The American Dream: A Study of its True Components and its Inevitable Oppression of the American People.

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Abstract

Both books “The Awakening” by Kate Chopin and “The House Behind The Cedars” by Charles W. Chesnutt, deal with the oppression and the subjugation of an entire people. They deal with it by creating an example, both in the form of women, in which they tell a story. A story which tells us of how exactly the calculated subjugation and oppression is and always has been. The oppression is both seen through the eyes of a white woman, and a black woman, but the outcome is the same respectively. This is because both books point out the reality of not being able to exist in a society freely. Neither society, in which either book takes place, permits a person of the main characters kind to be free. As the main characters of each book learn to think freely, they realize they cannot act freely. This creates the ultimate conflict in each book, which calls for each of the main characters demises. In both books we see that the idea of “being American” actually prevents an individual’s from being free if they are simply not a white Anglo-Saxon protestant man. Each book shows how the American dream has been manipulated, and how the calculative oppression and lack of freedom for women and African-Americans began.

(The American Dream, 1)

 When looking at any American literature we see influences from so many places, and so many complex struggles displayed beautifully and bluntly. The stories of struggle; the amount of history and knowledge, and firsthand depiction, is why we cherish American literature. The struggle for America and Americans to be free is a huge part of our history. But ironically enough, the struggle of the common modern American, whether African-American, Italian-American, or just American and a woman to be free is the most important story for this lesson. To be free in free America is the struggle that shows us the most about human nature when looking at American literature. Although people throughout history have wanted to be free, it does not seem that they care for the freedom of the entirety of humankind. They simply are concerned with their own. And even further, leaders throughout history have oppressed and stolen freedom for other people, in order to gain their own freedom. Those in power, the men who lead our societies, have always existed within this double standard. Those in power will always hinder the mobility of the weak if this will increase their own mobility. Regardless what they preach those in power usually do not have altruistic motives, and have not in the past. The struggle to be free for the common people still is one of the biggest struggles today and always has been since the creation of society. Two books, each with a similar main character, point out this struggle. The main characters, both women, in the books give us a firsthand experience of what it would be like during this time period to be oppressed. Each woman is oppressed differently, but both stories show the calculated way in which people are oppressed in a society. In the book “The Awakening” published in 1899 by Kate Chopin, the main character Edna Pontellier realizes that in her society, a woman cannot be free. Women have to exist by the

(The American Dream, 2)

standards of men because they are owned by men. Her struggle to be free ends with her realizing she cannot be because of the parameters set by society for a woman’s existence. Her unwillingness to live within these parameters causes her ultimate death at the end of the book. In the book “The House Behind the Cedars” by Charles W. Chesnutt the main character Rena realizes that she cannot be free due to the parameters set around African-American existence, regardless of the fact that she is a woman. For her similar unwillingness to live without being free, she has to die as well as Edna. Society does not allow certain people to be free, and when one thinks freely but cannot act upon their actions, internal conflict begins within the individual. Because of the lack of weight held in the individuals well being or desire to be free, society will always impinge the individual’s life and hinder the individual’s ability to live whole. Here we see that these conflicts are caused by social precepts that define “being American”. Following precepts which define “being American” do not speak to the individual and do nothing except further the lack of freedom the individual has. Being American has become synonymous with being oppressed for the colored and or female American.

 The Awakening deals with the American woman at the turn of the 20th century. Edna Pontellier, a woman who is part of an affluent family with a husband and her kids. Leisure is not

shortage for Edna. She doesn’t even have to cook dinner for her husband as most women would have to. She is privileged in every sense that one could imagine privilege in this time period for an American family in the south. But quickly in the book Chopin shows us that Edna is not a mother woman. This is a key factor in Edna’s awakening, but also in her revelation of the deluded American Dream. Early on in the book Chopin’s description of Edna creates a very

(The American Dream, 3)

strong character, a formidable opponent for society. This strong character, isn’t like most women. She isn’t designed to be a mother. That is not her purpose in life. This is shown to us through descriptive aspects of Chopin’s writing. In the seventh chapter of the book Chopin begins be describing Edna. This shows the reader the overall tone of the book and the purpose of Edna as a character. Edna is designed to point out the fallacies of the American Dream and the oppression and lack of mobility the woman had in the early 1900s. “Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature. Even as child she had lived her own small life all within herself.” (Chopin, 13) Here Chopin discusses Edna’s nature. It shows that she is introverted to an extent; it shows that she also keeps to herself to a large extent. This shows the reader the nature of Edna’s life, and how her true feelings and desires have always been stifled within her. This is useful for Chopin because it not only shows the complexity of a woman’s life, but also leads the reader to question why Edna has always been so reserved. Her reservations began with her childhood. Edna didn’t want the same things that her parents told her she ought to want. This is the ultimate conflict of the book. No matter where Edna goes, her purpose is supposed on her by others, particularly men. Her fate always lived within the future marriage that she would take part in. Ever since a little girl this created fascinations of her marrying an actor or some other out of reach person. But looking inward as an adult, she realizes that these desires themselves have even been supposed onto her to an extent. This is the beginning of Edna’s awakening. Edna isn’t able to think freely within herself without it affecting the perception of her reality directly. The more she realizes her own life doesn’t belong to her, she begins to awaken. Her awakening is a refusal of her existence depending on

(The American Dream, 4)

the decision of others. “She had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. They belonged to her and were her own, and she entertained the conviction that she had a right to them and that they concerned no one but herself.” (Chopin,48) This realization Edna has, comes during a conversation with a character named Madame Ratignolle. Her conversation involves her saying that she would give up the unessential for her children, but she would not give herself. She would even give her life, but not herself. The character Ratignolle seems to miss her point because she isn’t considering the metaphysical existence of an indivudal. Edna is realizing that herself as an individual is the most sacred thing that exists for her. It is what she needs to cherish and work on forever. The thoughts and feelings she has always carried inside her are manifesting her reality. She’s realizing the affect that her thoughts have on her actions. She would not give herself for her children. This is the connection between free thought and free action. Once Edna has learned to think freely, 100 percent on her own with no suggested ideals given to her, she begins to act freely. She falls in love with another man while still married to her husband Leonce Pontellier. This is the beginning of her awakening and her demise. Her awakening eventually leads to a realization of the parameters of her existence. Once she falls in love with Robert and is willing and desires to live her life with him, she realizes the problem. While she recognizes herself as a free individual because of her free thought, Robert doesn’t. The society in which they all exist in doesn’t permit free action when it is on the behalf of a woman. Through living in ways she never was allowed to, she points out the calculative ways in which women are subjugated. Women are seen as whores if they drink at a bar alone, or wear skirts above their

(The American Dream, 5)

knees. This is was at a greater magnitude at the turn of the 20th century, than it is now, but these ideologies still exist. The American woman is still subjugated in the same exact ways and parameters set around their existence are expanded, but still predominantly limiting. The struggle for the American women to achieve a state of mobility is the root of the issue. Women do not live free lives where they can have a job where they’re economically stable and independent. This leads to a woman not being socially and culturally fulfilled as a individual, because their entire mental power is being used to keep up a house and a family while the husband is away making the money. This lack of mobility is what drives Edna toward her awakening. Once she awakens she realizes the ultimate reailty of her existence. She cannot exist without being owned by a man. This is shown to Edna and the reader simultaneously when Robert can’t fathom Edna as a free indivudal. “She did not know how it would e when he returned. There would have to be an understanding, an explanation. Conditions would always adjust themselves, she felt; ut whatever came, she resolved to never again to belong to another than herself.” (Chopin,81) Besides the sheer power of Chopin's words, understand that here Edna is wondering here what Leonce will think of her and Robert in love. But her realization is that her condition keeps being controlled by men. Even if Robert does not characterize her as being bound or owned by somebody or something, the evidence is clear that she is. And he acts accordingly to this fact regardless of his awareness of it. He feels the moral obligation to ask Edna’s husband for the permission to marry her. This is literally the same as saying that Robert needed to ask her previous owner to grant him permission to own her. At this point her awakening leads to her demise. But this isn’t her fault. This is due to the fact that she cannot live freely within the

(The American Dream, 6)

society she exists in. She will always be owned by a man. But however, before she realizes this she makes a very important decision regarding her life. She refuses to take another step backwards in her life. This is the distinction between free thought and free action. She knows she is thinking freely, but because of this she desires and needs to act freely and vows to do so. Once this is seen as inevitably impossible, her death is almost certain. She will not live her life like Madame Ratignolle, the perfect mother woman who embraces her life of seemingly endless leisure. Edna is aware she could exists like this, but because of her awakening in thought, she refuses to. This is important in understanding that her presumed suicide has really no connection to a fear of not being able to be with Robert. It is a reaction to the fact that she cannot exist without belonging to a man.

 Rena a complex and interesting character, shares certain fates with Edna which will be the focus of her purpose as a character. She shows us the subjugation in the same way that Edna does, but of the African-American race. This is done by contrasting types of black life. She is a very light skinned mulatto who can pass for a white woman, but not in the town she is from because everyone knows who she is. Her brother sees this as an opportunity for freedom for Rena, unique to her because of her physical appreance. This is first clear oppression of the African-American people, that light skin is equal to power and mobility. Even darker black people were looked down upon by lighter skinned black people. This was all created psychologically by the white man. Here we see that Rena has a similar lack of mobility to Edn, but she does not share the same reason. Rena has no mobility because she is black. But her

(The American Dream, 7)

brother notices that she can catch a loop hole of society and exist freely within it, but she must pass as a white woman. The idea of passing is a very big portion of the book, because her brother does the same thing. Her brother’s goal in life was to pass. He knew he could make more of himself given that he appeared white, and he jumps on this opportunity. This opportunity sparks a moral dilemma for the African-American, which is asking whether is morally correct for an African-American to ‘pass’ for white in such a way. Does this not further his or her ability to be free, which is the original essence of the American Dream? Does this make him or her a morally indecent person because they merely ceased the only opportunity they had in life? This sparks the same question about human nature and their desire to be free, and in doing so shows us an entirely separate way modern society strips freedom from people. Rena awakens a bit later that Edna. She gets a taste of real free life. This you can also think of as white life. Because she passed, and because she isn’t allowed to have free life she had to be punished. This punishment is similar to Edna’s. She must die. This is not because she has tricked society into giving her free life. She has to die because when she awakens she goes backwards unlike Edna. Edna says I will never go backwards and belong to anybody. Rena lives freely for a time like Edna, but it comes to an end. It comes to an end because her fiancé George Tyron finds out the truth of her race. “…Rena was no philosopher, either sad or cheerful. She could not even have replied to this argument, that races must lift themselves, and the most that can be done by others is to give them opportunity and play fair.” (Chesnutt, 166) Here Rena has already awakened, she realizes she doesn’t want to pass and live freely. Living freely isn’t given to her people, so she wants to return to her people and do progressive things for them. This is why she becomes a school

(The American Dream, 8)

teacher. This is why she can’t live. She got to live free, and went backwards. Society does not let the African American or the woman live freely. This is why the women are robbed of their lives, whether it seems that they willingly let go of them. Being American has contrived the idea of life and freedom for the African-American. As a society we calculatedly have oppressed the African-American in many ways, but ultimately by creating the ideology that lighter skin is better and is a credential for freedom.

 In a piece written by Ralph Waldo Emerson entitled “Self Reliance” he encourages that the reader get in touch with their inmost. He also refers to this as every person’s genius. He tells the reader here to think freely. The basis of his philosophy is what Edna and Rena come to realize individually. There is a big difference between awakening and being self reliant. What Emerson mainly pushes, is that the reader think freely. His points are mostly metaphysical even though they hold weight on the way a person acts. But he challenges one to think from within, not judge themselves based on the outmost, and be original. He is aware of the hindrance caused by society, but does not suggest that the individual rebel against it. “Good and bad are ut names very readily transferrable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it.” (Emerson, 11) Emerson’s words are powerful, but he is determining a metaphysical existence of the self, and what it deserves. He tells the reader that to be an individual one must think from within. He even points out that the world will attack you for being yourself. He knows the consequences of this, but he states that this is what it is to be great. To be great is to be misunderstood. So to further understand Emerson we must understand his

(The American Dream, 9)

vision. He is not pushing people like Edna or Rena to awaken and rebel completely against a society that limits their freedom. He just says strive for it and know that you deserve it and that you own your own freedom and nobody else does. He concisely makes that point here: “For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face.” (Emerson, 13) Emerson’s awareness of a societies ambivalence to accept the free individual is clear here. He tells the reader that you need to be an indivudal to be whole. I truly believe what he says applies to men and woman and all people of color, he just was so ahead of his time his writing has to reflect the current knowledge of the people he is writing for. That is why we can say that when Emerson says ‘Man’, we can replace this with ‘Whole’. This is because he is telling the reader how to live truly from within. He knows this is the opposite of what society tells an individual to do. He makes the distinction between free thought, free action, and the limits of society very clearly in one of the most important paragraphs of the piece. “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the worlds opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” (Emerson, 12) Here what Emerson is saying is very powerful but also the exact distinction between self reliance and free action. Self reliance is free thought and living from within. Free action means acting upon those thoughts constantly. What he is saying is that the world will always assume for the individual the path he should take. This

(The American Dream, 10)

is the path that would lead the individual to look normal, fit in, and succeed enough to be financially independent. This isn’t the entirety of life and its purpose for Emerson. He is aware that societies will always do this as the nature of society is to create some sense of uniformity. What he’s telling us is that to follow this sense of uniformity is easy. And also it is easy to think freely when alone in a room. What matters is when a person is able to apply this to their daily life, when they are interacting with society. It is the *whole* person who is able to transcend the precepts of a society. This doesn’t mean the person will transcend the boundaries set for them by society, it just means they will understand them. In understanding them one must not fully attack the boundaries, or run away from them. He doesn’t make any points about social rebellion or disagreement with the government which is why this is more metaphysically applicable to the individual. If Edna or Rena decided to fight the social boundaries, this isn’t a result of them being self reliant, but evident of their awakening. Their awakening did follow their new found ability to be self reliant in terms of thought, but did not cause the awakening entirely, or suggest that it needed to occur. While Emerson teaches us to act based on free thought within society, he never suggests rebelling, just suggests a disregarding. These women learned to think free but due to the severity of their social constraints, did not want to exist semi freely. They simply refused to. Here is the difference between an awakening and what Emerson is talking about when he talks about ones genius, ones inmost, and one’s own plot of land to till. Emerson is suggesting that one must learn that society suggests a depreciation of the inmost, of the individual. He understands the calculative way in which a society oppresses the mind or spirit from being truly free. He does suggest non-conformity, but not in the severity that everyone takes it. He doesn’t

(The American Dream, 11)

simply mean act out against what is normal, be different and rebellious. He means don’t fall so easily into a path that isn’t yours. That is why he says we are forced to take with shame our own ideas from another. It isn’t because your thoughts are so unique compared the rest of the entire world that you will be the first person to say what you have said, but more simply that you shouldn’t rely on its existence anywhere else to trust yourself. He encompasses the struggles of the women in each of the books discussed earlier, and that is why they connect so well

 . Edna is actually reading Emerson laying down, towards the end of the book after she has already had her awakening. Nothing went wrong for Edna’s pursuit of an artist that stemmed from Emerson. What happened is Chopin created a woman who said ‘I don’t need a man’. She looks at the man and in her own free thought she knows and says ‘I will walk away from you’. This kind of woman was not allowed to exist in 1900 society. Furthermore a woman who did that and then wanted to become an artist could definitely not exist in this society. Because of the boundaries women are kept within, their actions are kept within boundaries as well. This submissiveness of power of the woman, led to the ultimate rebellion of the female spirit. But what is important to take from these facts is that the American Dream of having a picket fence house and a leisurely life with cute kids and a husband, is actually a confining delusion of a free life. This is the most confined life a human being within a modern society could exist. This supposes the lack of education in the American woman. This creates the lack of freedom for the American woman. The African-American is equally subjugated through the same conditioning. As a society we need to learn that the definition of one strives for uniformity, but that in reality it

(The American Dream, 12)

creates boundaries on the indivudal. ‘Being American’ has been contrived through modern history and now had deluded the freedom of so many American people. We can all learn from Emerson how to exist from within and metaphysically own yourself. And from Chopin and Chesnutt we learn so much about testing boundaries, and that if we want to change how America defines its people we must make a thought out plan.

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