



# Struggling for a New Identity: Glimpses of Nineteenth Century Womanhood in the Fiction of Gilman and Chopin

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RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century marked the first important milestone in the history of women not only because of increased awareness about their situation, which would lead to the feminist movement, but also because such gender awareness and feminist attitudes became part of the literary canon, forever changing the way the works of women writers would be written and interpreted. Believing that women's history may offer a vantage point from which to assess and understand how a society works, this article makes women's issues its main focus. The setting is the controversial nineteenth century, which is examined through a combined approach of close reading and an analysis of secondary sources. This article is a comparative study of two stories produced by two nineteenth century American women writers tackling the situation of the women of the time, the difficult transition from male expectations to female self-assertion, and the importance of such texts as representations of the period when they were written.

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By the end of the nineteenth century, the USA had achieved a stage of development which would soon make it a supreme world power. These achievements—unprecedented industrialization, advanced technology, nation-wide transportation, banks, businesses and corporations—were celebrated by the Chicago Fair of 1893. Another interesting success of this fair was its discovery of women, who, in Henry Adam's view, could play a contribution for the nation's future as essential as that of science and technology (qtd. in [Lauter 3](#)).

As the end of the century approached, thanks to the changes taking place, more and more women started to question the roles that society expected of them and many were empowered to express their opinions through writing by using literature to both reflect and influence. They tried to create a voice through a literature of their own, for their own. The nineteenth century was, as Gilman would define it, "the woman's century, the century of the great awakening" when women were finally "beginning to write real history, human history, and not merely masculine history" (Gilman, *The Man-Made World* 36).

The 'New Woman' novels became an essential part of late Victorian culture—only in a few years—more than a hundred were produced ([Richardson and Willis 1](#)). Back then, such books were often believed to have a corrupting influence on women readers and the novelists were described as "self-degrading creatures who delineate their fictional creatures as wallowing in unchastity and who write freely on subjects which men would hesitate to name" (Corelli qtd. in [Richardson and Willis 20](#)). Later critics like Juliet Gardiner, however, acknowledge the importance of such fiction as an instrument contributing to social change. For [Elaine Showalter](#), the women writers of the 1880s and 1990s played a significant role in both writing and spreading of the feminist ideology (qtd. in [Richardson and Willis 24](#)).

This article starts with a short overview of the situation of American women in the nineteenth century as documented by historical scholars and then look for glimpses of such a situation in two selected fictional texts produced by two women writers of the time: Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Chopin's *The Awakening*.

## AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*: A SHORT HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

According to women's studies scholars of the 1960s–1970s, middle-class Victorian men and women lived in separate spheres. During the middle and late nineteenth century, it became a symbol of success for a man to provide for his family while the woman was limited to domestic roles at home. In household duties, much of the responsibility for educating children fell upon the mother as she did most of the work at home. Even women's primary role as citizens was to influence men through their positions as housewives and mothers. [Barbara Welter](#) talks about the 'cult of true womanhood' as an ideology which legitimized the victimization of women by means of its central tenets: the cult of domesticity and the cult of purity. The former imprisoned women in the home sphere, while the latter imposed loyalty in marriage; both aimed at ensuring women's passivity and docility. This view seems to be consistent with Elizabeth Cady Stanton's who described the nineteenth century woman's situation in a letter written to her colleague Lucy Stone in 1856 as follows:

She patiently bears all this because in her blindness she sees no way of escape. Her bondage, though it differs from that of the negro slave, frets and chafes her just the same. She too sighs and groans in her chains ... (qtd. in [O'Neill 9](#)).

Ellen Dubois argues that it was women's discontent with their situation that led to changes, including their political demand for the vote. She believes that women's growing awareness of their situation—the limited domestic life and exclusion from political and economic life—is what laid the foundations for a feminist movement (9–19). In turn, feminists concerned themselves with making women aware of their inferiority and removing the restrictions imposed by both law and society ([O'Neill 10](#)). Simon Morgan contends that these women were the ones who contributed to the emergence of a middle-class identity and culture which was to be expressed publicly by helping the further development of the feminist movement in the

late nineteenth century. He points out that it was such public involvement that enabled the expansion of women's roles (5).

Jean Matthews attributes the changes in the women's situation to the growth of urbanization. She traces such changes in the years following the Civil War when women were able to move around more freely thanks to the emergence of public transportation and better lit streets. These years were marked by an increased number of young women who graduated from high school, which facilitated their entrance in the workforce. The new industrial economy had also introduced jobs for the working class women, taking them out of their houses. In addition, a growing number of upper-class women were attending university (8–9).

13 July 1848 marked the beginning of Women's Rights Movement in the United States with Elizabeth Cady Stanton as its promoter. In a week's time, the world's first women's convention, the Seneca Falls Convention with its adoption of "The Declaration of Sentiments", would follow. Fashioned after the "Declaration of Independence" it was women's first tract to challenge patriarchal ideologies (after that of Emma Hart Willard, who as early as 1819 had suggested a plan to improve women's education). Despite not having an immediate impact, it would definitely mark a turning point in the women's struggle leading to its first major achievement in the early twentieth century when women in America won the right to vote. The feminist movement, however, was divided, as women from different classes had different goals. Some thought the right to vote was the most important thing, others believed it should first be given to black men, some advocated the inclusion of black women, others did not, and there were also debates concerning sexual freedom over traditional moral conventions (Mathews 32–34).

In addition to overt feminists, there were also the covert ones who hid in the garb of the so-called spiritualism which encouraged women to speak in public (Braude 84). Many believed that just the act of standing up in public to deliver a speech evidenced spirit agency as a woman was not capable of it:

That a young lady not over 18 years of age should speak for an hour and a quarter in such an eloquent manner, with such logical and philosophical clearness proved a power not natural to the education and mentality of the speaker. (85)

Because the trance was viewed as enabling women to speak when they were otherwise unqualified to do so, the claim of entrancement became a convention used to support women's right and ability to ascend the public platform. Such trance mediums were not only important in creating a public role for women in the 1850s, but also helped to lay the foundations of the woman's rights movement. Many women who began as trance speakers became reform lecturers or suffragists. Mediumship made it possible for many women to assume a public career by departing from their assigned role as housewives. Some of them even managed to become economically independent by supporting themselves with lecture fees and travelling alone from state to state. However, such public appearances of women did not go unreproached. Women's achievements and departure from their traditional roles could not be easily accepted by men. Social Darwinism was often applied to produce the idea that women are by nature weaker and less intelligent than men, reinforcing this way the perception about women's inferiority and justifying their constrained and submissive state and their inappropriateness for public roles with the 'scientific' theory of biological determinism. The disciples of the emerging discipline of 'evolutionary psychology' publicly attacked the efforts of women to change their situation (be it marital, educational, or occupational) as against nature and jeopardizing the human species (Murphy 221).

Depression, a typical women's disease in the nineteenth century, provided the perfect excuse for men to discourage women from doing intellectual work. Cesare Lombroso talked about "the penalty of the sex"—he believed that because women have the burden to bear children, they spend a lot of energy and as such, doing intellectual work would be too much of an "extravagant expenditure of energy" (qtd. in Russett 116) leading to an inevitability of diseases varying from depression to neurasthenia (defined as nervous exhaustion). Doctors threatened that the "evil of [their] education would infect their whole life" (117). The cost would be either mental disease or sterility. The increasing number of unmarried women, it was claimed, was another consequence of wanting to pursue higher education. Caricatured as "plain, bespectacled spinsters" (Eltis 230), the new women were feared for the threat they presented to the conventional constraints of women's sphere and their sexual morality.

Social expectations and prescribed roles were constant barriers in the making of the ‘new woman’ in the nineteenth century. Those who dared enter the medical profession were mocked by their male counterparts, who believed that it was a man’s sphere. Having completed academic work, the would-be woman doctors would often find their next career steps blocked by not being allowed to practice their profession. In some cases, they had to work disguised as men and were even imprisoned when discovered (Ehrenreich and English 62).

The collocation ‘New Woman’<sup>1</sup> was first coined around 1894, but the phenomenon pre-existed the term and was already familiar (Matthews 36). The term, however, is contradictory and often contested by scholars.<sup>2</sup> Lyn Pykett sees the figure as shifting and mobile: “The New Woman, when she wasn’t in a library or suffering from hysterical breakdowns, was careering around on a bicycle” (xi). The scholar believes that it is hard to homogenize the category and chooses to look at the New Woman as related to

fin-de-siècle utopianism, socialism, imperialism, Aestheticism and Decadence, urbanism, mass culture, sex science, psychoanalysis, economics, eugenics, the discourses of evolution (and degeneration), and definitions of masculinity, as well as in relation to debates about modernity and modernism and early twentieth-century developments in feminism. (xi)

Similarly, Matthews points out that even though the roles of women were expanded, and women had gained increased access to all levels of education and professions and enjoyed greater personal freedom and financial independence, still, many doors were shut and “the appearance of equality was illusory” (4). For Richardson and Willis, “the New Women wanted to achieve social and political power by reinventing rather than rejecting their domestic role” (9).

All things considered, a woman of this time seems to have had to face a hard choice: be a woman and therefore less of an achieving individual or an achieving individual and therefore less a woman. It was assumed that she could not be both. The two stories analyzed below capture such frustration of the *fin de siècle* American women.

## THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER: FROM ISOLATION TO LIBERATION

First published in 1892, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” tells the story of a young woman suffering from what her physician husband describes as “temporary nervous depression, a slight hysterical tendency” (726). In the story, it is clear from the beginning that the main character’s illness is further worsened by the kind of treatment she receives—isolation, deprivation from work and total rest by her ‘well-meaning’ husband. This leads her to the brink of madness, which, ironically, makes up the most interesting part of the story as it is at this stage that she is most awake and discovers the real cause of her suffering and the way out of it: “I’ve got out at last in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back” (732).

The yellow wall-paper with its “hideous” (728) color, “torturing” (729) pattern and its horrible, suffocating odor, suggests the emptiness, stagnation and constraint of this woman’s lifestyle. Her final act is an attempt to escape from the domestic enclosure which circumscribes her in a socially-defined role and limited connections with others. Gilman seems to deliberately have not given a name to her character to suggest that her situation was that of most women of the time.

The presence of a “loving” and “caring” (727) husband implies that love alone is not sufficient in marriage. Her marriage being a bondage and her being treated like a child may be the very roots of the main character’s illness. John may be loving, but she is deprived of freedom to speak up, to work and write: “John would not hear of it (...) he looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word” (732). Her talent as a writer is being wasted because of this senseless issue of role expectations—writing being regarded as a deviation from what is ‘normal’ for a woman or housewife: “John’s sister is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper and hopes for no better profession. I believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick” (729).

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1 In this article, it is used to refer to the changes related to the situation of 19<sup>th</sup> century women and the new fiction (produced by women) that emerged.

2 See the collection of essays *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (2001), edited by A. Richardson and C. Willis.

“I have a schedule prescription for every hour of the day (...) he hardly lets me stir without special direction” (727).

She feels watched over by the wall-paper as much as John and Jane watch over her:

“This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!” (729)

The greatest error John makes is that of not taking the time to understand what his wife feels: “It is hard to talk with John about my case” (729). Instead, he does what *he* thinks is best for her, exemplifying as such the godlike attitude of the medical profession. John’s other mistake is being blindly guided by logic: “John does not know how much I suffer. He knows there is *no reason* to suffer and that satisfies him. (He) scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (726). Her distress at not being heard and not being taken seriously is also accompanied by a feeling of inferiority and helpless submissiveness: “John laughs at me, but one can expect that in marriage. He does not believe I am sick. But what can one do (...) I was beginning to be afraid of John” (725). She cries a lot.

Not only does inequality in marriage ensure the protagonist’s immobility, which is facilitated by her being treated like a child, but it also cultivates deceit: “I hate having to be so sly about it [writing]” (726). She shifts from being manipulated to manipulating not only by not telling her husband what is going on, but also by pretending to be taking her pills.

She is confused; the chaotic pattern of the wall-paper is the very perplexity of her mind: “curves [that] commit suicide plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in the most unheard of contradictions” (727). In her desperate search for the way out, she becomes fascinated by the wall-paper: “I’m getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall-paper. Perhaps *because* of the wall-paper” (727). The wall-paper provides the possibility for reading that she has been denied. She starts ‘reading’ the wall-paper to discover what is beneath. What she finds is a woman who “by daylight is subdued, quiet (in the wall-paper which) at night becomes bars” (728). The peak of the story is the point in which she identifies with the woman in the wallpaper: “I wonder if they have come out of the wallpaper as *I* did” (732). The woman who wants to hide and the one who wants the hiding to be stopped become one; the liberation of the woman locked in the wall-paper becomes a struggle to liberate herself, although everything is antagonistic, from the barred window to the nailed-down bed—symbol of her immobility.

This story challenges our perceptions about insanity. The protagonist goes mad (creeping around the room), but ironically, it is only at this point that she seems to fully realize her situation. It is a moment of illumination and awakening—however paradoxical it may appear—which leaves us with several questions. Does this mean that definitions of insanity are relative? Does it mean that a prescription of female madness by male doctors overcasts description of it (i.e. women are insane only when/because prescribed as such by male doctors)? The end of this story challenges (and confounds) our idea on whether it can be considered a liberating story. Although liberation is incomplete due to its protagonist’s insanity, at least, it can throw a critique to society accusing it of a potential consequence of the segregation of women. For Quawas, it may be effective in that an insane person is ironically *free* to say or do anything since that is justified under the label of insanity. In addition, madness becomes “not only a form of rebellion but a potentially healing response to conflicting social demands” (47).

“The Yellow Wall-Paper” is an important piece of writing because it gives us glimpses of what was happening at the time. For example, the so-called “rest cure” was the most common therapy used to treat depression at the time. It consisted in seclusion of the sick person, a high fat and caloric diet, retreat of the sick to a specialized institution for six weeks and in some cases electric stimulation. Critic Russett explains that it was a common nineteenth century belief that it was women’s attempt to do more than what was typically womanly which led them to depression. They were made to believe that such ‘extra’ activities required additional energy, which resulted in a deranged mind.

Despite its dramatic ending, we can still say that “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is effective. While the story may be interpreted from many perspectives, there is one point at which they all meet: the

need to change a male-dominated world, which can only be achieved through the liberation and emancipation of women. As Gilman herself noted in her *Women and Economics* (alluding to the evolutionary theory), women's confinement to domestic activities had made them more primitive and underdeveloped than men. If women had not emancipated, the whole race would be dragged down (62).

Written only in a couple of days, this story has often been seen as strongly autobiographical, having as an immediate context its author's own depression. Like Gilman herself, the main character is also fond of writing. The writer only managed to escape the domestic trap by divorcing "an entirely satisfactory husband" (O'Neill 38) and giving up her child for the sake of her career as a writer and feminist theoretician. Gilman did not stop after achieving her personal battle but made it the fight of other women by attacking a whole system which restricted women to home. Rejected by a Bostonian physician as a story whose only reading could drive people mad, it met an immediate response by Gilman who blurted out that "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy and it worked" (Gilman, "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wall-Paper'").

However, it was not Gilman's only attack to the system. She also reflected on women's social role in her *Women and Economics* (1898) by claiming that all women needed to work, not just for themselves but for the society as well. She strongly believed that women needed to become economically independent if they wanted to be considered equal with men, which would in turn benefit marriage (67). Another blow against the system and particularly on the cult of domesticity would come in *The Home* (1903). Gilman called for a domestic revolution in addition to an institutional one believing that the change should come from within (qtd. in O'Neill 38).

## AWAKENING TO A NEW IDENTITY: CHALLENGING THE CONVENTIONS OF 'TRUE' WOMANHOOD

*The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, first published in 1899, provides another interesting source about the situation of nineteenth century women in the USA. Edna, 28, wife of 40-year-old businessman Leonce Pontellier and mother of two children, leads a seemingly quiet life. Although her husband is described as kind, she is not happy. Having done everything out of habit up to that moment, Edna becomes aware of her unhappiness while on holiday at Grand Isle, especially after getting to know Robert Lebrun, 26, son of the vacation house's owner, who likes keeping company to his mother's lodgers. Robert (unlike Edna's husband) has long conversations with her. He is the first trigger for Edna's awakening from her life of dullness:

Edna Pontellier could not have told why, wishing to go to the beach with Robert, she should in the first place have declined, and in the second place have followed in obedience to one of the two contradictory impulses which impelled her. A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her—the light which, showing the way, forbids it. At that early period, it served but to bewilder her. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears. In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning 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. (17)

Edna's awakening is a result of her starting to see herself as an individual in her own right rather than what society expects her to be. She understands that she is more than just a mother and wife; she is first and foremost a woman. Split between her obligations and social expectations on the one hand ("If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" 7), and her longing to live as a free woman, on the other, the choice is not easy. It is only when she gives up trying to be a model wife in the New Orleans Creole community that her character develops, liberating her inner emotions and artistic ambitions. What is happening is 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" (69).

Edna's change is not unexpected. She definitely does not appear to belong among the mother-women who "seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle, (...), idealized their children, [and] worshiped their husbands" (12). Since the very beginning, she is described as different both

physically with her “graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd” (19) and emotionally:

“Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature” (18). And she was aware of this: “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (18).

Edna appears as the exact opposite of Adèle Ratignolle, “the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm (...), the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams” (12) who adores her husband and children, lives to serve them and needs not dream of anything else. Indirectly, however, Madame Ratignolle’s openness also stimulates Edna’s awakening helping to “loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (18).

Alcée Arabin, a handsome, good-humored young man, is another stimulus to Edna’s awakening. Following Robert’s departure for Mexico at the realization of his impossible love with a married woman, Alcée pursues Edna in a casual relationship which raises her awareness of her own sexuality: “It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (88).

Mademoiselle Reisz is another important character orbiting Edna and enhancing her illumination. An independent ‘old spinster’ who is described as rude and ugly by other characters, her music and free spirit captivate Edna, and the two become close friends. Mademoiselle Reisz is Edna’s alter ego and Edna is magnetically attracted to her: “the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free” (83).

In addition to people, it is also the sea that stimulates Edna’s awakening by providing her with the space and solitude she needs to contemplate: “The voice of the sea is seductive (...) 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” (18). When she swims, Edna feels like intoxicated with her newly conquered power. The sea provides her with “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” (32).

The more Edna self-isolates, the more she enjoys her solitude and the more she grows disinterested and even hostile to the world: “She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (58). She even starts thinking of her husband as “a person whom she had married without love as an excuse” (82).

The new Edna stands for what many women can only live in their fantasies—liberty from restrictions and dependence imposed by marriage, and the opportunity of being regarded as a person in one’s own right as contrasted with the roles ascribed by society. However, this does not come without a cost. Edna’s change affects her relationship with others, including Madame Ratignolle. The first crack in their friendship follows Edna’s declaration

“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 (...) the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language” (52).

The contrast between the traditional woman (embodied by Madame Ratignolle) and an independent woman on the make (Edna) becomes even sharper when one evening, invited by the Ratignolles, Edna realizes she is bored by her friend being “keenly interested in everything [her husband said] laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth (...). Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her” 61).

Despite surface strength and resistance to conform tradition, the transition is not easy. At first, Edna is perplexed about the woman she is becoming:

One of these days, she said, I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it (87).

Her internal frustration is externalized by Mademoiselle Reisz's observation that "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (88). Birds, symbolically standing for the freedom women are denied, recur throughout the story. At the end of the novel, there is a bird free from a cage but with a crippled wing, symbolizing Edna's fragility following her newly found independence.

As the story unfolds, we see that she becomes fully aware of what the society would consider as indecent and irresponsible, but has no regrets, "resolved never to take another step backward" (62). As she tells Robert: "I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself" (111). This newly acquired skill gives her the freedom to be the owner of herself instead of "one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions" (113).

The evolution of Edna's awakening takes a new turn once her husband and children leave as she "breathed a big, genuine sigh of relief, a feeling that was unfamiliar but very delicious" (77). She has reached a point at which "there was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual" (99). Relieving herself from obligations empowers her as an individual. She begins "to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life" (99).

Mr. Pontellier, on his end, has been a rather courteous husband "so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife" (61). But her new, unconventional behavior and disregard for her duties as a wife enrage him: "It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (62). At some point he even thinks that his wife is growing a little mentally unbalanced and calls for a doctor whom he tells that "she doesn't act well. She's odd, she's not like herself. I can't make her out" (70). The doctor attributes her uncommon behavior to a possible involvement with "a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual beings" (70).

Another male figure in the novel, Edna's father, the embodiment of conservatism at its highest with regard to womanhood reproaches Leonce for being "too lenient" (76) pointing out that what is needed is authority and coercion: "Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it" (76).

Robert, the first drive to Edna's awakening, left because he loved her and did not want to enter an affair that would harm them both. Upon his return, Edna discovers that he is unable to come to grips with her newfound freedom. Indeed, he seems hopelessly bound by the traditional values of the French Creole community. By such an attitude, Robert shows to be no less conservative than Edna's husband and can thus no longer be a trigger for further awakening; on the opposite, it marks the first crack in Edna's antisocial struggle, it is the evidence of the futility of her attempts. At this point, she can no longer go back, but without any support, she cannot go ahead either. Trapped between two clashing worlds—the internal and the external—Edna understands she cannot completely tear herself away from the threads binding her to the hateful concepts surrounding her, awakening for a final time only to understand that she has no place in this world and that one person alone cannot change the world. It is this realization, this second awakening that leads to the tragic end of Edna's life, her suicide.

The end of the story is a reminder that tradition is often too strong to be trespassed; the woman who transgresses must be punished. Madame Bovary and Ana Karenina are but a few classical examples. But is Edna's drowning a punishment? Probably not. She may have lost her battle against a world enmeshed in conventions, but still, she is showing strength and courage at not accepting to reconcile with a world in which she does not fit, a world which does not accept her for the woman she has become. She is once more making a choice of her own, for her own.

The novel met no little disapproval upon its publication, mainly criticized by male reviewers for its explicit sexual references, bad influence on young people and especially the fact that Chopin does not condemn her heroine at a time when it was believed that it was a writer's duty to



remove “morally diseased” characters and “adult sin” (Wells). Apparently, as Howard notes, despite the changes that had been taking place by the end of the nineteenth century, it was still too early to accept independence for women or a single sexual standard for both genders. The unfavorable reception of the book is a reflection of the Puritan morality, which was still influential at the time: “Puritan morality became a rigid stronghold imposing its restrictive influence on artistic endeavors as well as on practical aspects of life” (Holland 7). To critiques, Chopin would simply respond: “There should be an eleventh commandment: Thou shalt not preach!” (qtd. in Howard)

Why does Chopin make an unconventional woman the protagonist of her story? A close reading of the writer’s autobiography helps understand that. Daughter of an Irish immigrant, she grew up in a household of women. Her great-grandmother entertained her with tales of women who “dared and seldom married” (Howard). She was a zealous reader, started writing at a very young age (which was very uncommon for women of her time) and attended higher education. Her getting married at the age of twenty and bearing six children did not stop Kate from either reading and writing or other activities she enjoyed doing. In this light, she was a very modern type of woman for her time. In the New Orleans community, she challenged a number of conventions from leaping astride her husband’s horse, to helping out in his shop, smoking, walking about the city alone, or exploring the area by car, which may explain why she chose to write about “human existence in its subtle, complex true meaning, stripped of the veil of convention” (Howard).

## CONCLUSION

Literature may offer an interesting source to learn more about the past. Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and Chopin’s *The Awakening* present similar stories of the situation of women in late nineteenth century American society. Both written by female authors and narrated from the point of view of a female protagonist, these pieces are important in documenting and giving glimpses of women struggling with the suppressing sexist society in which they lived.

Through a vivid psychological portrayal of the heroines in the physical and social setting they inhabited, these stories provide interesting representations of the social and family life of the time by critically addressing issues concerning women in the *fin de siècle*. They offer testimony to the clash of the two ideologies of the period— ‘The Cult of True Womanhood’ on the one hand and ‘The New Woman’ on the other.

While we do not see the public roles discussed by scholar Morgan, we do see the ‘cult of true womanhood’ about which Welter discusses (in Jane, the sister in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and Madame Ratignolle in *The Awakening*).

The selected pieces chronicle a woman’s doomed search for independence and self-realization through ‘reading’, writing, and contemplation in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and sexual experimentation, solitude, and art in the case of *The Awakening*. In both cases, breaking off such a society—through insanity in the first story and suicide in the second—is the means by which the main characters free themselves from patriarchal seclusion.

The message shared by both is that marriage and the duties it involves impose a value system on women that limits their perspective and experience, and compromises their moral, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional freedom. When a whole society contributes to maintaining clearly defined roles, the consequences may be fatal. Although the above tell personal stories and have a tragic ending, they can still be significant as their heroines are an epitome of the new women of late nineteenth century and the ideals they were fighting for. The protagonists become aware about their situation and attempt to change it. In this way, these stories serve at both reflecting as well as influencing the women readers. Despite being emotional and private struggles, they manage to give the idea that it is from the individual that the fight must start; the private needs of women are as indispensable as the public ones. These stories capture the essence of the struggle for freedom, equality and independence in which women have been engaged for 150 years. They are a perfect example of Chopin’s philosophy that “it is better to wake up after all even to suffer, than to remain a dupe to illusion all one’s life” (*The Awakening* 120). Despite their fictional nature, these pieces are pamphlets of feminism making women readers aware of their situation and encouraging them to change it.

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