themes relating to Edna’s growth and change as she “begin[s] to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (893).
First, she believes that she has the best husband in Leonce since “she knew of none better” (887); second, she likens her fair companion, the mother-woman Madame Ratignolle, to “a faultless Madonna,” while her musical artist friend Mademoiselle Reisz has achieved independence and success; and third, Edna exchanges “occasional words, glances or smiles which indicate a certain advanced stage of intimacy and camaraderie” with the always present, accepted young flirt, Robert Lebrun. Fourth, Edna’s husband and children are either engaged in some activity apart from her or simply do not need her care or her company at all. And fifth, precisely when Edna realizes that “a certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it” (893), the narrator declares that “this may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.” These words remind readers of the narrator’s intrusion in Jewett’s short story as she contemplates Sylvia’s choice of silence resulting in her alienation from the only two persons whom she knows and loves.

Chopin’s narrator continues with the interjection of her philosophy: “But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!” Kate Chopin herself knew the consequences of delving into disturbing philosophies. Does Edna emerge successfully from her chaos? Is Chopin’s philosophy delineated here rather than being paradoxical, as in her essay “A Reflection”? And does the us encompass Chopin and Edna and us, her readers? Edna’s themes are chaotic, complex, varied, and contradictory. Edna is neither the sublime, quintessential heroine nor the common
or extraordinary victim. And Kate Chopin’s novel itself cannot easily be successfully pigeonholed as romanticism, local-color, realism, or naturalism. Instead, *The Awakening* is a search for self by experiencing solitude and ultimately reaching a kind of indifference indicative of the growth of Bachelard’s poet-thinker.

“Whither Would You Soar?”

John R. May’s essay “Local Color in *The Awakening*” reminds readers that local color “is not just a southern literary eccentricity. [. . .] Local color elements possess a critical duality of function” (1031). And Chopin’s novel goes well beyond regionalism. Suzanne W. Jones, echoing May’s argument, suggests that “the tension in the novel between freedom and restraint is evident in the two settings—the sea and the city” and that the city as “a social setting controls thought and determines identity,” whereas the sea embodies the opposite of both traits (120). Edna, a Presbyterian southerner from Kentucky, is not a member of the subculture of Catholic southern Creole; neither is she Cajun. Lewis P. Simpson urges readers to avoid distraction by the novel’s surface romanticism and focus “on the sexual identity of the family and the individual in Southern settings” (quoted Skaggs 83). Peggy Skaggs maintains that *The Awakening* is an example of late nineteenth-century naturalism “as Edna finds that her life must be lived within socioeconomic and biological boundaries as unyielding as the walls around any penitentiary” (83). The novel’s diversity of form is evident, as Thomas Bonner details admirably (though its views on adultery hardly resemble those in Flaubert’s novel):

As a local-color novel its settings are essential to the development in structure and theme. As a southern novel, it offers a contrast in addressing the myth of the chaste heroine. As a novel of realism, it is linked closely with *Madame*
Bovary in its treatment of adultery. As a romantic novel, it presents a theme of self-discovery using thoroughly consistent patterns of imagery. And as a feminist novel, it emphasizes the particular nature and situation of the heroine with respect to her gender. (Bonner 100)

Substantiating the view of The Awakening as a feminist novel, Barbara C. Ewell lists female concerns and issues: “the nature of female sexuality, the conventional opposition of romance and passion, the moral isolation of women in patriarchal systems, the role of female friendship, the importance of the body and the physical world to self-realization, the ambivalence toward children and childbearing” (89).

Early in the novel, Edna answers Madame Ratignolle’s questions as to her thoughts:

First of all, the sight of the water stretching so far away, those motionless sails against the blue sky, made a delicious picture that I just wanted to sit and look at. The hot wind beating in my face made me think—without any connection that I can trace—of a summer day in Kentucky, of a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now! (896)

But Madame does not; she decides that Edna was running away from Sunday service, rather than searching, when Edna adds: “Sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided.” Later, she wonders back among her memories at Grand Isle, “and she trie[s] to discover wherein this summer ha[s] been different from any and every other summer of her life” (921). Such seeking of self-awareness is arduous and painstaking.

Chopin strikes a note alarmingly similar to Margaret Fuller, who, as mentioned in Chapter 1, wrote in her journal of having an intense experience of self-discovery at age twenty-one, when she was “able to pray only after she walk[ed] out of a church service in
Groton, Massachusetts, to wander through the surrounding fields. [. . .] ‘I was for that hour taken up into God’” (Gatta 108). Solitude, nature, self-discovery—all the elements are there, absent God, a significant absence, as Chopin’s focus is absorbingly on the self.

Very clearly, the content or theme is not culture, family, sex, politics, self, suicide, or despair alone; these entities are minor parts of the whole theme. The text that precedes and follows Edna’s beginning realizations and the narrator’s intrusion into the text announces the major role of solitude and the sea. “The sun was low in the west, and the breeze soft and languorous that came up from the south, charged with the seductive odor of the sea” (892). “Her glance wandered from [Robert’s] face away toward the Gulf, whose sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty.” “The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (893). Without stating it overtly, the sea communicates not only passion, solitude, and self-discovery, but an intuition of death that particularly resembles Walt Whitman’s famous lines of an intuitive epiphany by the sea in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”:

Whereunto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper’d me through the night, and very plainly before daybreak,
Lisp’d to me the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous’d child’s heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over
Death, death, death, death, death. (2216)

Whitman’s poet-persona hears, learns, and is changed by this revelation. Chopin’s adventurer-spirit hears, too, and her action is her response—the response of a human soul fascinated with, and given over to, self-discovery in solitude. To discover herself, she learns,
she must step outside herself, that leap mentioned earlier. And the ultimate step outside oneself is death.

Most certainly, learning to live life outside oneself is tumultuous, chaotic, and often forbidden. Shortly before her walk into the sea, Edna speaks to her husband “with friendly evasiveness,—not with any fixed design to mislead him, only because all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference” (988). The dangers of solitude in the sea and ultimately what happens to Edna in the sea are foreshadowed in conversation; however, each speaker thinks only of the body and not of the soul. “‘Oh, come!’ he [Robert] insisted. ‘You mustn’t miss your bath [swim]. Come on. The water must be delicious; it will not hurt you. Come’” (892). (Recall Whitman’s “low and delicious word death.”) Edna’s summertime infatuation with Robert, however, hurts not her but him, because his infatuation leads to love, and later he wants to marry her, a situation that she finds absurd. When Edna learns to swim at last, she loses “that certain ungovernable dread” when alone in the water and instead:

She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water. [. . .] She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. [. . .] Intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone.

She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself. (908)

Like Melville’s Pip, Edna experiences that “intense concentration of self” away from the physical and mental restraints of her life on land. She feels that she herself has space and that she is totally alone and can engage in losing herself in the “abysses of solitude” where she can
lose her soul in “mazes of inward contemplations” that require endless correct and wrong turns in the soul’s search for the meaning of self. When Edna expresses her moment with death, her fear of having swum out so far, to her husband, he replies, “You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you.” Leonce does not share her accomplishment or her fear or any one of her inward contemplations, and worse yet is that he does not “watch” her; soon he will not know her at all.

Descend in the Social Scale to Ascend in the Spiritual

After the Pontelliers leave Grand Isle, they return to their large, sumptuous home on Esplanade Street in New Orleans, a house filled with all of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions. Edna maintains her Tuesday reception days as she has religiously for the past six years. One night Edna does not appear in evening dress for dinner, and her husband learns that she did not receive callers; she informs him, “I simply felt like going out, and I went out” (932). Mr. Pontellier is angry and shocked; he leaves Edna for his club. But Edna has changed since she learned to swim at Grand Isle, since she learned to flirt, to listen to the ideas of a different culture, and to phrase her own questions, as “she was seeking herself and finding herself.” She takes off her wedding ring, tries to crush it on the floor in a fit of frustrated rage, and flings a glass vase upon the hearth. “She wanted to destroy something. The crash and clatter were what she wanted to hear.” Susan J. Rosowski quotes Willa Cather, who condemns both Edna and Emma Bovary as “the victims of the over-idealization of life. [. . . They] expect the passion of love to fill and gratify every need of life. [. . .] They have staked everything on one hand, and they lose” (30). But clearly, Edna seeks more; she ultimately realizes that her
passion with Alcee and her anticipatory union with Robert do not and will not fulfill her every need. Edna seeks answers to her own “inward contemplations.”

At home, Edna finds that “she felt no interest in anything about her” (935), including visiting Leonce’s friends, shopping, playing with her children, even the sketches which had given her so much pleasure. “She liked the dabbling. She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” (891). However, when Madame Ratignolle of the perfect union and perfect motherhood announces, “Your talent is immense, dear! [. . .] Never have I seen anything more lifelike” (937), it is apparent that she has brought her art to the wrong critic. Edna realizes that the “domestic harmony”—the perfect marriage of the Ratignolles—“gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it [nothing] but an appalling and hopeless ennui.” Edna does not long for the perfect marriage, which she acknowledges is attainable, nor does she want (like Madame Ratignolle) “that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she never would have the taste of life’s delirium.” Edna does not know what “life’s delirium” means; however, she is certain that it is not found in home and family and is not really in art. Soon she realizes it is not found in an infatuation or in a passionate sexual relationship either.

Edna continues her journey to find the core of her being, to expand her thinking and her knowing. She sheds the accoutrements of society and family: “She liked then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many a sunny, sleepy corner, fashioned to dream in. And she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested” (939) by friends, acquaintances, her husband, and even her children. She retires to her atelier,
a kind of snug studio workroom. Her husband cannot see that she is “becoming herself and
daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear
before the world.” She is happy and unhappy “without knowing why” as she wanders about,
and she finds it “good to dream [...] when life appear[s] to her like a grotesque pandemonium
and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation.” Worms burrow
underground and cannot see; they are like the “souls and bodies [that fall] beneath the feet of
the ever-pressing multitude” (Chopin “Reflection”).

Edna describes the Lebrun house as looking like a prison “with iron bars before the
doors and lower windows. [...] No one had ever thought of dislodging them” (941). Edna
removes the bars, figuratively, from the house where she lives to her own atelier without any
locking in or keeping out. Slowly, Edna escapes her prison with its societal, familial and
economic kinds of walls when she visits the “disagreeable and unpopular” Mademoiselle
Reisz, who challenges Edna to succeed: “The artist must possess the courageous soul. [...] The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies” (946). Mademoiselle refers not merely to the
artist as one who draws or paints but to the artist as one who sees, like the poet.

Even her husband notices that Edna has shed her old life as she “goes tramping about
by herself.” However, Leonce sees surface changes only; he tries telling Doctor Mandelet that
“she’s peculiar”: “She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of
women [...] She says a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (948).
Edna refuses to attend her own sister Janet’s wedding. To Robert’s dream of her becoming
his wife, she imagines Leonce giving her to him and responds, “I should laugh at you both”
(992). Edna learns to choose for herself.
When her own father visits, Edna cannot wait for him to leave. “What should I do if he stayed home [i.e., at her house]? We wouldn’t have anything to say to each other” (951). Her children go to live with their grandmother, and so Edna emotionally separates herself from her old friends and acquaintances, her husband, sister, children, father: the past, all that her life represented. “When Edna was at last alone, she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief” (955). Next, she completes the emotional separation by physically moving herself and one maid, Old Celestine, out of her Esplanade house to a tiny four-room home, referred to as a “pigeon house,” which she furnishes herself. There she exults in her first sense of independence by selling her paintings, winning at the track--“the race horse was a friend and intimate associate of her childhood” (957)--seeing her own friends whom she knew from the previous Grand Isle visit, organizing and having her first dinner party for her invited guests, and taking a passionate lover as she responds to the “animalism” of Alcee Arobin. Edna continues to leave her old life as Madame Pontellier behind, both emotionally and physically, and tries to explain that separation unsuccessfully to her young enamored friend Robert, as she tells him that she likes to walk to a garden in the suburbs. “I always feel so sorry for women who don’t like to walk; they miss so much--so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole” (990).

Edna decides that since her “instinct [ . . .] prompted her to put away her husband’s bounty in casting off her allegiance,” she “resolve[s] never again to belong to another than herself” (963), a stronger formulation of what she had expressed only negatively before, looking on even the perfect marriage with ennui. “There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. [. . .]
She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life.

No longer was she content to ‘feed upon opinion’ when her own soul had invited her” (977-78). Both Hester and Pip also underwent this descent in the social scale to rise in the spiritual.

Back to the Sea, to Beginnings, to “Taste of Life’s Delirium”

While Madame Ratignolle reminds Edna of her obligation to her family, particularly her children, as she exhorts her, “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (995), Madame is thinking only of potential scandal. But Edna moves beyond social concerns as she tells Doctor Mandelet, “I’m not going to be forced into doing things. I don’t want to go abroad [with Leonce]. I want to be let alone. Nobody has any right--except children, perhaps--and even then, it seems to me--or it did seem [. . .] perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (995-96). The doctor urges Edna to talk with him, suggesting that he knows her inner tumult as she continues:

There are periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me. But I don’t want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others--but no matter--still, I shouldn’t want to trample upon the little lives. Oh! I don’t know what I’m saying, Doctor. Good night. Don’t blame me for anything. (996)

Edna confuses her love for her children and her obligation as a mother with her own personal need to find herself, to soar. And so she returns to the sea without them, alone. “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach” (999).
To taste of “life’s delirium,” earlier Edna appeals to the non-mother Mademoiselle Reisz. Although Edna sketched in an “unprofessional way,” she “liked the dabbling. She felt in it satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” (891). She equates her “dabbling” with becoming an artist, whereas Mademoiselle compares the artist to the bird who takes flight. For Edna, Mademoiselle Reisz expands the definition of art and the artist: “She [Mademoiselle Reisz] put her arms around me and felt my shoulder blades, to see if my wings were strong, she said. ‘The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth’” (966).

Edna shares these thoughts with her lover, who concludes that Mademoiselle is partially demented. Edna has only a sexual relationship with him, not a shared philosophical one. Earlier in the novel, she thoroughly enjoyed listening to Mademoiselle Reisz play a piano piece that Edna names for herself “Solitude”: “When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him” (906). All these metaphors--family, art and artist, nakedness, and winged bird--point to Edna’s search for self. When she swims for the last time, in the final phase of her search, “a bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (999).

Over and over, the major theme of The Awakening revolves around the sea and its seductive, caressing, entreating qualities for Madame Pontellier. The sea is more than a sight
to gaze at; for Edna the sea has a voice, an odor, and even a mood, to witness from moments in the text such as these:

There was a soft effulgence in the east. The moon was coming up, and its mystic shimmer was casting a million lights across the distant, restless water. (905)

The sun was low in the west, and the breeze soft and languorous that came up from the south, charged with the seductive odor of the sea. (892)

There was no sound abroad except the hooting of an old owl in the top of a water-oak, and the everlasting voice of the sea, that was not uplifted at that soft hour. It broke like a mournful lullaby upon the night. (886)

Most of them walked into the water as though into a native element. (908)

Edna Pontellier, indeed, has “done all the thinking which was necessary” (999). A season earlier she confided to Madame Ratignolle, the perfect mother-woman and wife, “Sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (897), a statement that is more like a question, to which Madame can only pat her hand and murmur, “Pauvre chérie.” Another “self-contained” woman could not help Edna then, but now she needs no one. She, herself, has become self-contained.

“Sailing across the bay [. . .] Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening--had snapped [. . .] leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails” (915). Then, she drifted; then, she did not know herself or her capabilities or her passion. But now, Robert Lebrun has gone back to Mexico or at least is out of her life, since she found it absurd that he should want to marry her. She wants Robert but knows that “the day would come when he, too, and the
thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (999). Her sexual liaison with Arobin was just that, a satisfying, adulterous affair of passion devoid of love. “She had said over and over to herself: ‘To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me.’”

That heightened awareness of the solitary soul experiencing liminality empowers Edna. Her husband Leonce was in Europe or about to leave without her, her “lovers” were elsewhere, and her sons were safely cared for and loved by grandparents. “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach.” That those individuals make no difference to her is paramount; Edna Pontellier has reached indifference; others do not matter. What is all-important is self. And she is not going to sacrifice that newfound self to anyone, not even to the children whom she does, indeed, love.

Chopin’s narrator tells the reader that Edna was not thinking of any of the five males who had dominated her life or had sought to influence her thinking and, therefore, her very being. (Dr. Mandelet could be male number six, except that Edna never visits him for his final, perhaps avuncular advice.) A narratorial intrusion is necessary to state clearly what Edna was not thinking as she walked down to the beach for the final time. That she was not thinking of others underscores what Louise Mallard whispers in “The Story of an Hour”: “What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognizes as the strongest impulse of her being. ‘Free! Body and soul free!’” (353-54). So Edna is literally free and alone when she returns to Grand Isle. “The
water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive [. . .] inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight” (999). She has reached the essential seascape of Pip and Ishmael and Walt Whitman.

But there is a “living thing,” a bird with a broken wing. Chopin describes the bird to the reader, but Edna does not see it. Since she does not interact with it at all, the bird becomes the equivalent of a narratorial intrusion, a figure that mirrors her as she approaches death. She puts on her old bathing suit, having found it “upon its accustomed peg,” but then takes it off, for she has reached the state of indifference:

and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

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. (1000)

The notion of cracking the egg, of rebirth, of a newborn coming into the world, comes not just from stripping naked under the sky; instead, Edna knows a rebirth of self, of a new person, indifferent, complete, in continuing quest of self. She has indeed crossed the threshold and entered a liminal state.

The critics who insist that this novel is only about a sexual awakening point to a final metaphor of snakes. Earlier Edna gained confidence in swimming as in herself: “The sea was quiet now, and swelled lazily in broad billows that melted into one another and did not break except upon the beach in little foamy crests that coiled back like slow, white serpents” (908). The serpents also appear at her final swim as “the foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out” (1000). What critics miss is what
happens to this metaphor between Chapters 10 and 39. And that is connected to the image of
the Madonna.

Contrasting images of the Madonna are scattered throughout the novel: Madame
Ratignolle is described as the “faultless Madonna,” perfect mother-woman and wife,
possessing a “lofty chastity.” Twins frequent the holiday resort always dressed in Virgin Mary
blue; a widow dressed in black repeatedly walks behind lovers as she fingers her beads, a
Creole Catholic praying the Virgin Mary’s rosary. These images act as foils, accenting the
conventional life that Edna discovers she must leave behind. Beneath this level of the Virgin
Mary’s iconography is a more mythic level, however, and many traditional votive statues
show her standing with her bare feet upon the head of at least one serpent, so as to crush the
serpent’s head and destroy it. The image states figuratively that Mary will deliver the Christ,
who will redeem the first parents, Adam and Eve, and all humankind and so expiate the
original sin of pride that drove humanity from the Garden of Eden. If we interpret using this
image of the serpents, then, the “faultless Madonna” now describes Edna in an analogous way.
She has overcome the necessary and important sexual part of her awakening; that achievement
becomes subordinate to her complete knowledge of self. Yet Chopin’s presentation remains
elusive and ambiguous. The serpents that “coiled [. . .]about her ankles” may be snaring her
in the finality of the sea and death no less than they are submitting to her superior spiritual
power.

She walked out. [. . .] 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.

She went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and
recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore.
She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end.

As she tires during these final moments, Edna does not think only of herself. “She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul.” Earlier, Edna visited her sons at their grandparents “giving them all of herself, and gathering and filling herself with their young existence” (978). She leaves with a “wrench and a pang” and carries away with her the “sound of their voices and the touch of their cheeks.” But it quickly becomes a kind of distant memory: “Their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song. But by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul. She was again alone.”

No one can live entirely for her children or husband and expect to live a complete life. Whether her family did or did not think that they enslaved Edna is unimportant; that she perceives that they attempt to enslave her is the perception that leads to her decision not to turn back. She muses, “How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew!” (1000). “And you call yourself an artist!” she imagines Mademoiselle Reisz upbraiding her. “What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.” Her final swim is her response to Mademoiselle Reisz’s challenge--the challenge of art. She does something else, equally daring: a quest for self carried out to its ultimate conclusion.

Earlier the stretch of water between her and the beach was a “barrier.” It is no longer so; “the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone.” She does not cry out for a rescue from Victor or Mariequita, with whom she discussed dinner entrees moments before.
Instead, she looks seaward: “She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again.” That old terror was one she experienced before she learned to swim, before she was confident enough in her swimming ability to swim far out and still return to the beach. But now that terror is gone because she is in control. “Edna heard her father’s voice and her sister Margaret’s.” Margaret had replaced Edna’s mother as the maternal caregiver after their mother’s death, so she is reliving real and imagined moments from her past: “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.” It is impossible to smell such a small carnationlike flower from so great a distance, yet Edna smells pinks. Like Emily Dickinson’s speaker in “I heard a fly buzz--when I died,” that kind of heightened, near surreal, memory of seemingly insignificant moments, of mere being, comes to Edna at the end.

The reader might regret that Edna does not return to join society and spread her insights, as do Hester Prynne and Ishmael, but she does leave behind Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, who have learned from Edna to glimpse the life and contributions of the poet-thinker. For Edna, indeed, experiences Turner’s liminality as she stands on that threshold of the sea, contemplates her very soul, steps into the water, and swims too far. That threshold has been crossed. Some say that her crossing was too tragic, but this study suggests that readers remember that she was in a cage like the birds and only now experiences the glory and freedom and insight to know herself.
The Bird Metaphor

Critics often dwell on Edna’s suicide and interpret symbol after symbol as negative and destructive. Several critics claim, as does Patricia Hopkins Lattin in “Childbirth and Motherhood in *The Awakening* and in ‘Athenaise,’” that Edna chooses death “as a solution to the problems threatening her newly reborn self” (42). To Lattin “the image of the disabled bird with the broken wing circling down to earth clearly symboliz[es] a defeat” (44) since “death will soon rescue her [Edna] from her despair and turmoil” (46). Lattin reminds her reader that “Edna is herself torn between the two possibilities of triumph and defeat, and the scrupulously objective narrator provides no solution to the ambiguity facing the reader” (44).

But the “objective narrator” does provide a solution to Edna’s death, and one discerns it after examining and comparing the birds in the narrative: the caged parrot, the mockingbird, and the uncaged bird with the broken wing as symbols of Edna. She does perish, but her soul does not “perish in its [the world’s] tumult!” (Chopin *Awakening* 893).

In the first sentence of Chapter 1, Chopin describes two birds in cages:

> A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over [. . .] “That’s all right!”
> He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence. (881)

That the parrot speaks a language “which nobody understood” and repeats only a phrase of humble concession over and over, while the mockingbird repeats bird calls over and over again repeating other birds, and that the descriptions of these caged birds begin this novel clearly indicate their importance as symbols for Edna Pontellier herself. Edna is in a Catholic
marriage; divorce is unacceptable. Even her sexual relationship with Alcee Arobin and her near-platonic one with Robert Lebrun do not set her free. During the entertainment at the beach, “music, dancing, and recitation” were offered, but the caged parrot does not listen and is so interruptive that it is almost removed from sight and “consigned to regions of darkness,” a place where Edna almost goes. Instead, when Edna daydreams as she listens to Mademoiselle Reisz play “Solitude,” she imagines “the figure of a man standing naked beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him” (906). Later, Edna becomes that (wo)man, but she never represents “hopeless resignation,” for she is calmly indifferent at the end. The narrator discusses the situation of drowning as “Monsieur Farival thought that Victor should have been taken out in mid-ocean in his earliest youth and drowned,” as if drowning should be a punishment for bad boys. Clearly, Edna’s drowning is in no way similar to this denunciation.

The bird images frame the entire narrative. Near the end, when Edna stands looking out to sea, her gaze is drawn to the bird with a broken wing who seemingly dives to its death in the sea because of that wing. Before Edna stands naked at the water’s edge, the narrator singles out a “bird with a broken wing [. . .] beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (999). But Edna does not notice the bird; she is not intimidated by it; instead, when she is absolutely alone, she begins her final swim as “for the first time she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her” (34). The bird is free; Edna transcends her symbol. She is invited and she accepts her rendezvous with solitude.
Emily Toth in *Unveiling Kate Chopin* dismisses the idea of deliberate drowning, maintaining, “She [Edna] turns to art and adultery, but neither one fully satisfies her hunger. Ultimately she figures out how to elude everyone’s demands, and she does” (ix). Although she asserts that *The Awakening* is the unveiling of Edna Pontellier” (219), Toth declines to analyze the character’s death; instead, she relates Edna’s story to Kate Chopin’s own life. Readers are left with questions: “They also wonder about the ending: is it positive? Is it negative? Is it over? [. . . They] wonder whether they are supposed to like Edna, understand her, or loathe everything about her” (209). Perhaps readers were meant to be left with these questions; perhaps their questions reveal more about them than about the text.

Edna Pontellier escapes the caged life she led with her husband Leonce and her two sons once she opens that cage and begins to fly, the master image for her swimming at the end. All the staid, experienced women, the gate-keepers of the Creole, southern beach society tell her how to behave first toward Robert and later Alcee, the known rogue, giving Edna cautions and advice and entreaties, all of which she laughs away. She is determined first to fly out of her cage and experience freedom with a younger, more resourceful, more attentive, unrestrained man and later with a much more sexually experienced man, more than any other men she had previously known or dreamed about. Her flight out of the conforming society into others’ lives, however brief, changes her so that she begins to think less of herself as Madame Pontellier and more of herself as Edna, a separate self. Chopin never depicts the bird drowning but seems instead, with her framing bird images, to give the sequence of birds locked up followed by free birds that are wounded. Once Edna steps into that water, she is free, no longer tethered to cage or family or convention. And like the “reeling, fluttering [. . .]
disabled” bird, she enters a new realm of existence, one in which she approaches death with the keenest awareness of life.

Edna Pontellier does not commit suicide to free herself from society’s boundaries or from the seduction of unfulfilled sexual experiences. She is neither worthy of canonization nor guilty of conspiracy to kill. Instead she is freed to be Bachelard’s poet-thinker.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

British Romanticism: A Contradiction?

In the early nineteenth century, the great English poet Lord Byron wrote a sonorous tribute to solitude in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Reflecting on the place where Petrarch is entombed, he praises and connects nature and introspection while opposing solitude and society in a stark and provocative way:

> Developing the mountains, leaves, and flowers,
> And shining in the brawling brook, where-by,
> Clear as its current, glide the sauntering hours
> With a calm languor, which, though to the eye
> Idlesse it seem, hath its morality.

*If from society we learn to live,*

*> ’Tis solitude should teach us how to die;*
> It hath no flatterers--Vanity can give
> No hollow aid; alone--man with his God must strive:

> *Or, it may be, with Demons, who impair*
> *The strength of better thoughts, and seek their prey*
> *In melancholy bosoms--such as were*
> Of moody texture from their earliest day,
> And loved to dwell in darkness and dismay,
> Deeming themselves predestined to a doom
> Which is not of the pangs that pass away;
> Making the Sun like blood, *the Earth a tomb,*
> *The tomb a hell--and Hell itself a murkier gloom.* (emphasis added; 4. 33-34)

Like the contrasts in this poem, this study has argued that in solitude we learn a truth that is other than what society would teach us. Of the American fictional figures examined
here, two die from their solitude, one goes mad, and only one returns to her community to live out her days in peace. Each has to struggle with dark powers: for Hester both self-condemnation and self-justification; for Bartleby, who can know? Implicitly in each of their dramas, however, lies a dynamic that is not content to leave society to its own hopeless fate but yearns for it to live. There remains the hope that in returning to society--or, put more hopefully, to community--someone can teach or show others how to live so that devils do not find us desolate at the end.

Byron admits the role of nature, the aloneness of the individual, hearing a “brawling” brook that apparently does not interrupt the thoughts of the idler, though the solitude will end. So for Byron, society teaches us how to live but must block out with all its busy preoccupations the deeper truth of how to die. The contemplation of the stream in unhurried hours does not so much yield a truth about nature as it provides a setting in which self-confrontation is finally possible. Alone we have no community and therefore cannot rely upon the compliments of flatterers; instead man is alone with his God and so must contend or attempt meaning alone. Certainly, making “the earth a tomb” and “the tomb a hell” could at least in part describe Melville’s Bartleby; but it seems rather that it was society that made a tomb for him. Even in this instance, though, Bartleby’s employer-narrator declares that the scrivener rests with kings and counsellors, definitely not a “murkier gloom.”

Frederick Page, editor of *Byron: Poetical Works*, observes of this passage that “the struggle is to the full and as likely to be with demons as with our better thoughts. Satan chose the wilderness for the temptation of our Savior. [. . .] John Locke preferred the presence of a
child to complete solitude” (890). In light of these analogous cases, solitude seems a place of danger, meant only for stronger souls, better for sociable Lockeans to avoid. What my study has found, however, is rather that solitude is a salubrious state, whether it be contemplating nature in idle, languorous hours or an introspective learning experience, if the individual can meet his/her demons to identify, assimilate, and integrate them so that the earth is never a tomb. Or as it appears to be for Hester Prynne, Bartleby, and Edna Pontellier, “the earth a tomb” was only temporary, leading not to a hell of “murkier gloom” but back to community where each became fully herself or himself: the poet-thinker in Hester Prynne, a silent teacher in Bartleby to his former lawyer-employer, an active teacher in Pip to Ahab and ultimately to Ishmael, the narrator, and finally in Edna Pontellier, the teacher, one hopes, to those whom she leaves behind.

A Modern Approach to Solitude

What is the outlook for solitude in our time? A glimpse of this may be adumbrated by turning to a recent study of works in the twentieth century. In Solitude and Its Ambiguities in Modernist Fiction, Edward Engelberg asserts that solitude tends to be a person’s choice and under his or her control. It occurs to me to wonder whether Boethius would have written his seminal work The Consolation of Philosophy had he not been accused of treason, imprisoned, and sentenced to die. Engelberg does concede that “our inhibitions of choice are many, and are often psychogenically involuntary. At times, ‘return’ is nearly impossible, and we are irretrievably beyond it, although no external force holds us prisoner” (163). Examining Samuel Beckett’s The Lost Ones, in which naked people climb on ladders in a futile attempt
to escape, he observes, “What is so intensely painful is their inability to achieve either solitude or communality” (164). For Beckett and Erwin Mode, who sees postmodernism as a “‘nihilistic time’ in which ‘self-annihilation’ is an inevitable outcome,” solitude has become part of the postmodern condition “‘from which the human being cannot free itself’” (164). Engelberg asks how solitude became the “condition of the anguished, the forlorn, the misanthropic, the alienated” (165). Nonetheless, he goes on to argue that Beckett’s fictions, like other late modern works he examines, reveal “precisely that ‘radical alienation,’ in the end, does not exist; however brave the face of solitude, it is never ‘immune to community’” (165).

Engelberg argues for either solitude or socialization or a “perpetual shifting” that brings “tension and ambiguity [. . .] from stasis to engagement” (166). For him, “the major triumph, if that is the right word, is the ability to make a choice” (Engelberg’s emphasis; 167). He agrees with Storr that “the real question of one’s mental health is not whether one indulges solitude to the detriment of the Self’s relationship to Society, but whether one is able to sustain solitude as a condition of insight and self-revelation” (Engelberg’s emphasis; 169). He maintains the philosophy hinted at in his book’s subtitle, Ambiguities of the Solitary State: its “beneficial effects” must always be measured against “its possibly self-annihilating danger, the loss of identity altogether” (170). This is a tightrope seen repeatedly in readings on solitude, from Doris Grumbach’s to Hawthorne’s record of Hester’s inner thoughts to Edna’s final swim. Engelberg cites English and European examples of characters negotiating or slipping off that tightrope:
While Crusoe was able to resist the undermining of Self and identity, in the twentieth century that becomes more difficult, if not impossible. [Thomas] Mann’s hero is nearly undone by his relentless addiction to solitude; Woolf’s characters cling stubbornly to self-perpetuated barriers that preclude the normal flow of language, which creates communication. The antagonists of Sartre and Camus are caught in different forms of inhibiting silences, but their lives are precariously close to becoming merely self-reflexive. And Beckett’s ‘I’ is in the ditch—or the bed, the room, the space where he lies ‘rotting with solitude.’ (170)

“Inevitably,” he states, musing on Crusoe but perhaps unknowingly echoing Melville on isolatoes, “all solitaries are islanders, and solitude is an island-experience. [. . .] So while savoring independence, they fantasize with resentment or sadness (seldom with hope) about lost possibilities of return” (173).

Although he depicts a human situation in which solitude and being-with are always bleeding into and contaminating each other through fantasy, wish, regret, or resentment, Engelberg concludes in his study that late modern literature has emphatically chosen the opposite point: that mankind’s situation must be either solitude or community. But it seems unlikely, even for the postmodernist who needs to create new icons or at the very least rethink the old ones, that the question is one of either/or: the problem is not one of solitude or community. Instead, this study shows that for the characters of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Kate Chopin, and others, solitude leads to enlightenment, leads to knowledge, leads to a sense of self, and ultimately leads to the return to the community of the seeker of solitude --or at least to his or her influence on that community--as Bachelard’s poet-thinker or teacher.
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