

4-1-2010

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Kevin Chen '10

*Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy*

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### Recommended Citation

Chen, Kevin '10, "Female Liberation in *The Awakening* and “The Yellow Wall-Paper”" (2010). *2010 Spring Semester*. Paper 2.  
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2010/2>

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Kevin Chen

Kotlarczyk

The Idea of the Individual

15 March 2010

Female Liberation in *The Awakening* and “The Yellow Wall-Paper”

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” both initially published in 1899, present strikingly similar stories of the plight of women in society. Both texts adopt a markedly feminist bias, narrated from the point of view of a female protagonist who wrests with the restrictive conventions of a misogynistic society before finally breaking free through separation from the thinking world, via suicide in *The Awakening* and insanity in “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Some would argue that the women themselves are flawed, through either mental instability or rampant libido, and thus the stories are skewed through the eyes of an unreliable narrator. Yet what is significant is the realization that both women would rather forsake sanity and life than endure the shackles of subjugation, because separation from the conscious world is the only way to achieve complete liberation in an oppressive androcentric society.

The topic of female liberation and empowerment is particularly interesting in Chopin’s and Gilman’s works because each female protagonist must resort to a drastic means to achieve it. Chopin’s Mrs. Pontellier, after moving out of her husband’s home, still does not feel satisfied and must resort to drowning herself for the ultimate escape. Similarly, the main character of Gilman’s story, having struggled with the limitations of physical confinement and isolation, finally descends to insanity as the only method to free herself from her entrapment.

Some would argue that one cannot conclude from the texts that escape from the sapient world is the only viable source of freedom because the protagonists have significant emotional and mental shortcomings and thus serve as unreliable narrators. Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that the choices an emotionally or mentally unstable character makes do not represent the entire female demographic as a whole. Yet Mrs. Pontellier and Gilman's main character are ordinary women who inherit their flaws because of their environment; the lust and insanity that develop are products of their oppression. Until the events of *The Awakening*, Mrs. Pontellier has been married to her husband for decades. She experiences an epiphany after a vacation in the Grand Isle, but up until that point, she has functioned as a subservient wife without questioning her role. Just as Edna begins the story as a typical, rational woman, the main character of "The Yellow Wall-paper" starts as a mentally stable individual. Gilman's protagonist describes the "garden--large and shady, full of box-bordered paths" (4), the "pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings" (5), and even "those sprawling flamboyant patterns" (5) of the wallpaper in a perfectly reasonable manner, an indication that she is capable of speaking from a rational point of view. Furthermore, she has been sent away to the countryside not because she is mentally unstable but because her husband has diagnosed her with depression. She even confesses early in the text that she believes that if she "had less opposition and more society and stimulus," her condition would improve (4).

Having established that both heroines are in full possession of their mental faculties at the start of the stories, a comparison of *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wall-Paper" reveals a similarity in the oppressiveness of the predominant male figures. The husbands in both stories share similar qualities: doting, self-aggrandizing, and unquestionably domineering. However, the other characters ignore their flaws because the men epitomize the values of an androcentric society. Indeed, in *The Awakening*, the other housewives declare "that Mr. Pontellier was the

best husband in the world” (Chopin 9). The men are the moneymakers who hold prominent positions in society: John is “a physician of high standing” while Mr. Pontellier is an eminent businessman in New Orleans (Gilman 3). Their status imparts power over their wives, providing a backing for their conventional views of the inferiority of women.

By casting such stereotypically “male” figures as the husbands of their protagonists, both Chopin and Gilman attack marriage as an institution that restricts women. At the epoch in which the characters of both stories live, society functions with the understanding that the wife is always subservient to the whims of the husband. The narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” acknowledges this convention when she states, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (Gilman 3). To the husbands, their wives are fragile beings who must be coddled but who hold little intrinsic worth. Their patronization is evident in the way they treat their wives as children. John addresses his wife as “little girl” (12) and “read[s] to [her] till it tire[s her] head” (11). Mr. Pontellier buys his wife’s favors through sweets, sending her “*friandises*, with luscious and toothsome bits--the finest of fruit *patés*, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance” (Chopin 8). When the women begin to wrestle with ideas of emancipation, their husbands ascribe it to a mental condition rather than the innate human desire for freedom. Mr. Pontellier consults with Doctor Mandelet because he does not “know what ails” his wife, and John’s conviction that his wife is depressed is, after all, the reason that they move to the country (62). Neither woman can achieve liberation because of the paralyzing nature of marriage.

Having grounded their characters in an antifeminine society, Chopin and Gilman then set out to flesh out the lives of female protagonists who experience a renaissance and become aware of their fight against marital enslavement. The state of solitude is common to both texts and

represents the moments during which the women are most able to develop their ideas of liberation. Alone during the day, the heroine of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” begins to free herself by writing about her growing obsession with the wallpaper, stating that she is “determine[d] for the thousandth time that [she] *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion” (Gilman 10). Meanwhile, Mrs. Pontellier moves by herself into a small house down the street, imbuing herself with “a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual” (Chopin 89). These moments of independence, though temporary, are the first tastes of freedom that the women enjoy and fuel their craving for complete liberation.

Some would argue that this state of solitude provides Chopin’s and Gilman’s main characters all the freedom that they need and that the women’s continued dissatisfaction is unwarranted. Yet both texts indicate that these strategies of isolation do not suffice; neither Mrs. Pontellier nor Gilman’s madwoman feels content with her situation because the freedom she achieves does not extend to her social and spiritual life. The narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” begins to see “a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” in the wallpaper, an indication that she is becoming increasingly insane (Gilman 11). Likewise, Mrs. Pontellier still succumbs to “periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me” (Chopin 105). The ultimate emancipation that both female protagonists crave requires complete separation from male-dominated society--and thus, a separation from the sapient world.

Both texts utilize a symbol to represent the confinement and eventual liberation of women; in *The Awakening*, Mrs. Pontellier swims out to the sea that once “seized her at the fear of being able to regain the shore,” (Chopin 109) whereas in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the protagonist believes she has broken out from “that horrid paper” (Gilman 7). Metaphorically,

both the sea and the wallpaper function as a cage, trapping the women on land with the rest of Creole society or within the confines of a bedroom. Up until the point at which the women overcome these obstacles, they do not feel liberated; the narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is haunted by her obsession of freeing the woman behind the wallpaper, while Mrs. Pontellier grows restless with desire for an unobtainable man. Breaking through these barriers is symbolic of breaking free of societal restraints and expectations, though it comes at the price of a sane, conscious life. At the instant when she has fully descended into the depths of insanity and escaped from the oppression of a sane life, the protagonist of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” believes she has “got[ten] out at last” from behind the wallpaper; in fact, she has succeeded in tearing it down (20). Similarly, as Edna walks out to drown at sea with “[t]he foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet,” far away from the reach of Creole society, she is the image of a reborn Venus, goddess of beauty and female empowerment (Chopin 109). Clearly, these symbols indicate that the women value freedom more than their lives.

Through the dramatic denouement of *The Awakening* and “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Chopin and Gilman underscore their critique of the paralyzing restraints that society imposes on women and their insistence of a woman’s right to complete liberation. In the final pages, as each woman finally severs her ties with the rest of the world, the reader is struck by the unprecedented happiness and freedom that the two main characters finally experience. By imprisoning their female protagonists in marital life and allowing them to escape only through immense sacrifice, Chopin and Gilman effectively criticize the restraints of American society and advocate for the legal, social, and--above all--spiritual liberation of women.

Works Cited

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