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Idea of the Individual

Mr. Kotlarczyk

26 May 2010

The Possibility of Female Autonomy in *The Awakening* and “The Yellow Wall-Paper”

Both *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and “The Yellow Wall-Paper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman present female main characters pursuing individual autonomy. At first, it would appear that both of these characters gain their freedom in the course of their respective stories. In *The Awakening*, Edna is able to escape from her husband into a new house, and pursue romantic interests with other men, and at the end of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the protagonist exclaims, “I’ve got out at last!” (Gilman 20). However, there are several elements in each piece which hint that liberation is not truly achievable. In actuality, societal norms and constraints severely restricted the possibility of individual autonomy for the main characters in these works, as evidenced in the cage symbolism used by the authors, the representation of male-female relationships as owner-property relationships, and the dismal endings of both pieces.

Both authors demonstrate the degree to which their main characters are trapped through the use of cage or prison imagery. The first example is at the very beginning of *The Awakening*, when the reader is shown an image of a caged parrot who had “the right to make all the noise [he] wished,” but was frequently ignored by Mr. Pontellier (Chopin 1). This parrot could be seen as a symbol for Edna’s own state, trapped by social norms instead of cage bars. Edna, like the parrot, can speak up all she wants, but it will never earn her independence. Another example of cage imagery is Edna’s pigeon-house—the small home to which she moves to escape the influence of her husband. The reader is at first lead to believe that the small home provides Edna with some degree of freedom. However, by juxtaposing the idea of Edna’s new home with the

image of a pigeon-house, the author reminds us that she still has not escaped. Pigeon-houses are rooms full of cages keeping the pigeons from taking flight. Because a bird in flight is a symbol of freedom, one can see that a pigeon-house is a symbol of the restriction of that freedom.

In “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the author writes several passages involving prison bars. For example, the character notes, after long hours of staring at the pattern in the wallpaper, “by moonlight, it becomes bars!” (Gilman 14). Later, she begins seeing a woman in the wallpaper, who “takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard” and who is “all the time trying to climb through” (Gilman 16). The woman even states that, referring to the figure in the wallpaper, “nobody could climb through that pattern” (Gilman 16). Near the end of the story, the protagonist begins to sympathize with the woman behind the bars, and the reader realizes that the trapped figure is representative of the main character’s own feeling of restriction. The bars in the wallpaper represent the social limits set on her autonomy from which she will never be able to escape.

Next, there are many references to an owner-property relationship between a man and a woman, an interpretation which implies a large degree of restriction upon the autonomy of the woman. From the very beginning of *The Awakening*, the reader is shown that Mr. Pontellier thinks of his wife as property; when Edna comes in from the beach, the author tells us that Mr. Pontellier looks at his sunburned wife “at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 4). This interpretation is reinforced when, after climbing into bed with her husband, Edna feels “an indescribable oppression” (Chopin 8).

Even more than revealing the existence of this kind of relationship, the author also shows the reader that it is inescapable. When Edna is speaking to Robert and he is telling her of his “wild dream of [her] some way becoming [his] wife,” he speaks optimistically of, “men who had

set their wives free,” hoping fancifully that Edna’s husband might do just that (Chopin 102). Logically, if a man has to set a woman free, she must once have been held as a captive or slave, without independence or freedom. Therefore, Robert implies a property-owner relationship between man and wife. Then, when Edna asserts that, were Robert to act as if she was some possession that Mr. Pontellier could dispose of, she would “laugh at [them] both,” Robert does not seem to understand her assertion (Chopin 102). Robert is the man with whom Edna hopes to start a new, independent life, away from her possessive husband. However, this conversation shows that even her new admirer is entrenched in society’s perceptions of women as property, and demonstrates that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for Edna to find a man unaffected by these influences.

In “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the author also displays a relationship where the man has almost complete control over the woman. Throughout the story, the main character’s husband attempts to prevent her from writing, citing that such amounts of mental stimuli would only worsen her condition. She is also almost never allowed to leave her room, and her husband’s sister is constantly keeping an eye on her. Finally, even though she is a new mother, she is kept from seeing her baby during her rest-cure. This last example is most compelling, because in it the character loses control over one of the few things over which women are generally allowed dominion—her children. Restriction of intellectual liberties, constant surveillance, and physical confinement irreversibly rob the main character of her autonomy.

Another two compelling excerpts which supply evidence toward the limited degree of individual freedom both women may achieve are found at the ends of both pieces. It is misleading that, at the end of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the main character exclaims, “I’ve got out at last” (Gilman 20). Though she has supposedly escaped from the bars she saw in the

wallpaper, the reader quickly realizes that her escape is only a descent into madness. Her inability to achieve forcible independence with which she could convince her husband to release her from the room has caused her to lose her mind.

The ending of *The Awakening* is similarly hopeless. Edna, unable to find any other means of escape, is driven to suicide: “exhaustion was pressing upon and over-powering her” (Chopin 109). The fact that she is unable to achieve any decent amount of individual autonomy in this life forces her to search for it in death. The author also includes some symbolism which reaffirms this viewpoint. Earlier in the novel, Madame Riesz advised Edna that, “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” (Chopin 79). Keeping that passage in mind, at the end of the novel, just before entering the water to drown herself, Edna sees “a bird with a broken wing . . . beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (Chopin 108). The symbol of this injured bird shows that Edna has not been able to soar above the “plain of tradition and prejudice,” but has instead had her wings broken by its inescapable force (Chopin 79). Together, Edna’s suicide and the appearance of the injured bird serve to show the reader that the attainment of freedom is impossible for this character.

In both pieces, it is clear that these women’s freedoms were extensively inhibited. This restriction is symbolized using images of caged birds and women behind bars. It is also shown through the controlling relationships in both characters’ lives. Lastly, the endings of both pieces—one death, the other madness—show the inescapability of both characters’ situations. In the end, neither of these women had the ability to overcome the pressures and influences of society to achieve individual autonomy.

Works Cited

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Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wall-Paper." Boston: Small & Maynard, 1899.