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American Literature

**SELF RELIANCE PROHIBITED**

Ralph Waldo Emerson makes it clear that we should return to our states of genius and become self-reliant. Although his writings were meant only for the white male, it influenced many others as well. Members of society need to stop censoring themselves, as well as others, because it becomes a world not worth living in when forced to assimilate. Kate Chopin was a student of the Emerson belief system and she saw this as well. She is one of the many people who depicts censorship leading to devastation within her writings. For centuries the way to fit within a society is always to assimilate, otherwise you are seen as outrageous and rude. “I ought go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways” (Emerson 1) says Emerson in regards to culture affecting ones actions. We would be better people if we could go upright and speak our mind consistently without a negative connotation applied.

    Women from birth are trained to become submissive “lady like” housewives. Edna Pontellier, a character from “The Awakening” by Kate Chopin, was no exception to this cultural norm. She had a good husband, two kids, and a good amount of wealth at her disposal. Yet Edna was more of a possession and child in this time. At the age of 28 she began to realize that she was unhappy:

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. (Chopin 2)

This leads her to experience multiple epiphanies that give her an awakening.

Edna realizes that the life she’s been living is not one she wanted to exist in, so she promises herself she will go to find what does make her happy and will never take a step back. She leaves her husband and her kids. Here Chopin metatextualizes Emerson, “I shun father and mother, and wife and brother when my genius calls me” (Emerson 3).  She wanted the feet they took from her at birth back. Men have feet and can move where and when they wanted to, she wanted the same amount of mobility. Her genius called, and it was art. So she has her mentor Mademoiselle help her into this process. Being an artist already Mademoiselle has some first advice for Edna. Chopin writes:

To be an artist includes much;...the artist must possess the courageous    soul...Courageous, ma foi! The Brave soul. The soul that dares and defies. (Chopin 4)

Edna is persistent, and even after a pushback such as this one she is still willing to head towards her goal of self-reliance and freedom. She has begun to have a taste of it and she knows there is no life to live if it’s not her life.

Step one and two when trying to become self-reliant is leave what holds you back then find what frees you.  For Rena and John Characters from "The House behind the Cedars" they believe what held them back was the fact that they were of African descent. So they take the first steps, they leave their homes where people know they’re black and they begin life anew in a white society. Being mulattoes this works for John who left home first. He has tremendous success, and when he comes back for his sister Rena it begins as success but ends in tragedy. Societies will not allow a person to be self-reliant. Whether it be through force or mental repression, being self-reliant represents disloyalty to some people’s societies, in their head you think you’re better than they are or have a right they feel you do not deserve

The laws for Edna and the Walden’s were similar. Women’s rights were due to the Napoleonic Code, which were brought to the American people from the European standards. The code states several things. One is that when a man is relocating his woman HAS to follow. As well as the man can cheat on wife with no repercussions as long as the mistress isn’t brought home. Women were equity, an insurance that the male was not ever lonely if his bedroom associates ever decided to leave. Like Edna a character in “A Doll's House” Nora leaves her husband and her kids. As she packs to leave she tells her husband:

Torvald. I have heard that when a wife deserts her husband’s house, as I am doing now, he is legally free from all obligations towards her. In any case I set you free from all your obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect freedom on both sides. (Henrik Ibsen 5)

Edna releases herself from any actions she felt were obligatory with in her relationship. She is not bound to him, nor him to her.

For African Americans it was a period where slavery just ended and almost no one in society was ready to accept this. They were no longer technically property, but most definitely lower than a third rate citizen. Both women and African Americans had to assimilate, a lot of generations were born into this. Instead of some having to assimilate systems were set up so that they were trained and raised to be this way already. For instance a young girl being bought a play oven, baby doll that has “real spit up action”, and a stroller were just given the training tools for her future, while maintaining a sense of "herself".

Crow Foot, Sitting Bull’s son shows him how they allow him to catch his own food. To me this is the most powerful scene, as well as the best representation of what the Europeans were doing to the Natives. In the three steps of assimilation; Language, Religion, and Education, getting food falls under one of these. They believe that educated people need not hunt for their food but raise it and kill it. The reason they allowed Crow Foot and others to “Hunt “ for their meal is because a major part of structured assimilation is assuring people still feel like they’re being themselves. They also make them into children, only giving them clothes and food when they ask for it. If you have to ask for your essentials every time you need them it is a constant reminder that you are not in control.

    The cultures that were the most singular with nature were the Native American. They saw this land as beautiful and as alive as they were. They had more than respect for nature they had an internal bond. Their bond was so strong that they would die for their beliefs in nature. Like Edna they would never take a step back. Edna made this rule to make sure her path to self-reliance was arrived at, but for the Native Americans have already reached it. So anything other than what they had was taking away the freedom they had for all these years.

    The Sioux could not simply give in. The Sioux was one of the last tribes to give in, even when they did they continued with the Ghost Dance. This was a dance brought to the Native Americans by a prophet by the name of Wovoka. The ghost dance to the tribes were a way to reunite them with their dead loved ones. The hope was to bring peace, prosperity, and unity to their tribe, situation, and lives. To the soldiers they only believed the Ghost Dance was to spark a revolution which had the dance banned, anyone caught participating in these dances would be handled by the soldiers. The natives would not conform. Society would not let them be self-reliant anymore. To take a step back would be like death to them, but not taking a step back was death to them. They had to die to keep their beliefs alive. A Sioux proverb says; "It is easy to be brave from a distance, easy and quite safe”. (Wounded Knee 6) They were noble, they were brave, and as the proverb says it was not safe.

    The Sioux was a living representation of “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau. Essentially this is the refusal to comply with governments rules, usually based from personal beliefs that it is wrong to follow the laws. Thoreau cannot comprehend how one can be satisfied with not getting back what is theirs. He says:

How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely, and enjoy it? Is there any enjoyment in it, if his opinion is that he is aggrieved? If you are cheated out of a single dollar by your neighbor, you do not rest satisfied with knowing you are cheated, or with saying that you are cheated, or even with petition him to pay you your due; but you take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount, and see to it that you are never cheated again. (Thoreau 7)

The Sioux seem to have the beliefs that these 19th and 20th century great minds believe we should have now. Europe seem to have robbed the Natives of their home. Seems like the world lost the chance to have them pass on their beliefs. This was like the bully being put in the room with the good kid expecting or hoping the good child would rub off on the bully. What did happen was the bully not only corrupted the good kid but he killed him after he wouldn’t act exactly like him.

Emerson gives us the solution to find our genius. “Self-Reliance” by Emerson claims:

What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behavior of children, babes, and even brutes? Their mind being whole, their eye is yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces we are disconcerted. Infancy conforms to nobody; all conform to it; so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it (Emerson 8)

We are suggested to return to return to the unaltered states of living. As an infant who knows nothing and has yet to conform, and to nature, complete pure nature which follows nothing but the rays of the sun.

Edna had to die because she couldn’t discover happiness in the era she lived in. There was a moment when Edna first felt free from this, she finally swims alone, and without the help of anyone. She felt like she could do anything. She could venture and do what no man could do. Her suicide was the most selfless thing she did for herself. She went back to freedom, like a prisoner refusing to abide by the rules of the cage that housed her she set herself free. The women's suffrage had not yet started and in Mrs. Pontellier’s eyes I am sure she saw no change n the behavior of her society and she felt no hope for them. She at a point says:

I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. I can’t make it clearer; it’s only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.(Chopin 9)

She meant every word of this. This was for her children, husband and anyone else who tried to hold her back when her genius called. To not step forward, to the sea would be giving herself to the world. Edna definitely tried to embrace tenets from social and cultural ques. Yet this exact thing is what made her unhappy. Without feeling this sense of freedom she had no comparison to how trapped she felt previously. Culture won’t let her remove its restricting shackles. She says she will never again take a step backwards, to ensure herself she is moving towards her goal. She shuns all others against her genius, yet she was still expected to censor herself. With the rule she set of taking no steps backwards there was no other way to go but back to the sea where she first felt complete freedom. Much like Oedipus the King when he swore the person who is guilty would be cast out, he doomed himself as did she did by setting law in her mind to never go back.

As much as we are caged and conditioned, like the animals we are we want our freedom back. It’s instinctual, from birth we have the urge to resist structures being laid out by our parents. Assimilation, conformity, they are both detrimental to health. The health and progression of a culture or society. The mental health of us, while we can pretend and be hoaxed into believing this is what we want but we need to become self-reliant. Censor bars are toxic. The people being forced to assimilate are always the ones who are hurt, watch how you assimilate.

"There is a redemptive power that a choice has, rather than feeling that you're an effect to all the things that are happening, make a choice, you just decide, what's it's gonna be, who you're going to be, how you're going to do it, you just decide." (Smith 10)

Our decisions drive our lives. We believe that we have to do things but we never do. We decide to not run if a gun is pointed at us because we don’t want to face the bullet that’ll end us, but we can still run if we are willing to face it.