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Songs of the Caged Bird

The Awakening of Edna Pontellier exemplifies writer Kate Chopin's unique spin on the artistic concept of the caged woman. Popularized by Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the motif of the caged female is a rarely examined cornerstone of modern feminine identity. Though the conveyance of the caged woman has been best recognized in the realm of literature, there is another artistic medium – perhaps underrepresented – that highlights caged women. The theatrical sphere of creative expression highlighted the notion of the caged female almost one hundred years before the release of Maya Angelou's iconic autobiography. A theatrical caged woman hatched twenty years even before Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy" could inspire Angelou's novel seventy years later. Literary and dramatic creation birthed the symbolic birdlike female, trapped in the gilded cage of societal oppression. And thus, through the aid of literature and theatre, the caged woman took flight.

Edna's Cage

The Awakening is enriched with heavy symbolism throughout the text which draws correlation between women and birds. For instance, the novella opens with a "green and yellow parrot" and a "mockingbird...whistling his fluty notes out"(Chopin). The green and yellow parrot is a "talking bird" that mimics the human voice(MyAnimals). In other words, the green

and yellow parrot is limited in speech to what has been spoken to it. This reflects upon the expectation of women. Women were placed in beautiful, gilded cages to be petted and admired. They were commanded to repeat, to think, and to act solely in the cage of their societal position. But Edna Pontellier experienced “difficulty in understanding the social mores”(Elz). She did not quite feel that she fit into her role of a “mother-woman” that “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands” and “extended, protecting wings when any harm...threatened their precious brood”(Chopin). Edna cannot constrain herself to the life of the green and yellow parrot, spending her days as a mothering woman in a role she truly does not wish to have. Edna is more like the mockingbird, having the ability to originate unique thoughts and compose her own song and place in the world.

While Edna may identify more as the mockingbird, this symbolism still does not quite yet classify her as a caged woman. Edna’s true classification as a caged woman stems from her awareness of her gilded bars. One questions whether the mockingbird and green and yellow parrot fully understood that they were in captivity. A cage is hardly a cage if one only perceives it as singular, independent wires. But when one is able to “stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage”, enlightenment is theirs(Clark). Edna perceived her cage one wire at a time, one wire acting as wife, another wire acting as her motherly role, and so on. It was only when Edna was able to step back, to realize that these wires were connected and sealing her inside, that she understood the cage of what society labels as a woman. As Edna’s vision grew to encapsulate the macroscopic view of her cage, she gained the enlightenment to recognize herself as a caged woman.

The danger of this reality for women such as Edna, comes at the price of psychological harm. A woman alone in her cage is subject to a life of “isolation, confinement, and a lack of

communication”(Clark). Historically, humans have been driven apart from one another on the grounds of class, race, religion, sexual orientation, and a seemingly unending assortment of differences. For early feminists, social status persisted as a barrier among women that were all fighting for a shared cause: a chance to be heard. The representation of characters such as Edna Pontellier encourages a flock mentality that bonds every caged woman together. For “birds fly in flocks and not alone”(Clark). Edna’s experience as a wounded bird that spiraled to her death, cautions against the dangers of restricting women to gilded cages. It is the responsibility of women to support and uplift each other. To notice those in the flock with broken wings that struggle to fly. And to aid those that remain entrapped behind their bars, yearning for freedom.

Establishing the Caged Woman

The journey of each individual caged woman is unique to their identity and life experience, but there are several commonalities which may be considered as a sort of criteria for caged women. For instance, each caged woman experiences a “first consciousness of her awakening” and recognizes that their identity is separate from the expectations of a “patriarchal society”(Gray). Edna’s true path to self-realization begins as she is reborn, in a sense, when she teaches herself to swim. She felt the desire to “swim far out, where no woman had swum before” to experience freedom(Chopin). Though she did not recognize the stirrings, longings, and deep rumblings of her heart, Edna undoubtedly knew that something was different. Nothing had altered externally, but everything had changed internally. Every individual caged female to be examined in this piece experiences a similar moment of rebirth or renewal, lending credence to its inclusion as a means of characterizing caged women.

The other consistent classification for females as caged women, comes as the manifestation of “several radical life-style choices”(Ramos). Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*

thoroughly exemplifies a caged female which chooses to radically alter her life. Nora, after eight years of marriage and three children, discovers her role as a caged woman entrapped by her husband's strictures. Nora makes the decision to leave her husband, expressing that she "must try and educate [herself]" and feels that she will only succeed alone. While this decision was incredibly radical for a woman of Nora's time, a trail of breadcrumbs ultimately led to this decision. Without her husband's knowledge, Nora took a job to earn money, and had illegally forged her father's signature. *The Awakening's* Edna chose to live independently in an establishment called The Pigeon House, thus severing her relationship with her husband and children. Caged women, such as Nora and Edna, make bold decisions to leave their husbands and neglect their societal roles, because they begin to realize that there is "a life beyond fatalism, a meaningful life set against...the constraints of nature and society"(Ramos).

The Victorian Caged Female

A particular manifestation of caged theatrical women are the women of Victorian productions. Set in the same time period as *The Awakening*, theatrical pieces such as *A Doll's House*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *The Baker's Wife* explore the notion of caged Victorian females. Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, for instance, spotlights a powerful caged woman, Johanna. Beginning as a shy, reclusive woman, she ultimately "reveals herself to be a feisty heroine" that sets herself free(Weltman). Similarly, *A Doll's House* and *The Baker's Wife* spotlight young women that have become trapped in their societal cages as females in the Victorian Era. This time period was incredibly restrictive for women. Gender roles were a cornerstone of a society, poverty was rampant, and feelings of hopelessness plagued the working class.

Females in the Victorian Era were unfortunately societally dependent upon men. Wealthy young women were offered up to wealthy young men to create affluent marriages for the

prosperity of their children. In England, for example, women were not typically able to inherit their family's fortune. The money was given to the woman's husband, which stripped females of a right to an independent life. Women were unable to independently pursue an education or career, but were arguable sold into businesslike marriages. Theatrical pieces such as *A Doll's House*, *The Baker's Wife*, and *Sweeney Todd* are so crucial, because they empower and give a voice to these restricted women. Stage representation of Victorian Era females provide recognition for women of this time period, reminds the audience of the progress made, and inspires courage to pursue further advancement.

Nora's Cage

A fellow iconic caged woman comes from the realm of theatre. Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* features Nora Helmer, a young woman that chose to leave her husband to pursue self-discovery. Much like *The Awakening*, Ibsen's theatrical production includes several comparisons between women and birds. First performed in 1879, *A Doll's House* is one of the earliest artistic forms that lend credence to the notion of the caged female. While Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* also supports this symbolic representation, it is interesting to consider that theatre had spawned the initial concept. Angelou's autobiography was released in 1969, about ninety years after Henrik Ibsen's original commentary featuring women as caged birds.

A Doll's House comprises of more direct symbolic representation of caged females, as well as more implicit metaphors. Nora's husband, Torvald, remarks, "how much it costs a man to keep such a little bird as you" as he reflects upon his wife's spending habits(Ibsen). He also refers to Nora as a "songbird" and "skylark", furthering the feminine, birdlike analogy. While these verbal affirmations support Nora's standing as a caged women, perhaps a more skillful and

subtle incorporation of this notion is gained from the unspoken aspects of the play. The very first scene of the play portrays Nora humming to herself, flitting about her home as she decorates for Christmas, and daintily snacking on macaroons. At first glance, these behaviors seem typical of any woman preparing her home for a holiday. However, further analysis establishes yet another instance of bird symbolism. Birds sing constantly, which parallels Nora's tendency to hum. Mother birds build nests for their eggs, as Nora decorates her home for her family. Birds also gracefully and skillfully utilize the peck of a beak for their meals, resembling Nora's indulgence in a delicate sweet treat.

These instances of Nora's birdlike characterizations build the wires of her cage, metaphor by metaphor. As an attractive and charming young woman, it was unbeknownst to her husband that she possessed the intelligence to hide a dark secret. Some time earlier, Nora had forged her dead father's signature as a means of acquiring a loan to pay for an expensive trip abroad to assist in Torvald's recovery from a serious illness. This risky plan resulted in the necessity to take a job and secretly put aside spending money that she had received from Torvald, so that she could afford to pay back the loan. When her illegal actions were caught, Nora clung to Torvald, desperately believing that he would save her from punishment. But Torvald had no intention of coming to her rescue. He lashed out at Nora, declaring that she was a "miserable creature", worse than a criminal and unfit to raise her children(Ibsen). This tongue lashing continued until sudden further written correspondence released the couple from their debt. This immediately pacified Torvald, as he recognized that his reputation would be protected. He reverted to his earlier behaviors of doting on Nora, consoling her, and promising that things could return to normal. In this moment, Nora experienced her moment of macroscopic view of her cage.

Nora realized that her previous views of her marriage and husband were not rooted in reality. She came to recognize that she did not truly know and love Torvald, but rather, the idea of his societal role. Nora believed that Torvald was a man of honor and integrity that loved her fiercely. She expected him to fight to protect her from the danger of her debt and forgery. But Torvald was only concerned with his own reputation and social standing, not his wife's future and wellbeing. Thus, Nora discovered that their marriage was based more upon societal roles than personal connection and love. She did not truly know her husband, and her belief that he truly loved her was severed. Nora understood the painful reality that she had been married to a "strange man, and had borne him three children"(Ibsen).

Riddled with pain and doubt, Nora chose a drastic course of action for women of her time: leaving her husband. As she grows to realize that she has been trapped in a cage, albeit a beautiful one, Nora expresses a horror in regards to her confinement. She is frightened to think that she is unable to truly think for herself, and despises the thought that a man must take care of her in order for her to survive. As a means of making peace with herself, Nora resolves to go into the world on her own, and embark on a period of self-discovery and soul searching. She begins to unfurl her feathers, which had been wrapped in a protective manner around her husband and children. Without her husband's permission or her children's knowledge, Nora flaps her wings and breaks free of her cage by leaving the confines of her marriage.

Johanna's Cage

Considered one of the best theatrical composers of all time, Stephen Sondheim had the ability to create musicals with a timeless and whimsical appeal. *Sweeney Todd*, one of his more famous productions and Blockbuster film, has become a household name known even to those

that may not realize its theatrical origins. While a decent amount of the plot spotlights male characters, the production's ingenue takes the form of a young woman, Johanna. Her iconic opening song, "Green Finch and Linnet Bird", metaphorically reveals her innermost thoughts as a growing woman in the British Industrial Revolution. Johanna has been locked away by her perverted guardian and has had little contact with the outside world. In a sense, this background parallels *The Awakening's* Edna, who feels out of place amongst the Creole culture and in her motherly role.

As Johanna is revealed in *Sweeney Todd*, she shares her soul's desires through music, not unlike Edna on the boat to the island. Johanna wonders aloud how her pets, a green finch and linnet bird, can sing in captivity. She asks "how [they] jubilate sitting in cages, never taking wing" while "outside the sky waits, beckoning"(Sondheim). She notices a man selling caged birds outside and questions whether those birds "are singing to be sold", in other words, singing to be purchased and to have a home(Sondheim). She reflects that her own cage, her guardian's elaborate home, is a place where nothing sings, not even her pet lark. Johanna closes her musical number mentioning that larks cannot sing in captivity, and by imploring her green finch and linnet bird to teach her to sing in her own cage.

Similar to the introduction of *The Awakening*, Johanna's entrance highlights two different types of birds: those who sing in cages, and those that do not. Edna's green and yellow parrot squawks back phrases that it has heard from its barred confines. It does not have the competence to understand its imprisonment, and cheerfully harps away. The parrot is similar to Johanna's pets, the green finch and linnet bird, with even the same colors. A green finch is obviously green, and linnet birds are yellow in nature. The other birds mentioned, Edna's

mockingbird and Johanna's lark, more accurately depict their owners. Johanna relates to the lark, as neither of them have the heart to sing from their gilded bars. Edna relates to the mockingbird, as they both compose their original thoughts and music, rather than the parrot, which can only repeat what was originally another's. These birds metaphorically represent the aforementioned notion of the caged woman. Just as Edna and Johanna's pets sing from captivity or repeat words they have heard, women find themselves in similar confines. Particularly in the Industrial Revolution, women were coming to grips with the unfortunate reality that they were expected to ignorantly sing and repeat the words that society placed in their mouths.

Like Edna's green and yellow parrot, Johanna's green finch and yellow linnet bird sing in what is seemingly blissful ignorance of their captivity. However, Johanna's questionings challenge this idea. Johanna wonders if the caged birds have "decided it's safer in cages, singing when they're told" (Sondheim). This speculation resembles the awakening of Edna, as she becomes aware of *her* cage. Edna grows to understand that, although her life cannot fulfill her, it is a safer option. She at last is able to discern that, to protect herself, she must remain in her cage and sing only when society requests. In this sense, Johanna's character is unique in regards to Edna and Nora. The two latter women each have a moment of realization that they are caged. But Johanna recognizes her confinement from the very beginning.

Johanna's opening song and personal revelations meet the requirement of recognizing herself as a woman trapped in a cage. The other requirement, radical lifestyle choices, comes as Johanna decided to escape from her captor. She plans to marry Anthony, a fetching young sailor, and run away with him. Though this plot is uncovered by her guardian, a greater radical choice occurs at the private asylum that Johanna's guardian confines her to. In a moment of

desperation, she shoots and kills the owner of the asylum to break free of its captivity. This is an incredibly defining moment for Johanna's character, as it depicts her as a strong, determined woman.

Though expressed through two different artistic mediums, the characters of Johanna and Edna each support the feminine caged bird metaphor. Each woman experiences a loneliness in their isolated life, but seems to glean an intelligence from it. Johanna and Edna's solitary confinement and feelings of difference from the outside world inspires a wisdom from their cages. In their own right, each woman independently discovers that they do not only have the capacity to be silently petted and admired. They even have more than the capacity to sing. They have the capacity to fly.

Genevieve's Cage

The Baker's Wife, a 1989 West End musical, captured the hearts of millions with its captivating plot and musical numbers. With music and lyrics written by Stephen Schwartz, best known for creating the hit musical *Wicked*, *The Baker's Wife* features a secluded French village and a young woman named Genevieve. The title character, Genevieve is married to a baker that is much older than herself. As newcomers to a village in desperate need of a new baker, Genevieve and her husband Aimable Castagnet are often confused for father and daughter, rather than husband and wife. Genevieve is soon taken with a charming young man, and agrees to run away with him. Before she leaves her husband and the quaint French village, Genevieve tells the story of a meadowlark through song. Since its release, "Meadowlark" has become a legendary musical theatre piece that has even crossed into the pop culture sphere. Renowned

for its storytelling element and exquisite musical quality, the piece also presents yet another depiction of a caged female.

Genevieve begins “Meadowlark” by sharing that its story originates from her favorite childhood fairytale. It recounts the life of a young meadowlark with a voice that “could match the angels in its glory, but she was blind”(Schwartz). An old king discovered the meadowlark’s beautiful song, and he brought her to his beautiful palace. The king treated the lark very well, offering to “buy [her] a priceless jewel, and cloth of brocade and crewel” if she would only sing for him(Schwartz). One day, the god of the sun heard the meadowlark’s music and was so enchanted with her, that he granted her the gift of sight. As “she opened her eyes to the shimmer and the splendor of this beautiful young god”, he begged her to fly away with him(Schwartz). The sun god promised to show the meadowlark the world and the joys of companionship. But the meadowlark declined the sun god, because she could not bear to leave the king that had loved her so well. The sun god left the meadowlark, but when the king visited her later that day, he “found his meadowlark had died”(Schwartz). As Genevieve finishes the tale of the meadowlark, the song continues with her own relation to its story. She feels that “finally for the first time, the one [she] is burning for returns the glow”(Schwartz). Though she knows she will hurt her husband by leaving, she feels compelled to fly away with her “beautiful young man” that has offered the promise of love and a new beginning(Schwartz).

Genevieve draws several comparisons between herself and the meadowlark through this piece of musical expression, characterizing herself as a caged woman that must leave to discover her identity. A first resemblance is drawn as Genevieve reveals that the meadowlark is blind. The quality of blindness resembles the veil of ignorance that Genevieve herself as

experienced as a caged woman. Caged women of her time led such reclusive and sheltered lives, dedicated to the societal roles delegated to them by a patriarchal society. Though Genevieve was initially contented with this lifestyle and her older husband's love, just as the meadowlark was contented with the old king's love, neither truly recognized the bars that bound them until they were endowed with the gift of sight. As the handsome sun god granted sight to the meadowlark, Genevieve's attracting young suitor opened her eyes to the possibilities of a new life. However, while both Genevieve and the meadowlark were bestowed with sight, or knowledge, only one of them had the strength to bear it.

After receiving the gift of sight, the meadowlark was unable to cope with this radical change. She recognized that her life had changed forever, and that nothing could ever quite be the same. The meadowlark also struggled with the knowledge that she had lost the love of the sun god and his marvelous adventures. Much like Nora, the meadowlark had lived a life in which she believed that she was happy, but did not find true happiness until she came face to face with it. As the meadowlark recognized that she could have experienced true love and happiness with the sun god, her life was forever tainted by the loss of it. Rather than trying to forge her own path and create her own happiness, like Nora and Genevieve, the meadowlark succumbed to the same fate as Edna Pontellier. Both Edna and the meadowlark discovered that the things which would bring their life meaning, were out of their grasp. Neither characters could bear the pain of this loss of innocence and blindness, and both died of heartache.

For Genevieve, the story of the meadowlark served as both encouragement, and a warning. Her favorite fairytale provided a sense of comfort and security, as she recognized that her own life paralleled the story's protagonist. However, Genevieve learned from the story of

the meadowlark, and decided that she would not make the same mistake of rejecting her handsome, young suitor. This moment qualifies as Genevieve's realization of her status as a caged woman. She recognized that she was caught in a life that did not satisfy her, restricted by her older husband and social expectations. And much like Nora Helmer, Genevieve had the courage to fly out of her cage to explore her identity as an individual. As caged women, both Nora and Genevieve are unique in the sense that they were able to escape their cages. Edna Pontellier and the meadowlark were met with an ill fate when they recognized the magnitude of their cages. But Genevieve and Nora were courageous enough to break free, and pursue a life beyond their cages.

Eurydice's Cage

Anais Mitchell's hit musical *Hadestown* premiered in London's West End in 2006. Thirteen years later, *Hadestown* crossed into America's Broadway and swept the 2019 Tony Awards. The musical featured an Industrial Revolution Era retelling of the classic Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. With a star studded cast and brilliant musical numbers, *Hadestown* provided a modern lens for timeless social realities, such as elitist and feminist elements. The musical's leading lady, Eurydice, offers an illustration of a young woman's fight for survival in a patriarchal society. She falls in love with Orpheus, a poor young musician, "in spite of herself" and the two become lovers(Mitchell). But as winter falls upon the land, Orpheus and Eurydice are left starving and homeless. In a twist of fate, Hades, the god of the Underworld, sets his sight on Eurydice. He lures her into his dark and dismal home with the promise of comfort and freedom. Hades's iconic musical number "Hey Little Songbird" confronts Eurydice with the reality of her dire situation, and compels her to become his muse in the Underworld.

Hades immediately places Eurydice behind bars with the pet name “little songbird”, which characterizes her as a fragile bird in need of a man’s protection(Mitchell). He reminds her that he reigns supreme of the Underworld’s grand, industrial city, and enjoys a life of plenty. Hades remarks that “poverty comes to clip [Eurydice’s] wings”, and it will leave her cold, hungry, and alone(Mitchell). Eurydice is immediately entranced by the mysterious Hades, wishing for “a nice soft place to land” in his expansive realm(Mitchell). To further entice her, Hades compliments Eurydice and induces feelings of special treatment within her. He softly calls to her, “You’ll shine like a diamond down in the mind”, reminds her that she has “nothing to lose”, and claims he “could use a canary”(Mitchell). Hades then ends his alluring melody as he brings Eurydice back to the reality of her circumstances. He hauntingly states that “people get mean when the chips are down”, and not even Orpheus will protect her from the clutches of poverty and starvation(Mitchell). And, against her better judgment, Eurydice gives in to the bars of a new, gilded cage.

Similar in character to Torvald Helmer and Edna Pontellier’s husband, Hades verbally characterizes Eurydice as a weak willed, helpless bird. Not only do these men speak restrictive and domineering comments. They impel their female counterparts to believe it. Such patriarchal tendencies become incredibly damaging to women, leaving them with no choice but to accept their roles, as Eurydice did. In an age of such extreme poverty as the Industrial Revolution, women truly were faced with a lack of choice, or rather, the illusion of choice. Eurydice’s options were to starve or die of cold with Orpheus, or to sell her soul to become the god of the Underworld’s canary. As a woman born into the lowest social class, Eurydice did not have the means to pursue an education or gain the knowledge to attain a skilled working trade.

Though her heart compelled her to stay with her true love, the pains of starvation overruled her deepest yearnings. Eurydice became entrapped as Hades's songbird when faced with the truth that she could not survive on her own.

Eurydice is unique in the sense that, when presented with her moment of macroscopic view of her cage, she entered of her own accord. In the cases of Nora, Edna, Johanna, and Genevieve, these women attempted to escape in any manner possible. But Eurydice, a true realist, recognized the futility of escape. She realized that she could not rise in society, and understood that Hades presented the only viable option for food and shelter. Her radical life choice was not to leave her cage, but to succumb to its fate. She did not depart from a husband and children as Nora, Edna, and Genevieve did, or flee an asylum as Johanna did. Eurydice resigned herself to a soulless new life in an industrial cage which provided her with the means to survive. And, for a woman of the Victorian Era or Industrial Age, Eurydice's fate was likely the most realistic of these caged women.

Finale

Historically speaking, the notion of women as caged birds is a concept that now spans across centuries. Particularly, the arts of literature and theatre have highlighted this classic illustration from as early as 1879. While caged females are quite an excellent metaphorical representation, the reality behind the illustration is much more alarming and disturbing. The continued presence of caged women throughout the arts highlights the ever-present strife and societal struggle that female identifying individuals still encounter today. *A Doll's House*, the play which popularized feminine birdlike comparisons, was first performed in 1879. Society railed

against a woman's decision to leave her husband, and Ibsen was asked to change the original ending. Twenty years later, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* furthered the dialogue of caged women in 1899.

For a time, it seemed that societal progress was beginning to uplift women, as they were granted the right to vote in several countries in the early twentieth century. Yet the presence of caged women Johanna in the 1979 production of *Sweeney Todd*, and Genevieve in the 1989 musical *The Baker's Wife*, provides evidence that the notion of the caged female was still relevant. Even *Hadestown*, which premiered as recent as 2006, comprised of women that had been placed in gilded cages by a patriarchal society. These particular production were all released and gained popularity in both America and the United Kingdom, which strengthens the claim that caged women are a universal reflection of females of all races, cultures, and religions. The recent quality of these pieces also lends credence to the unsettling truth that the lingering effects of the damage of these patriarchal cages is still felt today. Women still face oppression in a patriarchal society today. In the workplace, women have been found to have "earned 17% less than men on average" (Haan). This number greatly increases for women of color and other minorities.

Though women may no longer be confined to a life that only extends as far as their husband and children, societal cages are still present. True equality and accurate representation of females is a continued struggle across the expanse of the entire world. In these difficult and trying times, women might look to characters such as Edna and Nora for bravery. Birds travel and persevere in flocks, and so may we progress. Like Johanna, may we boldly stand up to those that would hide away our talents and qualities. Like Eurydice, may we have the clarity of reality,

but never lose sight of the dreams of our ambitions. And like Genevieve, may we “fly away in the silver morning” to pursue our dreams(Schwartz).

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