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The Liberation of 19th Century Women

The protagonists of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman are both women who are greatly affected by the constraints that society puts on their gender. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier begins to govern her own actions and pursue her own desires. The unnamed protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” struggles against her husband’s wishes for her and the beliefs of society. By the end of both stories, the women have overcome the societal restrictions placed on them and have gained their freedom in unexpected ways, but at great costs for both of them. Both of these stories are tragedies because the protagonists were young women with bright futures and heaps of potential that are now lost.

In *The Awakening*, Edna discovers her own sense of self that had been inside her all along. During the course of the story, the reader sees Edna gradually become her own person. The first step in her development occurs when she swims on her own for the first time. As Edna swims she is compared to a “clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence” (p.70). The use of the word “child” to describe Edna shows how dependent she has been on the other people in her life. The words “boldly” and “with over-confidence” are used to show how that when Edna finally swims out on her own, she is being more assertive. The most important part of this description is “of a sudden it realizes its powers.” It shows how Edna is capable of having an active role in making her own

decisions. This is a sort of “awakening” for Edna. Her new assertiveness continues throughout the story. A few pages later, Edna’s husband asks her to come inside and it is said, “Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly” (p.79). The word “habit” shows how in the past Edna has always submitted to what her husband tells her to do and that it has become something ingrained in her. Another key phrase how Edna usually “yielded to his desire.” Edna does not give in to what her husband wants, she does what *she* desires to do. What truly reveals how far Edna has come in her development, is what she does when her husband heads to New York on business. It is said, “When Edna was at last alone, she breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief. A feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious came over her. She walked all through the house, from one room to another, as if inspecting it for the first time” (p.188). “Genuine” is used to describe how Edna is on her own. This shows how when she is with her husband and her children, she is playing a part. When Edna goes around the house “inspecting it for the first time,” it is because she is now a whole new person. Edna is now herself.

As Edna becomes her true self, she begins to act on her passionate desires for men who are not her husband. Edna reflects on how her marriage to Léonce Pontellier “was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met him. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired” (p.46). By Edna saying that her marriage resembles “many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate,” shows how her union with Léonce was The line that Edna

“was in the midst of her secret great passion” shows that when she was younger and before she was introduced to higher society, she was her genuine self. Edna noting how Léonce “left nothing to be desired,” shows how she eventually gave into society’s expectations of women. She gave up her own desires for the desires of someone else. But all of this changes when Edna and her family are vacationing on Grand Isle. She meets Robert Lebrun and forms a connection with him. She feels, “No multitude of words could have been more significant than those moments of silence, or more pregnant with the first-felt throbbings of desire” (p.77). The use of “throbbings” shows how these feelings for Robert are rapidly increasing in Edna, even during silence. This is contrasted with how Léonce had “pressed his suit” to Edna to show his feelings for her. Despite Edna’s love for Robert, she does have other options. She has a short relationship with Alcée Arobin. The day after she and him kiss for the first time, Edna thinks through her feelings, “She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, the monsters made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which inflamed her” (p.220). This is another form of awakening for Edna as a “mist had been lifted from her eyes.” She doesn’t feel “shame or remorse” because she is now an independent woman who can be with whomever she chooses. This also displays her love for Robert, because she has “regret” that her kiss was with Arobin. Edna’s surrender to her desire exhibits how she has embraced her new freedom.

At the end of *The Awakening*, Edna finds true freedom at the cost of her life. Before she kills herself, Edna stands naked on the beach and thinks, “How strange and awful it seemed to

stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (p.301). Edna being called a “newborn creature “is very similar to when she was referred to as a “clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers” earlier in the novel. Like how Edna’s first time swimming by herself was an awakening in her life, so is her second time. It brings the story full circle as she now knows her powers. While Edna swam out her first time in a bathing suit, this time she is naked, signifying her wholehearted acceptance of her freedom. As Edna goes into the water, she thinks of her family,”They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (p.302). The strong use of the word “possess” shows that Edna believed her husband and children were in control of every part of her. But by Edna killing herself, she will be able to keep who she is. This idea of Edna being able to give up her life for her children but not who she is, is paralleled by an earlier conversation she had with another Grand Isle vacationer, Mademoiselle Ratignolle. Edna told Mademoiselle Ratignolle,”I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give up 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” (p.122). This quote shows how much development Edna has gone through as she says “it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend.” By the end of the book, Edna knows herself. In her suicide she does give up her life for her children, as she knows she can’t abandon them. At the same time, she can’t stay with them and let them control what she does with her life. Edna’s suicide lets her “possess” her own newfound sense of self. In Edna’s final moments she hears, “the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree” (p.303). Edna has been chained to her own sycamore tree, the

expectations of society. In her death, Edna was able to break the chain that has been attached to her for so long, and reach true freedom.

The unnamed protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” struggles against her husband and to gain the freedom to voice her thoughts. As soon as the story begins the reader can see that the protagonist’s doctor husband treats her like a child. The main character says that when she voices her concerns about the house they are staying in, her husband John, “laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (p.1). The phrase “one expects that in marriage” displays how the narrator is convinced that the way men treat their wives in society is normal, and shows that she is very dependent on John. John does not listen to his wife when she requests they take a different room. She says, “I don’t like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza...but John would not hear of it” (p.2). The phrase “John would not hear of it” is so final and shows how inferior the narrator is to him. The most obvious example of his subjugation of her is aspects of the room itself. She says that the “immovable bed--it is nailed down” and that “the windows are barred for little children” (p.3 and p.6). These both show that the protagonist is physically trapped in the wallpapered room as well as being imprisoned by society’s impression of women.

Despite the heroine initially hating the wallpaper, she eventually comes to like it because it gives her the mental and social exercise her husband forbids her from having with other people. Because the narrator is stuck in the same room everyday, she takes note of the wallpaper and becomes obsessed with following its pattern. She says, “It dwells on my mind so!...It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you...I determine for the thousandth time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion” (p.6). She says the wallpaper “dwells” in her brain

which means that she is constantly thinking about it. This is so different from how she was when she first began living in the room. She also calls following the pattern a form of “gymnastics.” The word choice shows that the main character is actively exercising her brain to discover the secret of this wallpaper. The wallpaper also gives the protagonist the social interaction that she has been craving. The narrator begins seeing a shape in the wallpaper saying, “I didn’t realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman” (p.10). As the woman in the wallpaper is not real, the reader can gather that she is a figment of the protagonist’s imagination. At one point, the heroine sees, “The front pattern *does* move--and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over” (p.12). The narrator mentions occasionally seeing “a great many women” in the paper. This image depicts how the protagonist is using her imagination to think up even more women. The multiple women in the wallpaper also represent the other real life women in similar situations to the main character. Not only does the wallpaper help to exercise the protagonist’s mind, it also gives her the freedom to express herself. While the narrator is in isolation in her room, she finds the time to express herself through her writing. At first, the protagonist has to write in secret saying, “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal--having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (p.2). She tries to write to “spite” her husband. But as the narrator spends more time in the room, she begins to write again because she wants to. She says, “I don’t know why I should write this. I don’t want to. I don’t feel able. And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way--it is such a relief!” (p.7). The emphasis of the word “must” shows how imperative the

protagonist needs to write. She needs to be able to express herself despite what her husband may say. She even calls writing a “relief” which really shows how it is one of the only actions giving her any peace while in the room. This freedom of self expression is why the yellow wallpapered room becomes a safe space for the narrator. As the protagonist has found haven in the room, her protectiveness towards it and her growing madness come out when her husband tries to enter the room. The narrator’s pleasure in being in the room is evident when she says, “It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!...I don’t want to go outside. I won’t, even if Jennie asks me too” (p.15). The phrases “as I please” and “I don’t want to” show how the main character is now making decisions for herself no matter what anyone tells her. There is the contrasting image of when Edna drowned herself and heard the barking of a dog chained up, is the image of the protagonist tying herself to the bed. She says, “I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope--you don’t get *me* out on the road there!” (p.15). Similarly to how Edna wanted to break the chain to get to freedom, the protagonist of “The Yellow Wallpaper” wishes to keep her freedom by staying in the room and does so by being “securely fastened by” her rope. She feels threatened when her husband, the man who has never listened to her, enters. When he comes in the narrator thinks, “Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!” (p.16). As John falls into his wife’s path, he is still preventing her from doing what she wants. But the protagonist creeps “over him every time!” This shows that she has physically overcome what he has done to her, but at the cost of her sanity.

While *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman both end in tragedy, they leave behind an important message for future generations of

women. The two stories can be viewed as a warning to women that some choices they make may come too late, such as Edna pursuing her own independence and life after having a family. If women had their own “awakening” earlier in their lives, it might save them from a tragedy similar to Edna’s. Despite that, the tales are also a beacon of hope. Though both characters’ lives end tragically, they find their freedom and act on their desires in a society with barely any options for them. At the end of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the protagonist freely expresses herself through her writing, and goes against her husband. Even though what happens to both women at the end of their stories is devastating, they still were both able to become active participants in their own lives. *The Awakening* and “The Yellow Wallpaper” show that women are indeed capable of deciding the course of their lives if they only take their chance.