Research Paper

ENG 2200 American Literature:

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Abstract

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist in *The Awakening*, and Rena, the protagonist in *The House Behind the Cedars*, are trapped in a world dominated by men. This paper evaluates the introduction of feminism in that time of society and societal values, of women and how they think they should behave. In this context, the second section elaborates women struggling to live up to strict cultural standards from a society that is male dominant. Two main similarities of Edna and Rena are that they both have an awakening and are like caged birds without freedom. Then, through Chopin’s focus on Mademoiselle Reisz as a suggested role model for Edna, I will display how it allows her to see that the life of freedom and individuality that she wants goes against both society and nature. In the last part, this paper will explore the significance of how Chopin and Chessnut used common relationships involving men so they can explore the females characters reaction to each. My research will ultimately allow the reader to get an understanding of how these relationships advance Edna and Rena's self-knowledge and how it contributed to their awakening.

People have always been interested in tales of glorified tragedy and chaos ; which is

exhibited throughout a variety of Kate Chopin writings and is intended to send a very powerful message to readers . Chopin style of writing captures the attention of readers for it’s blunt and unpleasant nature in her stories. Many of Kate Chopin short stories explore our fascination with intelligent women in the generally male-ruled society of Louisiana, turning real-life

events into fictionalized versions.

Chopin writings usually expose women’s revolt against conformity, often against gender conformity or against social norms that limit women’s possibilities in life. (“Kate Chopin's Themes”) Chopin’s writings emphasized women’s struggles for freedom, but she did not consider herself a feminist, although she was certainly a feminist far ahead of her time. She believed that women were not only put on earth to please men, but that they also have feelings and desires of sexual natures of their own. As exhibited, the sexual revolution was never about entitling men or women to sex. Basically, the sexual revolution brought sex outside of traditional heterosexual marriage and into other situations, such as committed relationships (without marriage), casual encounters, same-sex relationships, sex with yourself.

The author is popular for her stories related to women’s search for selfhood, for self-discovery or identity which appears realistic to the reader allowing them to feel as if they have been there. In her writing, Chopin dreams her way into fiction as if she was a character in one of her stories. Most of Chopin fictional characters are women. These women are victimized by men, in which in her stories, Chopin creates a culture that is dominated by men.

In The Awakening, Edna Pontellier awakens only begins after who she perceives herself to be, and who she actually is. The novel captures the inner life of a woman oppressed by Victorian society, who is forced to live for the sake of others . As illustrated in the text, “She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves.” (Chopin, Kate.) Edna relearns who she is, reclaims the dreams of her youth, and abandons her husband and children. At this time in American history, Louisiana was governed under Napoleonic Code and Louisiana Law. The Napoleonic Code said that all of the wife’s "accumulations" after marriage belonged to the husband and that the husband automatically got custody of children in a divorce.

*Napoleon did not believe in equality for women, so they received none of the rights in the Napoleonic code.Under Napoleon's Civil Code women were declared to be inferior to men by and children had no rights at all. It recognized civil marriage and divorce but left the wife with restricted powers over property. Minor children had absolutely no rights; the father had absolute control over them. (How did Napoleon's Civil Code treat women?)*

Mr. Pontellier does not understand Edna’s need for freedom and does not care. He keeps her trapped and does not want her to have freedom. Robert, on the other hand is the one that takes her to the sea all of the time and is willing to take Edna to her freedom, as explained in the case with Emerson’s "Self-Reliance," this ignites the idea of Edna redeeming her “awakening” by following her own beliefs and ideas. “Even as a child she had lived her own small life within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life - that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin, Kate.)

Edna has been placed into the role of motherhood even though she is characterized as not being a “mother-woman”. She does not want to live the life of Adele Ratignolle, who is a great mother and wife. Instead she aspires to be an artist like Mlle Reisz. In which it is illustrated in the text, "Courageous, ma foi! The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies." According to Mademoiselle Reisz, it takes bravery to be an artist, as instructing Edna that an artistic soul must dare and defy society. At the end of the book, Edna walks into the sea and takes her life but because she has found freedom, but it is not accepted by society, and she will not live in a world where she is not free and can not be herself. Chopin establishes some key similarities in the novel with Edna. This novel focuses on a woman who is trying to reconcile her views on femininity and motherhood with those of the very conservative South versus the real life criticism Chopin received whilst critics calling *The Awakening* a scandal because of its portrayal of a strong, unconventional woman involved in an adulterous affair.

“What distressed critics was not that Chopin published a steamy and controversial novel which was inappropriate for young people, for that type of literature was available in plenty. Rather, what sparked their fury was that Chopin was an established author and respected member of the higher echelons of society. Critics took offense that Chopin condoned (or at least did not condemn) Edna's immoral behavior.” ("Kate Chopin's The Awakening: A Critical Reception.)

It shows the compromise of self and values to to embraced in "normal" society.

Madame Ratignolle is the epitome of motherhood and femininity. The relationship between both Madame Ratignolle and Edna, is illustrated while Edna begins to share her thoughts with her, and although she cared for her deeply, she views Adele's decision of being a victorian woman as that of caged bird. Edna wished that Adele could experience the same self discovery that she had found on Grand Isle. "She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle... pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment..." (676). Edna’s relationship with Madame Ratignolle is opposite, and if Edna had conformed to her lifestyle the plot would have changed in a way that would have not encouraged Edna, who is at a period of self-discovery that causes all of her beliefs to change which challenges her development.

This tendency to conform occurs in small groups and/or society as a whole. As prevalent in society today, there are many existing social norms in society which, instead of giving any benefit, cause consequences for women. Most of the time women repress their desires in order to conform to the social norms; however, those who go against social norms are considered as social outcasts and are treated harshly.

*Female oppression is having to claim physical illness to avoid sex because men won’t take “no” for an answer. Female oppression is men being so entitled that they think being denied sex is oppressive. Before the sexual revolution, men were held to a lower standard than women. Women were expected to be virgins while the men gallivanted around. There were many things that happened to women who got pregnant before the sexual revolution; for one thing, there were some women who were forced into shotgun marriages. .(TOP 10 REASONS WHY WE NEED FEMINISM)*

To further develop, Feminism is the idea that women should be treated as an equal part of society. They should get the vote, they should be able to be in positions of power, they should earn the same amount of money for doing the same job as a man. equal opportunity.I guess the point is, that men and women have been /are being held to different norms and expectations in society. Feminism is challenged in a way that it is an insistence that these differences exist to subjugate women and privilege men and that gender equity can be achieved by affecting the status of women

In American author Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars*, Rena’s primary dilemma centers on her mixed racial identity. Black woman are still fighting against and deal with sexism and colorism within society, including the black community.Unfortunately, Black woman had to become strong black women because most of them had to run the family or "step up to the plate" when black men would not or could not be men(i.e. Bread- winners) go out and work on top of taking care of the family. So black woman had to step in to what was "traditionally a male role" to take care of the family. Most blacks were never afforded the luxury of defining themselves. “After the Civil War, Southern whites, not wanting this swirling of races to get out of hand and seeking to keep the white race as pure and powerful as possible, instituted a rule that anyone with "one drop" of black blood was black.” (P. Kladky, William.)

*Racial mixing-"miscegenation"-was the white South's worst fear, and their social and legal regulations show how deeply rooted this fear was in Southern society. Immediately after the Civil War, Southern states passed onerous laws to maintain their legal control and economic power over African Americans in response to the 1865 passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which ended slavery. Under slavery, whites had disciplined blacks mostly outside the law. (P. Kladky, William.)*

Rena, a young, light-skinned African-American woman, explores racial passing which forces her to constrict to limited choices in the post-Civil War South. The story opens up with her brother John Warwick, given his appearance, he is a mulatto and decided to try and make something out of himself, he succeeds and proves people wrong. He decides to be a lawyer and he eventually becomes being one of the most successful lawyers. Passing for white offered not only opportunities, but also the opportunities white people received. During slavery, it could mean freedom. The study, titled *"African Ancestry of the White American Population,"* indicates that during the 1940s, approximately 15,550 fair-skinned blacks per year crossed the color line. The study estimated that by 1950, about 21 percent or 28 million of the 135 million categorized as white had black ancestry within the past four generations.(STUCKERT, ROBERT P) There are many documented instances of fair-skinned slaves who posed as white to escape. The whole idea of having to pretend to be someone you're not just to be given equal opportunity and a chance at the "American Dream" It required other people who were willing to keep your secret, and a community that was willing to let you go and look the other way, even when it hurt.Quite a compelling story that deals with an aspect of African American history that still has an impact today. It shows the compromise of self and values to to embraced in "normal" society.

John encounters little difficulty during his transformation into the white side, but Rena isn’t as successful since John is empowered by his fair skin and manners. Rena is known to not be the most intelligent despite being beautiful:

*The girl was beaming with gratified vanity. What woman*

*would not find such praise sweet from almost any source,*

*and how much more so from this great man, who, from his*

*exalted station in the world, must surely know the things*

*whereof he spoke! She believed every word of it; she knew it*

*very well indeed, but wished to hear it repeated and itemized*

*and emphasized. (Chesnutt,14)*

“Rena possessed neither John's lack of conscience nor the resiliency needed to reclaim some place in her social world. She is seemingly a white woman in a black woman's social station; Rena is happy as a Black woman in Patesville, yet John wants her to pass for white and marry a white man to strengthen the families legacy. Therefore her psychological and physical states are thrown into upheaval leading to her demise”. (Passing as a Form of Punishment and Social Convention.) Rejected by her white love and white life, she determines to devote herself to "her people…At the time women were not seen as equal beings, yet it makes sense to fight for all the struggles rather than one.

Both Chopin and Chesnutt were bombarded with an onslaught of unfavorable reviews. Most critics regarded the novel,  *The Awakening* as vulgar, unwholesome, unholy, and a misappropriation of Chopin's exceptional literary talent.(“Kate Chopin's The Awakening: A Critical Reception.") However, decades after her death, literary critics rediscovered her work and began to celebrate her stories for their strong perspectives on female independence and sexuality. Chesnutt's writings about slavery and mulattos living on the “color line” allowed readers a deeper understanding of racial issues. His criticism of social injustice during the reconstruction period of the late 1800s intensified as he dealt with issues considered sensitive and controversial for his time, such as miscegenation. Both authors preeminence in the public eye is also of importance, and their novels illustrated a glorified tragedy that is intended to send a very powerful message to its readers; in that racism and sexism leads to senseless tragedy,

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